Postmodern Liberal Literature: Richard Rorty's "Liberal Ironists"

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Summary

This article explores the notion of postmodern liberal literature through the filter of the political theory of Richard Rorty. It is generally assumed that the rival claims to validity of liberalism and postmodernism are mutually contradictory and therefore irreconcilable. Rorty's work, however, is characterised by the attempt to accommodate the most valuable insights of postmodern theory within the political ideals of liberalism. For Rorty, it is perfectly possible to be both a political liberal and a postmodern sceptic, or "ironist", at the same time: hence his coinage of the term "liberal ironist". Rorty argues further that the figure of the liberal ironist is best represented by writers of literature, in the narrow sense of poets, dramatists, and especially novelists. Ironist writers are, in Rorty's view, primarily interested in the *private* goals of self-creation and redescription within the context of an acute awareness of the contingency of their belief system. Nevertheless, in so far as their work also concerns itself imaginatively with issues of human pain and suffering, it will have utility within the *public* sphere of political action, and so influence moral progress. Even if Rorty's ambitious project is ultimately unsuccessful as a political theory per se, many of the insights which he provides may nonetheless be shown to have great value and significance for contemporary cultural and literary studies. To demonstrate this, the article will consider a number of writers, from a variety of backgrounds, whose work displays the characteristics, on Rorty's terms, of liberal ironism.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die idee van postmoderne liberale letterkunde deur die filter van die politieke teorie van Richard Rorty. Dit word algemeen aanvaar dat die wedywerende eise tot geldigheid van liberalisme en postmodernisme wederkerig teenstrydig en dus onverenigbaar is. Maar Rorty se werk word gekarakteriseer deur die poging om die waardevolste insigte van postmoderne teorie binne die politieke ideale van liberalisme aan te pas. Vir Rorty is dit heel moontlik om 'n politieke liberaal en 'n postmoderne twyfelaar, of "ironis", gelyktydig te wees, vandaar sy skepping van die uitdrukking "liberale ironis". Rorty argumenteer verder dat die figuur van die liberale ironis die beste verteenwoordig word deur skrywers van letterkunde, in die eng sin van digters, toneelskrywers, en veral romanskrywers. Ironistiese skrywers is, volgens sy mening, hoofsaaklik geïnteresseerd in die *privaat*doeleindes van selfskepping en herbeskrywing binne die konteks van 'n skerpsinnige bewusheid van die toevalligheid van hul geloofsisteem. Nietemin, vir

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sover as hul werk ook op verbeeldingryke wyse vrae van menslike pyn en lyding aanspreek, sal dit nuttig wees binne die gebied van *openbare* politieke aksie, en dus morele groei beïnvloed. Selfs al sou Rorty se ambisieuse projek uiteindelik faal as 'n politieke teorie per se, kan baie van die insigte wat hy verskaf nogtans van groot waarde en betekenis vir moderne kulturele en literêre studies wees. Om dit te demonstreer, sal hierdie artikel verskeie skrywers, van verskillende agtergronde, wie se werk die kenmerke van Rorty se "liberale ironisme" toon, oorweeg.

Introduction

It is generally assumed that the rival claims to validity of liberalism and postmodernism are mutually contradictory and therefore irreconcilable. For liberal political philosophers, postmodern political theory represents a systematically incoherent, irrationalist and ultimately non-serious body of thought. Postmodernists, in their turn, regard liberal democratic theory as deriving from an unfounded conception of reason and the individual self which is unprovably essentialist, universalist, and hypostatic. And that is where the conversation, such as it is, usually rests. A notable exception, however, is the American philosopher, Richard Rorty, whose work is characterised by the attempt to accommodate the most valuable insights of postmodern theory within the political ideals of liberalism. For Rorty, it is perfectly possible to be both a political liberal and a postmodern sceptic, or "ironist", at the same time: hence his coinage of the term, "liberal ironist", to describe someone who has successfully managed to include these two apparently exclusive theoretical traditions within his or her system of belief. Even more than that, Rorty goes on to argue that the figure of the liberal ironist is perhaps best represented not by philosophers or political scientists, as one might have expected, but rather by writers of literature, in the narrow sense of poets, dramatists, and especially novelists. Ironist writers are, in Rorty's view, primarily interested in the *private* goals of self-creation and redescription within the context of an acute awareness of the contingency of their belief system. Nevertheless, in so far as their work also concerns itself imaginatively with issues of human pain and suffering, it will have utility within the *public* sphere of political action, and so influence moral progress, far more powerfully than the abstruse theories of political philosophers ever could. Rorty is a difficult and at times elusive writer and for that reason perhaps his work is not generally very well known. The purpose of this article is to bring his thought to the attention of literary scholars who have been attracted by the possibilities of both political liberalism and post-modernism, but who have been troubled by the seemingly insurmountable discontinuities between the two. Even if Rorty's ambitious project is ultimately unsuccessful as a political theory per se, many of the insights which he provides into what is here termed postmodern liberal literature may nonetheless be shown to have great value and significance for contemporary cultural and literary studies.

As a way of contextualising Rorty's viewpoint, the article will begin by adumbrating the divergences between postmodern and liberal political theory by contrasting the polarised positions of two of their leading proponents, Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, respectively. Given the complexity of Rorty's thought, the article will then offer a fairly detailed explication of his theoretical position, especially as developed in his most important work, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989). The article will then move on to consider a number of writers, from a variety of backgrounds, who might well be described, on Rorty's terms, as liberal ironists. These are writers who display in their work both an awareness of the thorough-going contingency of knowledge and yet, simultaneously, a heightened sensitivity to the pain of others. This article will suggest that Rorty's theory provides a way of coming to terms with these seemingly inconsistent and even contradictory elements in such work. The writers selected for discussion in this article, though it is not possible to do more than glance at their work, include such diverse figures as the poet Philip Larkin, the dramatist Athol Fugard, the novelists Fay Weldon, Joseph Heller, Ayi Kwei Armah, and J.M. Coetzee, and the film-maker, Alejandro González Iñárritu.

