

Richard Rorty, European Theory,
and the Poetry of American Politics

Simon Stow

Despite his being the author of *Achieving Our Country*¹ and the advocate of a return to national pride as a source of democratic renewal, America's embrace of Richard Rorty was, at best, an uneasy one. For many, Rorty symbolized everything that was wrong with the American academy at the turn of the millennium. He was, his critics held, a promoter of relativism over objectivity; rhetoric over Reason; and art over science. Indeed, Rorty's influence seemed to demonstrate the intellectual ascendancy of that most pernicious of European imports into America, Theory with a capital (T.) And although Rorty made repeated attempts – especially in his later work – to situate himself within the American pragmatic tradition of William James and John Dewey, many American neo-pragmatists made it abundantly clear that they did not want him. Rorty's work, they argued, was not only fundamentally dishonest it also misrepresented the pragmatist canon and threatened to damage its legacy.² Paradoxically, however, many of the figures – both European and American – most associated with the rise of Theory in the United States proved to be equally unwilling to embrace Rorty: failing to recognize in him anything like a fellow traveler.³ Nor was this sometimes-hostile reception of Rorty in Europe confined to those most often associated with the rise of Theory in America: old-fashioned Marxists also took umbrage, with Norman Geras accusing Rorty of advocating philosophical views conducive to Third Reich politics.⁴

In a previous essay I sought to resolve the enigma of Rorty's relationship to postmodernism and pragmatism – or what could be reformulated for our current purposes, not too crudely I think, as Rorty's relationship to European and American theory – in what might be considered a typically Rortian fashion: by offering a third perspective from which to view the other two.⁵ Historicizing his work by

¹ Richard Rorty: *Achieving Our Country. Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, Cambridge/Mass. 1998.

² See, for example, the essays by Susan Haack and James Gouinlock, in: *Richard Rorty & Pragmatism. The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, ed. by Herman J. Saatkamp, Nashville 1995.

³ See the essays by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Derrida, and Simon Critchley in: *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. by Chantal Mouffe, London 1996.

⁴ Norman Geras: *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind. The Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty*, London 1995, 73. See also Terry Eagleton: *The Terry Eagleton Reader*, ed. by Stephan Regan, Oxford 1998, 291.

⁵ Simon Stow: 'The Democratic Literature of the Future: Richard Rorty, Postmodernism, and the American Poetic Tradition', in: *Histories of Postmodernism*, ed. by Mark Bevir, Jill Hargis, and Sara Rushing, New York 2007, 193–214.

situating it within a tradition of American political poetry, I suggested that Rorty was among a group of thinkers, writers, and artists who sought to create the American Republic by writing what Walt Whitman called «the democratic literature of the future».⁶ Here, however, I wish to qualify that claim and to identify the theoretical/political consequences of this revised understanding of Rorty's work. Rorty, I argue, while distinctly American in his concerns and outlook, nevertheless depended upon a specific connection to European thought and politics, but not the connection for which he is most often known and vilified. This connection, I suggest promoted a peculiar blindness in Rorty's work to the distinctly American issue of race. This is not to say, of course, that there is no focus on the issues of race in European thought and politics.⁷ It will, however, be to note that the issue of race plays itself out in insidious ways in the United States that are, given its unique history of slavery and oppression, peculiar to American politics and society. Rorty's relationship to a class-based European theoretical political tradition, it is argued, leads him to underestimate and under-emphasize the problems posed by race for his stated goal of «Achieving Our Country».

In what follows, I will rehearse, qualify, and expand upon, the previous argument. Situating Rorty within a tradition⁸ of American political poetry suggests that far from being a «postmodernist» as the term is generally understood – as being associated with irony, a rejection of objectivity, intrinsic textual meaning, and philosophical foundations – Rorty merely utilized the rising popularity of European theory in American academia for his own ends, temporarily associating himself with the briefly-fashionable postmodernist label to promote his liberal political agenda. Rorty's relationship to this European import was, I will suggest, one of philosophical coincidence and political-poetic opportunism.

In making this argument, however, I should of course acknowledge the extent to which, as François Cusset has ably pointed out, that «Theory», this ostensibly-European import, was partly an American creation woven out of the disparate threads of quite different European approaches to literary texts and social formations. That the success of Theory in America was a product of specific academic, political, and critical needs in the United States during the period of its proliferation and ascendancy.⁹ In this, I would suggest, we see the ways in which even those American theorists who believed that they were employing a radically new way of

⁶ Walt Whitman: Democratic Vistas, in: W.W.: *Complete Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Justin Kaplan, New York 1982, 972.

⁷ Indeed, one of the most often-overlooked positive legacies of postmodernist and poststructuralist thought is the attention now paid to previously marginalized social groups. Valentine Cunningham: *Reading After Theory*, Malden/Mass. 2002, 53.

⁸ Here tradition is understood as a core set of ideas or practices with clear historical evidence of influence and shared understandings across time. Mark Bevir: *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, Cambridge 1999.

⁹ François Cusset: *French Theory. How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, Minneapolis 2008.

seeing the world were, perhaps, actually engaged in a much older syncretic practice. The key difference between Richard Rorty and these thinkers was, however, that Rorty knew what he was doing: that he self-consciously used this movement towards high Theory for his own political ends, but was never of the Theory movement.

Establishing these claims requires of course, establishing the existence of this syncretic American tradition; identifying its key features; and showing why – despite sharing many similarities with the advocates of high Theory – Rorty belongs to this tradition of American thought and not to the Theory movement characterized by one professor as «the thousand-year Reich that lasted 12 years».¹⁰ It is to these tasks that I will now turn, before highlighting Rorty's relationship to another – class-based European political tradition – and explaining why this connection proves so problematic for Rorty's political work in the United States.

