'Conversation' among Pragmatist Philosophers

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> As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an enquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is the ability to participate in this conversation, and not the ability to reason cogently, to make discoveries about the world, or to contrive a better world, which distinguishes the human being from the animal and the civilized man from the barbarian.
>
> Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (11)

In this essay I will examine two aspects of the conversation metaphor in pragmatist philosophy. Competing conceptions of the trope are compared in "Part I" to argue that Rorty, the most influential of the current "conversationalists," works from Michael Oakeshott's sense of conversation. Conversations, in this special sense of the term, are always inherently conflictual, since all human claims for a more or most important truth must "battle it out" in conversation.[1]

In "Part II," I illustrate how pragmatists turn to literature to restore a sense of inspiring vision when faced with the problem of "undecidability" in the face of conflicting interests, e.g. when William James turns to literature for inspiration after realizing that his own feelings of moral outrage are balanced by alternative views that are, democratically considered, not less valid than his own. "Literature" can thus figure both directionlessness and direction. The conversation metaphor as used by Rorty and William James relies on these two contrasting properties of literature.[2] In the final section I will circle back to the writings of Emerson, from whence this conversation truly begins.

I. The Varieties of Conversational Experience:
The Argument against Transcendental Truth

The "conversation metaphor" is a consequence of the belief, central to philosophical pragmatism but also common to most versions of post-modernism, that there is no absolute truth about how we should live our lives. As Rorty puts it, truth exists only within human sentences and not in a world apart from human description. Some sentences will form a more compelling narrative than others, but for a pragmatist there is no method of hitching one's sentences to any kind of tran-scendent truth. One consequence of this rejection of terminal truth, as we see in the Oakeshott quotation I use as an epigraph, is the celebra-tion of verbal communion without a need to justify the conversation in terms of a march toward philosophical finality.

In critical debate "conversation" is a trope that can actually refer to the totality of human culture; this usage has been popularized in the last two decades by Rorty. In his anti-foundationalist manifesto, *Phi-losophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty reintroduces the conversation metaphor, which he borrows from Oakeshott's essay "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind." For Oakeshott the conversa-tion is best understood as taking place between three distinct voices, that of science, that of practicality (language in the service of business and political purpose, in Oakeshott's formulation), and that of poetry.[3] Oakeshott suggested in this famous essay that the conversation was becoming boring of late (meaning in recent centuries) because instru-mentalist concerns, both of a scientific and political sort, had hedged out poetry, in which language is used chiefly in order to delight.[4]

Rorty could have associated his use of the conversation metaphor with other usages, such as Kenneth Burke's. Burke's *Philosophy of Literary Form* was first published in 1941. For Burke, interlocutors enter a heated conversation already in session, catch up and shift the ground according to their wishes and desires, and then leave without knowing where the conversation will go next. Burke's use of the conversation metaphor is resumed in R. W. B. Lewis' 1955 study of the

American character as revealed in nineteenth-century American litera-
ture, *The American Adam*. Lewis urges the intellectual historian to
locate not just the positive terms through which cultural interlocutors
define a culture but also the dialectical terms—those aspects of an
identity that come into being through opposition to another kind of
identity and which shift in meaning according to the dialectical and
polemical nature of the debate.

Lewis and Burke present the matter of conversation in significantly
different ways: urbanity is a necessary condition for Lewis but not for
Burke. Lewis presents the possibility of various communication styles
ranging from dialogue to debate. For Burke the extension is not just
from dialogue to debate, but also from identity to war: for Burke,
conversation can easily morph into war by other means. A phrase like
"the Culture Wars" makes perfect sense for Burke, whereas it verges
on oxymoron in Lewis' discourse. When we proceed from Burke and
Lewis' conceptions to Oakeshott's as he describes it in *The Voice of
Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*, we notice that the conversation
about the conversation metaphor becomes increasingly urbane. Lewis
and Oakeshott define out aggressiveness. The rhetorical slide into
persuasion and even combat of Kenneth Burke's version of the con-
versation metaphor has dropped out.

