Ph.D. Dissertation Theses

Antipodean Conversations:

Rhetorical Strategies of Discursive Authority in Richard Rorty's Metaphilosophy and Political Thought

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1. Subject and objectives the dissertation

My dissertation focuses on the work of Richard Rorty, one of the most influential and most debated contemporary philosophers. Rorty is best-known for his revival of American pragmatism and his pervasive critique of analytic philosophy, but he is also a renowned detractor of all forms of metaphysical, foundationalist and essentialist thinking. His critical reflection, however, extends far beyond the realm of disciplinary philosophy: his oeuvre comprises publications on a wide range of subjects such as political theory, historiography, literary criticism, and also on less typically academic topics like terrorism, human rights, or evolutionary biology. This multidisciplinary disposition can be ascribed to his conception of philosophy as an ongoing conversation, and the philosopher as a "Socratic intermediary,"[1] a public intellectual conversant with several kinds of language games, practicing a kind of interdisciplinary cultural criticism. At a general level, the dissertation concentrates on this "Socratic" aspect of his work, and investigates certain rhetorical mechanisms operative in his neopragmatist discourse.

My main contention is that despite Rorty's professed anti-authoritarian persuasion and overtly emancipatory endeavors, we can read his texts as *performatively* evincing certain rhetorical strategies, which appear to aim at maintaining the discursive authority of his own radically antiessentialist idiom. In four chapters, I identify and discuss four closely interrelated rhetorical strategies, which can be glossed as (1) "conversation"; (2) "irony"; (3) "appropriation"; and (4) "exclusion." The former two are Rorty's own terms, the latter two are my designations. The whole of my argument is thematized by the apparent conflict brought about by Rorty's simultaneous valorization of "conversation" and "irony."[2] In contrast to received critical opinion, the claim I will defend through the dissertation is that these two rhetorical elements function in a complementary fashion in Rorty's discourse, constituting a *consistent* metaphilosophical and political standpoint. I

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[1] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.* Princeton: Princetion UP, 1979. (317)

[2] Rorty's critics—for instance, Nancy Fraser, Jo Burrows, Thomas McCarthy, and Frank Lentricchia—object that the notion of conversation is all too vague to have any substantial consequence to philosophical discourse or political practice, and that his championing of private idiosyncrasy potentially propagates a kind of dissident irrationality, which not only blots out the ideal of conversation, but is also incompatible with his professed commitment to liberal democratic values.

also claim that this consistency hints at a surreptitious authoritative intent taking shape in the guise of Rorty's emancipatory rhetoric.

Through the metaphorics of "conversation," first deployed in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (264ff), Rorty stresses the importance of unbounded communication both among academic disciplines and in political practice. "Irony," on the other hand, argues for the value of idiosyncratic redescription, relating to such key notions of Rorty's philosophy as "abnormal discourse" or "strong poetry," which function both as vehicles of cultural progress and as quasi-poetic means of private self-fashioning. Conversation, in Rorty's view, can serve as a model for antifoundationalist discourse: conversations proceed without theoretical grounding or the control of a formalized discipline, while they require that ideas and arguments be formulated in terms intelligible to all participating interlocutors. On the other hand, irony—in its specifically Rortyan sense—requires a capacity to invent novel metaphors, formulate hitherto unimaginable patterns of thought, reveal or establish unforeseen relations. These "idiosyncrasies" can either be enlisted for the purpose of the social, cultural, political or scientific advancement of a community, or be so thoroughly "privatized" that they remain valueless or unintelligible to anyone but their inventor. In short, while conversation calls for the ability and willingness to come to an agreement on the rules of the language game being played, redescription in idiosyncratic terms aims to be incommensurate with all extant language games.

Adopting Thomas Kuhn's terminology, conversation presupposes "normal discourse," in that interlocutors have to cover a large amount of common ground, that is, to rely on in-place discursive norms to secure the potential of mutual understanding. Novel redescriptions, by contrast, constitute what Rorty—patterned on Kuhn's notion of "revolutionary science"—calls "abnormal discourse," which privileges idiosyncrasy and innovativeness over consensus. Rorty repeatedly declares his disdain for the stasis of uncritical consensus and the potential emergence of an oppressive discourse, which might result from normal discourse, while commending the energizing and emancipatory potentials of abnormal discourse. Nonetheless, the burden of my argument is that what underlies Rorty's argumentative strategies is, in fact, a "normalizing" intent, which he keeps effacing by his blatant endorsement of "abnormal" discourses.