Postmodernism and Liberalism

The word "postmodernism" is of course a blanket term of convenience designed to cover a diffuse range of thinkers, which would include most notably Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.[1] Whatever the differences between these thinkers, and there are many, they nevertheless have in common a rejection of the liberal philosophical tradition which views human beings as essentially autonomous, rational individuals whose purpose in forming political communities is to advance the cardinal liberal values of individual liberty and moral equality under the rule of law. This article will not concern itself with the first three of these theorists, since their work, in various ways, refuses to validate any regulative or normative bases for practical political action. Suffice it to say that the supposedly apolitical nature of such postmodernist thought is at best irrelevant to political theory and at worst dangerous, in that it implicitly sanctions, through its emphasis on the indeterminacy of meaning, the abuse of human rights through the exercise of arbitrary power wielded by

1. For the purposes of this article, the term, "postmodernism", will be utilised in its broadest sense. The aim is not to offer a comprehensive understanding of postmodernism as such but only to differentiate the general postmodernist perspective from that of liberalism.

totalitarian regimes.[2] The article will take as its focus instead the work of Michel Foucault since his work ostensibly presents the most pertinently *political* critique of liberal democratic society and is thus the form of postmodernism which Rorty himself takes most seriously.

The fundamental purpose which runs throughout Foucault's work is the "unmasking" of what he regards as the multiple ways in which modern, supposedly liberal, society, far more than pre-modern societies, functions to constrict and destroy freedom and social cohesion. Rather than constructing an overarching political theory, Foucault focuses instead on the "micro-practices" of society to show at a localised level how "power is exercised from innumerable points" (1980: 94). At this level of analysis, Foucault certainly offers a useful critique of the often hidden or unrecognised ways in which freedom may be curtailed in modern social structures and institutions. If this were all that Foucault were saying, then the debate would turn on whether it were possible to reform liberal institutions so that the manifest benefits of modern democratic societies sufficiently outweighed the particular limitations on freedom which are inevitably imposed. Liberal theorists naturally believe that liberal society is corrigible and that it is indeed continually ameliorating itself in a progressively emancipatory direction. As Rorty maintains:

> I think that contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement – an improvement which can mitigate the dangers Foucault sees. Indeed, my hunch is that Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs. J.S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word. Discoveries about who is being made to suffer can be left to the workings of a free press, free universities, and enlightened public opinion – enlightened, for example, by books like *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish* ....
>
> (Rorty 1989: 63-64)

For Foucault, however, like Nietzsche and Marx before him, liberal society is beyond the possibility of reform and therefore some sort of total revolution is needed. However, and this is the first serious limitation to his work, Foucault offers no concrete alternatives to liberal democracy; in fact, he refuses even to consider any practical solutions at all. As he has maintained, "to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present one" (1977: 230). In the view of Michael Walzer, a liberal political theorist who has great admiration for much of Foucault's work, this refusal

2. A comprehensive discussion of these issues is provided by the various contributors to the first in the series of Oxford Amnesty Lectures, entitled *Freedom and Interpretation* (Johnson 1992).

to "reiterate the regulative principles with which we might set things right" renders Foucault's critique of state power incoherent:

> The point is rather that one can't even be downcast, angry, grim, indignant, sullen, or embittered *with reason* unless one inhabits some social setting and adopts, however tentatively and critically, its codes and categories. Or unless, and this is much harder, one constructs a new setting and proposes new codes and categories. Foucault refuses to do either of these things, and that refusal, which makes his genealogies so powerful and so relentless, is also the catastrophic weakness of his political theory.
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> (Walzer 1986: 67)[3]

Even more than this, however, Foucault's political standpoint seems unintelligible in the light of the fact that his conceptual model is based on a fundamentally anti-Enlightenment attitude in which it is claimed that the individual self has no substantive meaning at all. As he asserts in *Power/ Knowledge,*

> the individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike …. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals.
>
> (Foucault 1981: 98)

For liberal theorists, it is Foucault's attempt to provide strategies for resisting power while at the same time repudiating any normative basis for such resistance that renders his political vision fatally self-contradictory. As David Hoy, following the work of Hilary Putnam and others, exasperatedly points out, "Foucault's position is self-refuting, for if every cultural standpoint, including Foucault's, is irrational, then there is no standpoint from which Foucault could assert that every cultural standpoint is irrational. On such a view asserting or denying anything becomes nothing more than crazy behaviour" (1986: 21).

Or, as Jürgen Habermas (1986: 108) more formally puts it, Foucault "contrasts his critique of power with the 'analysis of truth' in such a fashion that the former becomes deprived of the normative yardsticks that it would have to borrow from the latter". For this reason, Habermas rejects

3. At best, it might be concluded, as Linda Hutcheon (1989: 168) does, that postmodern writing such as Foucault's is "politically ambivalent, doubly encoded as both complicity and critique", whereas in the view of Hans Bertens (2001: 144), postmodernism "is fundamentally apolitical because it always sits on the fence, hanging on to a both/and position where radical either/or choices are politically necessary".

Foucault's political theory as "presentistic, relativistic, cryptonormative" (1985: 276).[4]

For the vast majority of mainstream liberal political philosophers, particularly Anglo-American theorists such as the towering figure of John Rawls,[5] postmodern political theory is a non-issue which is simply rejected out of hand or ignored.[6] Habermas is one philosopher, however, who has constructed a sustained, detailed and meticulously argued defence of Enlightenment humanism against the postmodernist challenge, especially that of Foucault (see Habermas 1985: 238-265 and pp. 266-293).[7] It is impossible to do justice to the complexity of Habermas's political theory in just a few lines, but a very brief outline may serve not only to contrast his thought with that of Foucault's, but also to suggest the conceptual gulf between contemporary liberal and postmodern philosophy more generally. Having begun as a proponent of "Critical Theory" as developed by the Frankfurt School, he has steadily moved away from Marxism in the direction of constitutional democracy to the extent that he has come to be regarded as one of the most important living liberal philosophers (see Lessnoff 1999: 5).[8] Habermas has forcefully argued that human rationality need not have to be founded (as postmodernism avers) on metaphysical notions of the Subject, but may nonetheless assert a universal validity

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4. As John McGowan (2002: 87) observes to the extent that writers like Foucault (and Derrida) focus "on the violence done to the other out of intolerance of difference, the other is going to be located, to some extent, at the level of the individual (the victim) who suffers that violence. And here postmodernism comes very close (despite all its protests to the contrary) to espousing liberal notions of individual rights and pluralism". See also McLennan (1995).

