RICHARD RORTY AND THE POLITICS OF MODESTY

BY MICHAEL BÉRUBÉ

> For every day they die
> among us, those who were doing us some good,
> who knew it was never enough but
> hoped to improve a little by living.
>
> —*W. H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud"*

THE UNITED STATES is not the kind of country that notices the death of its philosophers. But when Richard McKay Rorty died of pancreatic cancer on June 8, 2007, the event was national news, and his mourners, in print and online, included not only fellow professors like Daniel Dennett and former students like me but people like the musician Brian Eno. Rorty was, as absurd as it sounds, famous; and though I did not know him well, I knew him well enough to know that he was very possibly the shiest famous person I have ever met. When I ran into him in Australia in July 1999, while the Humanities Research Centre of the Australian National University was devoting the winter to his work (and hosting Rorty himself for two months), I overheard someone hailing him as "America's most famous and influential philosopher." Rorty demurred politely, saying softly that he believed the title rightly belonged to Judith Butler.

Illustration by Jacob Weinstein

It was an odd moment. Like Butler, Rorty was considered—especially by critics outside the world of academe—as one of those postmodernist-nihilist-antifoundationalist-poststructuralist-sophist-relativists who corrupt our youth and whose success offers right-thinking people a barometer of the intellectual decline of the American university. But unlike Butler, Rorty wrote in the plain style and remained determinedly optimistic about vanilla liberal democracy; indeed, Rorty believed that people like Butler were on the wrong track—that they were right to reject the idea that philosophy should appeal to something external to human experience in its search for "Truth," but wrong to reject the liberal pragmatism that tries to do us some good and knows that it is never enough. I wondered whether, in designating Butler as more famous than himself, Rorty wasn't merely acknowledging Butler's profound influence on the struggle for gay and lesbian rights in the United States, but suggesting as well that modest and un-oracular thinkers like himself aren't appropriate candidates for "fame."

Rorty's death mattered to me—chiefly because I was one of his many students, and he changed the way I think about things; but I was amazed to find that his death mattered to so many other people. And, while not quite amazed, I was pleasantly surprised to see that most of the newspaper accounts of his life's work were accurate, substantive, and respectful. The contrast with the sometimes jeering and even malicious notices of the deaths of Edward Said in 2003, and Jacques Derrida in 2004, was instructive: Although Rorty offered his critics at least as many targets as did those iconic figures from the world of theory, even his sternest critics agreed that the world of philosophy was poorer for his absence, and nobody took any cheap shots at the man or his legacy. I wondered if perhaps the difference in the tone of the obituaries could be attributed to the fact that Rorty, unlike Said and Derrida, was not iconic—and perhaps he was not iconic because he persistently, yet diffidently, refused iconicity. Though he was influential, he did not amass—or desire—legions of disciples. He seemed embarrassed to be "famous"; and whenever I told him that I'd been mulling over something he'd written—as I did when I ran into him in Australia, or as I did when I appeared with him and John McGowan on a panel discussion of American politics on my own campus in 2006—he always seemed surprised and flattered that other people had been mulling over something he'd written.

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It had to be an act, I thought. Surely he was aware, over the last couple decades of his life, that every English-speaking scholar in the humanities knew his name, his work, and the story of his career. No doubt he did know this; but he never behaved as if he was aware of—or, more to the point, deserving of—all that attention. He always insisted that the musings of professional philosophers didn't matter very much to the fate of the world, not nearly as much as wars and famines and inventions and good and bad governments; perhaps it was something more than ordinary professional modesty, then, that kept him from getting used to the idea that his own musings mattered to thousands of people who weren't professional philosophers.

In the fall of 1984, in my second year of graduate school, I decided it was time I learned something about the world of contemporary literary theory. I had heard that Rorty would be offering a seminar on Derrida in the fall of 1985—but I was advised to take the upcoming Heidegger seminar instead. "If you want to understand where all this poststructuralism comes from," I was told, "you can't do better than to start with Rorty on Heidegger." And so it was that in January 1985, I found myself slogging through *Being and Time* at the rate of five or six pages per hour and meeting weekly with Rorty and 10 or 12 other graduate students to try to make sense of our slogging.