*An American Poetic Tradition*²¹¹

Since the founding of the Republic, a persistent theme of American letters has been the absence of an American literary tradition. In the Second Volume of *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville observed: «The inhabitants of the United States have, then, at present, properly speaking no literature.»¹² What writers they did have, he suggested, borrowed largely from Europe. «They paint with colors borrowed from foreign manners; and as they hardly ever represent the country they were born in as it really is, they are seldom popular there.»¹³ Such was the apparent absence of an American literary tradition that calling for one to emerge became a trope among American writers. In his 1837 essay «The American Scholar», Ralph Waldo Emerson declared: «Perhaps the time is already come when it ought to be, and will be something else; when the sluggish intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill.»¹⁴ It was a call that Emerson would make repeatedly, most famously in his 1844 essay *The Poet*. «I look in vain» he wrote, «for the poet whom I describe [...] time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, who all things await.»¹⁵ In such circumstances, seeking to situate Richard Rorty's work within a

¹⁰ Ibid., 178.

¹¹ Parts of this section draw on my previous essay, Stow: *Democratic Literature of the Future* (note 5).

¹² Alexis de Tocqueville: *Democracy in America*, Vol. II, ed. by Philips Brady, New York 1990, 56.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson: *The American Scholar*, in: *The Portable Emerson*, ed. by Carl Bode, New York 1981, 51.

¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson: *The Poet*, in: *The Portable Emerson* (note 14), 261.

tradition of distinctly American political poetry might seem somewhat quixotic. As with all tropes, however, the call for a distinctly American poetry hid as much as it revealed, with poets attempting to situate themselves as the answer to this call becoming as common as the call itself. None, however, situated themselves as successfully as Walt Whitman.

Leaves of Grass was Walt Whitman's attempt to meet Emerson's challenge.¹⁶ Initially delighted, Emerson sent Whitman a letter of congratulation, the most famous excerpt from which – «I greet you at the beginning of a great career» – Whitman had printed on subsequent editions of the text. Nevertheless, a less-famous extract from Emerson's letter best captures the dominant motifs of a distinctly American poetic tradition. «It has» wrote Emerson, «the best merits, namely of fortifying & encouraging.»¹⁷ For Whitman, as for Emerson before him, this commitment to fortification and encouragement was the hallmark of his literature. His goal was to generate hope in his audience about the possibilities of America's democratic future. «The attitude of Great Poets» he declared in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, «is to cheer up slaves and horrid despots.»¹⁸

Underpinning this understanding of a distinctly American poetic tradition was an almost complete faith in the moral, political, and emotional power of literature not only to support American democratic institutions, but also to create the nation itself.¹⁹ As Whitman declared:

Our fundamental want to-day in the United States with our closest, amplest reference to present conditions, and to the future, is of a class, and the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatures far different, far higher in grade than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, lands, permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it a new breath of life, giving it decision, affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage, with results inside and underneath the elections of Presidents or Congresses – radiating, begetting appropriate teachers, schools, manners, and, as its grandest result, accomplishing, (what neither the schools nor the churches and their clergy have hitherto accomplish'd, and without which this nation will no more stand, permanently, soundly, than a house will stand without a substratum,) a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual basis of the States.²⁰

¹⁶ Reminiscences of Walt Whitman, in: *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. LXXXIX (2), 163–175.

¹⁷ Walt Whitman: *Leaves of Grass. The First (1855) Edition*, ed. by Malcolm Cowley, New York 1976, ix.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁹ For a wonderful discussion of the role of poetry, and Whitman in particular, in the ongoing creation of the American Republic see Jason Frank: *Constituent Moments. Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America*, Durham, NC 2010.

²⁰ Whitman: *Democratic Vistas* (note 6), 932.

For Whitman then, literature was to provide the basis for the American Republic. Declaring the writer of such poetry «no arguer»,²¹ Whitman suggested that the method was performative, that the poet's effectiveness could be judged on results alone. «The proof of a poet is» he declared, «that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.»²²

In this vision of political poetry, the poet was to be a self-originating source of authority and value. Central to this goal was the creation of what Malcolm Cowley called the poet's «idealized or dramatized self».²³ For, as Rorty once observed, «you cannot make a memorable character without thereby making a suggestion about how your reader should act.»²⁴ The method was to create a dramatic persona in order to enforce and enhance the power of the poet's words. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was, for example, graced by a daguerreotype of the author. The poet is depicted with his shirt open-necked, hand on hip, his hat and head jauntily cocked to one side. As Cowley observes, «The hero depicted in the frontispiece – this hero named «I» or «Walt Whitman» in the text should not be confused with the Whitman of daily life [...] he is put forward as an representative American workingman, but one who prefers to loaf and invite his soul.»²⁵ Emerson too makes the poet the hero of democracy, declaring:

Long he must stammer in speech; often forgo the living for the dead. Worse yet, he must accept – how often! – poverty and solitude. For the ease and pleasure of treading the old road, accepting the fashions, the education, the religion of society, he takes the cross of making his own, and, of course, the self-accusation, the faint heart, the frequent uncertainty and loss of time, which are the nettles and tangling vines in the way of the self-relying and self-directed; and the state of virtual hostility in which he seems to stand to society, and especially to educated society.²⁶

The method is to create the poet so that he might judge others and find them wanting in ways that will inspire them to change. We might think, for example, of the way in which Emerson scorns «modern man» in «The American Scholar». «Men in history, men in the world today», he wrote, «are bugs, are spawn, and are called «the mass» and «the herd»,»²⁷ seeking to shame his readers and listeners into evaluating themselves by the standards that he created: the mark, as Harold Bloom observed, of a «strong poet».²⁸ Indeed, by setting himself up in opposition to «a thinker» as a «Man Thinking», Emerson engaged in a poetic self-creation for purposes both public and private. In these aspects of Emerson's and Whitman's work

²¹ Whitman: *Leaves of Grass* (note 7), 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 24.

