

In Memoriam Richard Rorty

To those who knew him personally Richard Rorty was a quiet, gentle man, preferring to listen to others rather than expostulate on his own, which also made him often formidably zen-like in the terseness of his replies. But he genuinely liked to listen, and would generously read and comment on the work of practically anyone who asked him (including some graduate students of mine, who never told me they were sending Dick their work until *after* he wrote them a complimentary letter, probably feeling—correctly!—that I'd discourage them).

Wherever he was—Princeton, Charlottesville, Stanford—he opened his home to a steady flow of scholars from around the world. Those who experienced his hospitality knew him to be spontaneously and warmly generous—with his attention, his house, his table, his frankness, and his easy sympathy. He had a deeply ironic sense of humor, was self-deprecating nearly to a fault, and had a tremendous store of memorized lines and lyrics from comic opera and especially *Beyond the Fringe*, from which he could recite entire skits. It's a pity more people didn't see *this* side of Dick!

He loved nature. He was happiest tramping through mountain forests, binoculars ever ready to watch birds. He knew flowers, fruits, and mushrooms, reading the forest trails as he might a favorite passage in a book to which he happily returned again and again. Conversation on the quiet trails could be serious or light-hearted, frank and personal or almost metaphysical, from personal reminiscence to views on American history and politics, world literature and criticism, or the philosophy of practically any school in the West.

I exchanged letters with Dick for nearly 30 years, from my time as a graduate student during his last days at Princeton until shortly before his death. In his first letter to me, February 1981, he commented on some papers I had given him after he agreed to supervise my graduate work. Later that year, in September, he wrote from Paris of his first meeting with Foucault, which he summed up in one deadpan word, "pleasant." By July 1982, Dick had decided to leave Princeton for Virginia. He spent the summer in Australia where he wrote from Canberra:

I finally finished a shallow little essay ... and now have to do another ... before I figure out whether I want to write on Heidegger or just walk through the eucalyptus in search of lyre-birds. I feel so good about no longer being at Princeton, and at being in this lovely new countryside, that I am not really inclined to work very hard.

By December, Dick was still in Canberra, and I was beginning a year abroad in Germany. I recounted a trip to then Communist East Berlin,

where I visited the small churchyard where Hegel is buried (along with Fichte and Brecht). Dick commented back in a classic mix of his Cold-War anxiety and self-deprecating humor:

I had been too scared of the evil Commies to spend more than a few hours in East Berlin. I suspect that even if somebody had offered to show me Hegel's grave I would have been scared to get too far from Checkpoint Charlie. Part of my heebie-jeebies is due to long engrained relatively rational fear of the KGB, which in turn is partially due to the fact that when Trotsky got pickaxed in 1940 one of his secretaries, fleeing from Mexico, wound up at our house in remote northern New Jersey, hoping that the KGB wouldn't look there for him. This made a great impression on my nine-year-old self.

I had gone to Germany with the intention of studying Heidegger with the experts. However, my experience of a seminar at the Free University of Berlin convinced me that I could not write the kind of dissertation that would be acceptable to the Princeton faculty on such a topic. So I shifted back to an old fascination with Wittgenstein, and began a dissertation on the relation of the earlier and later work. Though Dick had by now resigned from Princeton he was still my supervisor, and in April 1983, I wrote to him seeking approval for this change of direction, to which he replied, "Heidegger is perhaps best left to middle-aged *Schwärmer* like me anyway."

Letters from this time are filled with encouraging practical advice for completing a doctoral dissertation. For example, in June 1983, he writes from the Stanford Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences:

Bear in mind that eine brave akademische Dissertation only comes into being when somebody finally decides to stop writing a systematic presentation of something and just slaps together what he has in fact written and applies some interstitial glue.

In February 1984, he commented on a draft chapter, "I am afraid that you are falling under Wittgenstein's spell and beginning to write about him as he wrote. For God's sake don't. Look what happened to Cavell." In September 1985, he passed on this nugget: "Don't be discouraged by ... the general weirdness of the Princeton department. One's graduate school isn't the world."