Discussing Rorty's conversational metaphorics in the first chapter, I argue that not only does he refrain from the kind of rhetorical invention he associates with abnormal discourse, but also seeks to redescribe complex philosophical and theoretical abstractions as well as idiosyncratic rhetorical configurations in his own pragmatic terms. Thus, what his redescription aims at in such cases is just the reverse of poetic innovation: it acquires a demystifying function, its purpose being to make philosophical problems cast in highly specialized terminologies available to a wider circle of interlocutors than that delimited by the boundaries of a professionalized academic discipline. This endeavor is entirely compatible with the ideal of furthering interdisciplinary/interdiscursive communication through making the conversational space open to a diverse array of disciplines/discourses, which, however, require a certain basis of "normalcy" (strictly in the Kuhnian sense) if mutual understanding is to be achieved.

This normalizing tendency harmonizes with Rorty's liberal democratic persuasion. Besides the right to unrestrained communication being one of the central values of all liberal democracies, he repeatedly emphasizes that democratic politics do not require abstract philosophical or theoretical grounding. Instead of elaborate theories, what is required for achieving and maintaining democracy is a thoroughly practice-oriented disposition, which necessitates a widely comprehensible common language in which to articulate and negotiate political needs and interests—in other words, democratic politics at its best must be normal discourse. Furthermore, the primacy of the normal also comports with a key concept of Rorty's moral philosophy, according to which our moral duty consists not in discovering an underlying metaphysical essence in the other, but finding what we have in common, thereby strengthening our sense of solidarity. This can be achieved through a conscious enlargement of our community by positing a large basis of "we-intentions," which, in turn, can be accomplished by engaging ourselves in as many conversations as we can.

The significance of Rorty's imputing political and moral primacy to broad-based cultural conversation is apparent when examined alongside his advocacy of abnormal modes of discourse. As long as abnormal discourse is to be intelligible, as long as it is to convey beliefs and be mediated via language, its discursive operation is permitted at the cost of empowering a linguistic community, which constantly monitors "abnormal"

utterances. Abnormal discourse, in other words, can be abnormal only to the extent that the normal discourse of the given community allows it to be. In Rorty's economy, therefore, the radical otherness and the potentially subversive content of abnormal discourses are safely kept under the control of communal surveillance.

In the second chapter, I discuss Rorty's concept of irony as an entailment of the latent authoritative purport underlying his conversational trope. I claim that Rortyan "ironism"—despite the putative subversive/liberating function associated with it[3]—can be viewed as a means of discursive control, which serves to keep the conversational space safe for normalcy. I discern two senses in which the notion of irony, on Rorty's hands, functions as a means of control: it can denote (1) his radical nominalism (linguistic antiessentialism), which enables his discursive operation to be kept at a constant meta-level; and (2) an entirely privatized way of self-fashioning, which, by the same token, keeps the "private ironist" barred from entering "public" forums of cultural/political conversation. In the first sense, irony acquires traits reminiscent of the Socratic method. "Private irony," in its turn, can be interpreted as marking out the limits of publicly acceptable discourse, and as such part and parcel of Rorty's normalizing intent. In this sense, the operative term is "private," rather than "irony," which can be applied to any discourse or utterance that harbors potential dangers to the given normal discourse.

In the third and fourth chapters, I examine Rorty's normalizing argumentative strategies at work in specific metaphilosophical and political contexts by focusing on two discourses that he has extensively reflected on: Derridean deconstruction and religion respectively. The common denominator between the two discourses is Rorty's much debated claim that certain forms of abnormal discourse (such as deconstruction) and certain individual beliefs (such as religious faith) may be instrumental in one's private self-perfection, but are to be rendered irrelevant—and even potentially detrimental—to "public" (political, institutional, academic, etc.) practices. I will examine the curious ambiguity that inhabits Rorty's rhetoric in his writings on deconstruction and religion, which results from a constant attempt to poise between the liberal compulsion to accommodate both of them in discursive space, and the pragmatic urge to marginalize

[3] Especially in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.

them on account of their implicit or explicit metaphysical/essentialistic content. The rhetoric of endorsement, thus, masks a coercive attempt at banishment.