The seminar turned out to be one of the formative intellectual experiences of my life, but not because Rorty converted me to the ways of Heidegger; Rorty himself didn't care for all the ways of Heidegger. At the time, Rorty was mainly interested in Heidegger's work on the history of Western philosophy. Rorty responded most fully to the first half of Heidegger's career, in which Heidegger could be aligned with (of all things) the American pragmatism that Heidegger despised and Rorty revered. Rorty was intrigued, for example, that in the course of developing the argument of the first half of *Being and Time*—that asser-

tions are not the locus of truth, that "truth-as-disclosure" (or "unfolding," or "revealing," depending on how you translate the Greek *aletheia*) is prior to mere statements *about* truth—Heidegger construed objects and assertions about objects as mere "ready-to-hand" and "present-at-hand" tools. Rorty thought that was a kind of crypto-pragmatism worth putting next to the work of the great American pragmatist, John Dewey, who saw philosophical debates as forms of problem-solving, no different in kind from questions that carpenters and plumbers pose to themselves whenever they are confronted with difficult tasks.

As the semester progressed, it became clear that Rorty thought of Heidegger's idea of aletheia-as-truth as an anticipation, written in dense German neologisms, of Thomas S. Kuhn's argument about paradigm change in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), in which paradigm shifts open up new realms of inquiry, disclose new features of the universe, and allow scientists to pursue new research programs: The paradigm shifts were the "disclosures," and the consequent research programs were full of present-at-hand assertions about the objects made available to us by those disclosures. For Heidegger's late work Rorty had almost no use at all, and was happy to let late Heideggerians ramble on about the "jug" and the "event" and the "fourfold" while he comically furrowed his brow, sighed, and shrugged his shoulders.

Throughout the seminar, Rorty generously gave us copies of his essays-in-progress as he was establishing the lines of thought that led to his 1989 book, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*; he also gave us copies of essays written by people who disagreed with him passionately. John Caputo, for instance, lit into Rorty's indifference to late Heidegger, charging that "Rorty denies the strangest of the strange in Heidegger, the abiding incommensurability of the thought which thinks that which is not a thing," and capping off the indictment with the accusation that all Rorty really wanted was for the discipline of philosophy to keep a civil conversation going. "Well, he's got me there," Rorty admitted ingenuously, looking around at the class. "That really *is* all I want."

It was the signature Rorty gesture, at once disarming and vexing. On one hand, it took the *agon* of debate down a few notches: when you're arguing with someone who says he simply wants to keep a civil conversation going, you run the risk of sounding insufferably pompous if you insist, *No, there's something much larger at stake here*. On the other hand, what if there *is* something much larger at stake here? There were moments that spring when I felt as if Rorty were trying to cure us of our infatuation with the numinous and inviting us instead to live in a world where there was nothing more profound than zoning laws and recycling centers. And then there were moments—many more of them, in the end—when I believed that this invitation was a good thing, that philosophy is better off without the damn numinous already and should pay attention to the quotidian and the sublunary. So far as I know, Rorty never said much about zoning and recycling per se. But to everyone who insisted that a man's reach should exceed his grasp, that there was something Out There to which we should aspire and to which our thoughts and beliefs should correspond, Rorty would reply, in effect, *Yes, that's what a heaven's for. But I prefer to think about our lives right here on Earth.*

RICHARD RORTY'S SEMINAL WORKS:

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979)

Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980 (1982)

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989)

Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers I (1991)

Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers II (1991)

Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America (1998)

Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers III (1998)

Philosophy and Social Hope (2000)

Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers IV (2007)

THE THOUSAND MILES

BY LORI SHINE

When I say I love
the wrecked brick lintels

of the row houses across the drive,
I mean I love them.

