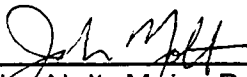


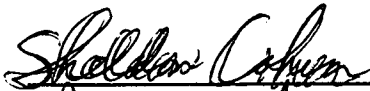
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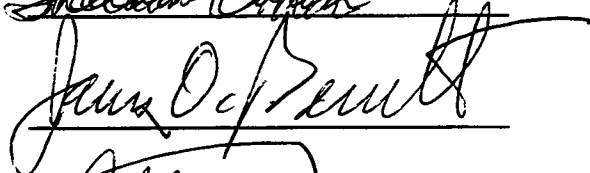
I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by John Zavodny entitled "The Marks and Noises of The Monster at The End of The Book: From Irony to Camp with Rorty, Kierkegaard and Derrida." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Philosophy.



John Nolt, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:







Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

THE MARKS AND NOISES OF
THE MONSTER AT THE END OF THE BOOK:
FROM IRONY TO CAMP
WITH RORTY, KIERKEGAARD AND DERRIDA

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

John Zavodny
December 1997

DEDICATION

To my human contingency:
The Zavodny's -- Mom, Dad, Tim, Kalee
and Zip

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is no way to recognize everyone who has had a hand in this project, but impossible tasks give life meaning. My academic gratitude extends as far back as my academic history. I am grateful to the faculty and staff of the department of Philosophy at the University of Tennessee for their obvious commitment to me and to my projects. I am especially grateful to Dr. John Nolt, whose unwillingness to let me sweep matters under the philosophical rug is a constant source of frustration and improvement, and whose willingness to deal with idiosyncrasy and torturous syntax is a testimony to his tenacity and friendship. Thanks to the members of my accomodating dissertation committee: Drs. Jim Bennett, Sheldon Cohen and Allen Dunn. I appreciate Dr. Richard Aquila for his rigor and humor and Dr. Kathy Bohstedt for her constant and sincere interest. Many thanks to Ann Beardsley and Marie Horton for the daily encouragement and 4:45 coffee calls. Thanks to the Cleveland State University Philosophy department for giving me confidence and an M.A. Thanks to Vicki Balzar for believing that there was more to me than a sarcastic trouble-maker. Thanks to 813a for being a place so miserable that there was nothing else to do but write.

Thanks to all my friends and fellow graduate students at U.T; Thanks especially to Matt Stolick, my friend, room-mate, and colleague. Matt is to blame for introducing me to the concept of "camp," but more importantly, has been with me as I have begun to live it out. Thanks to David Reisman who has been much more than a distraction and a philosophical and literal play-mate (as if that isn't enough!). Thanks to Wayne Vaught for being my buddy and colleague for years.

I am grateful to innumerable others who have been good to me for no good reason. Here are some of them: Craig Ritchie, who got me through those last days in Cleveland and who remains my "boy," Kelly Houck and her nearly mystical otherness, Jamie Wheeler, for his friendship across miles and world-views, Karl Kreiss and Annette Mendola (and soon, little Birkenstock), Jenny Heyl, Bobby Mack, Carolyn Ells and Nancy Dumler. I have been proud to know and count as my friends a pride of Nurse Practitioner students, "The Nitwits," and their significant others.

Finally, I am ineffably grateful to the category-defying Anna McGalliard.

ABSTRACT

In *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, Richard Rorty advocates the project of pursuing personal freedom through the finitization of the authority figures of one's relevant past. For people like Rorty and, according to Rorty, Jacques Derrida, these figures are roughly identifiable with the major names of the western philosophical canon. Rorty's promotion of personal freedom plays on his use of linguistic metaphors for the self, and ironist metaphors for the project of freedom-enhancing self-recreation.

In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard has given expression to some basic intuitions regarding the phenomenon and concept of irony, including its reliance on the representational appearance/reality distinction. Through an analysis of Kierkegaard, I illustrate that although Rorty finds in the word "irony" an apt vehicle to advocate breaking with the past, it also has associations that he wishes to avoid. I motivate the tension in Rorty between the representational associations belonging to irony and his long-time negativity toward representationalism in particular and toward epistemology in general. Further, I suggest that Rorty, through his use of ironist metaphors for self-recreation and their connection to a linguistic notion of self, unwittingly encourages an unsympathetic, yet very popular, reading of *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. This interpretation sees *Contingency, irony and solidarity* as a self-undermining pronouncement of, among other things, the essence of what it is to be a self. I motivate a more sympathetic, and Rortean, reading of the book as an edifying work about human possibility.

As a means for resolving the tension between Rorty's anti-epistemology and his chosen metaphors for the self and for self-recreation, I outline a redescription of autonomous self-recreation in the aesthetic and anti-epistemological terminology of "camp" as found in the work of Moe Meyer. I redescrbe the Derridean behaviors and attitudes that Rorty has selected as ironically significant as moments of camp. Having offered an alternative to the epistemologically weighty term "irony," I outline a new, less weighty, way to break ties with the past.

PREFACE

When I was a kid -- I mean a *little* kid -- one of my favorite books was a *Sesame Street* book that featured the character Grover. Grover was a lovable, blue, furry, and difficult to categorize little creature. The name of the book was "The Monster at the End of This Book." On page one Grover welcomed me to the book, and warned me regarding the terror awaiting should I turn the pages. Page by page he became more and more nervous regarding the monster waiting at the book's end. What began on page one as a distressed curiosity about who or what was at the book's climax soon turned into Grover's anxiety and then panic. He pleaded with me, "Please! Turn no more pages." he felt sure that my persistence was bringing us both closer and closer to vicious ruin. Eventually, Grover began to try to fasten the pages of the book together so as to physically constrain the page turning that he could not otherwise hinder. He taped, stapled, nailed, boarded, bolted and chained the leaves together, but somehow I was always able to page ahead. Each leaf turned revealed both the destruction left by my persistence, and an increasingly panicked and sweaty Grover begging and preparing one more attempt to arrest my, *our*, progress. When I turned that last page, and found only the exhausted little blue creature that had greeted me so friendly at the beginning, both he and I were relieved. But more than relieved; it was while reading that book that I first felt what I have come to think of as the vertigo of self-reference.

I have since become something of a vertigo junkie. When Carly Simon sings "You're so vain, you prob'ly think this song is about you," I do. And then I decide that by saying that my understanding the song as *about me* is a sign of my vanity, she must be implying that it is not really about me. But, I reason,

since she is describing *my* vanity, then it does seem directed toward me. Around and around I go: *whee!* When Monty Python ended their *argument clinic* comedy skit by having a policeman come in and arrest them for not having a proper end to the skit, and had another arrest that one for the same reason, and another and another, I was light-headed. But it wasn't until Jerry Seinfeld's situation comedy, *Seinfeld*, about him and his friends producing a situation comedy about themselves producing a situation comedy that I realized that I was addicted. The addiction to vertigo that began with Grover's innocent self-reference was so thorough that I would obviously satisfy it in any way I could.

It was about that time that I read Richard Rorty's *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. I had already developed a Socratic irony habit that found me reciting "All I know is that I know nothing" just to make it out of bed in the morning, so Rorty's "There is no redescription that cannot itself be redescribed" didn't seem to be much of a leap. I immediately demanded of Rorty, "but what about *your* redescription, can it be redescribed?" I have recently come to suspect that Rorty may have read Grover's book as well and has felt the tyranny of the vertigo. The literary evidence to substantiate my suspicion is on page 104 of *Contingency, irony and solidarity*: "The question 'Why should I think, how can I possibly claim, that redescription ends with me?' can also be thought of as the question 'How can I end my book?'" The language is conspicuously familiar. The trouble with Rorty is that he leads to harder stuff. I don't even want to think what might be next. This is where you come in. Please, heed the lovable Grover's warning that I ignored, save yourself, and maybe me, and don't turn the page.

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INTRODUCTION

It is the need to express the unconditioned while realizing that it is inexpressible which brings us to the point described by Wittgenstein: "Sometimes, in doing philosophy, one just wants to utter an inarticulate sound." But that will not prevent somebody from writing a thesis on whatever sound one makes. -- Richard Rorty¹

Ugh! -- Charlie Brown

Doh! -- Homer Simpson

Richard Rorty agrees with Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida that "phonemes and graphemes matter." What this means for Rorty is that the "marks" and "noises" involved in communication, although they are *often treated* as accidental, material and therefore peripheral and unimportant, are not different in kind from the more so-called "essential" and "symbolic" meanings, those that are typically treated as central and significant. Rorty chooses, for example, to use the word "edification" rather than "education" when describing the sort of thinking he promotes, not because it strikes him as the correct description of what he advocates, but because it strikes him as more lively, less "flat." (PMN, 360) Rorty recognizes that certain words newly employed may have more and different kinds of power than other words that have been traditionally used when dealing with certain issues. Rorty is all for using old words in new ways for the sake of invoking the associations they

¹CP, p. 102; I will adopt the convention of referring to the works of Richard Rorty and *The Concept of Irony*, by Kierkegaard by abbreviations; these abbreviations are located on page 272 of this work. All other references are by author name and date of publication and are listed in the "works cited" list.

bring, and "irony" is the word that Rorty chooses when describing the private autonomy-enhancing project that he advocates in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.

Rorty's overall project in that, his latest, book appears to be to outline the organic relationship between realizing that language is a product of time and chance, that people are products of language, that the most freedom we can achieve is freedom over how we talk about things, and that all these add up to an individual who is less concerned with forcing his or her redescription on others, and more interested in freeing herself and her fellow human beings from the unhappy and unredescribable features of our human existence, i.e., pain and suffering.

Rorty uses "irony" to mean something like having as one of your beliefs the belief that all beliefs are the curious product of time and chance as it manifests itself in the linguistic dealings unique to human existence. The ironist, according to Rorty, is able to achieve liberation from the idea that there is a preferred way of describing the world and the things in it, including persons, if "preferred" here means anything more than preferred by communities of language users.

Although he never says why, Rorty apparently chooses the word "irony" because it has the connotations of paradoxical self-reference that make it an apt metaphor for conveying the self-referentiality involved in believing that what you believe is a function of time and chance. If what I believe is a product of time and chance, and if what I believe is that what I believe is a product of time and chance, then I only believe that my beliefs are the products of time and

chance because of time and chance, and not, say, because they are in some absolute sense justified or true. This is the irony.

The rub seems to be that to believe as a function of simple and random causes and not as a function of reasoned decision is somehow inappropriate to rational creatures such as ourselves. The self-referential paradox applies to thinkers who recognize the contingency of their beliefs, and yet attempt to formulate beliefs and *beliefs systems* that accommodate and express their paradoxical belief that their honestly and deeply held beliefs are contingent. Rorty calls this the problem of ironist theorizing.

Another reason that the word "irony" is a good choice for describing Rorty's way of seeing our relationship to our beliefs is because of the associations of "subjective freedom" that have built up around the word owing to its consideration by people like Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard celebrates Socrates as the quintessential ironist, *and*, not coincidentally, as the first to possess the freedom from objectivity that comes with subjectivity. For Kierkegaard, objectivity is something like the standard-setting and defining authority of one's time. And so, for Rorty to call his project of finitizing the figures who make up one's relevant past "irony," and so to import into his considerations the associations of subjective freedom seems really very handy.

There are, however, other associations that come along with irony's connotations of freedom and self-referentiality that are less fitting for Rorty. One of Rorty's long-time projects has been to render epistemological projects obsolete. His suggestion has, for some time², been that philosophers cease

²"The World Well Lost" was first published in 1972.

using essentialist and representationalist metaphors, since these ways of speaking have shown themselves largely unfruitful and distracting.