In the former case, Rorty endorses Derridean discourse as an example of "private irony" (a paradigm case of abnormal discourse), but, by the same token, plays down the philosophical (and potentially political) significance of deconstruction. He suggests, moreover, that deconstructive rhetoric is highly abstract and overstated for an efficacious critique of metaphysics. Thus, Rorty's pragmatic/normalizing interpretation of deconstruction obtains a quasi-political edge besides the more evident metaphilosophical one. Rorty's intention can be revealed to have a power-laden undercurrent to it, in that he renders the critical function of deconstruction inconsequential, while surreptitiously *appropriating* that very function as a pragmatist monopoly.

In the case of religion, we can observe the same power-laden argument taking shape, devised in more overtly political terms. Despite his repeatedly professed atheism, not only does Rorty render religion acceptable as a form of private self-perfection, but he also denies the epistemic inadequacy of religious faith in the face of the alleged supremacy and universality of post-Enlightenment rationality. He stipulates, nonetheless, that religiously conceived arguments had best be *excluded* from public discourses, whereby he reinstates the distinction between faith and reason, where the latter reappears in the guise of the pragmatized normal discourse of secularized democracies.

The main title of the dissertation is adopted from the second chapter of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where he adduces a short science fiction tale to illustrate an argument he advances against the philosophy of mind. The "Antipodeans" are imaginary extraterrestrial humanoids, with a culture much like our own. They cultivate a discipline which can be referred to as "philosophy," but their philosophical vocabulary entirely dispenses with the notion of "mind." When analytic philosophers from Earth visit their planet, the attempted philosophical dialogue between Earthlings and Antipodeans fails, due to the analyticians' unwillingness to accept the fact that there *can* be persons living without minds, as a result of which they insist on redescribing the natives in the terms their analytic vocabulary.

"Antipodean conversations" can be read as "failed conversations," preemptively—and none the less ironically—undercutting Rorty's concluding statements

in the very same book, where he argues for the moral duty of the philosopher to sustain conversation. The tale, willy-nilly, becomes an illustration of how communicational impasse occurs in an attempted conversation where one interlocutor tries to redescribe the other in the terms of his/her vocabulary, being convinced of its discursive supremacy. Besides being an imaginative jibe at some of the basic tenets of analytic philosophy, this illustration, on a more general reading, also points up questions about the interrelatedness of communication, ethics, and authority, which are precisely those aspects of Rorty's philosophy that my discussion aims to probe.

2. Methods employed in the dissertation

Although the thesis focuses on the work of a prominent philosopher, the argument I deploy is not, strictly speaking, a *philosophical* argument: it is not my intention to analyze or adjudicate substantive conceptual issues related to Rorty's work by way of the analytic tradition, Continental philosophy, or pragmatism. Neither do I aim at a comprehensive representation of his philosophical thought, thus the dissertation can by no means be regarded as a contribution to the history of contemporary philosophy. Rather, it offers a tendentious reading of his thought, delimited by a specific set of problems. For this reason, my approach is necessarily "angled," and, perforce, fails to span the whole range of themes and ideas associated with Rorty's vast oeuvre. Furthermore, the dissertation takes the form of a critique, but it does not aim to contradict or offer a corrective to Rorty's overall philosophical position. On the contrary, both the logic and the rhetoric of my argument are determined by my fundamental accord with the basic assumptions of his neopragmatism, especially with regard to its antiessentialistic traits. In this sense, I intend to offer a *Rortyan* reading of Rorty, in an attempt to pick up the language he speaks as a public intellectual, rather than a professional philosopher.

In my analysis, I draw on a wide range of Rorty's texts, written in different periods of his long writing career. My main sources are his two monographs, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), the four volumes of his *Philosophical Papers* (1991-2007), two collections of his writings,

Consequences of Pragmatism (1982), *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999), his study of Leftist thought, *Achieving Our Country* (1998), as well as papers, essays, and debates, and interviews published in various journals and anthologies. My reading of Rorty's texts conceptually takes a certain deconstructive slant, but it does not employ the rhetorical strategies associated with poststructuralist methods of close reading.