²³ Malcolm Cowley: Introduction, in: Whitman: *Leaves of Grass* (note 7), viii.

²⁴ Richard Rorty: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge/New York 1989, 167.

²⁵ Cowley: *Introduction* (note 23), xv.

²⁶ Emerson: *The American Scholar* (note 14), 63.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁸ Harold Bloom: *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford 1997.

we see the considerable similarities between the methods of this American tradition and of Nietzsche and his European heirs.²⁹

Connected to the self-aggrandizement of the poet as a source of authority, was the call made for a poetry – understood in the broadest Rortian sense as the power to describe and make things new – identical to the one being offered by the poet making the call. In this sense, there is a rich methodological irony within the tradition, with the persistent trope of the absence of an American literature being very much a cover for an advocacy of the poet's position. This takes many forms, but emerges most clearly Emerson's work. «We have yet» he wrote, «had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer.»³⁰ Part of Emerson's later hostility towards Whitman was, no doubt, connected to the latter's appropriation of the mantle that Emerson sought, the manifestation of Emerson's frustration of his ironic self-effacement being taken at face value. Whitman's deliberate attempt to inherit this mantle, his method of authority through heroic self-creation, and his call for poetry just like the one he himself was offering, find their culmination in the few favorable reviews *Leaves of Grass* received upon its publication, the majority of which were penned by Whitman himself under a variety of pseudonyms.³¹

Central to this attempt to make America through poetry was the depiction of the nation – what Whitman memorably called «the greatest poem»³² – as the land of the future. It was an attempt underpinned by the notion that civilizations moved, like the sun, from East to West, a view espoused by, among others, Benjamin Franklin.³³ It was this theory that led Horace Walpole to declare, rather optimistically perhaps, «The next Augustan age will dawn on the other side of the Atlantic. There will, perhaps, be a Thucydides at Boston, a Xenophon at New York, and, in time, a Virgil in Mexico.»³⁴ Within this tradition, the poet's job is to provide a vision of the American future towards which her citizens can aspire. «I submit», Whitman wrote in *Democratic Vistas*, «[...] that the fruition of democracy on aught like a grand scale, resides altogether in the future.»³⁵ The idea of cultural migration as improvement was key to this viewpoint, the suggestion being that the Westward movement provided the opportunity for new cultures to build upon, and out of the materials of, the old in a kind of cultural palimpsest. The poet's job was to

²⁹ Indeed, drawing on the work of Alexander Nehamas, Rorty describes Nietzsche as «Emerson's disciple.» Richard Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London 1999, 25. See also, Alexander Nehamas: *Nietzsche. Life as Literature*, Cambridge 1987.

³⁰ Emerson: *The Poet* (note 15), 261 f.

³¹ Cowley: *Introduction* (note 23), viii.

³² Whitman: *Leaves of Grass* (note 17), 5.

³³ Joseph J. Ellis: *After the Revolution. Profiles of Early American Culture*, New York 1979, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ Whitman: *Democratic Vistas* (note 6), 956.

weave a new narrative out of the traditions of previous civilizations and other nations. In Whitman's memorable phrase: «To him the other continents arrive as contributions.»³⁶ Such an approach employed what Cusset calls «a historical tradition of subversive counterreadings, a quintessentially American tradition that started with the Founding Fathers and their reinterpretation of the Bible.»³⁷

As Wendell Holmes admirably noted, Emerson's method was to skim works of literature and philosophy from all types of cultures with an eye to appropriating words and phrases for his own use.³⁸ Indeed, just as Emerson sought also to make the wisdom of the past useful to the present by drawing upon multiple ancient sources and applying them – often anachronistically – to the present, Whitman declared: «The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be, from what has been an is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them on their feet...he says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you. He learns the lesson...he places himself where the future becomes present.»³⁹ Such an approach, as Whitman makes clear, has little to do with what the texts being employed actually say, but rather with what they can be *made* to say, regardless of the compatibility of the texts or their relationship to one another. As Whitman declares in perhaps the most famous passage of his most famous work:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then ... I contradict myself;
I am large ... I contain multitudes.⁴⁰

In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman identifies multiple sources for his work, including both the Old and New Testaments, Plutarch, Homer, Milton, Cervantes, and Shakespeare, observing: «These are models, combined, adjusted to other standards than America's, but of priceless value to her and hers.»⁴¹ The job of poets, he suggested, was to create a compelling narrative out of the conflicting voices of the American Republic, borrowing from wherever they can – including ancient and foreign literatures and traditions – to make their distinctly American poetry: an approach that relies purely upon effect rather than argumentation.

This tradition of distinctly American political poetry encompasses then multiple aspects: a belief in the power of literature as a foundation for the American Republic; the self-creation of the poet as a source of authority; a call for a poetry just like the one being offered; and the provision, through a strong misreading of multiple – and often ostensibly incompatible – literatures, of a compelling narrative of

³⁶ Whitman: *Leaves of Grass* (note 17), 6.

³⁷ Cusset: *French Theory* (note 9), xvii.

³⁸ Louis Menand: *The Metaphysical Club. A Story of Ideas in America*, New York 2001, 58.

³⁹ Whitman: *Leaves of Grass* (note 17), 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴¹ Whitman: *Democratic Vistas* (note 6), 959.

hope about America's future. It is a tradition whose existence Rorty not only acknowledged, but also embodied.