When Rorty refers to "conversation," he mentions Oakeshott but not
Burke or Lentricchia, who has tried to restore this pugnacity to the
conversation about conversation in his 1983 commentary on Burke,
Criticism and Social Change.[5] Part of the popularity of the conversation
metaphor, then, stems from the release it grants us from the nastier
aspects of rhetorical struggle admitted by Burke. Oakeshott, for
example, allows us to distinguish between civility and barbarism. In
his view, the larger conversation of mankind, like the conversations
between particular human speakers, has no predetermined content,
but it has a built-in methodological purpose. Through conversation
we become human:

> . . . it seems not improbable that it was the engagement of this conversation
> (where talk is without conclusion) that gave us our present appearance,

man's being descended from a race of apes who sat in talk so long and so late that they wore out their tails (11).

These apes, clubbish gentlemen of leisure, were too refined in their own apish ways to expend energy determining which among them was to be the alpha-male. Clearly they preferred dialogue to debate.[6]

Dialogue is, Lewis suggests in *The American Adam*, an ideal version of the cultural conversation. Lewis uses this metaphor casually, perhaps to demystify his writing by connecting "culture" to ordinary experience for the sake of a popular reading audience. Oakeshott, too, casually argues that one aspect of the conversation trope is that no particular search for truth need shape a given conversation, and in making this point Oakeshott is distinguishing the concerns of culture, which he calls "the conversation of mankind," from something like a scientific search for truth or a philosophical quest for something like a final, Platonic truth. Oakeshott writes that "In a conversation the participants are not engaged in an enquiry or a debate; there is no 'truth' to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought" (10). In Oakeshott's formulation, the "conversation" is something like a long poem that we are to delight in. Notice again the mixture of humanistic civility and natural selection:

Thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other's movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions. Nobody asks where they have come from or on what authority they are present; nobody cares what will become of them when they have played their part. There is no symposiarch or arbiter; not even a doorkeeper to examine credentials. Every entrant is taken at its face-value and everything is permitted which can get itself accepted into the flow of speculation. (10)

The view that "voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy" will of course seem more persuasive to those who do not feel that they have been excluded from the conversation.[7] As the exclusion of those who belong to less powerful groups (such as women, minority group members, and homosexuals) from the cultural conversation has in recent decades been a primary concern of humanistic intellectuals in America, it is safe to say that Oakeshott's

claim that no one is excluded from the conversation is, at the least, very controversial. As regards Oakeshott's use of the term "conversation," it can be argued that we ought to avoid mixing up the prescriptive and descriptive uses to which the metaphor is put. As a Darwinian description of ideas battling for supremacy, the notion of a "conversation" works better than, say, the notion of a chemical reaction or other analogies one might consider. To give Oakeshott his due, a *descriptive* sense of conversation implies that members of less powerful groups have been able to win public attention precisely because there was no transcendent position from which to exclude them. In its prescriptive uses, the metaphor is being deployed rhetorically by writers (Oakeshott, Lewis, Burke, Rorty) who are not transcendently commenting on the world but who are, rather, trying to push the world in a certain direction—in this case toward liberal tolerance and civility among interlocutors.

Hierarchy, then, is one problem that arises frequently in discussions of the conversation metaphor, and ethics is another. The presumption that there is no absolute truth in which to ground claims made "in conversation" and thus to give the conversation a necessary terminus would seem to put a pragmatist's ethical stances at a disadvantage, since the pragmatist will be the first one to assert that, ultimately, ethical claims rest on no firmer foundation than human self-interest and storytelling: they cannot be grounded in nature, if by nature we mean something apart from subjective human interests. William James makes it quite clear that pragmatism is a method for cutting through philosophical knots by relating the questions directly to consequences, and Lentricchia argues that this is a serious limitation (*Criticism and Social Change*, 3-6). He points out that a pragmatist outlook on life could affirm equally well a ruthless robber baron or a radical democrat on the side of exploited workers, which is to say that pragmatism (like "conversation") does not give you the solution to a problem. In order to resolve this problem Lentricchia recommends marrying pragmatism with Marxism, and Rorty pragmatism with liberalism, but Rorty argues that being a liberal *ironist* means ac-

knowledging that one is not a liberal because it is *true*. Rather, we are moved by fictions rather than by a belief in truth.