A lopsided vase
holding your breathing.

In a small city I wait for news of your death.
I suspect

you and I have to share enchantment,
sheaves of *onces*

on our tongues. Grass in the blind sun,
waving mosaic.

The sky is nothing solid
to get up against.

Trees, minutest gestures,
not for any of us. Parting green

and silver the flood
comes slow rising,

fastens me to the screen.

Disarmed and vexed by turns, I loved the class, and after spending the entire summer of 1985 worrying how I could possibly come up with a paper that said something about Heidegger that Rorty would find worth reading, I eventually wrote an unwieldy 50-page essay on how Heidegger's late work can be read as an attempt to put the argument of *Being and Time* into practice—to develop a form of philosophy that discloses a new understanding of Being rather than spins out mere present-at-hand arguments about it. I didn't know then that Heidegger's sense of philosophy as poetry (and poetry as aletheia) had a curious overlap with Rorty's (though Rorty's was far less grandiose); I was simply glad to finish a long-overdue paper.

I wound up not taking Rorty's Derrida seminar after all—or his Freud seminar the semester after that. But the graduate-student gossip about those later courses was intense: whereas there were no True Believers in the Heidegger seminar, the Derrida and Freud courses were populated by graduate students and practicing psychoanalysts who were convinced that Derrida and Freud were not merely interesting intellectual figures but revealers of the One True Path. Predictably these people were infuriated by what they saw as Rorty's irreverent attitude toward their icons.

Rorty infuriated many True Believers in the course of his career; for many years he was considered an apostate by Anglo-American analytic philosophers, or as someone who had simply stopped doing real philosophy. I don't want to exaggerate the degree of Rorty's alienation from the world of professional philosophy; he was more complex a figure than that, and he somehow managed to think in the analytical and the Continental traditions at the same time:

He continued to talk of Quine and Habermas, Davidson and Foucault, Carnap and Derrida long after everyone else had pledged allegiance to one side or the other.

Yet the history of his academic appointments nonetheless forms a kind of triptych, a *Rorty's Progress* from philosophy at Princeton to the humanities at Virginia to comparative literature at Stanford, where, as James Ryerson noted in a very fine postmortem on Rorty's career, he "twitt[ed] his own popularity by suggesting that his title be 'transitory professor of trendy studies.' " Still, Rorty wasn't fully embraced by the proponents of theory, either; his shoulder-shrugging treatment of deconstruction and psychoanalysis as possible "vocabularies" (rather than as a set of true propositions about language and the unconscious) seemed deliberately to cultivate an air of intellectual insouciance. At a time when Jacques Derrida was being hailed as the man who had truly won the Continental tradition's Last Philosopher Standing competition (Derrida overcoming the last vestiges of Platonic logocentrism in Heidegger after Heidegger had overcome the last vestiges of "inverted" Platonism in Nietzsche after Nietzsche had overcome the last vestiges of Platonism in everybody else), Rorty was content to see Derrida's work as an interesting kind of writing—almost as if Derrida were a figure more like James Joyce than like John Rawls. Which, in the end, he very probably was.

The Theory Wars of the 1980s were a great and terrible thing. Who knows how many lives were lost in the struggle between humanism and posthumanism, belletrism and barbaric jargon, New Criticism and newer criticism? When I arrived at the University of Virginia in 1983, deconstruction had already peaked at Yale—but the Battle of Charlottesville was just beginning. On one side, the many schools of Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, structuralism, and poststructuralism; on the other side . . . well, on the other side, mostly a bunch of old guys.

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For a time, the Theory Wars were clearly a generational matter, and that's one of the reasons figures like Rorty were so central to their unfolding: Rorty showed us coltish young'uns that we could trust some people over 50.