*Richard Rorty in the American Tradition*⁴²

In the spring of 2000, I was fortunate enough to be a participant in Richard Rorty's graduate seminar in the Comparative Literature department at Stanford University. The subject matter of the seminar was 'Philosophy for Literature Students', and the class drew a wide array of students of varying interests and intellectual backgrounds. In person, Rorty seemed much older, shyer, and less personally charming than the urbane, witty sophisticate pictured on the cover – and suggested by the prose – of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. He was, of course, a formidable intellect, and the class was provocative and challenging. Nevertheless, as the semester progressed, I became increasingly uncomfortable with some of Rorty's accounts of key philosophical texts. Of course, Rorty being who he was, I was reluctant to challenge him. Finally, however, when the class turned to a discussion of Wittgenstein – a thinker whom I believed I knew well – I worked up the nerve to address the great man. «Professor Rorty», I offered, «I think that Wittgenstein is far more ambiguous on the relationship between language and the world than you are suggesting.» «You are absolutely right», Rorty observed. My heart swelled with pride. «When I said that Wittgenstein would say», he continued, «I should have said 'What my idealized Wittgenstein would say'» and carried on as if the distinction were unimportant. Momentarily crushed, I briefly joined the ranks of those for whom Rorty was some kind of charlatan. Comfortingly, however, I later discovered that I was not alone in my unease. As David Bromwich observed in his *Afterword* to the thirtieth-anniversary edition of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, «the compulsion to notice what a philosopher 'should have said' was an argumentative instinct that [Rorty] would never surrender.»⁴³ This commitment to strong misreading, combined with Rorty's rejection of foundations and metaphysics, is, perhaps, partly responsible for the frequent characterization of Rorty as a postmodernist. Rorty himself must, however, shoulder some of the blame, not least because of his apparent willingness – on occasion – to embrace the label.

In *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids*, Rorty states that he became aware of the inroads that French Theory was making into America in 1976 via his then colleague, Princeton literature professor Jonathan Arac.⁴⁴ In a 1983 article titled «Postmodernist

⁴² Parts of this section draw on my previous essay, Stow: *Democratic Literature of the Future* (note 5).

⁴³ David Bromwich: *Afterword*, in: Richard Rorty: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition*, Princeton 2009, 426.

⁴⁴ Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (note 29), 12. First published as: *Wild Orchids and Trotsky*, in: *Wild orchids and Trotsky. Messages from American Universities*, ed. by Mark Edmundson, New York 1993, 3–20.

bourgeois liberalism», Rorty appeared to situate himself in the postmodernist camp. «I use «postmodernist» he wrote, «in a sense given to this term by Jean-François Lyotard, who says that the postmodern attitude is that of a «distrust of metanarratives», narratives which describe or predict the activities of such entities as the noumenal self or the Absolute Spirit or the Proletariat.»⁴⁵ Nevertheless, even here Rorty suggested his ambivalence by tying the term to an indigenous tradition, labeling John Dewey «a postmodernist before his time».⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Rorty's characterization of Dewey seemed to rely upon the strong misreading frequently associated with postmodernism, as did his more aggressive attempt to conflate postmodernism with pragmatism in 1989's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.⁴⁷ There he declared that postmodernism and pragmatism were virtually synonymous, separated only by the names of their biggest advocates. «The great names of the first tradition» he asserted «include Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, Derrida and Foucault. The great names of the second [...] James, Dewey, Kuhn, Quine, Putnam and Davidson.»⁴⁸ Further declaring that «existentialism, deconstructionism, holism, process philosophy, poststructuralism, postmodernism, Wittgensteinianism, anti-realism and hermeneutics» were all names associated with the same «anti-essentialistic, anti-metaphysical movement» in philosophy, and that his own preferred term for the movement was «pragmatism»,⁴⁹ Rorty conflated a number of would-be-distinct sets of claims. All, he suggested, were «ways of saying that we shall never be able to step outside language, never be able to grasp reality unmediated by linguistic description.»⁵⁰

The recognition of our inability to step outside of language, Rorty claimed, created a new philosophical method that eschewed traditional argumentation. Its aim, he wrote, was «to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate forms of nonlinguistic behavior.»⁵¹ Philosophy became a kind of writing: collapsing many of the distinctions between the literature, philosophy, science and politics. As far as the latter was concerned, this method could not, said Rorty, provide any guidance for choosing between competing normative accounts of human existence. There were, he said, simply no such criteria to guide our choices. Seeking to fill this lacuna, Rorty offered his now-infamous account of post-foundational liberalism predicated upon Judith Shklar's observation that «cruelty is the worst thing that we can do.»⁵²

⁴⁵ Richard Rorty: Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism, in: R. R.: *Objectivism, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers*, Vol. I, Cambridge/New York 1991, 198f.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of this aspect of Continental theory see David Mikics: *Who Was Jacques Derrida? An Intellectual Biography*, New Haven 2009, 59.

⁴⁸ Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (note 29), xix.

⁴⁹ Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (note 29), 47f.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵¹ Rorty: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (note 24), 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 74.