5. There is no scope in the present article to attend to Rawls's theory, but an excellent overview of his life's work may be found in Catherine Audard's recent study, *John Rawls* (2007).

6. In the voluminous amount of theoretical work on liberalism conducted in the twenty-odd years since the fall of communism, any reference to postmodern theorists like Foucault is almost entirely absent.

7. The debate between Habermas and Foucault was unfortunately cut short by Foucault's premature and untimely death, though, as Ian Hacking (1986: 235-240) suggests, there were indications in Foucault's last, unfinished works in progress that he was moving towards a more normative ethical position.

8. This is already evident in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985) but emerges clearly in his more recent work, most notably *Between Facts and Norms* (1996).

through a "philosophy of intersubjectivity" where truth is attained by means of "communicative reason", that is, by means of the concept of an "ideal speech situation", characterised by "domination-free communication", which must eventually lead to "discursive consensus" based purely on "the force of the better argument". More particularly, this process may justifiably be applied to the domain of political morality, where, if continued long enough, such ideal discourses ultimately constitute a procedure that generates moral truth, or true moral norms, or true norms of justice. Habermas believes that his "discourse ethics" differs from Rawls's theory of justice (see Rawls 1971) in that it is dialogic rather than monologic and hence more binding on the participatory members of society. In the end, however, Habermas and Rawls come to share very closely a vision of the ideal society as a liberal constitutional democracy, characterised by freedom and openness, in which debate and critique are nor merely tolerated but actively encouraged, and in which there is a high degree of political participation and deliberation on the part of the citizenry.

Both Habermas and Rawls have been criticised in their turn for positing an idea of the subject as implausibly antecedent to the effects of socialisation, and for basing their theories on idealised situations which have no experiential basis in reality: Rawls's "original position"; Habermas's "ideal speech community". As such, their theories have been accused of resting on foundational assumptions which cannot be demonstrated, and which therefore lack any universal moral compulsion. And if that is the case, postmodernist critics would aver, then their theories are just as relativistic and unconvincing as any other.[9]

Even so terse a delineation as this ought to confirm that there are indeed enormous conceptual differences between liberalism and postmodernism, which has generally hindered any meaningful debate between their various advocates. Having established these polarities, however, it is possible to turn to a consideration of the political theory of Richard Rorty and to his provocative attempt to include a number of the central ideas of postmodern theory within a liberal political perspective.

Postmodern Liberalism

Although Richard Rorty declares himself, in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989: 65), to be in fundamental political agreement with Jürgen Habermas, it is clear that he also has great sympathy for the philosophical endeavours of Michel Foucault. Conversely, while he differs quite sharply

9. To be fair, both Rawls (1993) and Habermas (1996) have sought to refine their theories in the light of these charges, but a consideration of these developments lies beyond the scope of the present discussion.

with Foucault's illiberal politics, he also suggests that there is something lacking in Habermas's philosophical outlook. Through the development of his concept of liberal ironism, then, Rorty seeks to locate himself somewhere between these two disparate positions. As he puts it (1989: 61), "Michel Foucault is an ironist who is unwilling to be a liberal, whereas Jürgen Habermas is a liberal who is unwilling to be an ironist". It is important to note, however, that Rorty is not seeking to "unite" liberalism and postmodernism, but only to see how certain aspects of postmodernism may be maintained within an overarching liberal political vision: his goal is "accommodation – not synthesis" (1989: 68).

In attempting this accommodation, the crucial move which Rorty makes is to draw a sharp distinction between the private sphere and the public sphere. He deliberately offers no philosophical justification for this move; nor does he maintain that such a distinction is acceptable to most people. His claim is simply that it is at least potentially possible for the kind of liberal ironist he has in mind to make this distinction in her/his own individual life. On Rorty's view, the private sphere is that arena of life where the individual carries out the endeavour of self-creation, pursuing personal autonomy and perfection in whatever way (s)he sees fit, without regard for the demands of society. The public sphere, on the other hand, is principally concerned with the social purpose of decreasing suffering and extending human solidarity. The two spheres are quite independent of each other, though they are not necessarily unrelated. For this reason, whereas Habermas regards anti-Enlightenment postmodernism as "destructive of social hope", Rorty sees "this line of thought as largely irrelevant to public life and to political questions. Ironist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics" (1989: 83).

In developing this position, Rorty builds on his earlier work, especially in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) where he demonstrated that the supposedly empirical foundations of philosophy and the natural sciences were in fact nothing more than linguistic assumptions. Once one acknowledges the ubiquity and relativity of language in knowledge construction (what Frederic Jameson (1972) termed "the prison-house of language") the only conclusion to draw is "that nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and that there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence" (1979: 178). In the light of such anti-foundationalist ideas, he then went on to develop in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) "a thorough-going pragmatist" conception of knowledge which focuses on what people do in coping with the world rather than on the impossible notion of "discovering the truth" (1982: 150-151). Given this pragmatist approach to epistemology, it was logical, then, that Rorty should eventually have sought to apply his theory explicitly to the domain of politics, initially in "Postmodernist

Bourgeois Liberalism" (1983) and then more substantially in the book with which this article is chiefly concerned, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989).

He begins his argument by reiterating his central differentiation between reality and truth, between the actual world and our attempted descriptions of it:

> We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.
>
> (Rorty 1989: 4-5)

On the basis of this distinction, Rorty develops his political theory, as the title of his book suggests, by detailing three key aspects of what he considers an ideal political perspective: contingency, irony and solidarity. He is concerned, firstly, to show how the contingency of language impacts on our understanding of all dimensions of human life. Most pertinently, what follows from an acceptance of the contingency of language is the necessary conclusion that all conceptions of the self and community are also merely contingent. In this, Rorty would agree with a number of postmodern thinkers that there can be no objective knowledge of a centre to the self, or an essence to humanity. Concomitantly, there can be no foundation for believing in the universal validity of any particular form of community, or socio-political organisation, including liberal democracy. If "the idea of truth as corresponding to reality" is replaced by the idea of truth as merely "what comes to be believed in the course of free and open encounters", then it is clear that such notions as democracy, individual liberty, and human rights are not the result of a discovery about the truth of human nature but "simply the fortunate happenstance creation of modern times" (1989: 68).