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Or so it seemed back then. The division between the partisans and the opponents of literary theory, at Virginia as at so many universities, ostensibly separated the intellectually curious from the incurious. As a result, most of my peers weren't drawn to theory because it was flashy and fashionable and the newest latest; they were drawn to it because it was fascinating stuff, and because the young professors who could teach it—people like Michael Levenson and Karen Chase—were rigorous and brilliant. The questions they asked us were large and exhilarating: Is there a useful distinction between "literature" in the sense of "everything that is written" (the sense in which one is enjoined not to distribute literature in the mall or at the airport) and "literature" in the sense of "imaginative writing of a high order of complexity"? Does it depend on a distinction between "literary" and "ordinary" language? Does that distinction depend on the qualities of the language itself, the intent with which it is used, or the context in which it appears? What do we mean by "context"? What claims should history have on our attention to literary works? How can we understand the relations between time and narrative? Are gender and sexuality important categories of literary analysis, and if so, how so? What determines the plausibility of an interpretation? Does the reader *make* meaning, or merely *find* it? Is meaning identical with intention? What do we mean—I mean, *intend*—by "intention," anyway? As I wrestled with questions like these, I understood all the more tangibly literature's ancient quarrels with philosophy and history, and I thought of "theory" as the latest version of those quarrels.

The Bunch of Old Guys, by contrast, seemed chiefly to play the role of the *senex iratus* in Roman comedies; they were the blocking figures, the crotchety grandfathers who had to get out of the way so that younger generations could thrive. It wasn't quite true, of course; some of the oldest professors at Virginia, like Ralph Cohen, were as rigorous and brilliant and theory-savvy as they come. But for a time, the Theory Wars were clearly a generational matter, and that's one of the reasons figures like Rorty were so central to their unfolding: Rorty showed us coltish young'uns that we could trust some people over 50. He also showed that the party of the Theorists consisted of people who read everything—for even Rorty's crabbiest critics had to admit that Rorty was one of the most voracious, diligent,

and eclectic readers in the humanities. (I still owe him a debt of gratitude for reading my dissertation on a few months' notice, agreeing to do so after I'd learned that I needed an "outside" reader on my committee. It was not clear at the time whether Rorty was outside or inside, but it was clear that he was generous.)

I didn't keep in touch with Rorty after I left graduate school for the University of Illinois, but I kept track of his work even as most of my young'un theory-cohort turned on him, mocking his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* by retitling it *Contingency, Irony, and Property* and scoffing at Rorty's insistence on writing in clear declarative sentences that were readable even by people who weren't professional philosophers and theorists. But in 1993, Rorty and I wound up rubbing elbows in a collection of essays, *Wild Orchids and Trotsky*, and as I was finishing my second book, *Public Access*, I took my editor's suggestion and sent a copy of the manuscript to my former professor, to see if he would be so kind as to grace its back cover with a blurb.

Rorty responded more kindly than I could have imagined, but he refused to grace my book's back cover with a blurb. Instead, in a pungent and detailed letter, he explained to me that he liked much of the manuscript, but found the book overall too breezily dismissive of postwar social democrats on the left. And while he acknowledged that he wouldn't want to wind up, politically, retracing the steps of someone like Sidney Hook (who started off on the Communist Left only to wind up voting for Richard Nixon in 1972 and accepting the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Ronald Reagan in 1985), Rorty insisted that Hook was right about the Soviet Union quite early on, which was (as he put it) an important thing to be right about, and that Hook ought to be given more credit for that by the Democratic Left. And as for the contemporary scene, he suggested that there was more complexity in the *Dissent* tradition than I was letting on; I, for my part, had become a bit too fond of the Woody Allen line about *Dissent* and *Commentary* merging to form *Dysentery*.

Well, I knew that Hook was an old family friend of the Rortys, but I had to admit that Rorty had a point—and that he was mostly right about the *Dissent* tradition, too, even though some of its standard-bearers, including the great Irving Howe himself, were exasperating, equivocating, or just plain clueless during the "political correctness" opéra bouffe of 1991–1992. And Rorty's letter as a whole was so magnanimous and so encouraging—as was his later reply to my reply—that I began to think better of him than I did of most of his critics on the left, who, true to form, wound up lambasting *Public Access* as too cravenly liberal, too soft on those evil social democrats.