Since the notion of conversation is pivotal to my thesis, the representation of various debates which took place between Rorty and his fellow-philosophers, or theoreticians (notably, Hilary Putnam, Barry Allen, Christopher Norris) gain central importance. There is one subchapter in the dissertation, though, which is spent discussing an exchange not directly related to Rorty's work: a conversation between Stanley Fish and Richard J. Neuhaus, where the former—on account of the proximity of their antifoundationalist positions—functions as a "stand-in" for Rorty.

3. Results of the dissertation

The contributive arguments of the thesis can be summed up in the following four blocks:

(1) I claim that the metaphorics of "conversation" and "irony" can be interpreted as complementary elements of Rortyan discourse, adding up to a consistent metaphilosophical and political position. I also claim that Rorty's conversational penchant entails "normal" discursive operation in the Kuhnian sense, where normalcy is a function of the empowerment of a community which legitimates the consensus underlying the given discourse. Since the rhetorical mechanisms of Rorty's own discourse point towards a conversational/normalizing penchant, we can regard his deployment of irony as a means of control whereby the "normality" of the given conversation can be safeguarded.

(2) I argue that in philosophy the adoption of the conversational mode leads to a "deprofessionalized," demotic discourse which dispenses with distinctive disciplinary traits. Thus, Rorty's aspiration for the "conversation of mankind" can be interpreted as a yearning for a normal discourse as broadly based as possible, whose openness secures it

against isolating itself in (quasi-)metaphysical metaphorics. My further contention is that insofar as Rorty deploys irony in his own discourse, it does not serve the purpose of private self-fashioning, but, rather, that of taking a metaposition from which to adjudicate other discourses.

(3) Through examining Rorty's interpretation of Derrida, I touch upon the issue of intertheoretical commensurability, through the construal of the relationship between deconstruction and pragmatism. Although the two philosophical positions seem to be united by their common antimetaphysical outlook, their constitutive rhetorics rift an unbridgeable chasm between them. Furthermore, I argue that Rorty's radically nominalist (Wittgensteinan-Davidsonian) conception of language makes him incapable of assimilating a deconstructive mode of analysis, and it is highly problematic to apply such analysis to his own texts. What we can bear witness to in Rorty's readings of Derrida is a kind of "theoretical stalemating," due to the fact that practitioners of either theoretical position look upon the other as embodying a relapse into metaphysics.

(4) At a more general level, the dissertation targets issues related to Rorty's rhetoric. The initial question that was to give rise to my main argument is: to what extent is the deceptive transparence of Rorty's prose constitutive of his substantive philosophical outlook? One of the distinctive traits of his texts proves to be his "flair for redescription," the ability to recontextualize the most diverse kinds of discourses in relation to his neopragmatism. His characteristic strategy is to inscribe the object of his redescription in his own pragmatic narrative without regard to the extent to which s/he could identify with the basic assumptions or the rhetorical constitution of that narrative. The discursive authority I ascribe to Rorty is a function of his apparent certainty about the right(ful)ness of the antiessentialist premises underlying his redescriptions. As a paradigmatic ironist, he may have doubts about whether or not he uses the right vocabulary, but it seems these doubts never overwrite the convictions formulated *within* that vocabulary.

4. Related publications

1. “In the Wake of the Lost Grail: Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* as Anti-*Parsifal*?" *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (*HJEAS*) 4.1-2 (1998): 307-331.

2. "The Requiem of Irony: On Leonard Bernstein's Kaddish Symphony." Proceedings of "Multicultural Challenge in American Culture/Hemingway Centennial." Eger: Eszterházy Károly Teacher Training College, 1999. 54-63.

3. “Tangled Hierarchies: Postmodern Fiction vs. Deconstruction." *HJEAS* 6.2 (2000): 91-110.

4. “Az elveszett Grál nyomában, avagy Thomas Pynchon anti-Parsifalja: A 49-es tétel kiáltása.” *Filológiai Közlöny* 41.3-4 (2000): 105-126.

5. “An Interview with Jonathan Culler.” *HJEAS* 8.2 (2002): 59-71.

6. “Kód és Rettentés: Csató Péter” [Code and fright] *Hat vita* [Six Debates]. Ed. Miklós Zelei et al. Budapest: Platón, 2005. 282-287.

Awaiting publication

“Sacredness and Interpretability: The Case of Melville’s ‘Bartleby the Scrivener.’” *Imaginaires* 13 (University of Reims, France)