In view of the unmitigated contingency of human existence, Rorty describes someone who is fully aware of his or her condition as an "ironist", that is, someone "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" (1989: xv). The ironist is a person who accepts that there is no way ever to know objective reality and that all versions of the truth, including one's own, are just different linguistic descriptions, and there is no "neutral and universal meta-vocabulary" available to choose between them (p. 73). Ironists therefore have "radical and continuing doubts" about what they believe because the terms in which they describe the world and themselves are always subject to

change, or "redescription" (p. 74). Rorty concedes that in reality the majority of people will not be ironists but rather "commonsensical nonmetaphysicians" (p. 87) who simply accept the current version of reality as uncomplicatedly true, so that the ironists' profound scepticism will often lead them to feel alienated from society, and motivated to concentrate on their private visions rather than on public goals.

Now, the causal link between an awareness of contingency and the development of an ironist attitude is fairly clear and uncontroversial. What is rather less clear and more controversial is how Rorty relates these two ideas to the third of his key terms, that of solidarity. To do so, Rorty draws on the work of Judith Shklar, particularly in *Ordinary Vices* (1984), for his definition of liberals as "the people who think cruelty is the worst thing we do" (Rorty 1989: xv). By cruelty here, he means, generally speaking, causing "pain" and "suffering" to others, and more particularly, "humiliation", which is something unique to humans (p. 89). On this view, "the morally relevant definition of a person, a moral subject", is "something that can be humiliated" (p. 91). However, while many people might harbour the desire to alleviate others' pain, they usually base this desire on some religious or metaphysical belief system. Rorty's liberal ironists, by contrast, have eschewed such beliefs, and are therefore "people who include among [their] ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease" (p. xv). For liberal ironists, "human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth", for none exists, but rather "of sharing a common selfish hope – the hope that one's world; the little things around which one has woven into one's final vocabulary[10] – will not be destroyed" (p. 92).

Rorty offers no explanation for why one should not be cruel, or why one should be kind, or why one should not simply be indifferent to the suffering of others, because, given the contingency of belief, there can be no non-circular answer to these or indeed to any other moral questions. Instead, he merely asserts that what matters for liberal ironists is not trying to find a reason to care about suffering but rather making sure they "*notice* suffering when it occurs" (1989: 93). This aspect of Rorty's argument has been widely criticised from both sides of the theoretical divide: on the one hand he has been charged with promoting an irresponsible relativism in ethics, while on the other he has been accused of dishonestly smuggling in a kind of moral universalism through the back door. Even sympathetic liberal critics have felt that he gives such an attenuated view of moral motivation that he makes it hard to understand the nature of moral conduct at all (see

10. For Rorty (1989: 73), a person's "final vocabulary" is the "set of words which [human beings] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives". It is final not in the sense of being demonstrably true but rather because, if such words were challenged, the user would have no non-circular argumentative recourse; the words are "as far as one can go with language".

Guignon & Hiley 2003: 37-38).[11] But, in a sense, such criticisms miss the central point of Rorty's argument, which is not so much about the reasons for being a liberal ironist but rather the fact that it is perfectly possible to be both a liberal and an ironist at the same time. In making this point, Rorty refers to Isaiah Berlin's use of Joseph Schumpeter's remark at the conclusion of his famous essay, *Two Concepts of Liberty*: "to realise the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian" (Berlin in Rorty 1989: 46). In Rorty's terms, it is quite feasible to acknowledge the contingency of language, community and self, and yet simultaneously care about minimising the suffering of others. Even more pertinently, Rorty's further point is that it is liberal democratic society which provides the best basis for people to be liberals and/or ironists. The standard liberal institutions guarantee individuals the freedom for private ironism and self-creation, while the democratic process is concerned essentially with the lessening of pain and suffering at a public level. It is this characteristic separation of the private and public in democratic society which makes possible the idea of liberal ironism, or postmodern liberalism. As Rorty puts it,

> The view I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. But that solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, custom and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us".
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> (Rorty 1989: 192)

Postmodern Liberal Literature

Richard Rorty's work has generated an enormous amount of critical commentary, much of it overtly antagonistic (see the many examples provided and discussed in Brandom 2000; Malachowski 2002; Guignon & Hiley 2003). Part of the reason for this lies in his attempt to take both liberalism and postmodernism seriously: liberal critics find his emphasis on contingency and irony unsettling, while postmodern theorists regard his advocacy of human solidarity misplaced. A second reason is that he refuses to employ the traditional discourse of empirical philosophy, developing his

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11. Recent work on moral motivation suggests, in fact, that the issue is an extremely complex one, and that there is no straightforward explanation for why human beings choose to act altruistically (see Frankfurt 1999; Pettit 2001; Kelly 2005).

ideas instead in a remarkably light and elegantly conversational style, which makes his argument (he would no doubt prefer the term, "vocabulary") difficult to engage using the conventional tools of philosophical analysis.[12] His purpose, however, is not to construct the kind of meticulous, detailed political theory of, say, John Rawls or Jürgen Habermas, but rather "to suggest the possibility of a liberal utopia" (1989: xv) in much the same way that Robert Nozick once did – even the title of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* echoes the syntagmatic structure of Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974) – though he reaches very different conclusions. In so doing, and this is a third reason for the hostile reception of his work, he makes the pragmatic move of privileging politics above philosophy, and even more contentiously perhaps, of seeing literature and literary criticism as the chief conduits of political morality.