Rorty's recommendation, especially in the latter chapters of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the book just before *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, is that we stop doing epistemology with its associations of essentialism and representationalism and instead do hermeneutics with its associations of edification and solidarity. He does not recommend that we do hermeneutics instead of epistemology because hermeneutics does a better job *at the same job* as epistemology. Rather, Rorty recommends that we do hermeneutics because the job it does, that of education or self-formation, is one that shows much promise in the way of achieving what Rorty thinks should be the goals of our greatest efforts, relieving suffering and building a sort of camaraderie between persons.

Unfortunately -- and I use this word to echo Rorty's use of "accidental" to describe the causal efficacy of words spoken and written -- unfortunately the word "irony" brings with it not only connotations of freedom and paradox, but associations of representationalism as well. Kierkegaard offers an account of irony that lines up nicely with Rorty's -- so nicely in terms of autonomy from the past, and self-referential writing, that when Kierkegaard insists that the appearance/reality distinction is, along with subjective freedom, one of two "necessary determinations" for irony, we must take notice. Rorty considers the appearance/reality distinction to be one of the vestiges of representationalist epistemology that needs to be purged from our vocabularies. Further, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he specifically recommends that one way that people who recognize their contingency yet wish to philosophize can get

beyond the self-referential problem of ironist theorizing is by disabusing themselves of appearance/reality talk. To motivate this tension, between Rorty's irony and his anti-representationalism is my main project in the first two thirds of this work. My intention in the last third is to create a vent for the pressure once it has ballooned.

To relieve the tension it is not enough to simply recommend that Rorty use a different word than "irony" for describing his freedom projects. For Rorty's recommendation that humans render themselves free from others' authority is tied up with his ways of talking about what it is to be human. And the metaphors Rorty chooses for describing what it is to be human are overwhelmingly linguistic. Rorty describes the self as an "incarnated vocabulary," a set of "sentential attitudes," "a book," *etc.* And so, since Rorty selects highly linguistic metaphors for his descriptions of what it is to be a self, it is only fitting that he would choose "irony," a word thoroughly entrenched in rhetorical and literary studies, as his metaphor for human projects of autonomy. Our pressure-relieving outlet valve must be more thorough-going than merely changing the terminology for autonomy, we must change our metaphors for the self while accommodating Rorty's notion of autonomy as self-referential breaking with the past for the sake of personal freedom.

In the 1960's the longtime gay phenomenon of "camp" came on the popular culture scene and caught the fancy of many intellectuals both gay and "straight." In 1964 Susan Sontag offered a description of camp as a "sensibility" or disposition that celebrated intensity and failure, awkwardness and extravagance, playfulness and performance.

Moe Meyer, in his polemic against the straight popularization of camp (a popularization which he credits at least in part to Sontag), offers a redescription of autonomy and of the self that recommends itself as a way of relieving the tension in Rorty's thought. Meyer's consideration of the performatively constituted "queer" self, and its freedom-enhancing activity as "camp" recommends itself structurally by maintaining Rorty's self-referentiality, attitudinally by incorporating Rorty's recognition of contingency and phenomenologically by encouraging Rorty's feeling of autonomy while improving upon his metaphors for the self and autonomy by invoking anti-essentialist and anti-representationalist associations, rather than traditional epistemological associations.

In the last analysis I will recommend a reading of Rorty's ironist hero, Jacques Derrida, that renders Derrida's exemplary ironic activity as philosophical camp. Derrida is exemplary for Rorty because Derrida is an *ironist fantasist*. The ironist fantasist is one who has worked through the urge to philosophize that distinguishes the ironist theorist (e.g., Nietzsche, Heidegger, Hegel) from the ironist novelist (e.g., Proust). The ironist fantasist is a one time ironist theorist who is able to recognize the authority figures (significant philosophers) of his relevant past (the canon of philosophy) as only *contingently* exercising control over him, treating them as finite in their power, and so rendering them impotent or at least no more important or authoritative than any other part of our relevant past.

I will render Derrida a camp figure by redescribing the specific behaviors that Rorty celebrates in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, i.e., Derrida's treatment of his significant philosophical past in *The Post Card* and his

treatment of John Searle in the first two volumes of *Glyph*. I will redescribe Derrida's attitude toward his philosophical past as a moment of what Sontag calls "naive" camp, where the camp sensibility appreciates an occasion of failed, yet extraordinary, sincerity. And I will motivate an interpretation of Derrida's treatment of Searle as an occasion of "deliberate" camp, which is the conscious self-expression of the camp sensibility that renders itself as part of the play.

Rorty has shown, and said, that he is not interested in doing traditional philosophy in traditional ways. Rorty is interested in moving beyond transcendental projects of outlining the fundamental conditions for the possibility of this or that phenomenon. He is also tired of employing the argumentative method of offering rigorous and tightly woven deductions in the terms of well-worn vocabularies. And because my purpose is to develop an intuition I have with regard to Rorty's thought in a way that will get his attention, I will not develop my concern in terms of "definitions" and "arguments" so much as "metaphors" and "redescriptions." I will not *argue* that Rorty is using the word "irony" *incorrectly*, nor will I argue that Kierkegaard is *right* to say that irony requires the appearance/reality distinction. Rather, I will try to *motivate* the tension in Rorty's chosen vocabulary by *emphasizing* epistemological *associations* that his metaphors for the self and for autonomy *invoke*. And I will try to relieve the tension, once motivated, by *suggesting a new way of speaking* about the self and its acts of freedom-enhancement.

Having said all this, when I use words like "argument" and "definition" understand that I invoke Rorty's description of how the ironist recognizes that arguments are perfectly good when divorced from the rigors of business as

usual philosophy and understood and used within the context of the rhetoric and persuasion of marks and noises and their associations. (CIS, 78)

Chapter by chapter

In the first chapter I begin to motivate irony's associations with epistemology and autonomy. Kierkegaard, in *The Concept of Irony*, argues that the two necessary features of irony are subjective freedom and playing appearances against reality. Kierkegaard is apt because his analysis is thorough, in that he accommodates all of our intuitions about the phenomena of irony. Kierkegaard is apt because his description bears an uncanny resemblance to Rorty's description of irony in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, in that it emphasizes personal freedom as removing past authorities from their seats of power. And Kierkegaard is apt because he expresses the intuition that irony seems to require a sense of the dualism between appearance and reality that Rorty should wish to avoid. Whether we finally agree with Kierkegaard that the appearance/reality distinction is necessary to our understanding of irony is less important for this project than whether the association between representationalism and irony is strong enough to make Rorty like his irony language less.

In chapter two I continue to motivate the tension between Rorty's anti-epistemological position and his attachment to irony, by developing Rorty's linguistic metaphors for the self in terms of what I have come to call Rorty's two-fold linguistic origin of human being: 1.) humans are made by being given a language, and 2.) humans are made particular kinds of humans by the particular languages they are given. I show how Rorty's linguistic sense of self

relates to his autonomy project by unpacking Rorty's statement that "freedom is the recognition of contingency" in terms of a negative sort of freedom expressed by the realization that we are not bound by the necessity of language to any one description of what it is to be human. I also make sense of Rortean freedom by making sense of his interest in a Nietzschean self-overcoming that creates freedom by breaking with the past. Finally, as a summary and transition, I highlight the linguistic flavor of Rorty's metaphors for the self, and foreshadow the similarly language-bound descriptions of his metaphors for self-overcoming so that the ties between Rorty and the representationalism in irony can become clear.

Chapter three is devoted to Rorty's use of the term "irony." He seems to use "irony" as meaning something like taking seriously the claims made in the "contingency" section of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* that the self is a product of language and that language is a product of time and chance. Rorty describes the ironist theorist as someone who understands and feels the force of all this, yet still feels compelled to offer philosophical explanations of how this could be, and how best to understand its significance. Rorty says that the end result of ironist theorizing is being rid of the urge to theorize. The one who manages this kind of theoretical therapy and comes out the other end without the urge to recontextualize others' attempts at grand recontextualization once-and-for-all -- this one Rorty calls the ironist fantasist. In an effort to answer the obvious question of whether Rorty thinks that he is managing the sort of grand and final recontextualization that he claims is impossible, I describe Rorty himself as an example of an ironist fantasist. The ironist fantasist is one who shares the ironist theorist's interest and background in philosophy, but whereas

the ironist theorist thinks that he is getting his arms around something bigger than himself, the fantasist understands his projects as personal acts of self-redescription for the purpose of removing standard-setting authorities from their seats of power, not once-for-all, but idiosyncratically and only for himself.

In chapter four I try to bring the tension between Rorty's linguistic metaphors for the self and for self-overcoming, "irony," and his anti-episemology to a head. I do this by comparing Rorty closely with Kierkegaard and show that the phenomenon of irony as described in both thinkers is the same. This similarity between their use of the word is problematic for Rorty since he chooses words for their suggestive power, and Kierkegaard's analysis of "irony" illustrates just how imbedded the appearance/reality distinction is within the term.

In chapter five I begin to develop a way of relieving the tension so far created. I outline the intellectual history of the primarily gay phenomenon called "camp." Susan Sontag described it in 1964 as a sensibility that emphasizes play, frivolity, failed seriousness and immediacy. Moe Meyer, more recently, has reacted against Sontag's description of camp as a standpoint that can be adopted by gay and straight alike. Meyer's complaint is that the work of Sontag and her intellectual heir, Andrew Ross, has wrongly suggested that camp is a posture that can be maintained outside of what Meyer calls anti-essentialist, "queer" performative frameworks. I will suggest an interpretation of Sontag that will ease the tension between her and Rorty on the one hand, and Meyer on the other.

Chapter six amounts to a redescription of Rorty's own fantasist hero, Jacques Derrida as a figure of philosophical camp. I develop Derrida's camp

roughly in terms of Sontag's distinction between "naive" and "deliberate" camp, and show that there are striking similarities between the way that Rorty characterizes Derridean attitudes, postures and activities, and Meyer's description of queer camp performances.

In connection with my own pro-Rortean (read *anti-epistemology* and *pro-autonomy*) assumptions, my hope for this work is two-fold. First, I hope to motivate the need for an alternative to Rorty's irony metaphors by illustrating their epistemological associations. Next, I hope to redescribe the attitudes and behaviors of Rorty's ironist in such a way as to make the camp terminology an interesting alternative to Rorty's irony terminology by virtue of its associative integrity, while maintaining his project of encouraging autonomy.

CHAPTER I

KIERKEGAARD, IRONY, AND THE APPEARANCE/REALITY DISTINCTION

The current overall project is that of motivating a certain tension between Rorty's celebration of irony and his rejection of representationalism. One way of construing this tension in Rorty is in terms of the modern v. postmodern debate. Generally conceived, modernity thinks of the relationship between the world and language in correspondence metaphors, and postmodernity eschews such thinking for metaphors that paint correspondence theories as involving, e.g., the awkwardness of the sign/signified relationship, as in Derrida.

Although Rorty is not willing to call himself "postmodern," some of his concerns, especially his interest in moving beyond representationalism, essentialism, objectivity, and metaphysics, have currency within postmodernity and are set in opposition to those thinkers we might consider paradigmatically "modern," e.g. Descartes, Kant and Hegel. To contrast one of these last with Rorty on any issue, much less on irony, might illustrate how little they have to say to one another. Hegel is probably the obvious exception to this generalization, especially due to the heavy weather made of Hegel by such postmoderns as Foucault and even, here and there, by Rorty himself, e.g., in the

chapter "Self-creation and affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche and Heidegger" in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.

Closer yet to Rorty in terms of style and interest, but still Hegelian in overt method and essentialism, is Kierkegaard. The significant difference between Kierkegaard and Hegel, that makes Kierkegaard the better match for Rorty, is Kierkegaard's awareness of the irony involved in offering one more *final word* -- offering a theory that overcomes all previous theories and accounts for all future ones. In fact it is Kierkegaard's intuition that Rorty borrows when trying to illustrate this self-referential issue as one of the central themes in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. Rorty calls this problem the "problem of ironist theorizing."