In October 1986, shortly after I had taken up a position at McMaster University, he wrote to me from Berlin, commenting on some papers for a conference on his work in which I was participating (these papers were

later published in *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reason*, ed. Evan Simpson [Edmonton: Academic Publishing, 1987]). One paper, extremely negative, was by University of Toronto philosopher Rebecca Comay ("Interrupting the Conversation: Notes on Rorty"):

I rather admired Comay's essay, perhaps merely because it showed she'd studied my stuff pretty thoroughly—something authors always take as a sign of promise. But I admit that she had nothing to say of her own except to invoke the standard Marcusean phrases. It would only have been a really good piece if she had said something like 'There may be something to Rorty's criticism of the intellectual left, but ... [sic]' rather than 'Rorty is not one of us,' which was in the end all her argument came down to.

He goes on in this letter to touch on themes that only rarely entered his published work until *Achieving Our Country* (1998):

You're right that I must do something to make clear that my politics are, if inchoate and pessimistic, at least not neo-conservative.... I'm not sure what to do. What would be nice would [be] if I could affiliate myself with some party or movement, but I don't see any around that have any program. It seems to me that the left has neither a foreign nor a domestic policy—they are all so busy unmasking people like me (an activity about as futile as they say my own is) that they have nothing to say about, e.g., Brazil or Poland or ghettos or the deficit or possible economic legislation or the possibility of resurrecting the trade unions, or anything else.

I would love to be engaged in what you call 'working social criticism,' the way Dewey was and the way Habermas is. But the sad truth is that if somebody gave me a weekly column to play with I wouldn't have much idea what to do with it except to say things which everybody would agree with (e.g., it would be nice to figure out how to break the poverty culture of the ghettos) or which everybody would say (for different reasons) were irresponsible (e.g., it would be nice to have the CIA supply plastique to the blacks in South Africa before the KGB does—my only contribution to the S.A. problem; I do think it would be a hell of a lot more useful than not buying S.A. fruit). My trouble is that I don't think anybody has any bright political ideas lately and I don't have any myself. In the absence of such ideas all I have to say is 'Be socially concerned: i.e., bear in mind that us leisured intellectuals get our

leisure at the expense of people who are suffering.' But this doesn't sound very impressive unless I have some constructive suggestions about how to alleviate the suffering, and I don't.

My feeling is that I have no political initiatives to offer and my left-ist critics don't either, but that they have managed to convince themselves that their little exercises in unmasking somehow *are* a political initiate. By contrast, I stand about self-consciously naked, able to take pride only in my stubborn refusal to wear a figleaf.

Did I tell you that I told a conference of Scandinavian philosophers last month that I had visited S.A. and would be willing to state the case against academic boycotts if anyone were interested? The only result was that the students (at the U of Aarhus) threatened to close down the conference in protest against the presence of a boycott-breaker on campus. Now *there's* a political initiative for you!

In February 1988, he was back in Virginia. I wrote to him enthusiastic about Foucault, whom I was reading and preparing to teach for the first time:

You admire Foucault a lot more than I do. I think he had an original mind and a useful amount of historical curiosity and learning, but I don't think he has much useful to say about contemporary issues. It all seems to me too far removed from any question about what is to be done—much like the French Marxists whom he was criticizing, and by whose manner of speaking he seems to me to have been infected.... I guess the thing we disagree most strongly about is whether free speech, liberal procedural justice, and so on can cope with subtle insidious modes of control which F spots in contemporary societies. I guess I don't see why they can't. But mainly I'm inclined to say: F has no *better* idea of what could cope with them.

In January 1998 I was reading Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, and wrote to him about it. He replied, in part:

I was lucky about Stalinism. Since my parents broke with the CP when I was only one year old, I was raised an anti-Stalinist. I remember discussing politics with students at Berkely [sic] in the 70s who would say things like 'I spent the summer in Russia, and I certainly saw no evidence that the people were discontented

with the regime.' The whole of the 60s were [an] odd period for an anti-Stalinist red diaper baby.

