

Afterword

Mary V. Rorty

He read a lot, that man. He started early, and he kept it up.

Seeing where it took him, it's easy to suspect that he persisted in philosophy after his (very) early years at Hutchins' University of Chicago because, of all possible majors, it was the one least likely to restrict the range of things he could justify reading. But he read not just out of antiquarian affection for the best that has been thought and said—but also with constant attention to the implications of what he read for our time, our moment in history. And he read—and wrote—because of his conviction that words matter, that our language is our world, and that by our words we can change our world.

I don't think anyone ever doubted that he had in fact read all the people whose names fill the pages of his writings, and the scrawling marginalia in his library attest to the attention he gave their work -- whether or not his construals of what they meant were uncontroversial. In these three lectures, for instance, he drops 27 names in the first lecture, 37 in the third, and a resounding 42 names in the second—although, to soften the blow, it's usually the same names in each. One of the nice things about his cavalier division of the history of philosophy into heroes and villains, and one of the things that helps his international reputation, is that if you aren't familiar with what separates Pierce and Dewey, or the different priorities of Russell and Wittgenstein, you may nonetheless appreciate his view of what divides Husserl from Heidegger, and thus get a sense of the party for which he wants your allegiance. It is often with American pragmatism, under some – his? – description—a commodious tent into which he was inclined to drag many contemporaries who might have had little inclination to enter it voluntarily.

What strikes me about the Page-Barbours—and indeed about much of his later work—was his vision of philosophy as one form of literature, a novel, rather than a mere biography, about the life of some ideas, tracing the convoluted growth and transformations of concepts over the course of time. In the third lecture he finally gave me a source – Hegel -- for one of his deepest convictions: that “philosophy is, at its best, its time held in thought.” To hold late twentieth century philosophy in thought means to acknowledge its ancestry and its variety—and to suggest a direction for its future development, as well. Ambitious? Hmm. Controversial? I'd hope so. It is, after all, our disagreements that keep us reading our peers and writing about them.

Revisiting the Page-Barbour lectures Richard gave at the University of Virginia in the early years of the twenty-first century evokes pleasant memories of the time the family spent in Charlottesville—civility, collegiality, and the kind of intellectual stimulation and freedom that only a great university can provide. He was surprised, I think -- even puzzled -- by the impact of the publication of *Mirror of Nature* in 1979

on some of his most valued colleagues and friends; why, and how, could they take this Odyssey of an idea so personally? The offer of a University Professorship from UVA in 1981 offered a safe harbor of sorts; he could go to two department meetings (or neither); anything the English department didn't like they could blame on the influence of the Philosophy department, and vice versa. One of his heroes (second only to PG Wodehouse), the British humorist Stephen Potter, recommended in his book *Gamesmanship* that the wise man would be a member not of one club, but of two, so that he could "be the other in the other"—wear a beret to the Guards, a topee to the Arts. A trans-departmental University Professorship, he figured, was the best thing since the invention of tenure. His post-emeritus move to Stanford at the turn of the Century offered many of the same advantages.

Some of his most enduring friendships --and mine-- were formed in our decades in Charlottesville. The philosophy department and women's studies welcomed the participation in their programs of a faculty wife; the medical school, to my amusement, was offering a Masters in Clinical Ethics that encouraged philosophers to add some practical experience to their theory. The idea that philosophy could and should intervene in the world--in as many ways as possible, rather than only as a cloistered academic pursuit—was an idea dear to any Rortyan heart.

There is a certain justice in titling this collection of Rorty's Page-Barbour lectures "Philosophy as Poetry." For a man as logocentric as Richard, it is easy to think in genres, and certainly he considered philosophy as one literary genre among others--as are physics, or mathematics, or medicine, all representing ways of finding (or imposing) order on the chaos of the world around us, so we could talk about it to each other. His last publication was a short piece for *Poetry* magazine, titled "The Fire of Life." Speaking of the pleasure he took in the poems he had consigned to memory, he wrote that he wished he had spent more of his reading time stocking his head with verses to which he could turn at leisure. If philosophy is poetry, then perhaps, when changing how you describe things changes the world, poetry is also philosophy.