Kierkegaard said that if Hegel had prefaced the *Science of Logic* with "This is all just a thought experiment," he would have been the greatest thinker who ever lived. (CIS, 104)

Rorty knows that Kierkegaard is his kindred spirit, even if he is not familiar in world-view. Kierkegaard still pays homage to the modern notions of Reality and Ideas, while exhibiting a keen awareness of the sorts of concerns associated with the postmodern standpoint with regard to writing and theorizing.

Apparently because of this early sensitivity, even a cursory search of the latest journal entries regarding Kierkegaard will refer the inquirer to many postmodern articles celebrating or at least contemplating him. Kierkegaard seems to be getting more and more attention as a transitional figure between modernity and postmodernity. Obviously, the parts of Kierkegaard most interesting to those inclined toward literary readings are works as or about indirect communication.

Kierkegaard prefigured much of his later pseudonymous writing and indirect communication in his masters thesis, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*. And there are some significant similarities between the redescription of irony offered in Rorty's *Contingency, irony and solidarity* and Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*. It is my project to illuminate these similarities in such a way as to bring the tension within Rorty's work to light.

Because I am interested only in motivating the similarities between Kierkegaard's description and Rorty's redescription of irony, I will confine my comments largely to what Kierkegaard calls "the phenomenon" of irony. I will deal only fleetingly with what Kierkegaard calls "the Truth of Irony," since my interest in Kierkegaard is not with whether he is "right" regarding the necessary underlying structures of irony, but only with establishing the connection between irony and the appearance/reality distinction. Because the phenomenon of irony has its place of greatest prominence in his early work, I will deal nearly exclusively with Kierkegaard's masters thesis and with his early views regarding Socrates and irony, although Kierkegaard's view of Socrates apparently changed over the years. Therefore, when I describe Kierkegaard as ironic I mean only that Magister Kierkegaard, the author of *The Concept of Irony*, is open to consideration as an ironist of the sort he details in that work.

The difficulty of dealing with such a hard-to-place figure as Kierkegaard is that the very qualities that recommend him for placement within my current project, his apparent commitment to thoroughly modern concepts while embracing self-referential techniques that foreshadow postmodernity, make it

difficult to situate him next to Rorty without his apparent representationalism rendering either him or Rorty ridiculous.

I will, in chapter four, offer a reading of Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* as an example of the sort of ironic behavior he there describes. But in order to make sense of Kierkegaard as his own example, I will first explain how he understands irony. In order to offer an ironic reading of *The Concept of Irony*, I will first offer a, more-or-less, literal reading of the same.

Eventually I will accuse Rorty of having his cake and eating it too, with his paradoxical disdain for representationalism and celebration of irony. I will try to show that Kierkegaard and Rorty, in talking and thinking about irony as a phenomenon -- as something that happens and is experienced in the world -- are speaking and musing about the same phenomenon. I will also try to show that although their descriptions of the phenomenal line up rather nicely, all the way down to veiled admissions of their own irony, Kierkegaard has given expression to certain representationalist presuppositions that may be required in order for irony to continue to be as rich as it is in Kierkegaard, and as rich as Rorty seems to want it to be.

Happily, for myself and for you, the reader, we will not have to wade very deeply into Hegelian metaphysics in order to make sense of Kierkegaard's representationalism and essentialism. In fact, it is counter to my final ironic reading of Kierkegaard to make a literal understanding of his thesis rest too heavily on Hegel. I will eventually outline a reading, a la Louis Mackey, of *The Concept of Irony* as an anti-Hegel polemic offered in the self-undermining voice of "Hegelese." And so, if I were to rest my reading of Kierkegaard too squarely on thoroughly Hegelian considerations, the reading itself might eventually be

lost in the irony it tries to motivate. The trouble is, I need to demonstrate a strong tie between irony and metaphysics in order to motivate the tension between Rorty and Kierkegaard. The challenge is to maintain this strong metaphysical tie without rendering Kierkegaard literally Hegelian.

It is within the eminently readable chapter "For Orientation" that Kierkegaard most thoroughly explains basic irony, argues for the necessary connection between the appearance/reality distinction and irony, *and is the least Hegelian*. Although some use of Kierkegaard's Hegelianisms must be made in order to offer an anti-Hegelian ironic reading of the text, and to understand what Kierkegaard means at all, in those more Hegelian sections, his discussion of the appearance/reality distinction is all that is required to motivate the irony/anti-epistemological tension in Rorty. And that discussion is within the straightforward chapter "For Orientation."

What is required then, is to offer a reading of Kierkegaard that allows his Hegelianism to seep through so as to motivate Kierkegaard's own irony, without resting the connection between irony and the appearance/reality distinction too heavily on his Hegelianism. It is that reading I will now offer.

The Concept of Irony

My approach here will be to offer a Kierkegaardian description of irony in outline, and then to flesh out some of the particular themes that he has selected by pouring over the life of Socrates. These themes may be viewed, within the context of my procedure, as substantiating the description of irony that Kierkegaard offers. Kierkegaard's own method is much different.

Kierkegaard's method in *The Concept of Irony* is to examine at length certain Socratic linguistic and behavioral tendencies with an eye toward abstracting from these the themes that give structure to and define the concept of irony.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the concept of irony...it will be necessary for me to secure a dependable and authentic conception of the historical-actual, phenomenological existence of Socrates with reference to the question of its possible relation to the transfigured conception which has fallen to his lot at the hands of an enthusiastic or envious age. (COI, 47)

And then, once these tendencies are thematized in the form of a concept, Kierkegaard feels confident that we can look back on certain words and actions of Socrates as ironic, or as exhibiting the ironic standpoint.

Apparently to avoid begging the question, Kierkegaard rarely refers to specific actions or statements of Socrates as ironic, since most of these he deals with as phenomena leading up to the concept, and allowing it to emerge. Once the concept has emerged, however, Kierkegaard understands all Socratic behaviors as either exemplifying or needing to be accommodated to Socrates' ironic standpoint.

Once he has distilled the Socratic tendencies and thematized them into a concept, Kierkegaard measures this concept against other behaviors, utterances and events that we have in the past considered ironic. This he does in the chapter, "For Orientation," to which I referred earlier and to which I will soon return. Recognizing that I am only summarizing the results at which Kierkegaard arrived after meticulous speculation, I will first rehearse Kierkegaard's notion of irony, then I will draw special attention to the Socratic

behavioral and linguistic tendencies, particularly his reliance on the daimonion and his attitude of indifferentism, from which Kierkegaard abstracted this definition.

Here is the Kierkegaardian ironic moment in outline: An individual becomes aware of himself as obliged to an external authority. There is something outside of the individual that Kierkegaard calls the given actuality of the day toward which the individual feels an obligation of obedience. Kierkegaard sometimes characterizes this authority as having *defining authority*. When the given actuality loses its defining power over the individual -- this actually seems to begin with the recognition of the authority as external -- the given actuality or defining authority is said to have lost its validity for the individual. At this point, to whatever degree the individual asserts his own authority over the dominant power by denying it, to that degree he is an ironist.

I have referred to the "given actuality of the day" as the era's *defining* authority, I am using this metaphor of Kierkegaard's since it is more meaningful within the current project, and more meaningful to our current philosophical community. When he is discussing how the "given actuality" -- the Greek state - - had become as nothing for Socrates, and how Socrates had responded in kind by "exempt[ing] himself from sharing in the responsibilities of the state and was perfectly content to live as a privateer" he describes Socrates as "predicateless..."

...naturally I do not mean [predicateless] in the odious sense that he was not the Chancellor or First Secretary; but as he did not have any relation to the state, so nothing may be predicated of his entire life and work from the standpoint of the state. (COI, 204-205)

In an explanatory footnote to this passage Kierkegaard explains what he means by "predicateless" as "incommensurable with the standards of the state."

Kierkegaard makes it clear that he does not mean that Socrates was without a title, as anyone who didn't hold a government position would be. What he means is that within the language of Athenian society when viewed as a language-and-standard-determining community, nothing could be said of him.

Not only was Socrates predicateless from the perspective of the community, but Socrates could say nothing meaningful with regard to the state, when viewed from its perspective, and as framed in language meaningful to its population.

The irony of Socrates makes use...among other things, of a form of speech which sounds in the first instance like the speech of a madman. (Kierkegaard 1968, 77)

In keeping with this precedent of describing the "given actuality of the day" as the linguistic standard setting community, I will sometimes refer to what Kierkegaard calls the "given actuality of the day" as the time's "defining authority."

The subjectivity of the daimonion

In the "divine sign" of Socrates we see the will which formerly had simply transferred itself beyond itself now beginning to apply itself to itself and so to recognize its own inward nature. This is the beginning of a self-knowing and so of authentic freedom. --Hegel, Philosophy of Right §279

Kierkegaard's exemplar of ironic behavior is Socrates. The particular Socratic behavior of which Kierkegaard makes the most is Socrates' reliance on

the daimonion³ for direction in his personal life. It is in this activity that Kierkegaard sees Socrates distinguishing himself from all who came before him as the first subjective individual. (COI, 202) Kierkegaard describes subjectivity

³Following Kierkegaard, I will refer to τὸ δαίμονιον as "the daimonion", since he seems to think that his interpretation of Socratic irony as purely negative relies on the negativity of his inner voice, that for Kierkegaard is literally neither "inner," nor a "voice." The daimonion is to be considered as necessarily abstract. According to Kierkegaard, it is wrong to take the adjectival form of τὸ δαίμονιον as implying a noun to which it must attach. Nor is it any better to think of "the demonic" as suggesting a personality who has such a quality. Socrates' daimon is wholly impersonal and abstract. "...it is not simply adjectival so that one might render it complete by implying function (ἔργον) or sign (σημεῖον), or something of the kind; nor is it substantive in the sense that it describes a particular or unique being." (COI, 186)

Although we might *talk about* the daimon as a "voice," Kierkegaard suggests that to do so is an imprecision, and that thinking of this "voice" as anything other than an impersonal urge or directive is confused and misleading. "If we next inquire into its manner of operation, we learn it is a voice which makes itself heard, yet not in such a way that one would want to insist upon this, as if it manifested itself through words, for it operates wholly instinctively." (COI, 186)

Further bolstering the impersonal interpretation Kierkegaard wishes to fix in place are the ways in which the daimon appears to Socrates. It comes as a "manifestation," as a free floating attribute "something daimonic" and as an "occurrence," but never as an embodied (or disembodied but personal) voice or a vision. (COI, 186)

Kierkegaard follows Plato contra Xenophon in taking the *daimon* to be entirely negative. This means that although the daimon let Socrates know when he was *misguided*, it never would offer more positive direction. Kierkegaard dismisses Xenophon's contrary description as simplistic and presumptive. "If one must choose between Xenophon and Plato, I hold one should sooner side with Plato with whom the constant predicate or the activity of this daimon is that it only warns, and regard the additional contribution by Xenophon as a Xenophontic thoughtlessness which, *without any presentiment of the significance* that might be concealed in this, finds in his wisdom that if the daimon warned, then surely it must also instigate and impel." (COI, 187--my emphasis) The "significance" about which Kierkegaard speaks and which Xenophon misses is nothing other than irony itself as it spends itself in negative subjective satisfaction. When discussing the daimon, what is at stake for Kierkegaard is both subjectivity and subjective freedom.

as a personal opposition to objectivity (COI, 188-ff.), and so it is within this opposition that we may make sense of subjectivity. By "subjective" acts Kierkegaard is referring to consciously replacing the previously empowered authority with one's self as personally authoritative. The version of objectivity against which Socrates was reacting was the external authority of the Greek state. (COI, 188)

Kierkegaard discovers Socrates' imperfect subjectivity in his relation to the daimonion. The daimon was Socrates' personal and negative authority, this is how Kierkegaard gives expression to Plato's description of the daimonion as never giving positive counsel, but only telling Socrates what *not* to do. The daimon is negative in that it says "no." It is personal in that it counsels Socrates with regard only to his private dealings: it does not apply to matters of state. The negativity of the daimonion is central to Kierkegaard's interpretation of Socrates as ironic. Irony, we will see, is strictly negative, it only destroys and never builds, and so, similarly the metaphorical voice that was the origin of irony must also have been strictly negative.