The literary aspect of the "conversation of mankind" is expanded further in neo-pragmatist deployments of this metaphor, such as when Rorty subsumes *all* attempts at redemptive or edifying truth under the name literature, including writing from creative artists, social scientists, as well as the makers of films, comic books, and television soap operas. This radical expansion of the term literature is in sync with the neo-pragmatist's refusal of any sort of non-contingent truth-claims, and the expansion invites charges of relativism, but in his numerous essays Rorty presses the case for literary fiction especially. As we shall see, literature has a history within philosophical pragmatism of filling in the gap left by the vacation of transcendent truth. We do not have truth, so we tell each other stories, and some stories prevail. The pragmatist refusal of truth is sometimes called "undecidability," and the William James essay that I discuss in "Part II" gives an illustration both of this undecidability and the way literature flows into the vacuum left by truth to provide "vision."

II. Pragmatist Undecidability and "Vision"

> You may be a prophet, at this rate; but you cannot be a worldly success.
> William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (247)

William James' essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" is about the blind spot that is necessary if one is to take a strong position on any controversial matter. James first delivered it to students in 1898. The essay was published in 1899 in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*.[8] One of the most striking questions that James' essay presents to us is this: where is the visionary in our society? In asking this question, he attacks the division between philosopher and visionary, in other words the split between calculative and meditative thinking.[9] Furthering his claims that conventional academic philosophy has sacrificed poetic vision to sterile

logic, James scathingly dismisses analytical sophistication devoid of personal interest, which we find in much philosophical writing:

> If philosophy is more a matter of passionate vision than of logic—and I believe it is, logic only finding reasons for the vision afterwards—must not such thinness come either from the vision being defective in the disciples, or from their passion, matched with Fechner's or with Hegel's own passion, being as moonlight unto sunlight or as water unto wine?

James is a rare philosopher to praise "vision" in this way. If a philosopher were to have a visionary moment, how could this moment *not* be reduced until it became "as water unto wine?" Most philosophical writing is, in James's water/wine comparison, a reverse miracle. But what does James propose to *do* about this problem?

James attempts to communicate a "vision" in what has become an essentially anti-visionary genre, the philosophical essay. He begins by announcing the problem: if values are entirely a product of particular human perspectives, how are we to have social values? If any value is merely the result of a relative, temporary position, how are we to have communal values? Does the pragmatist insight not imply that we must continually struggle to work out those values that we had taken for granted, values to which we referred when confronted with a problem? After positing that all values depend upon our *feelings*, and that our feelings about a given matter are bound to differ with differing points of view, James dramatizes a clash of values with reference to a personal experience. In the very beginning of his account, there is no disabling "undecidability":

> Some years ago, while journeying in the mountains of North Carolina, I passed by a large number of 'coves,' as they call them there, or heads of small valleys between the hills, which had been newly cleared and planted. The impression on my mind was one of unmitigated squalor. (231-32)

James describes in detail how the settler has cut down trees, left charred and smouldering stumps in the ground, girdled other trees to prepare the ground for agricultural use, and build a log cabin, "plastering its chinks with clay," that is a standing eyesore within this

environmentalist's nightmare. James finds in this description of a squatter's settlement a glimpse of our primitive origins, but there are no signs yet of dandyish apes. James is disgusted. The cove is the antithesis of grace and beauty, and James can only see the landscape as a place of ruin: "Talk about going back to nature! I said to myself, oppressed by the dreariness, as I drove by. Talk of a country life for one's old age and for one's children!" (233). We should lightly note the class-contingency of James' position here, as he sees the landscape not as pure beauty apart from use (though this view tempts him), but in terms of one use rather than another: the wild, beautiful coves are for him "a country life for one's old age and for one's children."