In Rorty's vision of postmodern liberal society, of a culture which is utterly historicist and nominalist, human solidarity is to be achieved not by philosophical enquiry but rather by the imagination: "the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people" (1989: xvi). And this is the task, he believes, for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the docudrama, the movie, the TV programme, but most especially the novel, which has "gradually, but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicle of moral change and progress" (1989: xvi). Ideally, then, the otiose theories of traditional philosophy would be supplanted by "narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other. More important, [this sort of culture] would regard the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process – an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth" (1989: xvi).

For Rorty, such fictional narratives fall roughly into two categories: the first, exemplified by George Orwell (he also mentions Dickens, Olive Schreiner and Richard Wright), "gives us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had not previously attended"; the second, represented by Nabakov (as well as the likes of Proust and Henry James) "gives us details about what sorts of cruelty we are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves" (1989: xvi).[13] Liberal

12. It would be an intriguing stylistic exercise to compare Rorty's breezy American manner with both Foucault's flamboyantly Gallic rhetoric and Habermas's relentlessly turgid Teutonic prose.

13. There is unfortunately no scope in this article to present Rorty's fascinating discussion of writers such as Proust, Nabakov and Orwell in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.

writers are particularly "good at" providing such details because "they specialize in thick description of the private and idiosyncratic" and because they are able to create "new words", new vocabularies, to represent these unfamiliar situations (p. 94).

From this it is clear that although a writer who is a liberal ironist is principally concerned with his or her self-creation in the private sphere, he or she nevertheless has utility in the public sphere, at the level of both individual development and social amelioration. Firstly, part of the reason, Rorty suggests, one reads novels is to explore the "self-images" which are presented in these narratives, and to consider "whether to adopt those images – to recreate ourselves, in whole or in part, in these people's image" (1989: 80). One experiments with these "alternative redescriptions" in the hopes of making "the best selves for ourselves that we can" (p. 80). Secondly, at the level of the wider community, Rorty takes Harold Bloom's conceptualisation of "the strong poet" from *The Anxiety of Influence* to describe a writer who is not merely frivolous but who influences society by being "the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages", because "changing the way we talk" changes "what we want to do and what we think we are" (p. 20). In a fundamental sense, the strong poet is the "hero" of a liberal ironist society because "it recognizes that it is what it is, has the morality it has, speaks the language it does, not because it approximates the will of God or the nature of man but because certain poets … of the past spoke as they did" (p. 61).

Given the cardinal importance of literature, it follows that the pre-eminent scholarly activity within the high culture of liberal ironist society is not theology, or science or philosophy but rather literary criticism. By "literary criticism", however, Rorty does not mean explicating "the real meaning of texts" or evaluating "literary merit", but introducing the reader to a wider range of narratives and of possible self-images than before and, through comparison and contextualisation, helping the reader to choose between alternatives (1989: 80). Or, perhaps, helping the reader dialectically to synthesise narratives which are prima facie antithetical and yet equally admirable in order to achieve that level of understanding which John Rawls would term "reflective equilibrium" (Rawls in Rorty 1989: 81). For these reasons, Rorty contends that literary critics serve as "moral advisers" not because they have special access to moral truth but by sheer virtue of the fact that they "have an exceptionally large range of acquaintance" with a diversity of books (pp. 80-81) and thus are able both to guide readers through the existing canon, and to help enlarge the canon in ways which make it "as rich and diverse as possible" (p. 81).

If many moral philosophers have been outraged by Rorty's elevation of literary criticism above traditional philosophical enquiry, there are others who have found the boldness of his vision "inspirational" (Bernstein 2003:

137).[14] However, in attempting, as a literary critic, to apply Rorty's understanding of postmodern liberalism to existing literature, it seems necessary to forge a distinction which Rorty himself does not make sufficiently clear in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. For a writer to be identified as a liberal ironist, he or she would presumably have to exhibit the qualities of both a liberal and an ironist. On this definition, then, writers such as Alan Paton, Harriet Beecher Stowe or Alexander Solzhenitsyn are clearly liberal writers who have produced influential novels of social conscience, but they could hardly be described as ironists in the sense of articulating a private sense of pervasive contingency. Conversely, writers such as John Barth, Jorge Luis Borges and Umberto Eco certainly project an ironist perspective in their work, but it would be difficult to regard such work as liberal in any obvious sense. It might equally be argued that, in an important sense, of the two writers Rorty selects for discussion, Orwell is more clearly liberal than ironist in his outlook, whereas Nabakov is rather more ironist than liberal. As such, it needs to be made clear that the compound concept of "liberal ironism" does not apply generically to all literature qua literature; nor can it be applied to all or even most contemporary writers. What the remainder of this article seeks to do, therefore, is to take Rorty's argument to a further level by suggesting a range of writers who might well be regarded quite specifically as liberal ironists in Rorty's terms. The purpose of this exercise is not merely to clarify some of Rorty's most important insights by means of concrete examples, but also to provide a way of reading a number of writers whose narrative vision has at times seemed clouded by the tension between a self-conscious ironic detachment on the one hand, and a concerned engagement with human suffering on the other. In considering the work of these writers, the aim is neither a definitive interpretation nor a rigid classification, but merely to suggest a new and potentially fruitful means for understanding them more fully.

Liberal Ironists

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty provides a reading of Philip Larkin's poem, "Continuing to Live" (1989: 23-26), to illuminate certain aspects of contingency and ironism, and Larkin certainly would seem to be one of those writers whose work is congenial to Rorty's project. The central and recurrent concerns in Larkin's oeuvre (in poems such as "Toads", "Mr Bleaney", "Afternoons", "Sad Steps", "The Old Fools", "Next, Please", "Ambulances", "The Building" and so on) are an awareness of the meaning-

14. Bernstein does go on to complain, however, that Rorty's theory lacks "pragmatic toughness and a concrete program for reform" and so is in danger of being read as "an empty rhetorical hand waving" (2003: 138).

less passing of time, of encroaching age and the bleak certainty of death. In the absence of any metaphysical belief system, such poems enact the confrontation with our finitude, the sad pointlessness of our brief individual lives. This view is characteristically presented in Larkin's work not with any histrionic doom-laden rhetoric, but rather with a wistful resignation, an undemonstrative acceptance of the inevitable. As Calvin Bedient (1974: 71) puts it, "Larkin's distinction from other nihilists lies in his domestication of the void: he has simply taken nullity for granted, found it as banal as the worn places in linoleum". His outlook is summed up in the conclusion to a poem like "Dockery and Son":