Because of its strict negativity, and the fact that it applies only to personal matters, this first manifestation of subjectivity is to be thought of as preliminary and lacking much toward being the internal source of direction that subjectivity would someday be. "Now the daimonic in relation to Hellenism is also a determination of subjectivity, but subjectivity is not fulfilled in this; it still has something external." (COI, 192) After all, the daimonic, although visiting Socrates in his person, is *experienced* as external. And externality is at odds with pure subjectivity.

Although the daimonion pre-figures thorough-going subjectivity, instead of exemplifying it, the quasi-externality of the daimonion was required in order for Socrates to take it seriously. Socrates was the first of his sort of person, the daimonic was the first of its sort of authority, and as such must have been heard as *external* in order to maintain any sort of authority at all, even though it would eventually be interpreted, at least by Kierkegaard and Hegel, as basically internal. It has to be read as internal to some degree to count as a transition away from community-driven identity and toward subjectivity. Kierkegaard makes sense of the fact that it was necessary for the daimonion to be experienced as external, by appealing to the standards of authority in the Greek state.

The pre-Socratic view of authority was that *by definition* authority was from without the individual subject. (COI, 191) For public direction the Greeks looked to the Law, and for private guidance they consulted the oracle. Although it is tempting to substitute "personal" as a synonym for "private" here, the switch is an unwarranted anachronism, since, strictly speaking, before Socrates there was no personal self in any modern conception of self. It is an equivocation, then, to conflate "private" with "personal," since "private" in the Greek sense simply meant not *everyone's* affair and "personal" usually means something more like an individual's relationship with herself.

Before Socrates' daimonion, people had to look to the oracular for particular private advice.

But while the laws determined the universal, the older Hellenism still required a vehicle of decision in particular events, one which concerned the state as well as the private affairs of citizens. For this they had the oracle." (COI, 190)

Kierkegaard sees the daimonion as a sort of transitional authority in between entirely external authority, as manifested in pre-Socratic respect for Law and the state religions, and pure subjectivity, or autonomy.

Now instead of the oracle Socrates had his daimon.
This daimonic lies in the transition from the oracle's
external relation to the individual to the full
inwardness of freedom... (COI, 190-191)

As contrasted with "the full inwardness of freedom" as felt only imperfectly in Socrates' experience of the daimonic, Kierkegaard characterizes the reliance upon the external, either Law or the oracle as "the lack of subjective freedom." (COI, 190)

Subjective freedom as it found concretion in the person of Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, manifests itself in its resistance to the external authority of the state. In general, subjectivity finds its expression in the opposition of the subject to the imposition of the *existing* authority of his or her day.

The standpoint of Socrates is subjectivity,
inwardness reflecting upon itself, and in relation to
itself loosens and dissolves the existent in a surge of
thought that swells up over it and washes it away
before itself sinking back into thought once more.
(COI, 190)

The existent defining authority of Socrates' day was the Greek state, and so it is in opposition to this that subjectivity, in the immature, externalized form of the Socratic daimon, first finds actualization.

[Its unwillingness to advise in public matters) is the
visible manifestation of the daimonic's negative
relation to Socrates, for this in turn caused him to
relate himself negatively to actuality, or in the Greek
sense, to the state. (COI, 188)

Through the negative power of subjectivity, the objective authority of the state becomes as nothing.

The objective power of the state, its restraints upon the activity of the individual, its laws, its courts, everything loses its absolute validity for him, all are stripped away as imperfect forms. (COI, 221)

Subjective freedom is experienced when the individual stops caring what the objective defining authority has to say about him. For others the opinions of the state continue to have significance. For the ironist, the state is not in a position to speak. It has no authority.⁴

Subjectivity in Socrates expressed itself as his deference toward the daimonic to the neglect of the defining power of the state's authority. But because the daimonic was itself limited in its range of expression -- it could only negate -- although it was not limited in its authority, so was Socrates' range of usefulness and interest limited.

Socratic indifferentism

...and if one were to characterize his crime with a single word...then it could be called apragmosynā or indifferentism. (COI, 217)

In this passage Kierkegaard summarizes the Socratic standpoint as an attitude of "indifference." I will use this term, as Kierkegaard does, to indicate a moment of irony that appears less active than the aggressive and authority-

⁴My awkward anthropomorphism in construing a state as having an "opinion" and not having "anything to say" is meant to invoke the propositional metaphor that Kierkegaard uses and that I previously mentioned. The redescription I have in mind is when Kierkegaard talks of Socrates as being "predicateless" when considered from the state perspective.

crumbling self-empowerment of subjectivity. By "indifference" I intend to dwell more on the personal and particular aspect within the Socratic concern.

Because Socrates' subjectivity was entirely negative and didn't achieve the subjective fullness of positivity, he could not embrace the positivity of the defining authority of his day -- he could not say or do anything commensurable with the state standards which then defined what counted as significant. Socrates could not act significantly, and so could only deal in private relevance. He could say nothing meaningful both to him and to current public arena of his day, since, as an ironic subject, he could not communicate within objectivity and since objectivity for him meant the state.

Socrates' life, then was one of particularity and privacy -- not that he stayed home, but that his relationships were fleeting and immediate. Just as he had nothing to say in the current public language, neither could he, because his was only a negative certainty, make his way beyond his particularity and into the universal--for Plato this would be the realm of the forms, for Kierkegaard, the Idea (for both--*eidōs*).

Here again Socrates appears as one who stands posed ready to leap into something, yet at every moment instead of leaping into this 'other', he leaps aside and back into himself. (COI, 192)

This attachment to the private and particular is what Kierkegaard means when he speaks of Socrates having the "idea as limit."

We have previously seen that the standpoint of Socrates was in many ways that of subjectivity, yet in such a way that subjectivity did not manifest itself in its richness, that the idea became the limit from which Socrates turned back into himself. (COI, 192]

But he is not to be pitied for his self-absorption. Socrates' is a life of personal conscious freedom -- even though *his* person finds expression only negatively.

If we add to this [his particularity] the polemical consciousness with which Socrates assimilated his entire relationship to his age, the infinite yet negative freedom whereby he breathed light and easy under the vast horizon circumscribed by the Idea as a limit, the certainty he possessed through the daimonic so as not to get tangled up in the multitudinous events of life, then the standpoint of Socrates appears once more as irony. (COI, 192)

Apparently it was only through self-discipline that Socrates maintained his strict negativity, and the Idea as a boundary.

There is, to be sure, a deep positivity with much content in this constantly insinuated, at every moment both posited and recalled, negativity as soon as it is allowed to come to itself; but Socrates continually restrained this as a possibility which never became actuality. (COI, 196)

His motivation for avoiding the speculation that might have launched him into both the realm of the Idea and into politics was respect for his divine calling. (COI, 198) With this calling (and the daimonic) firmly in mind, Socrates busied himself with his own particular existence, and the dealings of those around him.

His efforts were oriented toward redirecting individuals. But this redirection was not toward this or that way of doing or seeing things. The direction Socrates offered was instead *away from* this or that way. "Socrates supplied a new direction...This activity was not so much calculated to direct their attention to what should come, however, as to wrest from them what they already had." (COI, 200) Kierkegaard compares Socrates to a general whose

mission is to besiege and starve out the commitments of himself and others, and this mission found its fruition in destruction. (COI, 199-200)

Not content to think about this philosophically, he approached each man individually, deprived him of everything, and sent him away empty-handed. (COI, 199)

Socrates' subjective freedom was the negative freedom from commitment. "In this way he freed the individual from every commitment, freed him in the same way that he himself was free." (COI, 200) And it was as basking in this freedom that he enjoyed "the pleasure of irony to the fullest extent." (COI, 200)

Thus he elevates himself higher and higher, becoming ever lighter as he rises, seeing all things disappear beneath him from his ironical bird's eye perspective, while he himself hovers above them in ironic satisfaction borne by the absolute self-consistency of the infinite negativity within him. (COI, 221)

Socrates was content to enjoy the negative satisfaction of razing his own and others' intellectual attachments. However, the vacant space left in rubble increased in those whose attachments were destroyed the desire to build anew. "Whereas his own standpoint culminates in himself, the same standpoint when assimilated into their consciousness is merely the condition for a new standpoint." (COI, 201)

The role of irony in history

Kierkegaard characterizes the Socratic standpoint when viewed from the perspective of its effect in history as "stillness." At the beginning of nearly every chapter, he uses metaphors that suggest Socrates' role in history and actuality as that of clearing, by destroying what came before, an intellectual

space which, although the negativity of the ironist prevents him from seeing or engaging its positivity will provide the vacant lot on which yet others will build.

The life of Socrates is for the observer like a majestic pause in the course of history: one does not hear him at all, a deep stillness prevails until this is suddenly broken off by the discordant attempts of several different schools of disciples to trace their origins back to this hidden and mysterious source. (COI, 222)

Socrates' role in world history as well as his own personal demeanor is described as a clearing in the tangle of objectivity and actuality. When considered from the historical perspective we may think of Socratic stillness, at any time and in any place, as the threatening distance from the objective other that is subjectivity. When we consider the Socratic demeanor, we imagine a recluse among the masses -- an intellectual hermit who has nothing to say to the community and who says it very loudly.

[Our age] will not tolerate a man to stand still and become immersed in himself, to walk slowly is already suspect, and how could one even think of such a thing in the animated moment in which we live, this fateful hour which everyone agrees is pregnant with the extraordinary. It despises isolation, and how could it possibly tolerate a human being getting the preposterous idea of going through life alone, an age which, hand in hand and arm in arm (like itinerant journeymen and mercenaries), lives for the Idea of community? (COI, 264)

When considered conceptually, Socrates provides a blank spot in actuality that is necessary for new pursuits, although the ironist does not consider himself from the perspective of the beginning, but as an ending.

As in a certain sense he is and is not in world history, so his significance for the development of the world spirit is just to be and not to be, or not to be

and yet to be: he is the nothingness from which a beginning must be made. (COI, 222)

How Kierkegaard construes the activity and purpose of irony is a function of whether he considers it as intended in the ironist, or in terms of its historical significance. When contemplating his actions from Socrates' own perspective, Kierkegaard refers to them as "subjective." But when speaking of Socrates' role in history, Kierkegaard describes them as "ironic."

It was not at all the concern of Socrates to make the abstract concrete...The Socratic concern was not to make the abstract concrete, but through the immediately concrete to cause the abstract to become visible. (COI, 284)

When Kierkegaard says that it was not Socrates' *concern* to make the abstract concrete, he is indicating the perspective from which we are considering Socratic irony. He is indicating that we are considering irony from the personal perspective, and not from the perspective of world-history. The individual whom history (in this case Kierkegaard) will decide is ironic does not see himself as playing any role, much less an historic one, neither does the ironist think of himself as ironic. What the ironist does is to try to get out from under the defining authority, the "given actuality" of the day, and to try to remove all claims and commitments for the sole purpose of freedom.

When considered from the Socratic, the personal, perspective, the function of irony (according to Kierkegaard and in one of his more Hegelian descriptions -- he is, after all, arguing with Hegel in this passage), is to illuminate the "abstract" through thoroughly concrete dealings. Kierkegaard contrasts "abstract" with "concrete" to mean "contentless." (COI 83) What "clearing away the concrete for the sake of the visibility of the abstract means,"

then, is that Socrates was trying to make room for *nothing*. "Nothing" is to be understood as "nothing *commensurable with the time's defining authority*." The particular dealings through which Socrates made the "abstract" (i.e. nothing) appear are things like Socrates' indifferentism with regard to the youth and courts of Athens, his rejection of the authority of the Greek state over the life of the individual, and his disdain for the jails and hemlock of the Athenian penal system.