By that point Rorty had undergone a distinct change in cultural status, from 1980s Theory Hero to 1990s Piñata for the Left, and Rorty charted his new position quite accurately in his essay in the *Wild Orchids and Trotsky* collection (titled, confusingly enough, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids"):

> The left's hostility is partially explained by the fact that most people who admire Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida as much as I do—most of the people who either classify themselves as "postmodernist" or (like me) find themselves thus classified willynilly—participate in what Jonathan Yardley has called the "America Sucks Sweepstakes." Participants in this event compete to find better, bitterer ways of describing the United States. They see our country as embodying everything that is wrong with the rich post-Enlightenment West. They see ours as what Foucault called a "disciplinary society," dominated by an odious ethos of "liberal individualism," an ethos which produces racism, sexism, consumerism and Republican presidents. By contrast, I see America pretty much as Whitman and Dewey did, as opening a prospect on illimitable democratic vistas. I think that our country—despite its past and present atrocities and vices, and despite its continuing eagerness to elect fools and knaves to high office—is a good example of the best kind of society so far invented.
>
> The right's hostility is largely explained by the fact that rightist thinkers don't think that it is enough just to prefer democratic societies. One also has to believe that they are Objectively Good, that the institutions of such societies are grounded in Rational First Principles. Especially if one teaches philosophy, as I do, one is expected to tell the young that their society is not just one of the better ones so far contrived, but one which embodies Truth and Reason. Refusal to say this sort of thing counts as the "treason of the clerks"—as an abdication of professional and moral responsibility. My own philosophical views—views I share with Nietzsche and Dewey—forbid me to say this kind of thing. I do not have much use for notions like "objective value" and "objective truth." I think that the so-called postmodernists are right in most of their criticisms of traditional philosophical talk about "reason." So my philosophical views offend the right as much as my political preferences offend the left.

The passage reminds me why, in the 1990s, I was often among the people criticizing Rorty from his left. Citing Yardley's line on the "America Sucks Sweepstakes" is a regrettable rhetorical move, and claiming that

"rightist thinkers don't think that it is enough just to prefer democratic societies" misses the point that some rightist thinkers don't actually prefer democratic societies at all. But then, this was very much what Rorty's career as a liberal public intellectual looked like in the 1990s: some brilliant sallies against antagonists Left and Right, some mistakes and missteps along the way.

Even today I find myself in agreement with Rorty's major premise—that liberal secular democracies are the best kind of societies humans have devised, and that they are things of our own invention, not discoveries of some kind of eternal (though mysteriously long-latent) political truths. I also agree with his sense that it was not very helpful to think of philosophy as a kind of epistemological physics in which one seeks to discover the laws of nature. And I agree that when liberal secular democracies like ours deserve criticism, they deserve it for not being liberal, or secular, or democratic *enough*; so when Rorty published "Religion as Conversation-stopper," his review essay on Stephen Carter's deeply wrongheaded book, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (1994), I wanted to nominate him for that season's MVP (Most Valuable Philosopher). To Carter's lament that religious beliefs are not sufficiently welcomed or respected in American public life, Rorty pointedly replied that in most districts of the United States, it was not possible for an atheist to be elected to any position higher than that of dogcatcher.

But then, 1994 was also the year Rorty decided to publish "The Unpatriotic Academy," a broadside in the *New York Times* op-ed pages calling on his colleagues to be more rah-rah for America—and ignoring the manifest possibility that the country needed a bit less defensive nationalism and a lot more cosmopolitan internationalism. If indeed Rorty looked forward, as he so often claimed, to a world without nations, to the Tennysonian vision of "the Parliament of Man, Federation of the World," didn't he realize that appeals to patriotism were precisely the wrong way to get there? And I never could figure out why he named antiporn activist and legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon as his own choice for Most Valuable Feminist; was he simply unaware of the many critiques of MacKinnon's work written by feminists, gay and lesbian scholars, and civil libertarians? Didn't he mind the fact that MacKinnon had spent the latter half of the 1980s teaming up with the Christian right in the struggle against sexually explicit representation?