We would correspond for nearly another decade, until just a few weeks before he died. Others will remember him their way, but I'll end with his wonderful humor and the enthusiasm for comic opera that I mentioned. In June 1999, I wrote to him about my long-delayed decision to take out Canadian citizenship:

Of course you'll have sworn loyalty to Her Majesty, now that I think about it. Do you know Flanders & Swann's patriotic ballad? It goes 'Russia is red, dilly-dilly / England is green / They have the moon, dilly-dilly / We have the Queen.' I always thought that about summed it up.

BARRY ALLEN, *McMaster University*

Richard Rorty was an exceptional philosopher; that much is obvious. What is less obvious is just *how* he was exceptional. Many would quickly answer that he was exceptional because of his relentless criticism of traditional analytic and epistemology-centered philosophy; others would emphasize his later, more politically oriented work; still others would focus on his rare combination of intellectuality and compassion. All would be right, but they miss an important aspect of Rorty's extraordinariness.

When one culls the history of the discipline for major philosophers who had the capacity—the inspiration, ability, and courage—to change direction, to look with fresh eyes at what they were doing, few names come readily to mind: perhaps Dewey, Heidegger, certainly Wittgenstein, Foucault. Rorty had a good measure of this capacity, as is demonstrated by his progression from thought exemplified by his early "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories" to thought exemplified by the later *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, to thought exemplified by the more recent *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

But what made Rorty an exceptional philosopher had less to do with his own progress and transitions, or with what he himself contributed to the discipline, than with how he influenced others: both the thousands he inspired and the thousands he outraged.

Too often influential philosophers are mainly emulated and their views expounded and perhaps refined. Rorty was different. Those he successfully influenced did not so much emulate and expound his views as much as they changed direction in their own thinking. In this Rorty

succeeded admirably in achieving Foucault's stated desire that his books be "a kind of tool-box"; Rorty might well have said what Foucault said: "I write for users, not readers." ("Prisons et asiles dans le mécanisme du pouvoir," in *Dits et Ecrits*, II [Paris: Gallimard, 1974], 523–4.)

For himself, Rorty sought *engagement*, not emulation or exposition. He wanted productive discussion with those who responded positively to his work and pertinent criticism from those who responded negatively. Instead he usually got adulation from the former and dismissal from the latter. However, this is the price innovative and provocative thinkers pay for their success. Lack of engagement is the curse of pioneering and challenging thinkers who are a little out of their own time and a little out of step with their canonically committed and methodologically steadfast colleagues and readers. After all, productive discussion and pertinent criticism presuppose understanding and appreciation of whatever is at issue—two things in short supply when what are at issue are novel ideas.

My first contact with Rorty's work was reading *Mirror*. I felt galvanized and spent my 1980–81 sabbatical at Princeton, attending his seminar on Heidegger. To my chagrin I learned at that time just how much Rorty disliked adulation. I also learned how frustrated he was by dismissal. He saw emulation and dismissal as precluding what he most valued: productive *conversation*—that practice which keeps us intellectually alive and humanely compassionate.

Rorty's attitude was confirmed over the years when I attended papers he presented in various venues and observed his handling of questions and discussions. And I was impressed anew at how those members of his audiences who most benefitted from Rorty's presentations did so in terms of changes in their own thinking. When Rorty visited Queen's in January of 1986, I was able to witness this effect on my own graduate students—one of whom mocked my earlier adulation by christening Rorty "St. Dick."

My last contact with Rorty was in 2003, when I interviewed him for this journal. Happily, nothing had changed. In responding to my questions he was most concerned to prompt rethinking rather than to push his own views. I thought this to be an incredibly enviable philosophical selflessness. In philosophy, where egos tend to balloon and argument too often is self-serving, Richard Rorty offered the fruits of his thinking, not as final decrees but as invitations to reflect, to reconsider, to explore; he strove to keep the conversation going. It is incumbent on those of us who admired Rorty to keep the conversation going. That is what will best serve his memory.