

Interview with Richard Rorty

Rory Ryan

The following interview was recorded at the University of South Africa on 14 August 1986.

Ryan: Professor Rorty, you have had a powerful influence on directions taken in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Remarkably, you are simultaneously one of the key figures in the current debates concerning the future of literary studies. Your extraordinary contribution to the project of the humanities has been not simply to participate in, but to be a massive presence within, at least two 'disciplines' – philosophy *and* literary theory. Do you regard literary studies as one of the current sites generating fierce upheaval and revolt which will have consequences for all discursive practice in the humanities?

Rorty: As far as I know, it is the place where there is the most action in the humanities in the Anglo-Saxon world. I think of this as an historical accident: academic departments of literature in the English-speaking academic community did not have much to do with philosophy for a long time, for accidental reasons. There was a kind of anti-philosophical tone among the New Critics in America and among the Leavisites in Britain. There is a nice phrase to describe the New York intellectual scene in the 1930s through the 1950s, coined by the art historian T.J. Clark – he called it a 'Trotskyite-Eliotic culture', which was remarkably perceptive. That was the way I was brought up – my parents were Trotskyites and I read Eliot early in life. If you were not a Marxist or a Christian in those days, you did not have any particular philosophical or religious general ideas. Philosophy was not present. Given that kind of culture, the stream of philosophical thought went by unnoticed, and this produced a kind of hunger for large, general ideas. The kinds of philosophical things that were said by the New Critics, for example I.A. Richards, were really pretty thin – disconnected from the stream of the history of philosophy. As far as I can see, the current vogue for literary theory is a result of the fact that there is this huge community of intellectuals (academics in literature departments) who suddenly got interested in philosophy again. In America, the initial opening was provided by a renewed interest in Marxism in the 1960s. Student and faculty radicalism caused people to try to read Marx and Hegel. Simultaneously, Derrida showed up. This caused them to try to read Heidegger and Nietzsche. With the leftover bits of 1960s radicalism plus Derrida, there was suddenly a large audience in the English-speaking universities for the so-called continental philosophical tradition. It became fashionable to be able to speak about Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. Once the door was opened, people began saying 'Gee, this philosophy is hot stuff. We ought to have more of it. We need theory.'

Ryan: In 'Texts and Lumps' (*New Literary History* 17, 1985, p. 2) you make the following claim for a pragmatist approach to literary studies:

When applied to literary criticism, pragmatism offers reasons why critics need not worry about being 'scientific', and why they should not be frightened of the appearance of 'subjectivity' which results from the adoption of an untheoretical, narrative style. It suggests that we neither be afraid of subjectivity nor anxious for methodology, but simply proceed to praise our heroes and damn our villains by making invidious comparisons.

Could this statement not cynically be used to perpetuate the orthodoxy, whose preferences have become codified, authorized, institutionalized and sanctioned? If we should 'not be afraid of subjectivity', should we perhaps be afraid of subjectivity masquerading as 'truth'? Does one simply concur, with Michaels that 'Our beliefs are not obstacles between us and meaning, they are what makes meaning possible in the first place' (Walter Michaels, 'Saving the Text', *MLN* 93, 1978, p. 780), and then carry on with what we were doing? In short, does pragmatism lead us to a powerless resignation, an inability and unwillingness to transform the academy?

Rorty: That certainly is a possibility, and various people who have criticized my work have suggested that – Christopher Norris, for example. When I was writing 'Texts and Lumps', what I had in the back of my mind as a paradigm was the best kind of literary criticism, the sort of thing that Bloom does. Bloom kindly, in a chapter of *Agon*, accepted my account of pragmatism as a reasonable theoretical backdrop for the kind of thing that he was doing. But of course you don't get many Blooms in any generation and you cannot institutionalize the kind of stuff that he does. I think it is significant that you have lots of small imitations of de Man; you don't have any imitations of Bloom. One cannot speak of a 'Bloomian school' – he's too good for that, so to speak. I think of the academic study of literature, ideally, as an indefinitely large number of Blooms. But that is like hoping that the academic study of philosophy will be an indefinitely large number of Wittgensteins. On the other hand, I don't quite see how you avoid the institutionalization of more or less routine work, and I think anything can be an apologia for that. Christianity, Marxism, phenomenology, pragmatism, you name it – once somebody suggests that the study of literature is 'X', then you can count on 90% of the graduate students dutifully falling into line, and producing more examples of 'X'. So, the only difference about the stuff I am calling pragmatism is that it is equally available to anybody.