> Life is first boredom, then fear.
> Whether or not we use it, it goes,
> And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
> And age, and then the only end of age.
>
> (Larkin 1988: 153)

Some of Larkin's poems do seem to hold out the promise of some sort of hope, of something more beyond this contingent existence: the hope of enduring love in "An Arundel Tomb", or of a numinous reality in "Church Going", or even of some ineffable subliminal realm in "High Windows", which ends with the supralinguistic

> thought of high windows:
> The sun-comprehending glass,
> And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
> Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.
>
> (Larkin 1988: 165)

And yet, in each case, a careful reading of the poems' seemingly ambivalent endings serves only to confirm the final negation of the promise they appear to hold. Lolette Kuby (1979: 12) makes the point well: in Larkin's universe, "Nature's cruel joke has been to equip his characters with minds unable not to construct a Platonic world of perfection, powerless not to conceive of the dream, yet powerless to turn the dream into reality".

There is, however, something more than just quiet despair in Larkin's work (though Rorty himself does not go so far as to consider this). In the very process of disillusioning and disabusing the reader of any vain transcendental hope, there is an understanding of, and sympathy for, all those who are, like Larkin's various poetic personae, bored and unsatisfied with their lives and fearfully facing the prospect of senility and death. There is an empathetic identification with the common suffering of humankind, and although there is nothing that can be done to obviate it, Larkin's poetry nevertheless gives his readers the ability to face up to and endure such suffering with greater honesty, self-awareness and courage. It is this aspect

of Larkin's work that has appealed to so many ordinary people, and has prompted the telling description of Larkin as "an uncommon poet for the common man" (Kuby 1979: 1). Put into Rortyan terms, Larkin's work certainly reveals an acute recognition of the contingency of belief and this produces in the poetry a pervasive attitude of ironism, but at the same time, through his attention to the psychological pain of others, there is also a liberal concern with strengthening and extending a sense of human solidarity. As Bedient (1974: 71) points out, "If Larkin is not merely admired but loved, it is partly because, finding poetry and humour even in sterility, he makes it bearable: he shows that it can be borne with grace and gentleness".

In a rather different way, liberal ironism may also be seen to inform the important early work of Athol Fugard, influenced as it is both by a sense of existential contingency and by a liberal desire to reveal the "suffering" of "the nameless and destitute" of his "one little corner of the world" (Fugard 1983b: 172), whether they are the marginalised Coloureds of *The Blood Knot*, or the alienated poor whites of *Hello and Goodbye*, or the desperate African workers of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*.[15] In this regard, Fugard's express intention (1983b: 172) to "bear witness" (like Albert Camus) accords well with Rorty's notion of the liberal writer needing to create "new words", a new language, with which to represent the suffering of the voiceless oppressed (p. 94). This is not a question of speaking for, or on behalf of, oppressed people who should be allowed to speak for themselves, but rather of creating a new way of representing the pain of those who quite literally lack a language, in Rorty's widest sense, to do so themselves. But perhaps the play in which Fugard's liberal ironism is most clearly manifested is *Boesman and Lena* ([1969]1983), involving as it does a deracinated and poverty-stricken Coloured couple who have been thoroughly humiliated by the apartheid system, which has reduced them to little more than "whiteman's rubbish" (p. 41). They spend their lives wandering aimlessly around the little towns outside Port Elizabeth, seeking some sort of meaning to their existence and confronting each other with their thwarted hopes and desires. At the end of the play, Lena finally gets Boesman to explain the order of the places they have been to, expecting that it will reveal some pattern and purpose to her life. Instead, she realises, devastatingly, "It doesn't explain anything" (p. 57), and the two trudge back off into the darkness from which they emerged at the beginning. And yet, in spite of this realisation of the ontological contingency of her existence, Lena still finds it in herself to feel compassion for others. Whereas Boesman reacts to his humiliation with violent frustration, Lena is able to offer love – to the dying

15. In an interview some years ago, Fugard admitted to this tension: "[T]here must be something of an abrasive coming together when you put [the radical pessimism of] Camus in with your parcel of liberal values. There's bound to be a lot of sparks!" (Fugard in Foley 1994: 69).

old black man who stumbles into their camp and even, despite everything, to her abusive partner, Boesman. As she advises him, "Maybe you just want to touch me, to know I'm here. Try it the other way. Open your fist, put your hand on me. I'm here. I'm Lena" (p. 46). And in walking into the darkness, there is a sense that Lena has found the strength to face up to the nullity of her life with what Camus himself termed "courageous pessimism" (in Fugard [1969]1983: xvi). In creating the character of Lena as an Everywoman, Fugard is able to extend this example of a liberal ironist to his audience and his readers and invite them, with him, to emulate Lena's "self-image".

A similar sort of female heroine, though in a quite different context, emerges in the fiction of Fay Weldon. As with Lena, Weldon's characters typically begin as victims of an oppressive patriarchal order, and have to fight their way to a degree of self-awareness and autonomy. In these narratives, Weldon's vision as a liberal feminist writer is explored through her characters' aspirations to help create a just society in which gender equality and personal liberty is guaranteed. And yet, throughout her work, this liberal perspective is brought into tension with the equally powerful vision of the ironist. As John Updike has appreciatively noted (in Barreca 1994: 2), "Fay Weldon restores irony to its rightful, high place in literature". Or, as Janet Burroway (2003: 4) more colourfully puts it, in Weldon's stories there is always at some level a vitally chaotic sense of everything "going to hell in a handbasket". Thus, in *Praxis* (1978), the eponymous heroine grows up in an environment where she "found it difficult to believe in the reality of the world, so oddly was it arranged" (p. 49). She then survives a series of bizarre experiences, including not only several abusive relationships, marriages, divorces, affairs, and child-swapping, but also prostitution and even incest. She eventually becomes a leader of the Women's Movement in England in the 1970s, only to be confronted by "the contingency and fragility" (Rorty 1989: 74) of her moral framework when she is forced to commit an act of euthanasia in order to spare her adopted daughter a life of hopeless drudgery. In *The Life and Times of a She-Devil* (1982), the plain Mary Patchett takes carefully planned and executed revenge on her unfaithful husband and his mistress, but ends by transforming herself, literally, physically, into the pretty, petite mistress in a narrative twist which challenges and even subverts conventional feminist notions of self-worth and independence. And in *Big Women* (1997), the story of the triumphant creation of a feminist publishing house (based on Virago) is continually undercut by the treachery, bitchiness and selfishness of the women who actually founded the company. In these "wicked fictions" (Barreca 1994: 1), then, it is possible to see Weldon as a feminist liberal ironist, involved in the attempt to balance her ironic vision of social and personal entropy with her genuine liberal concern for the often desperate plight of ordinary, oppressed women.