Until this point in James' essay there has been no actual conversation between James and anyone else. As James and his driver come across a scene in which a homesteader has cut his land clear of trees so as to eradicate all natural beauty from the scene, James is baffled. What could motivate such a disturbance of "Nature's beauty"? At this point, James asks the driver, "'What sort of people are they who have to make these new clearings?' 'All of us,' he replied. 'Why, we ain't happy here, unless we are getting one of these coves under cultivation'" (233). At this point the scales fall from James' eyes, as a pragmatist vision replaces his narrow-minded environmentalism—or so James would have us think:

> I instantly felt that I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation. Because to me the clearings spoke of naught but denudation, I thought that to those whose sturdy arms and obedient axes had made them they could tell no other story. But, when *they* looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory. The chips, the girdled trees, and the vile split rails spoke of honest sweat, persistent toil and final reward. The cabin was a warrant of safety for self and wife and babes. In short, the clearing, which to me was a mere ugly picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very pæan of duty, struggle, and success (233-34).

At the end of this introductory part of the essay, James comes to a preliminary conclusion: "I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of

their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge" (234).

James' openness to other points of view, his willingness to see that his views are contingent upon his own circumstances, is an essential aspect of pragmatism's notion of conversability. Were this moment the end of James' essay, we could rest here. Instead, James continues, and I think this is the result of the moral relativity of pragmatism's open-minded conversability.

James, who always insisted that pragmatism was a method rather than a program, presents the problem as though it were really a solution; in fact, he stands at the moral limit of pragmatism and looks longingly at the far side, at the kind of moral resolution pragmatism can talk about only in the abstract. What are the consequences of such a view? Does he no longer view the homesteader as a vandal within the realm of Nature? If not, has he abandoned his own (primarily aesthetic) defense of Nature's integrity? He does not say, and I do not think he can. James figuratively implies that he has gone from blindness to vision when he says, "I *had* been as blind" to them as they were to me, but he is not out of the woods yet.

In the remainder of James' essay, James comes to a point of philosophical blockage that sets him on a kind of quest for other types of vision. If the initial problem is a kind of blindness, then the first vision is a vision of blindness. Only after darkness has been made visible can the quest begin. Just when it seems that James has come to a sort of conclusion in his essay—the momentary false ending in which he says "I *had* been blind," James begins, almost manically, to quote inspirational literature. A story by Robert Louis Stevenson, a parable by philosopher Josiah Royce, a quotation from Emerson and an extended memory from a French novel about a mystic. Wordsworth and Shelley are quoted, and Whitman is presented as a visionary, but James offers no road signs to connect this extended foray into imaginative literature to the ethical problem presented by the clear-cut cove. His position is ultimately one of intellectual paralysis.

So James praises the poet, the sort of variation on the visionary that our society will accept. Hungering for a source of spiritual and moral authority, James asks, "But how can one attain to the feeling of the vital significance of an experience, if one have it not to begin with? There is no receipt [recipe] which one can follow. Being a secret and a mystery, it often comes in mysteriously unexpected ways" (254). So also does the quest mysteriously present itself in James's essay.