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The casual, shoulder-shrugging demeanor that served him so well in disputes with his fellow philosophers, reminding his colleagues that debates about "sense" and "reference" do not improve or harm the lives of one's fellow creatures, could be a serious liability once Rorty moved into the political arena. I was there on the night in early October 1996 when Rorty spoke at the Columbia University conference that was supposed to mark a historic reconciliation between the intellectual left and the American labor movement.

Many people remember the remarkable moment in which Rorty chastised the New Left. The antiwar protesters, he said,

> were absolutely right that Vietnam was an unjust war, a massacre of which our country should always be ashamed. But when the students began to burn flags, they did deeper and more long-lasting damage to the American left than they could ever have imagined. When they began to spell "Amerika" with a "k," they lost the respect and the sympathy of the union members.

In response, the standing-room-only crowd in Low Library hissed—hissed, as if we were confronted with a mustache-twirling Victorian villain on Drury Lane.

I did not join in the hissing; though I was not convinced that prowar union members would have respected antiwar students if only the latter had spelled America the ol' fashioned way, I thought it took a good bit of intestinal fortitude for Rorty to utter those sentences at Columbia. But what astonished me was an earlier line, in which Rorty acknowledged that while some of America's unions had been "taken over by greedy and cynical crooks," this fact did not distinguish them from American academic departments. I laughed for a second—until I realized that for all their faults, American academic departments never had serious ties to organized crime, and that this was a terribly glib way of dismissing a subject that any serious labor historian or union organizer would treat with the grav-

ity it deserves. Surely, the hijacking and the corruption of the American labor movement could be treated as fodder for a one-liner about academic departments only by someone who'd spent too much time around academic departments and not enough in the stockyards.

And yet at other times that casual demeanor could be charming. In 1999 he responded to my skeptical review of his 1998 book, *Achieving Our Country*, by cheerfully acknowledging our points of disagreement—and then extending the terms of disagreement by sending along an essay he'd recently written about the political theorist Nancy Fraser. "You haven't persuaded me of anything," he seemed to be saying, "but let's keep a civil conversation going." And over the next eight years, that's exactly what we did.

Gradually, I came to believe that there was something deeply paradoxical at work in Rorty's political and philosophical life. In the 1980s, I'd admired him not only for his way of handling disagreements but for his level-headed resistance to the genetic fallacy. When the Bunch of Old Guys tried to claim that the discovery of Paul de Man's wartime work for a collaborationist Belgian newspaper absolved them from grappling with all of deconstruction since 1966 (because obviously something was rotten at the heart of deconstruction all along), Rorty told them they were peddling nonsense; in "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," he wrote,

> Unlike both the orthodox and the postmoderns, I do not think that you can tell much about the worth of a philosopher's views on topics such as truth, objectivity and the possibility of a single vision by discovering his politics, or his irrelevance to politics. So I do not think it counts in favor of Dewey's pragmatic view of truth that he was a fervent social democrat, nor against Heidegger's criticism of Platonic notions of objectivity that he was a Nazi, nor against Derrida's view of linguistic meaning that his most influential American ally, Paul de Man, wrote a couple of anti-Semitic articles when he was young. The idea that you can evaluate a writer's philosophical views by reference to their political utility seems to me a version of the bad Platonic-Straussian idea that we cannot have justice until philosophers become kings or kings philosophers.