Ryan: I suppose I have a far more vested interest in the site of literary studies because, having been brought up in a very conservative, largely Leavisite, colonial tradition of criticism, the act of theorizing is regarded as something extremely removed, totally inapplicable to the so-called 'common-sensical acts of criticism' – critics believe that theorists should simply let them get on with the real, objective job of finding 'meanings in texts'. Most attempts at trying to show that objective meanings may not be recoverable, and that literary studies is controlled by a master-narrative with virtually no effective

opposition, fall on deaf ears. One is regarded as being too highbrow – making too much of something.

Rorty: I think what makes the quarrel bitter, sometimes, within literature departments is that the ability to play around with large philosophical ideas is to some extent a genetic endowment, like mathematics and music. Some people are good at it and some are not. If you are not good at it, or if dialectical play with abstractions does not turn you on, then you will say ‘Well, whatever those people who are good at it are doing, it is not properly part of our subject’ as a defensive reaction. I think a lot of that does go on. By contrast, the people who *are* good at playing around with large abstractions, and have a natural taste for philosophy, tend to go overboard in that direction by suggesting that they have hold of something which no self-respecting intellectual can be without. But the whole point about universities is to have all different kinds of intellectuals doing whatever comes naturally to them. The trouble is that because universities are broken up into departments, and departments have to generate quasi-official programs, statements of intent, and so on, you have to form up into packs and swear allegiance to some kind of joint statement of what you’re doing. The better universities are the ones where people don’t pay a lot of attention to those statements of intent.

Ryan: Having read *Of Grammatology*, I came to Derrida in the late 1970s in two ways – I read Spivak’s introduction and I read your early articles on Derrida, particularly ‘Philosophy as a Kind of Writing’. I have associated you with the right kinds of things said about Derrida. I want to ask you about your current feelings concerning Derrida and deconstruction. You have said of Derrida (in ‘Deconstruction and Circumvention’, *Critical Inquiry* 11, 1984, p. 15):

Much of Derrida’s account of what he is up to depends, as I have already said, on the idea that literature, science and politics have been forbidden to do various things by ‘the history of metaphysics’.

Assuming that this is an accurate assessment, do you think the two senses of deconstruction (Derrida’s critique of metaphysics *and* a very French new way of literary interpretation) have anything substantial and persuasive to offer the future of literary studies? I ask this question in the context of a remark you make in ‘Philosophy without Principles’ (*Critical Inquiry* 11, 1985, p. 462): ‘Pragmatists and Derrideans are, indeed, natural allies. Their strategies supplement each other admirably’.

Rorty: I think there is an unfortunate attitude on the part of people in literary studies, of waiting for the philosophers to do something for them – provide a method or a perspective, a strategy, or something. I think this is a bad thing to go around hoping for. It is another thing to read philosophical texts along with literary texts. This is something that the French and the Germans have always done, because of the way they are brought up. It seems to me a good thing to do. But I don’t think that Derrida or anybody else is going to liberate literary studies, or provide anything except one more set of texts to merge

with a lot of others. So, Derrida, it seems to me, has had this peculiar fate of being a remarkably idiosyncratic genius who, very early on, was taken to be a prophet and has been bemused by this weird phenomenon ever since. I do not know enough about American intellectual history to make the comparison stick, but maybe it is a little like the relation between Emerson and transcendentalism. Emerson is the same kind of oddball as Derrida and Bloom. When you read Emerson, you can't figure out what the hell 'transcendentalism' could be. When you read Derrida, you can't figure out what the hell 'deconstruction' could be. Somehow, the age in which these people lived required a prophet, and they got picked!