Somewhere in the mid- to late 1990s, however, Rorty began to dissociate himself from the postmodernist label. Upon taking up his position in the Comparative Literature Department at Stanford in 1997, Rorty jokingly suggested that he be given the title «Transitory Professor of Trendy Studies». ⁵³ In 1998, he declared that the «word «postmodern» has been rendered almost meaningless by being used to mean so many different things». ⁵⁴ Elsewhere he suggested that the word «should be dropped from our philosophical vocabulary». ⁵⁵ Indeed, from the early 1990s onwards Rorty began to suggest that the characterization of him as a postmodernist was something of a mistake forced on him by others. In seeking disassociate himself from that which he had once appeared to embrace, Rorty offered three criticisms of the Theory movement: first, that the playful open-endedness of deconstruction had been turned into just another method by Derrida's Anglophone followers; ⁵⁶ second, what Rorty perceived to be the inapplicability of postmodernist thought to practical politics; ⁵⁷ and finally that the postmodernist Left were unpatriotic and without hope. «The academic Left» he wrote, «has no projects to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by building a consensus on specific reforms.» ⁵⁸ In Rorty's moral vocabulary, the claim that the academic Left lacked hope was one of the worst charges that he could level against them, second only perhaps, to the suggestion that they were guilty of cruelty. It is, however, not only the prevalence of this commitment to hope and utopia that suggests we should connect Rorty to a tradition of American political poetry rather than to a school of European-influenced postmodern thought, but also his account of his own intellectual development.

Despite Edwards Said's claim that there is «no doubt that [Rorty] had absorbed the deconstructionist and archaeological principles articulated by Derrida and Foucault», ⁵⁹ Rorty's intellectual trajectory seems to suggest otherwise. Certainly, Rorty more often cited Thomas Kuhn as a source of his ideas and worldview than Derrida or Foucault. Indeed, declaring Kuhn one of his «idols», Rorty observed that reading *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, gave him «the sense of scales falling from my eyes». ⁶⁰ It is to Kuhn's work that Rorty ascribed his shift away from analytic philosophy, saying he came to regard the latter merely «as one way of doing philosophy, rather than as the discovery of how to set philosophy on the secure path of science.» ⁶¹

⁵³ Derek Nystrom and Kent Puckett: *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies. A Conversation with Richard Rorty*, Charlottesville 1998, 55.

⁵⁴ Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (note 29), 262.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁵⁶ Richard Rorty: Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism, in: Mouffe: *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (note 3), 13.

⁵⁷ Rorty: *Achieving Our Country* (note 1), 78.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁹ Edward Said: The Franco-American Dialogue. A Late-Twentieth-Century Reassessment, in: *Traveling Theory. France and the United States*, ed. by Ieme van der Poel and Sophie Bertho, London 1999, 14f.

⁶⁰ Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (note 29), 175.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

While there might be reasons to be suspicious of Rorty's account of his own intellectual biography, not least, the strong element of performativity in his work, it is, perhaps no less reliable than that offered by Neil Gross. For even as he unearths valuable information about Rorty's early life and career, Gross frequently seems keen to reduce Rorty's work to a sociological category or academic strategy, ignoring both Rorty's irony and politics. Gross's work does, however, suggest that the «epistemological break» theory of Rorty's work – in which he made a sudden and definitive break from being an analytic philosopher to a postmodernist man of letters – is misplaced. Certainly Rorty's desire to synthesize and reconcile apparently conflicting schools of thought was in evidence early in his career. «[M]ost of my early work in philosophy» Rorty declared in a grant application written in the early 1960s, «consisted of comparison between issues discussed by important figures in the history of philosophy and issues discussed in recent analytic philosophy [...] All of these pieces [...] were attempts to show that there was more continuity between contemporary movements and traditional figures than might be suspected.»⁶² Indeed, it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to see Rorty's early concern with «metaphilosophy» as being connected to his later therapeutic and syncretic tendencies, even if, perhaps, at this point in his career Rorty was more concerned to establish what philosophers actually said, not what they «should have said». Professionally these reconciliationist tendencies were manifested in his support for giving Marcuse a position at Princeton; his recommendation of Alexander Nehamas for a Guggenheim; and, starting in the early 1970s, his exchange of manuscripts with Habermas.⁶³

Of course, Rorty's concern with syncretism and social hope are not by themselves sufficient to establish his connection to the previously-sketched tradition of American political poetry. Once this thread is pulled, however, much about Rorty's work unravels in interesting ways. For Rorty clearly shares many characteristics, strategies, and concerns with Emerson, Whitman, and others in the tradition. Foremost among these is, perhaps, his rejection of metaphysics and argumentation in favor of performativity and effect. «I am not» he wrote in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, describing his method, «going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics.»⁶⁴ As Rorty himself noted, there was nothing particularly «postmodern» about his approach. «Deconstruction», he observed, «is not a novel procedure made possible by a recent philosophical discovery. Recontextualization in general, and inverting hierarchies is particular, has been around for a long time. Socrates recontextualized Homer; Augustine recontextualized the pagan virtues [...] and Hegel recontextualized Socrates and Augustine.»⁶⁵

⁶² Neil Gross: *Richard Rorty. The Making of an American Philosopher*, Chicago 2008, 149.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁶⁴ Rorty: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (note 24), 9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

Like his forebears in the American tradition, Rorty seemed to express an almost mystical belief in the power of the written word. Echoing Whitman's belief in the power of literature, that which he called «the greatest art»,⁶⁶ Rorty suggested that literary criticism did for thinkers such as himself «what the search for universal moral principles is supposed to do for metaphysicians.»⁶⁷ Moreover, both thinkers suggested that the value of literature lies precisely in its moral and emotive power. Whitman's assertion that the «true question to ask respecting a book, is, *has it help'd any human soul?*»⁶⁸ finds its echo in Rorty's suggestion that we «should see great works of literature as great because they have inspired many readers, not as having inspired many readers because they are great.»⁶⁹ Thus, Rorty like his forebears in the tradition wove together multiple – often ostensibly–incongruous – literatures to tell his tale of America and her future. Describing his method as «[w]hatever works» Rorty suggests that «[y]ou use whatever phrases the audience learned growing up and you apply them to the object at hand.»⁷⁰ The approach collapses the distinctions between disciplines, and between high and low culture, in the interests of achieving its effects. Just as Whitman borrowed from folk songs and Italian opera, Rorty declared that the job of binding people together is a task «for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel.»⁷¹ Rorty suggested that the poet's «job is to pick out useful strands from each and then weave a new, improved, narrative.»⁷² Rorty set out to do precisely that: to weave a narrative that would, he believed, produce a better outcome for America. It was a narrative that put together such apparently–contradictory figures as Trotsky and Eliot, Nabokov and Freud, Kant and Hegel, Nietzsche and Mill and, of course, the American pragmatists and the European postmodernists. It is in this call for a poetry just like the one he himself offered that we see most clearly Rorty's connection to the performativity of the American poetic tradition.