Another darkly comic vision of social chaos and absurdity is presented in the work of Joseph Heller, and particularly in his celebrated debut novel, *Catch-22* (1961). Based on his experiences in World War II, the novel was published only in 1961, so that the wartime setting is also meant to reflect, with only minimal hyperbole, a more general condition of socio-political and experiential absurdity in America and elsewhere at the time.[16] The novel's anti-hero, Yossarian, is an American air force bombardier who openly admits his cowardice and fear of dying. In view of the obvious madness of a fellow airman, Orr, he appeals to the military medical officer to have his tour of combat duty ended on the grounds of insanity, only to come up against Catch-22:

> There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and wouldn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.
> "That's some catch, that Catch-22," he observed.
> "It's the best there is," Doc Daneeka agreed.
>
> (Heller 1961: 54)

In this world of circular logic, of linguistic casuistry and moral arbitrariness, Yossarian, like Lena and Praxis, takes on the features of an Everyman figure who is confronted by the inescapable contingency of language and knowledge, and yet who manages to maintain compassion for others who are suffering. This includes not merely his fellow American soldiers, but also, in Rorty's terms, "other, unfamiliar sorts of people" (1989: xvi), such as enemy combatants and foreign citizens, all of whom are linked, like Snowden, the mortally wounded soldier who haunts Yossarian's dreams, by their susceptibility to pain and death. Like Athol Fugard, Joseph Heller is able to be both an ironist and a liberal at the same time: to convey an ironic sense of the absurdity of life while "increasing our sensitivity" through "the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers" (1989: xvi).

Rorty sometimes seems to imply in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* that liberal ironism is, at least at the present moment, the preserve of an American-European literary tradition. Yet a writer such as the Ghanaian, Ayi Kwei Armah, certainly evinces in his work a standpoint which might be

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16. Ken Kesey's allegory of social insanity, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, published the following year, serves a similar purpose, as does Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-5*.

described as liberal ironist.[17] It is true that Armah received his tertiary education in the United States, but his novels are set firmly in a specifically African setting, and are often deeply critical of Western influences on traditional African culture. In earlier novels such as *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Fragments* (1970), Armah sets his alienated protagonists against a society whose endemic corruption is viewed with emetic disgust, through intense images of disease, decay, excrement, and insanity. Armah's ironic perspective on a world which has gone quite mad is unrelieved by much humour, however dark. It is a world characterised by pervasive greed and graft, by Byzantine bureaucracy, by hideously unhygienic living conditions, and by a sheer general lunacy which appears to go quite unnoticed by its inhabitants. By contrast, genuine sympathy is created for the main character in each of these novels, as he strives to maintain his private integrity and dignity in the face of such grim absurdity. In *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, in particular, the chief protagonist, known simply as "the man", attracts great respect from the reader in his refusal to compromise his values in the face of both bribes and threats, and yet the novel ends with the man's painful recognition of the ultimate contingency of his system of values: "above all the never-ending knowledge that this aching emptiness would be all that the remainder of his own life could offer him" (1968: 183). Even in a novel like *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), which overtly attempts to suggest an alternative to the social and moral fragmentation of contemporary African society, there is a subversive undercurrent of irony, leading critics like Arthur Ravenscroft (1983: 8) to conclude that despite his work being "fired by an intense moral sense" there remains nevertheless "a pervading nihilism in Armah's outlook". On Rorty's view, this dualism in Armah's fiction, which has troubled many critics, would in fact represent a strength rather than a weakness, an authentic attempt to combine a concern with the "alienation" (1989: 88) of individuals in society with "radical and continuing doubts" (p. 73) about one's own deepest beliefs.

If the foregoing writers might not normally be described as liberal, one suspects that they would not strenuously object to the description. J.M. Coetzee, however, is a writer and public intellectual who has openly rejected the label "liberal", and whose work in many ways seeks to undermine the foundational assumptions of the Enlightenment project. And yet, Richard Rorty's particular definition of liberal ironism would seem to capture something of the spirit of Coetzee's often elusory ethical standpoint, especially in his most controversial novel, *Disgrace* (1999). Like his earlier

17. In passing, it may be noted that a number of theorists have argued compellingly that the liberal values of individual rights and freedom are not culturally specific to the First World democracies; see, for example, Armah's compatriot, Kwame Anthony Appiah (1997), and the Indian economist, Amartya Sen (2001).

fiction, such as *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *The Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe*, there is a subtextual level at which *Disgrace* operates, which seems to suggest that all claims to determinate interpretation, or truth, are irreducibly contingent. And yet, in tension with this contingency, there is a clearly discernible ethical discourse in the novel, at least with regard to non-human animals, whose rights form one of the book's central thematic concerns (see also *The Lives of Animals*). As such, Rorty's fundamental injunction that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" would seem to have a particular relevance to Coetzee's moral perspective, since it applies as much to non-human animals as it does to humans. As Rorty explicitly maintains, "pain is non-linguistic: it is what we human beings have that ties us to the non-language-using beasts" (1989: 94). If this is the case, then a novel like *Disgrace* represents a particularly interesting and unusual example of liberal ironism. One might go further, however, to claim that if Coetzee is willing to grant moral rights to non-human animals in the Rortyan sense of a prevention of cruelty, then it follows by extrapolation that similar rights ought to be granted to humans as well, if only in the limited form of the prevention of exploitation, or humiliation, or physical violence more generally. It could then further be argued that there is indeed a liberal political slant to the novel, in which, as counterpoint to the violent imbroglio of the post-apartheid power struggle, an alternative vision of a peaceful, just, rights-based society is implied. Coetzee, as always, refuses to consider how this might be achieved, or what particular shape such a society might assume, but, like Richard Rorty's liberal ironist utopia, it would certainly take as one of its fundamental aspirations "the desire to avoid cruelty and pain" (1989: 197).