What does James get for his time in the literary wilderness? At the close of the essay James pronounces the talk's ostensible moral: "Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer" (264). Skepticism about absolute truth and respect for the beliefs of others—these are certainly part of James' message, but James is hiding another kind of conclusion beneath the ostensible one. The smuggled vision has to do with the pages on which James praises "primitivism" and quotes Lao Tzu (whom James refers to as Lotze). James writes, "The savages and children of nature, to whom we deem ourselves so much superior, certainly are alive where we are often dead . . . " (258). James does not praise primitivism merely because it is exotic, but rather because primitive societies have certain cultural practices that our society disdains. Literature is James's road to this obscure realm. In a lengthy quotation from the W. H. Hudson novel *Idle Days in Patagonia*, James relates a parable on how we may attempt to re-connect with such a way of living, largely through isolation and the practice of "non-thinking":[10] "Sometimes I would pass a whole day without seeing one mammal, and perhaps not more than a dozen birds of any size." Hudson achieves a sense of calm, a full rather than a partial sense of vision, from the Patagonian wilderness. The W. H. Hudson experience, as unscientific, impressionistic, and thus as academically unreliable as it is, suggests that there is an undivided human relation to nature that is general to man, though it is a sense that atrophies from disuse when we insulate ourselves from direct contact with nature. Hudson puts it like this: "'My state was one of *suspense* and *watchfulness*; yet I had no expectation of meeting an adventure, and felt as free from apprehension as I feel now

while sitting in a room in London. The state seemed familiar rather than strange, and accompanied by a strong feeling of elation; and I did not know that something had come between me and my intellect until I returned to my former self, —to thinking, and the old insipid existence'" (262). Calculative "thinking" is what Hudson returns to, while meditative non-thinking, a state of suspense and watchfulness devoid of self-consciousness, is what has been left behind.

James, fifty years before Oakeshott, complains that the voice of the visionary is removed from the conversation of philosophy, but "On a Certain Blindness" and other writings attempt to restore this voice. The form generally taken by scholastic philosophy defies the vision-ary function; however, as James tells us, there are moments of sunlight and wine, passages from Hegel—and James himself—that ask for the kind of immersion that can be given by "your mystic, your loafer." James, in such moments, resists the formality we have come to expect from professional philosophers. He is, so to speak, "all over the map"—and this is in no way a criticism of his presentation. The quest James undertakes demands that he go *off track*, that he put himself apart from society for a period of time and in that way put to question habitual modes of thinking. We must not submit passively to habitual existence, much as we are in need of habits. We risk disorientation and paralysis when we step away from the pathways of habit, but at the same time there is value in recognizing habit for what it is, and, to this end, it is good for us to go "off the track" occasionally. Literature is inherently about going on vacation—it is a form of kenosis, an emptying of the self of instrumentalist activity, and, Oakeshott insists, it needs to be part of the conversation, lest the conversation degrade into a monologue:

> In recent centuries the conversation, both in public and within ourselves, has become boring because it has been engrossed by two voices, the voice of practical activity and the voice of 'science': to know and to contrive are our pre-eminent occupations. (14)

It is, paradoxically, *useful* to take vacations from purely practical thinking. Literature goes off trail, and Oakeshott, distinguishing the

voice of poetry from those of utilitarian and scientific concerns, identifies poetry with contemplation, with "delighting" as opposed to "desiring," "obtaining" (39), and other instrumentalist activities, even if, as we see in William James' case, this duality between utility and delight ultimately breaks down in practice. It is, as Emerson writes, "a point outside our hodiernal circle, through which a new one may be described. The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it. . . .The field cannot be well seen from within the field" (409).

III. In Lieu of a Conclusion: Of Pentecost and Pack-saddles

This essay has traced a recursive pattern in anti-foundational/pragmatist thinking about "conversation" and the function of "literature" in the ongoing conversation of mankind. As Rorty's title "The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture" suggests, literature exists in a state in which figural declension and ascension occur simultaneously. The dynamic nature of this process is made clear by Emerson in a passage from "Circles" which pushes back the genealogy of the conversation metaphor one hundred years from Burke's publication of *The Philosophy of Literary Form* in 1941 to 1841:

> Conversation is a game of circles. In conversation we pluck up the *termini* which bound the common silence on every side. The parties are not to be judged by the spirit they partake and even express under this Pentecost. To-morrow they will have receded from this high-water mark. To-morrow you shall find them stooping under the old pack-saddles. Yet let us enjoy the cloven flame whilst it glows on our walls. When each new speaker strikes a new light, emancipates us from the oppression of the last speaker, to oppress us with the greatness and exclusiveness of his own thought, then yields us to another redeemer, we seem to recover our rights, to become men. (408)