Rorty on <Rorty>

By 1990 Richard J. Bernstein noted, Richard Rorty had «offended and antagonized just about everyone – the political left and right, traditional liberals, feminists, and both analytic and Continental philosophers. His «strong» readings of key figures strike many as idiosyncratic creations of his own fantasies. He has been accused of being «smug», «shallow», «elitist», «priggish», «voyeuristic», «insensitive», and «irrespon-

⁶⁶ Whitman: *Democratic Vistas* (note 6), 991.

⁶⁷ Rorty: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (note 24), 80.

⁶⁸ Whitman: *Democratic Vistas* (note 6), 987.

⁶⁹ Rorty: *Achieving Our Country* (note 1), 136.

⁷⁰ Nystrom and Puckett: *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies* (note 53), 57.

⁷¹ Rorty: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (note 24), xvi.

⁷² Richard Rorty: Response to Bernstein, in: Saatkamp: *Rorty & Pragmatism* (note 2), 68.

sible). Rorty bashing is rapidly becoming a new culture industry.»⁷³ Rorty, however, seemed immune to the criticism. «If there is anything to the idea that the best intellectual position is one that is attacked with equal vigor from the political right and the political left», he observed, «then I am in good shape.»⁷⁴ To criticism of his scholarship, Rorty would offer a literal or figurative shrug of his shoulders, as he did to the often hostile and sometimes scathing reaction to *Achieving Our Country* in a collection of essays edited by John Pettegrew.⁷⁵ Rorty even acknowledged his own misreadings and the displeasure they often generated in the authors of the texts he appropriated. «[Donald] Davidson» Rorty wrote, «cannot be held responsible for the interpretation I am putting on his views, nor for the further views I extrapolate from his;»⁷⁶ a suggestion with which Davidson was in wholehearted agreement.⁷⁷ Similarly, Rorty ended an essay on Thomas Kuhn with what he called «an embarrassing admission: Kuhn would have been embarrassed by defense of him».⁷⁸ Rorty, that is to say, seemed to revel in his own semi-pariah status within the Academy, even as he appeared to play down his own significance and express surprise at his notoriety. Asked in 1995 by Joshua Knobe to account for his fame, Rorty offered:

I'm not sure. I was genuinely puzzled why *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* sold as much as it did. Obviously, I gave people something it turned out they wanted, but I am not quite sure what it was they wanted. And I've been truly puzzled about the translations. My stuff gets translated quite widely. When you find out that *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is being translated into Bulgarian – what do I know about Bulgaria? What do I know about why anybody there finds it interesting? It's a mystery to me.⁷⁹

In his alternately provocative and self-effacing public stances, Rorty proved to be something of an enigma. While Rorty's friend David Bromwich declared «so expansive an influence was neither sought nor quite foreseen by Rorty», and that Rorty believed Derrida «had made a bad bargain with his vanity;»⁸⁰ David L. Hall observed that Rorty suffered «from «the last infirmity of the noble mind» – the

⁷³ Richard J. Bernstein: Rorty's Liberal Utopia, in: *Social Research* 57.1 (1990), 31–72, quot.: 34.

⁷⁴ Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (note 29), 3.

⁷⁵ Richard Rorty: Intellectual Historians and Pragmatist Philosophy, in: *A Pragmatist's Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*, ed. by John Pettegrew, New York 2000, 207.

⁷⁶ Rorty: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (note 24), 10.

⁷⁷ Donald Davidson: A Coherence Theory of Truth, and Afterthoughts, 1987, in: *Reading Rorty. Critical responses to «Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature» (and beyond)*, ed. by Alan Malachowski, Oxford 1990, 139–155.

⁷⁸ Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (note 29), 187.

⁷⁹ Joshua Knobe: A Talent for Bricolage. An Interview with Richard Rorty, in: *The Dualis* 2 (1995), 56–71.

⁸⁰ Bromwich: *Afterword* (note 43), 423 ff.

desire for fame». ⁸¹ That Bromwich goes on to observe that Rorty was «in some ways prepared for» his fame nevertheless suggests that Hall's account is somewhat closer to the truth. ⁸² Certainly, Rorty never seems to have given up on his childhood ambition to make an impact on the world. Asked, for example, in 1960 by Gregory Vlastos whether he could «make a contribution to American philosophy» Rorty replied that he «certainly hoped so». ⁸³ Similarly, Neil Gross suggests that «Rorty liked Yale because it offered its graduate students a sense of historic mission: they would be the ones to put philosophy back on track, countering the pernicious influence of the analysts and restoring the field to its proper scope, range, and bearing.» ⁸⁴ Indeed, it is not too hard to discern a certain amount of ambition in Rorty's observation, circa 1958, that «there are in every generation one of two «great» professional philosophers (a Dewey or a Heidegger) who became known, are read, and have an influence outside of the profession». ⁸⁵ Identifying in 1976, two kinds of philosophers, one associated with «objectivity» and «science-as-a-model-for-philosophy», and the other «with the man of letters», Rorty seems to have identified his ambition and made his choice early. ⁸⁶ His decision to go to the University of Virginia was predicated upon the opportunity it offered him «to pin my hopes for the future on becoming a sort of all-round intellectual, or man of letters, or something of the sort». ⁸⁷