Although Socrates was not, himself, *concerned* with making the abstract concrete, that was his effect. When considered from the perspective of his effect on world history, Socrates is described most often as "ironic." The ironist is one who, when viewed from the perspective of history, made room in the clutter of ideas and concrete expressions for something new, something which would one day become a part of the clutter, and so may itself need removal. Irony, then, is a standpoint, or a way to organize the behaviors of subjectively aggressive individuals into an interpretation of that person that has world-historical significance.

Having come full circle now, from a Kierkegaardian description of irony to dealing with the particulars of the Socratic life which set the precedents and gave the impetus for subjective ironic existence, and back to a redescription of irony as the view of a subjective individual from the world-historical perspective, we may now turn to applying the concept of irony to occurrences, behaviors (linguistic and otherwise) and events which we consider to be examples of inferior and derivative tokens of pure standpoint, or eminent irony.

A common appreciation for the importance of personal freedom from defining authority is what Rorty and Kierkegaard share. Kierkegaard, however,

sees more to irony than just autonomy, he sees a contradiction between appearances and the realities that they betray. It is at this point that Rorty will wish to part company with Kierkegaard, but we will delay his escape if we have by that time joined them sufficiently and shown how Kierkegaard's description of irony recommends itself, not only in the areas he shares with Rorty, but also because of its completeness in dealing with ironic phenomena that Rorty ignores. I will now examine Kierkegaard's application of the concept of irony to these phenomena commonly considered ironic, so as to illustrate the usefulness and thoroughness of his descriptions. Next, I will demonstrate Kierkegaard's insistence that along with the subjective freedom whose intimate relationship with irony we have already established, and with which Rorty agrees, the appearance/reality distinction is also necessary for irony. This part Rorty won't much care for.

Irony pure and simple

Kierkegaard's overriding interest in *The Concept of Irony*, is in the sort of irony exemplified by Socrates. Kierkegaard alternately calls this sort of irony "pure," "eminent" or "standpoint" irony. Kierkegaard sets out not only to make the concept of pure irony emerge from his understanding of Socratic irony, but from his treatment of other, less pure, more common forms of irony. "For Orientation," the chapter devoted to a discussion of the "conceptual landscape" into which Kierkegaard's considerations regarding pure irony fit, may itself be received ironically.⁵ Indeed, if we are to make sense of the chapter we *must*

⁵Compare note 39, p 272.

take it as a token of what Vlastos calls "ostensive irony". In ostensive irony, the ironist is said to both mean and not mean what he or she says. The reader is certain that the most literal understanding is impossible, or in this case, incomplete, and yet there is a way to make sense of what is said. Since Kierkegaard couldn't possibly expect the chapter to serve as a positive formulation of what pure irony is --the chapter never says-- we are left to wonder what Kierkegaard *does intend*.

Kierkegaard proceeds by telling us what irony conceived of purely *is not*. He begins by making a distinction between what he calls "quantitative" and "qualitative" ironies. (COI, 271) Into the first group go most of what we normally deal with as irony. It includes oratorical irony in all its forms as well as that irony which we might for reasons forthcoming call "isolation irony."

Oratorical irony is defined as "a figure of speech...whose characteristic is this: to say the opposite of what is meant." (COI, 264) The most common form of irony as a figure of speech is "when one says something serious which is not seriously intended." (COI, 265) The other, more rare version is "when one says something facetiously, as a jest, which is intended seriously." (COI, 265) An example of this might be when the adulterer who is in the company of his wife passes someone on the street who is wearing his mistresses' scent and says with a laugh, "mmm, you smell good like my girlfriend. But shh! don't tell my wife!"

There are two features common to all irony (presumably this includes pure irony) which reveal themselves in the ironic figure of speech. These are 1.) "the phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence" (COI, 264) and 2.) "the subject is negatively free." (COI, 264) First, with regard to

irony as a figure of speech, it may be said that the phenomenon is the word and the essence is the thought behind the word. (COI, 264) In normal speech the essence, or literal meaning, of the word used is the same as how it is being used in this or that act of normal speech. But in cases of irony the word is used in opposition to its literal meaning. (COI, 264) And so, in the context of the ironic figure of speech, where the literal meaning of what is said is the opposite of what is meant, the phenomenon (the word--what is said) is the opposite of the essence (the thought--what is meant).

Second, the ironic subject is said to be "negatively free." This means is that the figure of speech ironist frees himself from attachment to any positive content of what is said by the negation inherent within the ironic act. When all that we can be sure of is that the speaker does not mean what she says, the only point of consistency or explanation to which the ironist can be held is that she must mean something *other* than what she says. And even this criterion of judgment goes by the way if the speaker or writer is not a self-proclaimed ironist (and what ironist has such an obvious tell as actually saying "I am being ironic"--and who would believe one if she did?) No, the ironist is free from all but the most basic interpretative requirements. This sort of freedom Kierkegaard rightly calls "negative freedom," (COI, 264-265) and contrasts it with the positive freedom that comes from offering an adequate and straightforward representation of what is meant. In the case of positive freedom, what is meant is what is said. This situation is characterized as positive because the speaker is saying more than merely what is *not* meant. The limitation with this more straightforward brand of communication, apparently, is that the speaker is then bound to his statement by his own

admission of its accuracy. "...I am bound in relation to myself and cannot detach myself whenever I choose." (COI, 264-265) The implication is, then, that the ironist is absolutely free. "If, on the other hand, what is said is not my meaning, or the opposite of my meaning, then I am free both in relation to others and in relation to myself." (COI, 265)

Now, even though irony as a figure of speech represents itself as other than it actually is, the intention is not to deceive.

The ironic figure of speech cancels itself, however, for the speaker presupposes his listeners understand him, hence through a negation of the immediate phenomenon the essence remains identical with the phenomenon. (COI, 265)

The cancellation here considered is the negation of the discrepancy between the word, the phenomenon, and the thought, the essence. Because the figure is spoken ironically, the speaker intends for the listener to hear the message ironically and convert the message from a forthcoming, straightforward one to a less direct, more subtle one.

Even though the method is an indirect one, the communication purpose is as straightforward as that one belonging to the man lacking subtlety who chooses his words as accurately representing his idea, and who, in doing so, binds himself positively to his message. The ironic figure of speech, although 'round about in method, has the net effect of straightforward communication. "It is like a riddle and its solution possessed simultaneously." (COI, 265)

But although there is no deceit present in oratorical irony, irony's pretense of deceit makes it in a certain sense exclusive like the thin disguise of the celebrity who wants to be found out. "Hence this figure of speech looks

down, as it were, on plain and ordinary discourse immediately understood by everyone; it travels in an exclusive incognito, as it were, and looks down from its exalted station with compassion on ordinary pedestrian speech." (COI, 265)

What I am calling "isolation irony" appears distinct from oratorical irony only in terms of its intention and in its place of honor in the ironic hierarchy. In oratorical irony the speaker's purpose is to communicate something to a listener or reader. Deceit is a phenomenon which is present within the realm of oratorical irony only occasionally, and then only as an unfortunate and unintended side-effect.

When it sometimes happens that such an ironic figure of speech is misunderstood, this is not the fault of the speaker, except insofar as he has taken up with such an underhanded patron as irony which is as fond of playing pranks on its friends as its enemies. (COI, 265)

But in certain forms of irony deceit is an intended and necessary ingredient. In order to effect the result of exclusion from the uninitiated, certain intellectuals will present themselves as other than they really are. The irony in this circumstance does not cancel itself, as in the figure of speech ironic variety, but relies upon undisclosed pretense as a means of achieving separation. Kierkegaard compares the subterfuge involved in this sort of irony with speaking another language in order to achieve distance from those who don't know the language.

Insofar as the higher circles (naturally this must be understood according to an intellectual protocol) speak ironically--just as kings and rulers speak French so as not to be understood by commoners--to this extent irony is in the process of isolating itself, for it does not generally wish to be understood. (COI, 266)

This is not unlike riding the elevator with people from the romance languages floor. This form of irony, and for obvious reasons, I am calling "isolation irony."

Not only does this form of irony conceal itself from the listener, but it is for that reason superior to irony of the figure of speech variety. "It is, furthermore, merely an inferior form of the ironic conceit which desires witnesses in order to convince and reassure itself..." (COI, 266) This inferiority is well illustrated by the Alfred Hitchcock classic film *Rope*. In that movie the two main characters, Brandon and Phillip engage in the murder of a friend of theirs, not for any mundane reason such as money or love, but rather for the art of the murder. They have abused the teachings of their Nietzschean headmaster, played by Jimmy Stewart, to justify the destruction of the inferior by the superior.

Now, in order to make the murder most artistic, to add the *signature to the painting*, as it were, they invite the dead man's friends, fiancée, parents and former headmaster, Stewart's character, to a dinner party. The crowning ironic touch is that they serve the dead man's loved ones from on top of the chest in which his body is stored. Thus far the story serves as an example of isolation irony. The two 'superiors' engage in subterfuge only for the sake of enjoying the ironies from their position of knowledge. Kierkegaard calls this feeling of the enjoyment of ironic isolation "satisfaction." "But [the ironist] experiences this satisfaction in solitude, and his concern is precisely that no one notices his deception." (COI, 266)

It is on the very point of solitude that the ironist murderers in the story fail on both accounts, that of undetected murder and isolation irony. It is clear that the ironist really in question here is Brandon. He is stronger in intellect and

continence than is Phillip. Indeed, by the end of the film it seems that Phillip's only role in the plot ever was that of observer/ appreciator. Phillip is no real help with the actual murder, (his barnyard strangulation technique is the butt of an ongoing joke) and he proves quite the hindrance in remaining undetected. Phillip clearly has no stomach for murder. No, it appears that Phillip's role is not to help the lie, but first to appreciate it, and then when he himself becomes too squeamish to experience the satisfaction, he 'helps' only by revealing the irony to Rupert, the headmaster played by Stewart. That this is a 'help' is the key. Brandon obviously wishes to be caught, at least by his idol Stewart who is the only one, he feels, who could appreciate their novelty, irony and superiority. It is Brandon's desire to be found out and appreciated that leads to his demise as a criminal and ironist. The isolation ironist cannot be found out. The satisfaction of solitude is ruined by disclosure. Brandon gets away with neither the murder nor the irony.

Kierkegaard observes that much of the time the ironist is not so much trying to get away from the world, or get away with something with regard to the world, but is trying to get the others from whom he is finding isolation to discover something about themselves. Or at the very least the isolation ironist is hoping that fatuous others will show themselves for what they are, even if they don't see it themselves.

In all these instances irony exhibits itself most nearly as conceiving the world, as attempting to mystify the surrounding world not so much in order to conceal itself as to induce others to reveal themselves. (COI, 268)

The ironist does, however engage in irony at times to hide himself in himself and from others. On these occasions, such as the occasion of a lover who

denies his love in order to allow it existence only within himself, the ironist increases satisfaction by augmenting the lie. But the more the ironist isolates himself for some reason other than the poetic achievement of the exclusion, just to make life easier, for example, the less the irony is pure, and the more plain and simple deceit mitigates.

But the more it is a finite consideration that determines one to engage in such mystifications, as when a merchant travels incognito in order to expedite the successful outcome of an investment, a king in order to surprise his custom house functionaries, a police inspector to come for once as a thief--in the night, a person in the most subordinate position in the state with fear for high-ranking superiors, etc., then the more it approximates plain and simple dissemblance. (COI, 269)

There are two ways that isolation irony excludes itself corresponding to the two forms of figure of speech irony. (COI, 266) Irony isolates itself by either feigning identification with, or by opposing itself to the contemporary feature of its society that is being highlighted by exclusion.