This passage is quite deliberate in denying that there is anything like a stable dualism in this conversation. Our overlapping comments are figured, by the reference to "Pentecost" from Acts 2, as the sacred

and redemptive moment when all strange tongues become under-
standable—the reversal of the linguistic Fall of mankind suffered after
Babel. But Emerson puns on "spirit" and makes of this conversation at
once a moment of divine communion and—perhaps?—a drunken
shouting match: tomorrow these same speakers will be found beneath
pack-saddles. For Emerson, as for James and for Rorty, neither con-
versation nor literature is a fallen or secular form of a previously
divine language. When "each new speaker strikes a light" and "eman-
cipates us from the last speaker," that emancipation, tentative and
temporary as it is, for Emerson, is divine:

> In common hours, society sits cold and statuesque. We all stand waiting,
> empty,—knowing, possibly, that we can be full, surrounded by mighty
> symbols which are not symbols to us, but prose and trivial toys. Then co-
> meth the god, and converts the statues into fiery men, and by a flash of his
> eye burns up the veil which shrouded all things, and the meaning of the
> very furniture, of cup and saucer, of chair and clock and tester, is manifest.
> The facts which loomed so large in the fogs of yesterday,—property, climate,
> breeding, personal beauty, and the like, have strangely changed their pro-
> portions. All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literatures, cit-
> ies, climates, religions, leave their foundations, and dance before our eyes.
> (408)

"Therefore we value the poet," writes Emerson (409). The poet in
this instance is not merely the verse-writer but is the "maker," the one
who makes his or her own reality actively, as opposed to the one who
waits to *find* something suitable. The poet is valued here, as in much
Romantic and post-Romantic writing, in place of the priest.

In what ways, then, do Emerson, James, and Rorty differ, if they do
at all? Each, as we have seen, is a thorough-going anti-foundationalist,
and each reminds us that the self—"the first circle"—has the power to
remake itself out of near-at-hand materials. But there are significant
differences between their "conversational styles", especially when we
look at their uses of religious vocabulary. Rorty's essay "The Decline
of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture," with its
three-phase history of the West as a movement from sacred authority
(external to humans), through a transitional philosophical stage, and

thence to our present, thoroughly human "literary culture," provides us with a paradigm for understanding the progression from Emerson to James to Rorty. All three of these writers "value the poet," meaning the human maker of human meaning, but they do not have the same relationship to the vocabularies of spirituality. Emerson uses the language of the New and Old Testament iconoclastically, but we have to admit a doubleness to his purpose.[11] He denies a Holy Spirit independent of the human imagination,[12] but his essay can be said to have its cake and eat it too: Emerson refers to religious inspiration and even *makes* religious inspiration in the course of its iconoclastic references to Pentecost, spirit, and veil. When he refers, in lower case, to the "god" who comes and quickens our perception, his concept can certainly be called a declension of the Christian concept of God as all-powerful, and yet his use of sacred language admits also the insufficiency of everyday self-hood, in which "society sits cold and statuesque." James, working in a transitional phase, speaks of "vision," but he does so with equal measures of enthusiasm and detachment. When we come to our third-phase pragmatist, we are solidly in a "literary culture," one marked by an outright hostility to the idea of divinity.[13] Rorty praises this literary culture in the antepenultimate sentence of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*:

> The line of thought common to Blumenberg, Nietzsche, Freud, and David-son suggests that we try to get to the point where we no longer worship *any-thing*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything*—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance" (*Contingency* 22).

Rorty, and to a degree James, will tell us confidently that nothing is sacred. Emerson on the other hand will say something more like "nothing is sacred or profane but thinking makes it so."