In this sense then, Hall seems to be right; Rorty sought fame of a particular kind. However, in the context of this American poetic tradition, what Hall sees as an infirmity of mind might better be conceived of as a public and political strategy. In *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids*, Rorty observed: «I am sometimes told, by critics from both ends of the political spectrum, that my views are so weird as to be merely frivolous. They suspect that I will say anything to get a gasp, that I am just amusing myself by contradicting everybody else. This hurts.» ⁸⁸ The essay, he suggested, was meant to combat this hurtful perspective. Rorty did seek fame, but fame of a particular variety and for a particular purpose: the advancement of an edifying and fortifying vision of America that would underpin and bolster her liberal-democratic values. The enigma of his perpetual self-effacement might be solved in two ways. First, it may be that such self-effacement was an ironic strategy much like that of Emerson whose call for a public poet was, in reality, a call for the recognition of his own genius. On the other hand, it might be that the self-effacing, somewhat-shy Rorty that I encountered at Stanford, was Rorty the person, and that the «Richard Rorty» of bold political pronouncements and iconoclastic

⁸¹ David L. Hall: *Richard Rorty. Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, Albany 1994, 231.

⁸² Bromwich: *Afterword* (note 43), 423.

⁸³ Gross: *Richard Rorty* (note 62), 165.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁸⁵ Rorty: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (note 43), 398.

⁸⁶ Gross: *Richard Rorty* (note 62), 194.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁸⁸ Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (note 29), 5.

philosophical views was very much a Whitman-like creation of his ideal, public self. Certainly, this seems to be the image offered by the jaunty Richard Rorty depicted on the cover of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Following Rorty's death, James Ryerson noted:

A restful photograph of Richard Rorty adorns the front cover of his 1989 book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. It is an image of him outdoors, looking tan and relaxed in a cream-colored sport coat against a backdrop of sun-dappled greenery and azaleas. Although I once spent a few days with Rorty, this tableau is what comes to mind when I think of him. It captures what you might call his philosophical mood.⁸⁹

Given Rorty's complexity, however, it is probably the case that both perspectives – the ironic self-effacement *and* the poetic self-creation – contain some element of the truth.

Having situated Rorty within a tradition of American political poetry – a perspective with which Eduardo Mendieta might agree⁹⁰ – his relationship to European thought, and, more specifically, to the French Theory, appears to be one of strategy and opportunism. Rorty used the emerging interest in the concept to promote his own distinctly American liberal-democratic agenda. Postmodernist texts were simply part of a vast body of literatures that Rorty appropriated for his own ends. They were further narrative material from which he wove his own story in much the same way that Whitman appropriated European artistic traditions and adapted them to the American context for American purposes. That this poetic tradition shares a number of important philosophical assumptions with European Theory made this borrowing easier than it might otherwise have been, and, for a brief period at least, offered Rorty a number of potential allies in his quest to provide a new grounding for liberalism and the American polity in a postfoundational world. When it became apparent, however, that such an association was a hindrance rather than a help, Rorty – displaying the opportunism of the poet who weaves from whatever is to hand in order to achieve his desired effect – sought to disassociate himself from the postmodernists and to seek out new allies, most obviously in the American pragmatic camp.

This is not to say, however, that Rorty was not influenced by European theoretical-political traditions, simply not those with which he is most often associated. For it is clear that Rorty drew on a European model of class politics, one that shaped his political perspective in ways that led him to ignore the ultimately-American question of race.

⁸⁹ James Ryerson: Thinking Cheerfully, in: *The New York Times Books Review*, July 22, 2007, 27.

⁹⁰ Eduardo Mendieta: Introduction: 'Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Toward a Postphilosophical Politics, in: *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself. Interviews with Richard Rorty*, ed. by E. M., Palo Alto/Ca. 2006, xxix-xxx.

Back to Class Politics

«If you go to Britain and attend a Labour Party rally», observed Rorty in 1996, «you will probably hear the audience sing ‘The Red Flag’ [...] You may find this song maudlin and melodramatic. But it will remind you of something that many people have forgotten: that the history of the labor unions in Britain, America, and everywhere else in the world is a blood-drenched history of violent struggle.»⁹¹ One of the ways in which Rorty is distinct from advocates of European Theory in the American academy is his apparent lack of concern with power, except in so far as it relates to class: a topic that is all but dead as an issue in contemporary American politics, both inside and outside of the academy. In this, of course, Rorty’s work served as a useful reminder of the salience of issues of economic inequality in the United States, even if, perhaps, this aspect of his writing is much less recognized and stressed in critical discussions of his work. The identity issues of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity that the advent of European Theory brought to the fore in American politics – again, both inside and outside the academy⁹² – clearly overshadowed and eventually eclipsed class issues, and in this Rorty stood apart from the postmodernists with whom many would seek to group him. In this regard, perhaps, the scorn of Norman Geras should come as something of a surprise, even if, perhaps, the class aspects of Rorty’s work came more to the fore during the last decade or so of his life. It is, however, clear that Rorty owed this aspect of his work to the European political traditions that informed his parent’s work and political outlook. «I was» observed Rorty in 1995, «brought up a Trotskyite, the way people are brought up Methodists or Jews or something like that. It was just the faith of the household.»⁹³ Rorty’s parents were part of a leftist-immigrant milieu in New York, the *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* crowd, who paid close attention to the developments in both Western Europe and the Soviet Union. As befits his tendency to see Rorty’s motivations as alternatively careerist or sentimental, but never political, Neil Gross sees Rorty’s transition to a leftist-patriot intellectual as a way of honoring his parents’ memory,⁹⁴ but it is clear that this identity was important to Rorty from his early childhood onwards.