In relation to an insipid and inane enthusiasm it is ironically correct to outbid this with ever more and more elated exultation and praise, although the ironist is himself aware that this enthusiasm is the greatest foolishness in the world. (COI, 266)

It is clear that the irony practiced by the isolation ironist who "identifies himself with the nuisance he wishes to attack" (COI, 266) is in form like that ironic figure of speech which "says something serious which is not seriously intended." (COI, 265) The isolation ironist may say something like, "Gee, I love those suspenders" when how she feels about the suspenders is very different indeed. The motivation for throwing how she feels into relief against what she

says is not to communicate a disgust with the suspenders, as it would be if this were an example of irony as figure of speech. The motivation here is for the ironist to enjoy the moment of separation, and the feeling of having gotten one by the uninformed. "In all these instances it is the ironist's pleasure to seem ensnared by the same prejudice imprisoning the other person." (COI, 267)

The other way that irony can isolate is by setting itself up in opposition to the present irritation.

In relation to a superabundance of wisdom, to be so ignorant, so stupid, to be as much of a bumpkin as possible, yet always so amiable and eager to learn that the landlords of wisdom take pleasure in letting one poach on their well-stocked preserves. (COI, 267)

This form of isolation irony finds its correlate in the figure of speech irony that says facetiously what it intends seriously.

Next Kierkegaard considers executive and contemplative irony.

Executive irony is also called "dramatic," or "natural" irony apparently depending on the context. There doesn't appear to be any fundamental distinction intended between the three terms. It might help to understand executive irony if we read the word less like "executive" as in *the executive branch of government* or *chief executive officer* and more like *execute*, as in when a gymnast or swimmer *executes* a tumble or dive well. Something executed is *something done*. Executive irony then, is irony that is performed rather than spoken, and that performance is not by a purposeful being *qua* purposeful being. Take the examples of irony offered by Alanis Morissette in the chorus of her song *Irony*: "It's like rain on your wedding day. It's a free ride when you've already paid. It's the good advice that you just didn't take; and who would've thought -- it

figures." The irony involves a purposeful being, but ironic things are happening *to them* caused by forces outside their decision-making.

When it is chance or nature performing the irony it may seem more appropriate to call it "dramatic" irony, since in a drama events unfold without constant mention or attention to who or what is behind them. In this light, Kierkegaard's first discussion, albeit in a footnote, of executive or dramatic irony is the irony of nature.

Belonging to executive irony, or dramatic irony as it might be called, is also the irony of nature, since this is not conscious in nature except for one who has an eye for it, for whom it is then as if nature were like a person playing tricks on him, or confiding to him its pain and sorrow. (COI, 271, note)

True enough, nature's irony does not require an ironic agent, what it does require, though is an ironic interpreter. This interpreter must not be so novice so as to fail to recognize, or to project, the irony in the situation. It is interesting that Kierkegaard describes the state of being of irony in nature as *conscious*. The ironic consciousness of nature seems to be half-way between just plain being and nothingness. This conscious irony appears to *have been there* in a certain manner, dormant, unappreciated in nature until the ironically developed consciousness perceives it. But it also seems that without the ironic consciousness it would not be.

Now all such features [the juxtaposition of remote extremes by nature] are not in nature, but the ironic subject perceives them in nature. (COI, 272 note)

And

This disparity is not present in nature for one who is too natural and too naive, but only exhibits itself for

one who is himself ironically developed." (COI, 271 note)

Here Kierkegaard goes on a little more explicitly, indicating how it is that the irony in nature is dependent upon the ironic appreciator. Talk of the ironically natural, or naive is to talk of children or child-like individuals who aren't surprised by nature's apparent purposefulness, since they are too inexperienced to know that things are supposed to act differently than people.

If we back up a little (or more precisely back *out* of the footnote in which we have been dwelling for the last little bit) we can make more sense of the ironic consciousness and its role in the appreciation of natural irony as we deal with that which Kierkegaard considers the more important applications of executive irony.

Here again Kierkegaard tells us what the concept in question *is* by telling us what it *is not*. Executive irony is not simple *dissembling*, although he notes that for simplicity sake it is often translated that way. The difference between the two explains how executive irony is not a matter of purposeful action, but of significant interpretation.

But whereas dissemblance describes more the objective act by which the disparity between essence and phenomenon is effected, irony is also descriptive of a subjective satisfaction, for it is by means of irony that the subject emancipates himself from the constraint imposed upon him by the continuity of life, whence it may be said of the ironist that he 'cuts loose.' (COI, 272-273)

So, in the case of natural irony, the description of events offered by the ironist includes *both* how the disparity between expectation and actuality came to be *and* that this is a disparity, that there was an expectation that went unsatisfied,

and that the events which actually unfolded had a discrepancy to them when perceived by the ironically developed consciousness.

Another significant difference between dissemblance and irony comes in their external teleologies. Simply put, lying has one and being ironic does not. More accurately put, lying has an external purpose, e.g. staying out of trouble, making others like you, etc. and irony's only purpose is the irony itself. Ironic satisfaction finds itself in the feeling of separation experienced by the subjective individual who is able to attain distance from others by presenting himself other than he is.

To this must be added that dissemblance, insofar as one wishes to relate it to the subject, has a purpose, an external purpose foreign to dissemblance itself. Irony, on the other hand, has no purpose, its purpose is immanent in itself, a metaphysical purpose. The purpose is none other than irony itself. When an ironist exhibits himself as other than he actually is, it might seem that his purpose were to induce others to believe this. His actual purpose, however, is merely to feel free, and this he is through irony. Irony has, therefore, no external purpose but is self-purposive. (COI, 273)

It is misleading then, to say that irony has no purpose. It does have a purpose, but that purpose is served by the achievement of irony itself, and requires nothing else for its satisfaction.

Finally, as far as the executive forms of irony go, we may add to our list of things that irony is not, that it is not hypocrisy. It may seem that irony is identical with hypocrisy because they both "have an external which is the opposite of the internal." (COI, 273) The difference is not in the phenomenon, but in the category to which each belongs. Hypocrisy finds itself in the category of ethical actions. Hypocrites are those who wish to seem to have *moral*

qualities (e.g. goodness and virtue) which they do not. Ironists, on the other hand deal on the metaphysical plane, and want to *appear* as something *they are not*. And again, this is not for the sake of fooling others, but for the sake of feeling free. Presumably then, the trickery involved in irony is not a necessary condition for the enjoyment of subjective satisfaction, except practically so.

But hypocrisy properly belongs to the moral sphere, for the hypocrite constantly strives to seem good though he is evil. Irony, on the other hand, belongs to the metaphysical sphere, for the concern of the ironist is merely to seem other than he actually is...It must be born in mind, however, that moral determinations are essentially too concrete for irony." (COI, 273)

This last comment about the concrete nature of matters of morality and how the ironist finds this sort of determination too concrete foreshadows his discussion of the Knight of Faith in "Fear and Trembling." In that work Kierkegaard develops the theme of how the faithful individual, with Abraham as paradigm, finds himself governed by considerations above both the ethical and aesthetic realms. In a manner of speaking the ironist seems to find much in common with the faithful, although in that work Socrates is paradigm, not of the faithful individual, but of the ethical.

Contemplative irony

Having considered executive irony in all its forms, we are now prepared to consider contemplative irony. Just as we discovered that irony of the executive variety is not dissembling nor is it hypocrisy, the contemplative or theoretical element in irony is neither satire, nor doubt, nor religious devotion.

Irony has the recognition of pointlessness in common with satire. Both bear witness to the absurd pit into which the important as currently defined is falling. But whereas satire's aim is to ridicule in order to bridge the gap and rescue the current, irony's intent is to render the chasm between what is and what should be more gaping, and allow the schism of the currently accepted to swallow it whole.

...it reinforces vanity in its vanity and renders madness more mad. This is what might be called irony's attempt to mediate the discrete moments, not in a higher unity but in a higher madness. (COI, 273-274)

If there is remedial value in irony it is secondary to the irony itself, and finds its efficacy in a forced homeopathy. Irony fills those full-of-themselves with yet more, and billows extra gas into the already too-puffed-up.

Irony is not doubt. Apparently this comparison arises out of Kierkegaard's attachment to Hegel's definition of irony as "infinite absolute negativity." "It might seem that as absolute negativity it were identical with doubt." (COI, 274) Kierkegaard finds the difference between the two in a fashion similar to his categorical distinction between hypocrisy and irony.

It must be borne in mind, however, that doubt is a conceptual determination while irony is the being-for-itself of subjectivity. (COI, 274)

In the discussion of hypocrisy contra irony, the ironist was unconcerned with the particulars of *how* he was to be other than he actually is (whether he was to be bad and look good, or be good and look bad) *except as the situation demanded*. More than with *how*, he was concerned with *that* he here and now appears other than he is. Similarly, here in contrasting theoretical doubt with

the situated subject, the ironist is concerned not with epistemological considerations, whether this or that is indubitable, but with the freedom of subjectivity which comes from inducing discrepancy and increasing distinction between phenomenon and essence with regard to the ironist qua individual.

Again it must be remembered that irony is essentially practical, that it is only theoretical in order to become practical again, in other words, it is not concerned with the irony of the situation but only with that of itself. Hence when irony gets wind of the fact that there must be something concealed behind the phenomenon other than what is contained in the phenomenon, this is merely what irony has always been so keen about telling everybody, namely that the subject feels free, and so the phenomenon never acquires any reality for the subject. (COI, 274)

Finally, irony is not religious devotion. ...

insofar as irony becomes conscious of the fact that existence has no reality, thereby expressing the same thesis as the pious disposition, it might seem that irony were a species of religious devotion. (COI, 274)

But the denial of the pious individual is not the wholesale rejection of actuality that belongs to the ironist. It is the more limited negation of the temporal, earthly actuality in favor of an entirely more wonderful actuality in a relationship with the divine.

In religious devotion, if I may be permitted to put it this way, the lesser actuality, that is to say, the relationship to the world, also loses its validity; but this only occurs insofar as the relationship to God at the same moment asserts its absolute reality. (COI, 275)

There is never, with the religious, a sense of complete risk. The pious person does not give up everything, for the sake of nothing, as does the ironist.

Whereas the ironist leaves nothing back, the pious individual maintains a

relationship with the divine in order to allow its actualization through the clearing of everything else.

The devout mind also affirms that all is vanity, but this is only insofar as this negation thrusts aside all interference and allows the eternally existent to become manifest. (COI, 275)

Although Kierkegaard intimates that the ironist retains nothing for himself, he does finally admit that the ironist has one satisfaction which is not given over, that satisfaction which comes with subjective freedom.

Add to this that when the devout mind perceives all is vanity, it makes no exception regarding its own person, makes no fuss respecting itself; on the contrary, this, too, must be thrust aside so the divine will not be impeded by its resistance, but pour itself out in the mind made receptive by religion's devotion. Indeed, we see from the more penetrating writings for edification that the pious mind regards its own finite personality as the most wretched of all. With irony, on the other hand, when everything else becomes vain, subjectivity becomes free. And the more vain everything becomes so much the lighter, more vacuous, more evanescent becomes subjectivity. Whereas everything else becomes vain, the ironic subject does not himself become vain but saves his own vanity. (COI, 275)

The ironist guards his person from the onslaught of his otherwise thoroughgoing negation. This is as it must be for Kierkegaard since for him the subject is the thing of most value. Indeed it was for subjectivity that Socrates died, and so offered himself as a martyr. Kierkegaard is willing to risk all for the individual. Kierkegaard is willing to risk all but the individual.

It is in this sense that standpoint, or eminent irony, the Socratic irony with which Kierkegaard is finally concerned, can be described as "pure irony." Socratic irony is pure in the sense that it is free of any purpose, motive or reason beyond itself. Now, we may be tempted to think that Kierkegaard's description of the ironist as determined to give up, even to destroy, everything

but the ironist's own subjectivity renders the irony less pure since in this case the freedom of subjectivity is protected from the all-consuming gaze of irony. Remember, though, that Kierkegaard identifies subjective freedom with irony, and so it does not count as something separable that is to be saved or negated. In this sense it is the negation.