Ryan: Recently, various American journals have devoted much space to attempts to achieve a marriage, or even a working relationship/alliance, between the so-called discourses of post-structuralism and Marxism. Simply stated, the aim seems to be to politicize Derrida, or to disabuse Marxist theorists of their belief in the truthfulness of a vast master-narrative. In some ways, this may parallel your endeavour to ground philosophy in the finite, the contingent and the *human*, and your skepticism concerning master-narratives. What is your response to the suggestion of this parallel between your work and current 'post-Marxism' and what are your comments on 'post-Marxism', specifically as a renovative discourse in literary studies?

Rorty: About attempts to get Derrida together with Marxism – it seems to me like oil and water. I'm inclined to think that trying to breathe some life back into Marxism is like trying to breathe life back into Thomism: I don't think it can work. Do you perhaps know Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism*? I buy Kolakowski's story that in the course of time, particularly after Lenin, Marxism as a movement became so hopelessly involved with the apparatus of state tyranny (in the way in which one might say Thomist philosophy became involved with the evolution of the papal court) that, by this time, trying to disentangle something called 'Marxist thought' from the ghastly set of institutions called 'Marxist governments' is not worth bothering about. What I should hope would be that the political left might just forget Marx. To give an example: there is a Brazilian political philosopher, Roberto Unger, who is coming out with a huge book this winter called *Politics*. He starts off by saying that if you are in a place like Brazil, which is ripe for some kind of social change, neither the liberal tradition of the Britons and the Americans nor the Marxist traditions is going to do a damn thing for you. That opposition has played itself out, and is a mere distraction from trying to come to terms with what is in fact going on in various third world countries. I find myself convinced by Unger, not to mention convinced by Kolakowski. It seems to me that never more than now has Marxism been the opiate of the intellectual. There is less to Marxism than there has ever been, yet liberal academics cling to it in a kind of fetishistic way as if, somehow, their contribution to relieving the suffering of the wretched of the earth is going to consist in an integration of Marxism with post-structuralism or whatever else. This seems to me about as footling a project as one can imagine.

Ryan: On the other hand, it seems that (for our discipline at least) the attempt has been to make literary studies an essential, objective, removed discipline. It seems that the only discourse which has managed to keep trying to act as a kind of conscience for literary studies, to bring the discipline into the realm of the human and the contingent, has been Marxism, although it has, at the same time, become institutionalized as the official opposition.

Rorty: I think there is something to that. For want of anything better, people who want social change gravitate towards Marxism as if, somehow, once you have decided that that system does not work in your country (e.g., that there is not going to be parliamentary reform as a means of social progress) and your thoughts begin to turn to mass uprisings, general strikes and so on, it follows the study of Marx will contribute to that effort. This seems to me just foolish. The thought that studying Marxist theory is somehow a useful propaedeutic to social change seems just wrong. I think Marxist theory has about the same relation to revolutionary impulse as neo-Thomist philosophy has to the Gospels.

Ryan: I want to talk about this notion of unforced agreement in intellectual activity, especially insofar as it relates to literary studies. It seems to me that while, on the one hand, the idea of 'unforced agreement' is potentially a very sound and healthy way of going about constructing the ideal discourses in the humanities, in literary studies this is already at work, but in a very sinister kind of way. The notion of unforced agreement has become a kind of mind control – one ideology or set of principles has so dominated literary studies for virtually the whole of this century, that this ideology has come to be seen as literary studies, as the *only* way – as objective, obvious, common-sensical, and technical. What I am trying to get at is that what is called unforced agreement in literary studies is not unforced agreement at all – it is habitual practice.

Rorty: Still, don't knock it. I am not competent to say whether you are right, but suppose you are, suppose that literary studies within the academy in our century has been one of the more barren parts of the academy. Still, the existence of academic departments of literature has provided a meal ticket for lots and lots of people to lead a life of study and reflection, and good things have come out of that. For instance, one good thing that came out of literary studies was the Trotskyite-Eliotic culture of my childhood. People like Irving Howe and Lionel Trilling, the heroes of the social democratic left of the America of my youth, were able to function because they had their salaries paid as professors of English. There are many examples of the same sort. It is worth a rather dull, conformist discipline if you can provide for people like that. It would be nice if the discipline were constantly exciting, but how many academic disciplines are like that?