While no doubt an important part of any social critique, Rorty’s concern with class, not least among which was his belief in the need to nullify Theory’s obsessive preoccupation with identity politics, nevertheless blinded him to the most compelling issue in American politics, that of race. Rorty seldom engaged with the issue, seeming to lump it with other kinds of cruelty that he believed the reading

⁹¹ Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (note 29), 255.

⁹² Todd Gitlin notes that between 1980 and 1990, the number of Americans who officially declared themselves ‘Native Americans’ increased by 255 percent; that in the same period, twenty times more called themselves ‘Cajun’, and three times more Canadians claimed Francophone heritage. Cusset: *French Theory* (note 9), 132.

⁹³ Knobe: *A Talent for Bricolage* (note 79), 64.

⁹⁴ Gross: *Richard Rorty* (note 62), 330.

certain texts could alleviate in their readers.⁹⁵ Indeed, that Rorty saw class and race as being examples of relatively similar forms of oppression is suggested by his direct paralleling of the struggles of labor unions and the civil rights movement in his essay on «Class Politics».⁹⁶ As even Bromwich points out, Rorty was liable «to generalize from his own good nature»⁹⁷ and to miss certain forms of sadism and oppression operating in life and politics. Rorty's – frequently politically-strategic – optimism about the value of liberal democracy nevertheless appears to have blinded him to the ways in which the civil rights movement was only one part of the American issue of race. In the words of Simon Critchley, Rorty ignored «the evidence of imperialism, racism, and colonialism that have always accompanied – or perhaps has always been the reality behind the cynical veneer of a legitimating discourse – the expansionism of Western liberal democracy.»⁹⁸ This was particularly so in the case of the United States.

In another context, Richard Bernstein suggested that Rorty's divide between public and private was an «apartheid» solution,⁹⁹ and although he was not referring to Rorty's work on race – not least, perhaps, because of its paucity – the phrase is revealing. As Casey Nelson Blake observed, Rorty's abandonment of the desire to «hold reality and justice in a single vision», led Rorty to:

break decisively with the urban orientation of the western utopian tradition by offering a decidedly suburban utopia, in which impersonal procedures of administrative justice reigned in skyscraper downtowns while far-flung residential neighborhoods were fragrant with the sweet smell of orchids. Whatever private freedom had been purchased by these arrangements came at a cost. Somewhere alongside the highway linking inner cities and the suburbs the outdated language of civic republicanism lay abandoned, its rhetoric of citizenship and virtue unknown to commuters chasing the life of irony.¹⁰⁰

What Blake does not say, but which is implicit in the divide that he identifies is that geographic separation in the United States is – due to a legacy of racism, deliberate government policies, and the lending practices of financial institutions – also a racial one: that the «bourgeois» in Rorty's postmodernist liberalism, leaves behind a large group of people for whom the move to such suburban utopias is little more than a dream, and not the sort of dream that Rorty believed could inspire a nation to greatness. Indeed, there is a tendency in Rorty's work to whitewash even the most critical of American figures on race. On Rorty's account, Martin Luther

⁹⁵ See Simon Stow: *Republic of Readers? The Literary Turn in Political Thought and Analysis*, Albany NY 2007.

⁹⁶ Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (note 29), 255.

⁹⁷ Bromwich: *Afterword* (note 43), 427.

⁹⁸ Critchley in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (note 3), 23.

⁹⁹ Bernstein: *Rorty's Liberal Utopia* (note 73), 42.

¹⁰⁰ Casey Nelson Blake: *Private Life and Public Commitment*. From Walter Rauschenbush to Richard Rorty, in: *A Pragmatist's Progress?* (note 75), 87.

King becomes a critic within the American tradition, remembered only for his speech to the March on Washington, and not for the scathing rejection of the gradualist moves towards racial inequality offered at Mason Temple on the eve of his assassination. Indeed, when Rorty does engage with a major critic of American attitudes on race, James Baldwin – who ultimately, of course, moved to Europe to escape American racial prejudice – the figure that emerges is, as George Shulman points out, one «who stands up for the universalism latent in a national consensus, to redeem a specifically American promise. Richard Rorty», Shulman continues, «thus celebrates him for – and reduces him to – the goal of «achieving America.»»¹⁰¹ The irony of such blindness to racial issues emerging from a concern with European political models is, perhaps, that Rorty's failure to engage with race in any compelling way made him even more deeply representative of American society.

Rorty, Europe, and America

The argument offered here suggests then that Richard Rorty is a quintessentially American figure whose work – or whose political work at least – can only be understood within the framework of American literature, politics, and history. It suggests, moreover, that what part of his work that Rorty does owe to Europe – his concern with class politics – is that which leads him to ignore America's still most salient social and political issue (the election of the nation's first black president in 2008 notwithstanding). To many Europeans (among whom, I should say, that despite living as an expatriate Briton in the United States, I still include myself), to make such a claim might seem just plain rude; not least, perhaps, because this essay grew out of an invitation to a European conference on the work of Richard Rorty. For that, of course, I can only apologize: good manners and good arguments are not always perfectly in sync. Nevertheless, as the conference and this special journal edition suggests, it may be that we are now seeing the emergence of a distinctly European Rorty, one whose work might itself serve as a contribution to another continent. In this, perhaps, Rorty's legacy will continue to grow in interesting and unexpected ways. This development, one suspects, Richard Rorty, with his prodigious syncretism and talent for bricolage, would not only have approved of, but enthusiastically embraced.

¹⁰¹ George Shulman: *American Prophecy. Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*, Minneapolis 2008, 89.