Emerson's sense of the sacred is not less real because it is a humanly made artifact, a poem, but Rorty all too often must attack this poem. He paints himself into a corner in passages such as the one quoted above, and he tries to write his way out in essays such as "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature" and its companion pieces

from *Achieving Our Country*. Contradicting the contra-religion passage from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty quotes Dorothy Allison's expression of "atheist's religion" from her essay "Believing in Literature." Allison writes of this belief, "There is a place where we are always alone with our own mortality, where we must simply have something greater than ourselves to hold onto—God or history or politics or literature or a belief in the healing power of love, or even righteous anger" (*Achieving* 132). We notice that God is mentioned as a term among terms and that the "belief" is expressed as an "atheist's religion," but we also notice that Rorty has smuggled the language of religion in via the back door. The narrative of progress in which religious sentiment is presented as an embarrassment we have outgrown is one Rorty presents most vigorously,[14] but his recent return to "inspiration" demonstrates that this narrative also moves in circles.[15]

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NOTES

[1] An earlier form of this paper was presented at the *Connotations* conference in Halberstadt in August 2001. My sincere thanks to Jeff Partridge and John Holbo for helping me get my ideas in better working order. I also thank the anonymous reader for valuable assistance. While all shortcomings of the final version are mine alone, this essay has been improved in a number of ways as a direct consequence of our frequent coffee-break conversations. No battles were fought during any of these talks.

[2] Regarding literature, Rorty refers sometimes to specific fictional or poetic works but at other times to any kind of discourse, including philosophy and some religious texts, which could be defined as "human attempts to meet human needs, rather than as acknowledgements of the power of a being that is what it is apart from any such needs." This quotation is from an essay not yet published in a hardbound journal, "The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture," accessed from Richard Rorty's web site (http://www.stanford.edu/~rrorty/decline.htm) on 22 October 2001.

When he writes about "literature" he often chooses texts that fit the old-fashioned sense of the term, but Rorty is careful to avoid distinguishing this sense from the more general sense that means something more like Oakeshott's "conversation." In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he discusses *Bleak House, Pale Fire*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* amid similarly ranked works of canonical literature, but he is careful to call these "books" rather than "great works of literature." In the introduction to this book, he subverts the notion that great literature and TV talk shows differ significantly. Notice the slide from one sense of literature to the wider sense between these two sentences from the introduction: "Fiction like that of Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, or Nabokov gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves. That is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress" (xvi). We notice also how this progress from sermon to treatise to literature prefigures the three phases Rorty describes in "The Decline of Redemptive Truth."

[3]Oakeshott divides contemporary/preterit political discourse from a prelapsarian approach to political language that was akin to "poetry."

[4]Oakeshott identified himself politically as a "conservative," not a pragmatist, but Rorty refers to Oakeshott's "Conversation of Mankind" frequently when describing his evolving sense of neo-pragmatism.

[5]Lentricchia's *Criticism and Social Change* was published in 1983, after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980), but in subsequent articles and books Rorty has continued to refer to Oakeshott but not Burke, Lewis, or Lentricchia. After Lentricchia, Steven Mailloux has attempted to restore the agonistic aspect of the conversation metaphor. See his *Rhetorical Power*, especially 58-60.

[6]What seems like a witty nonce-effect in Oakeshott's essay betrays a thoroughgoing humanistic teleology. The conversation did not have to go as it did, however; we might have evolved into something besides human beings. The circularity of the argument is in the pre-selection of humane conversation as the definitive characteristic of human beings. It is witty to backdate this characteristic to a time when "the people of the forest" had tails, and this delightful fancy may distract us from the fact that human communication tends to quarrelsomeness no less than toward pleasant, cooperative, aimless conversation.

[7]See S. P. Mohanty's "Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism": "If the forms and protocols of this conversation have developed historically—as they must have, given Rorty's arguments—we would need to be more attentive to the work of those feminist, anti-imperialist, and otherwise radical scholars who have been focusing on the exclusions that have shaped this conversation" (27).

[8]For a complete discussion of the philosophical and especially political importance of this essay, see George Cotkin's *William James, Public Philosopher*, which is

especially illuminating on the way in which American imperialism is a background to the talk. James does not mention the American intervention in the Philippines in this essay, but Professor Cotkin argues persuasively that James was, indirectly, attempting to teach his students about the consequences of the kind of blindness that makes imperial domination possible.