This sensible attitude not only underscored Rorty's anti-Heideggerian (and anti-Platonic-Straussian) conviction that the deliberations of philosophers don't determine the course of history; it also enabled Rorty to avoid—and, at times, to mock and deflate—the more self-aggrandizing rhetorical aspects of the enterprise of theory. But try as I might, I can't see how it makes sense when applied to Rorty himself. Over the course of the last 20-odd years of Rorty's life, it became ever

an all-powerful democracy attacked
civilian populations targeted
a pre-emptive invasion launched with flawed intelligence
a promised quick success turned into a protracted war
a leader's strategy questioned
a democratic society polarized
a world engulfed in a clash of civilizations

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clearer that, despite his demurrals about the importance of philosophy and his agnosticism about the relation of philosophy to politics, Rorty *did* believe—or, at the very least, hope—that the world would become at once more secular and more pragmatist, and that it would do so for the same reasons.

The paradox, then, is this: even as Rorty continued to insist that the disputes of professional philosophers don't determine the fate of the world, he showed us why they might matter—provided that we can stop thinking of philosophy as the search for Objective Truth and begin thinking of it instead as a creative enterprise of dreaming up new and more humane ways to live.

Rorty was sometimes paired in the public mind with Stanley Fish, possibly because Fish, too, is known for making cheerful, counterintuitive, and sometimes glib pragmatist remarks about the fruitlessness of the search for God and/or Objective Truth. But Fish, infamously, has always insisted that theory has no consequences, good or bad; Rorty, despite his allergic relationship to philosopher-kings, was less dogmatic on this point. In "Pragmatism and Romanticism," an essay published in the last year of his life, Rorty concluded by holding out the hope that pragmatism, like Romanticism, might yet serve as a means for holding out hope—hope that we might someday come to realize that we and we alone are responsible for dreaming up new and more humane ways to live:

> If pragmatism is of any importance—if there is any difference between pragmatism and Platonism that might eventually make a difference to practice—it is not because it got something right that Platonism got wrong. It is because accepting a pragmatist outlook would change the cultural ambience for the better. It would complete the process of secularization by letting us think of the desire for non-linguistic access to the real as as hopeless as that for redemption through a beatific vision. Taking this extra step toward acknowledging our finitude would give a new resonance to Blake's dictum that "All deities reside in the human breast."

This is Rortyism distilled: Once more with feeling, he takes the conflict down a notch, merely inviting us to join the pragmatist world and

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complete the process of secularization. (*But wait*, one might ask, *didn't you try to get us not to think of human thought as having a terminus, an end point, a completion?*)

And yet there's something else at work here, too. For late Rorty, as for late Heidegger, poets are as important as philosophers—and all innovative thinkers should be revered as people who offered us new and more humane ways of thinking about ourselves and the world into which we are thrown. Blake and Hegel, Galileo and Descartes, Kant and Darwin, Yeats and Derrida, the Plato of the *Republic* and the Neal Stephenson of *Snow Crash*—all have shown us what Rorty calls "alternative ways of being human," and all have shown us just how many alternative ways of being human we humans have imagined. And here, when Rorty tries to wean us from beatific visions and correspondence theories of truth, he speaks of our "acknowledging our finitude." The very phrase sounds Heideggerian; Heidegger's sense of being and time relies on our Being-toward-Death, on our awareness of our own finitude.

Just as Heidegger turned, in his later years, toward the poetry of the great German Romantic Friedrich Hölderlin, here is Rorty turning, in his later years, toward the poetry of the great English Romantic William Blake. For Rorty came to realize that he and Heidegger agreed about this much: the Romantic poets helped to secularize the world— and in their better moments, they understood that they were proposing new and more humane ways of being human rather than discovering the inner human essences that had been lying buried within us all along.

But Rorty himself was not a Romantic poet; and though he liked Percy Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" for its ecumenical expansion of the word *poetry* to cover all forms of innovative thought, he would have emphatically refused the title of unacknowledged legislator. Rorty would have been satisfied, instead, with having persuaded some people, by argument and by example, that a fully secular world is a pleasant place to live. It is a modest goal—suitable, no doubt, to those who think modestly about things like human goals; but perhaps Rorty wanted, above all, and with good reason, to teach us how to traffic in modesty. •