Kierkegaard is only interested in all these particular manifestations of *impure* irony so as to orient us in the intellectual landscape. Because it is only here at the very end that we receive any positive words regarding pure irony, it almost seems that the discussion of the more mundane forms of irony are offered as a sort of incantation or seance to call up the spirit of irony *itself*. Pure, eminent irony is the life standpoint irony with which Kierkegaard is preeminently concerned, yet towards which he is unable to offer more than the most cryptic gesture. He discusses irony in terms of nothingness, and even when considering irony in negation he proceeds by a negative method. Kierkegaard negates the speculative irony which we have lately been speaking about, and the sort of mitigated nothingness which attends it.

For irony everything becomes nothingness, but nothingness may be taken in several ways. The speculative nothingness is that which at every moment is vanishing for concretion, since it is itself the demand for the concrete, its *nisus formativus*. (COI, 275)

He turns against religious devotion and its attendant nothingness, "The mystical nothingness is a nothingness for representation, a nothingness which yet is as full of content as the silence of the night is eloquent for one who has ears to hear." (COI, 275) And finally, having explained what sorts of nothingness pure irony is not, he has created in his negating the very irony of which he cannot speak. He has nothing from nothing. He has made a hole in

the hole of nothingness, and by so doing has illustrated negatively the eminent negativity of standpoint irony. And here, the last words in the chapter devoted to orientation, are his first regarding that pure irony with which he is primarily concerned.

Finally, the ironic nothingness is that deathly stillness in which irony returns to "haunt and jest" (this last word taken wholly ambiguously)." (COI, 275)

The last word to which Kierkegaard refers is *spøger*. It is rendered "haunt and jest" by the translator, apparently because he could see no good single word translation for the original. In a note on the word, Capel offers the following paraphrase, "Finally, the ironic nothingness is that deathly stillness haunted by the ghoulish laughter of irony." In explanation of the overall irony of the chapter as directed against the given academic actuality of Kierkegaard's day (Capel doesn't word it this way, but it seems to fit his meaning), Capel mentions a work by Heiberg which mentions the haunting of the present by the past as the work of a "*poltergeist*." And here poltergeist is the translation for *spøgelser*, from the same root as *spøger*. I am not sure why Capel doesn't translate the word in the Kierkegaard text as some form of "poltergeist" unless he, like I am, is unaware of a verb form of poltergeist, and doesn't want to take the liberty of changing the syntax of the sentence to make the ironic ghost the subject of the sentence.

The haunt, though, doesn't begin at the end of the chapter. Indeed like the nice creature Grover in *The Monster at the End of the Book*, our playful ghost is ever with us. In the midst of the discussion he talks in terms of what has *not* been given. "...thus far we have merely conceived irony as a momentary expression, so that in all these instances we may still not speak of

pure irony, or irony as standpoint." (COI, 270) And yet at the same time he recognizes, seemingly as an afterthought, and not as a matter of design, as I believe it to be, that developing over and above all finite considerations of irony rises pure irony as an epiphenomenon of the moment.

On the other hand, the more the consideration of the relation between actuality and subject, as occasionally asserted here, draws into its orbit, the more we approach the point where irony exhibits itself in its usurped totality. (COI, 270)

That point is not considered merely hypothetically as though we might, *if we could refine the irony enough*, conjure the spirit of pure irony. Conjuring is precisely what Kierkegaard is doing throughout the chapter, and especially in statements like these. He is placing in our minds the seed of irony. He is at once hinting at and making good his intention of himself rising above the discussion in subjective freedom and ironic satisfaction.

These mid-discussion manifestations notwithstanding, however, the ghost's first appearance, in the form of Kierkegaard's regret, is at the beginning of the chapter. Kierkegaard reminisces about the days when a culture could tolerate the lone individual making his way without regard for and in spite of the rest, and by the end of the chapter we get the distinct feeling that it was in reference to himself that Kierkegaard talked of the quiet, introspective outcast.

[The age] will not tolerate a man to stand still and become immersed in himself, to walk slowly is already suspect...It despises isolation, and how could it possibly tolerate a human being getting the preposterous idea of going through life alone, an age which, hand in hand and arm in arm (like itinerant journeymen and mercenaries), lives for the Idea of community. (COI, 264)

In this chapter Kierkegaard has immersed himself in subjectivity in general, and in his own expression of subjectivity in particular. His most personal project is the consideration of the personal. He as individual is wrapped up in individuality. The subjective freedom that he feels is the result of his ironic stance on subjective freedom. It is toward the community with its objectivity that Kierkegaard bears resentment, and this chapter not only indicates this indirectly in its constant praise of subjectivity, but illustrates it in Kierkegaard's disregard for the current academic discussion of irony⁶, along with his disdain for the typical philosophical method in lieu of the more indirect ironic one.

We have received from Kierkegaard the deathly stillness that comes when concretions of a concept are negated wholesale and without explanation of how to interpret the vacuum positively. Kierkegaard himself haunts and jests with us as we turn that last page and in seeing the next chapter heading realize that we have gotten all the elaboration we are going to get from him regarding what pure irony is. And all the elaborations we have gotten are negative; they tell us what irony is not. But what they tell us is that irony is *not* is positive.

Irony is not positive. It has no content. It is wholly negative. It negates, and that is all it does. What we do get is an indication of how irony negates. Irony negates in the concrete and both by and against the given actuality of the day. This is huge for our understanding of irony. Kierkegaard offers his negation, his irony in the objective, metaphysical language of the day, and against the metaphysical theorists of the day. And what he says is that irony is

⁶ I have already alluded to Capel's discussion of Kierkegaard and Heiberg. Capel views the entire chapter and most of the book as an ironic response to his academic epoch. For a detailed account see Capel's introduction.

a vehicle for the subjective. Kierkegaard's irony negates the objective and accentuates the subjective, and it does so in a thoroughly metaphysical manner.

We might summarize Kierkegaard's project in the chapter "For Orientation" in this way. His purpose is to celebrate and define by illustration the subjective freedom that comes only from the wholesale negation that is irony, and is one of its two "necessary determinations." In this way Kierkegaard resists and negates the given actuality of his day, objectivity. His vehicle for this ironic undoing and the second of its necessary determinations as mentioned above is the appearance/reality distinction.

Appearance/reality

Given the previous discussion regarding Kierkegaard's view of irony, it should be obvious that he sees the appearance/reality distinction as a necessary prerequisite to any form of ironic activity; but obvious or not, I will try to demonstrate just this. Each example of each category of irony relies on and is given content by the dualism between phenomenon and reality.⁷ From the oratorical entry with its "saying the opposite of what you mean" to the standpoint irony of Kierkegaard himself as he haunts and jests his way into and above the discussion, each exploration and illustration either mentions or exemplifies the disparity between what *is* and what *appears to be*.

⁷ Kierkegaard words the dualism differently at different times and so I'll use the most generic "appearance/reality" when discussing the matter most generally.

Within the context of the ironic figure of speech the distinction takes the form of the disparity between word and thought. "When I speak the thought or meaning is the essence, the word the phenomenon." (COI, 264) What is said does not align, except negatively, with what is meant.

In oratorical discourse there frequently occurs a figure of speech which bears the name of irony and whose characteristic is this: to say the opposite of what is meant. *With this we already have a determination present in all forms of irony, namely, the phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence.* (COI, 264--my emphasis)

And even within this, the most mundane and accessible form of irony, the necessity of the appearance/reality distinction is apparent. And in fact, *because* this is the most ordinary and common manifestation of irony, the appearance/reality distinction reveals itself as fundamental to any ironic moment. If the clumsiest moments of irony require such a distinction, how much more must the most subtle? I do not necessarily mean this question rhetorically, as you will see.

In what I have called "isolation irony," that irony which has its freedom as an achievement of separation of the individual from others in an intended deceit, the appearance/reality distinction finds expression in the difference between the individual's presentation of himself with his understanding of himself.

Either the ironist identifies himself with the nuisance he wishes to attack, or he enters into a relation of opposition to it, but in such a way, of course, that he is always conscious that *his appearance is the opposite of what he himself subscribes to*, and that he experiences a satisfaction in this disparity. (COI, 266 -- my emphasis)

When the isolation ironist endeavors to remove herself from society by presenting herself in a manner contrary to how she really is, she must give content to *how she really is*. She must also be aware of what it would be like to be other than she is, so that she can make herself appear as this other.

Within the discussion of executive irony, which includes both dramatic irony and the irony of nature (Alanis Morrisette irony), the metaphysical nature of irony is made explicit, and in those terms. The subjective freedom that comes from the creation of a discrepancy between appearance and reality is described as *metaphysical*. In contrasting irony with lying, Kierkegaard notes that the more mundane *lying* is distinct from the higher *irony* in that lying has a purpose and irony has none, well almost none.

Irony, on the other hand, has no purpose, its purpose is immanent in itself, a metaphysical purpose. The purpose is none other than irony itself. When an ironist exhibits himself as other than he actually is, it might seem that his purpose were to induce others to believe this. His actual purpose, however, is merely to feel free, and this he is through irony. Irony has, therefore, no external purpose but is self-purposive. (COI, 273)

What is important, is not whether or not irony has a purpose, but whether it depends upon the appearance/reality distinction. Although it is obvious that Kierkegaard does rely on our current favorite distinction here, it is especially interesting, and will be of special importance later, to note that he here speaks explicitly of the appearance/reality distinction as metaphysical.

Kierkegaard identifies irony with subjective freedom, and he characterizes both of these as metaphysical in nature. When he sets about to clarify what sort of action he has in mind that has this metaphysico-ironic-

subjective purpose, he describes it as "When an ironist exhibits himself as other than he actually is..." Clearly, we are justified, then in identifying irony as a project of metaphysical freedom, which means it is one that juxtaposes phenomenon against essence, appearance against reality.

The appearance/reality distinction manifests itself within the discussion of the contemplative manifestations of irony, i.e. doubt and devotion. Irony is considered in terms of its similarity to, but not identity with, religious devotion and theoretical doubt. Irony and doubt share the property of making a distinction between what a thing really is, and how it appears, but whereas doubt arrives at its frustrated skeptical conclusion through stubborn attempts to penetrate the object essentially, irony sits back in self-satisfaction and gloats, "This -- this discrepancy between appearance and reality is what I have been celebrating all along."

Hence when irony gets wind of the fact that there must be something concealed behind the phenomenon other than what is contained in the phenomenon, this is merely what irony has always been so keen about telling everybody, namely that the subject feels free, and so the phenomenon never acquires any reality for the subject. (COI, 274)

Furthermore, doubt's efforts to penetrate the object in order to discover its essence, and doubt's subsequent pronouncement that it cannot be done have all been done in the service of universality--either universal truth or universal doubt. Irony, on the other hand, does not deal in universals, but in the particulars that come with individually situated creations of discontinuity between what is and what seems to be, and between what is and what I will permit to exist for me.

When we compare religious devotion with irony we find that in both moments existence, in the sense of what is now actual, has no reality. For the devotee as well as for the ironist, the concrete relations currently existing (those between people) are not real. For the devotee they are unreal relative to the reality of the relation to God. For the ironist they are absolutely unreal. Again we encounter the appearance/reality distinction in that what irony shares with religious devotion is the awareness that what is actual has no reality for the individual.

Finally, insofar as irony becomes conscious of the fact that existence has no reality, thereby expressing the same thesis as the pious disposition, it might seem that irony were a species of religious devotion. (COI, 274)

But whereas the pious individual is getting beyond actuality as presently construed in order to make room for communion with a higher actuality, the ironic individual is not. The ironist is engaged instead in a celebration of the very subjectivity that the pious individual is willing to give over for the sake of relating himself to the higher being.