Finally, Rorty's conception of liberal ironism offers an exceptionally useful way of understanding the films of Alejandro González Iñárritu. In his earlier films, *Amores Perros* and *21 Grams*, Iñárritu presented his bleak vision of what it means to be a mortal, vulnerable human being in a universe in which God is either absent, indifferent, or simply implacable. The title of *21 Grams*, for instance, refers to the mysterious amount of body mass which is lost at the moment of death. In *Babel* (2006), he again explores the idea of the utterly random, unpredictable nature of the causal forces which shape and distort human life. With grim irony the film shows how blind chance affects and connects the lives of four entirely different groups of people: a Moroccan shepherd and his sons; an American husband and wife who are touring that country; the Mexican caregiver who is looking after their children back in the United States; a Japanese businessman and amateur hunter, and his deaf, adolescent daughter in Tokyo. These people are divided by culture, creed, ethnicity, class, and, above all, as in the Biblical story from which the film takes its title, by language. And yet, as the film also shows, what unites them all beyond the confusion of language is their vulnerability to pain. The Japanese businessman gives the Moroccan

shepherd a rifle in appreciation of his skill as a hunter's guide. The shepherd's sons play with the rifle and inadvertently shoot an American tourist on a bus. Mistakenly identified as terrorists, the sons are hunted down and one of them is killed by the Moroccan authorities. The American tourist fights for her life in a remote Moroccan village without proper medical care while her husband desperately tries to organise her rescue. Their children's caregiver has to attend her son's wedding in Mexico, and when the couple cannot return home in time, illegally takes the children with her. Pursued later by the border police, she unintentionally puts her own life and those of the children in jeopardy by hiding in the Mexican desert, and, when finally apprehended, is summarily deported from America. The Japanese businessman's daughter, traumatised by her mother's suicide, her humiliation at her disability and her hormonally confused sexuality, sets off on a drug- and sex-fuelled path of potential self-destruction. In Iñárritu's universe, as in Rorty's, what binds all these people together is not destiny, or the will of God, or some essentialised idea of humanity, but rather, in Rorty's terms, a "common susceptibility to pain", a "shared ability to suffer" (1989: 91-92). As one comes to identify with each of these basically decent, ordinary human beings whose lives are in danger, so a liberal sense of human solidarity is both confirmed and strengthened. Iñárritu's film, in Rorty's terms noted earlier, encourages one "to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, custom the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (1989: 192).

In a world riven by religious conflict, by ethnic hatred, by cultural xenophobia, by gross disparities in wealth and opportunity, such a concept of human solidarity is shown to be by no means insignificant.

Conclusion

It is true that since the 1990s both the broad appeal of postmodern theory and the force of its challenge to liberalism have waned somewhat. The great debates in liberal theory today fall into two broad categories. The first, from an internal point of view, continues to be waged, as from the very inception of liberal thinking, between those theorists, like Philip Pettit (2001), who emphasise freedom as the cardinal liberal value, and those, like Ronald Dworkin (2000), who insist that equality be recognised as the sovereign virtue of the liberal state. The second, far newer debate, turns on the idea of extending the core principles of liberal democracy to the world at large at an international or even supranational level. There is clearly a great deal to be debated in terms of balancing the ideal of extending human rights and individual freedom to all the world's people, on the one hand, and respec-

ting the autonomy and traditions of particular communities in the context of a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multifaith reality, on the other. This extended focus has once again been led by John Rawls in *The Law of Peoples* (1999) and Jürgen Habermas in *The Inclusion of the Other* (1999), though important contributions have also been made by Michael Freeman (2002), Gerald Gaus (2003), Thomas W. Pogge (2001) and many others.[18]

Despite this shift of emphasis in liberal theory, Rorty's conception of postmodern liberalism continues to hold a "strange charm" (Malachowski 2002: 132) for many theorists. Rorty's political theory, as articulated in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, is a large and complex construction. In many ways, however, it remains an idiosyncratic and puzzling work, which has divided scholars not only with regard to the interpretation of some of its finer details, but also in terms of its general significance in the field of political philosophy. Even if its overall success as a self-contained political theory is uncertain, however, there is no doubt that it has exerted a considerable influence on the imagination of thinkers from a diversity of disciplines, through the very originality and singularity of its approach. As Richard J. Bernstein observes (2003: 137-138), one of the great values of Rorty's work is that it helps "to create a space for a different way of thinking about liberalism", and serves as "a healthy antidote to legalistic rights-based liberalism and to the abuses of the infatuation with theorizing by postmodern cultural critics". From the point of view of literary theory, Rorty's work serves in an unsentimental and pragmatic fashion to bring to the foreground, the importance of literature and literary criticism both in the formation of individual self-images and in the development of general political morality. More particularly, as this article has suggested, it offers a way of reading a number of writers whose work has contained disparate elements which have often seemed difficult to reconcile. The figure of the liberal ironist, however idealised, provides an understanding of how writers such as those discussed in this article are able to express a candid self-awareness of the contingency of their deepest beliefs and highest hopes, and, at the same time, to articulate an authentic concern with the pain and suffering of others in an imaginative enactment of human solidarity. And, as Rorty himself maintains, it is in coming to understand writers such as these more fully that the possibilities for individual and social redescription, and hence for human freedom in the most general terms, are indeed extended and expanded.

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18. Rorty himself has turned his attention more recently to the question of America's role in a globalised modern context, most notably in *Achieving Our Country* (1998). In all these works, the deleterious impact of neo-conservative globalisation forms an important concern.

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