[9]In his study of interrelations between Buddhism and existentialist philosophy entitled *The Faith to Doubt: Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty*, Stephen Batchelor examines Heidegger's distinction between calculative and meditative thinking as articulated in his *Discourse on Thinking: A Translation of* Gelassenheit: "Calculative thinking (*rechnendes Denken*) and meditative thinking (*besinnliches Denken*) are the two principle themes running through the first part of this short book, the Memorial Address. Meditative thinking 'demands of us not to cling one-sidedly to a single idea, nor to run down a one-track course of ideas. Meditative thinking demands of us that we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all.' Heidegger regards calculative thinking as dangerous insofar that it 'may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking.' If this were to happen 'then man would have denied and thrown away his own special nature—that he is a meditative being. Therefore, the issue is the saving of man's essential nature. Therefore, the issue is keeping meditative thinking alive'" (Batchelor 129). Heidegger presents essentially the same idea as Oakeshott (that instrumentalist thinking is narrowing the range of human response), but he does so in the language of survival rather than in the urbane aesthetic register of better as opposed to worse after-dinner conversations. Batchelor draws the Heidegger quotations from David Farrell Krell's edition of the *Basic Writings*, pages 53 and 56.

[10]"'Ah! my brother,' said a chieftain to his white guest, 'thou wilt never know the happiness of both thinking and doing nothing. This, next to sleep, is the most enchanting of things. Thus we were before our birth, and thus we shall be after death . . .'" (258). In the section of the book entitled "Talks to Students," James includes the essay "The Gospel of Relaxation," in which he recommends Eastern forms of meditation as an antidote to the deleterious effects of the American work ethic: "We must change ourselves from a race that admires jerk and snap for their own sakes, and looks down upon low voices and quiet ways as dull, to one that, on the contrary, has calm for its ideal, and for their own sakes loves harmony, dignity, and ease" (217).

[11]The torn veil echoes Hebrews 9:2-4 and several parallel moments in the synoptic gospels such as Matthew 27:50-52, in which the description of Jesus' death is followed by the rending of the veil separating God and man in the Great Temple: "behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; / And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose" (King James Version). For Emerson, the difference between "mighty symbols" and "prose and trivial toys" is entirely a matter of human perception.

[12]Richardson follows Harold Bloom's argument that Emerson's antipathy to Augustinian conceptions of divinity cost him the sympathy of the New Critics. Bloom writes, "sin, error, time, history, a God external to the self, the visiting of the crimes of the fathers upon the sons; these are the topoi of the literary cosmos of Eliot and his southern followers, and they were precisely of no interest whatever to Ralph Waldo Emerson" (qtd. in Richardson, 623-24; originally published in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, "Introduction" 1).

[13]In "The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture," Rorty refers to belief in a greater-than-human power as "the masochistic urge to submit to the non-human."

[14]In "Religion as Conversation-Stopper" Rorty rejects Stephen Carter's arguments presented in *Culture of Disbelief* that American culture trivializes religion inappropriately. Rorty reiterates the "Jeffersonian compromise" in which religious freedom is personally guaranteed but publicly constrained through the separation of church and state. In this essay Rorty goes out of his way, however, to associate religious belief with embarrassing topics, such as when he compares a statement of religious belief to a public iteration that one gets no pleasure anymore except through pornography—Rorty says such feelings are fine in and of themselves, but they ought to remain private.

[15]My exploratory comments about Rorty's philosophy of religion do not do justice to this topic, but in a future essay I hope to discuss the contrast between his utilitarian acceptance of religious beliefs for the private individual, and the rather hostile rhetorical presentation he accords such religious beliefs in specific discussions. See especially Rorty's "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," published in German in *Hoffnung statt Erkenntnis* in 1994 and for the first time in English in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999, 148-67).

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