Beginning the tension; Rorty, irony and appearance/reality

So then, in Kierkegaard we find a rich description of irony as an interesting philosophical moment that sees the individual reacting against the language- and standard-setting powers that be. This sort of standpoint irony may be made sense of, not only as an abstraction from the personal irony of Socrates, but also by allowing it to emerge from and as the negation of the rest of the field of ironist opportunities. Kierkegaard has it that a fairly thorough-

going appreciation of the appearance/reality distinction is necessary for this most interesting sort of irony.

Let's predict the tension that we will see emerge from a comparison of Rorty and Kierkegaard. Rorty is invested in at least two pertinent things. One is the coming obsolescence of the epistemological debate in all its forms. Another thing with which Rorty seems enamored is the self-recreative posture of irony especially as exemplified in the person of Jacques Derrida.

First, Rorty looks forward to the era of a liberal utopia which disdains epistemology and the metaphysics that accompanies it. Rorty longs to get beyond conversations that center on questions like "what is the world *really* like?" "who are we humans intrinsically?" and "will our current methods of philosophical and scientific exploration get us to the epistemological pot of gold at the end of the metaphysical rainbow?" In a nutshell, Rorty wants us to get over what we have taken as the distinctive questions for the distinguished discipline of philosophy. (CP, 93)

To suggest that we drop epistemology and metaphysics is a vague proposition, even for Rorty. But his encouragement is ultimately not without content. Rorty fleshes out his suggestion by offering, time and time again, lists of particular dualisms and distinctions which he has decided are both useless and epistemological/metaphysical in nature.

Rorty does not, however, advocate the sort of crude gainsaying of any and all binary oppositions that he credits to Anglo-American deconstructionism. To Rorty, as he says in "Two Meanings of Logocentrism," the "knee jerk"

reaction of certain deconstructionists⁸ against any and all dualisms as "philosophical," "logocentric," and hopelessly "western" is unintelligible. Rorty realizes that to deconstruct any and all dualisms from language is not to render language less western or less philosophical, but merely to make a show of our ability to reverse any hierarchy, and ultimately to render language unusable. Simple inversion, according to Rorty has no importance, since it does nothing to increase the utility of our ways of speaking.

Although the distinctions to be rejected must meet the fairly specific criterion of lacking utility, Rorty's writings are rife with lists of dualisms and distinctions to be left behind. Most of these lists, though spread throughout his writings, share certain, apparently centrally offensive, dualisms. Although I will indicate in later chapters more of the range of dualisms that raise Rorty's ire, let it suffice here to say that in particular Rorty sets his sights on the subject/object, realism/anti-realism and appearance/reality distinctions. He recognizes all of these (we are obviously mostly interested in the last) as part and parcel of the epistemological/metaphysical debate.

The particular dualism with which we are here, especially, although not exclusively, concerned is the appearance/reality distinction. The sub-category of epistemology of which that dualism is a part, according to Rorty, is representationalism. In the title of his introduction to John P. Murphy's *Pragmatism, From Peirce to Davidson*, Rorty sums up the philosophical traditions toward which he feels a familial connection in one word, "Pragmatism as anti-representationalism." And when offering a summary of his

⁸Rorty blames Paul De Man for giving Anglo-American deconstructionists a bad example.

congratulatory reading of pragmatism, the one he shares with Murphy, he sees representationalism and the appearance/reality distinction as part and parcel.

Anti-representationalism -- the abandonment of a "spectator" account of knowledge and the consequent abandonment of the appearance/reality distinction -- is the theme that runs through Professor Murphy's book" (Murphy 1990, 2)

The reason Rorty wants to drop the epistemological debate and its related distinctions is an appropriately pragmatic one. He feels that the metaphysical spokes in the logical wheels set in motion by the Greeks and perpetuated by Kant (wheels that have about come off anyway) would serve better as firewood warming post-modern hands than as a means for getting around the world. (If you'd like, I can make the same point using a mast and sail metaphor, and on that formulation we get to 'sail the high seas of metaphysics, worrying all the while that we will fall off the edge of the world').

Rorty considers those who pursue transcendental questions to make what he calls in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, "the metaphysician's assumption." The metaphysician is one who "assumes that the presence of a term in his own final vocabulary ensures that it refers to something which *has* a real essence." (CIS, 74) In his response to Hartshorne regarding the issue of finding the essence of things he says:

But since I do not know how to answer the question of whether Wordsworth or Democritus gets closer to the way things are in themselves, I turn pragmatist and deplore the question. I argue that there is no way things are in themselves...I argue that we would be better off without the notion of "the intrinsic nature of reality," and thus better off without metaphysics... (RP, 31)

Rorty wants to get beyond metaphysics and epistemology -- beyond all this realism-antirealism/appearance-reality/phenomenon-essence talk. He wants to leave behind epistemology and metaphysics because he thinks that if we do we will get more and more important things done -- things like decreasing suffering and increasing tolerance.

But Rorty is not only attached to getting rid of what he takes to be pointless considerations. Rorty also likes the example that people he considers ironists -- people like Derrida -- set for the rest of us. In *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, Rorty advocates irony as a way of being in the world. Irony may be considered as a certain kind of regard for one's own beliefs. This ironic regard amounts to being aware of the lack of necessity, i.e. the contingency, of one's beliefs. (CIS, 73) This awareness of the contingency of one's beliefs encourages the ironist to look back with scepticism at the authority figures who have functioned as the sources of his or her received ways of talking, and hence thinking, about themselves.

Among ironists who count the philosophical canon as the authority figures of their relevant past, Rorty distinguishes between two types, the ironist theorist and the ironist fantasist. What distinguishes the ironist fantasist from the ironist theorist is that whereas the ironist fantasist is interested in gaining freedom from the past only for himself, the ironist theorist is invested in universal liberation via grand and lasting redescription.

Rorty finds the later Derrida -- yes, Derrida has reached the philosophical status of having his life busted up into little bits -- Rorty considers *the later* Derrida to be exemplar of this sort of 'fantasizing'.

There is no moral to these fantasies, nor any public (pedagogic or political) use to be made of them; but, for Derrida's readers, they may nevertheless be exemplary --suggestions of the sort of thing one might do, a sort of thing rarely done before. (CIS, 125)

And although the two ironic behaviors are distinguishable, they are not unrelated. "Such fantasizing is, in my view, the end product of ironist theorizing." (CIS, 125) Now, by "end" Rorty must not mean a proper predetermined purpose in any teleological sense, since Rorty disdains any propriety talk with regard to how things turn out that is other than the usefulness criterion of the neo-pragmatist. Nor can he mean by "fantasy is the end of ironic theorizing" the purpose that ironist theorizing has set for itself, since the best theorizing does not decide before its performance what good it will serve. But rather, the "end" of ironist theorizing is ironic fantasy in the matter-of-fact gee-look-how-ironist-theory-turns-out "end" of the neo-pragmatist. Rorty's claim is an empirical one. As a matter of fact, ironist fantasy turns out more and more⁹ to be a sort of therapeutic end to the ironist theorist's urge to theorize.

One source of tension then, is this: Rorty is equally heavily invested in our ridding ourselves of the appearance/reality distinction and celebrating ironism as a way of living in the world. But Kierkegaard has given expression to some of our most basic intuitions regarding the use of the term "irony," and

⁹The fact that Hegel and Heidegger, two premiere ironist theorists did not, as a matter of fact, take the fantastic turn and become as Derrida may be programmatically explained as a feature of their historical situatedness. We may suggest that just as a Hegel was necessary before Heidegger could write and live as he did, a Heidegger was necessary before Derrida could find his fantastic freedom.

that expression includes its connection to the appearance/reality distinction.

But there is more at stake than merely what words Rorty uses, although what words he uses has more significance than it might for another, less metaphorically dependent thinker. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty suggests that we be done with epistemology and move toward hermeneutics, not for the sake of performing more effectively the job epistemology has done toward understanding reality, but as a alternative expenditure of our human resources of creativity, energy, time and interest.

Even so, at first reading many interpret *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, his next book¹⁰ after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, as an attempt to decide once and for all questions like, "What is the self *really*?" "What is the nature of reality?" and "How should we rightly spend our energies?" Given his rejection of such questions in his preceding work, and in the body of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* itself, this sort of reading is at least unsympathetic, and at most wrong-headed. I want to motivate a reading of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* that remains within the edifying spirit he suggests in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, while moving beyond merely invoking that spirit toward using it as a vehicle for recommending something other than paradoxical claims about how things are really is that they are no way. My reading of Rorty in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* is as an edifying work meant to give us an example of self-recreative redescription, not as a

¹⁰Although *The Consequences of Pragmatism* follows *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, it is, for the most part, a collection of previously published essays.

metaphysical/epistemological work meant to give us a detailed account of what it is to be human, *really*.

Unfortunately for Rorty, his chosen metaphor for self-recreation, "irony," not only brings with it associations of representationalism which he would rather be without, but through its apparent inextricability from a linguistic conception of self, also encourages the unsympathetic reading of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* as one more pronouncement of the necessary and sufficient conditions for what it is to be human. Because we cannot imagine a non-linguistic sense of self that might function as a correlate to Rorty's thoroughly linguistic description of self-recreation we are subtly, although unmistakably encouraged to receive Rorty's linguistic metaphors for self and self-recreation as more than just one way to construe the self and self-creation.

CHAPTER II

RORTY'S METAPHORS FOR THE SELF AND SELF-RECREATION

So far I have analyzed Kierkegaard's notion of irony in terms of subjective freedom and its reliance on the appearance/reality distinction. We have seen that the negative freedom that comes with irony, for Kierkegaard, amounts to reacting against the defining authorities or given actuality of the day, and that all irony (including pure or standpoint irony) assumes the appearance/reality distinction for the sense of freedom-enhancing distance that comes with developing appearance in contradiction with reality.

In the next two chapters I will develop Rorty's metaphors for the self and for a similar sort of negative ironic freedom. And as Rorty's notion of the self becomes clear, and his ideas regarding what freedom is and how selves become free develop, a tension will begin to emerge more and more obviously. In the last chapter I secured one end of the wire that will, in the next two chapters, draw itself tight. On Kierkegaard's end we have tied irony to the appearance/reality distinction. Now, I will string irony across Rorty in terms strikingly similar to Kierkegaard's (so that we know we have hold of the same line of thought) and fix it to Rorty's attachment to Derrida and the free play of signifiers and their associations. It will become clear that Rorty's interest in freedom from the figures of the philosophical past is at odds with his chosen metaphors for self and for autonomy.

In order to make sense of Rorty's notion of the self, and of the kind of freedom the self can enjoy, we must understand its nature as a by-product of language. So, we must start with language. We will see that there are more than just significant similarities between Rorty's redescription of selfhood and the way he construes language. Not only are language and the self both the products of time and chance, or as Rorty says, "contingent," but human selves depend upon language for their very being. In a following chapter I will argue that Rorty's metaphors for the self as linguistically constituted require a similarly language-bound portrait of self-overcoming.

The contingency of language

The world is out there, but truth is not. "To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states." (CIS, 5) Since Rorty is set on distancing the world and human mental events, we might wonder what are the few things which *are* the effects of the causes which *are* human mental states. One answer is language, and with it truth. Truth is a complement paid to sentences to which language-users are inclined to assent. In this way sentences are created and filled with meaning by humans, that is, by human mental events. "To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations." (CIS, 5) We might similarly say that where there are no trees and no stories there are no leaves and no plots since leaves and plots are by-products of trees and stories, as truth is a by-product of language. To

add, as Rorty does, that language is contingent, is to add two things; it is to add first, that *which* languages are actual is contingent, and second, it is to add that the matter of fact that languages are at all could have been otherwise as well.

The world's role in the making of belief is this. The world causes our beliefs, but does not make them true. "*The world can*, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, *cause us to hold beliefs*. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak." (CIS, 6 -- emphasis mine) Now, to talk of "cause" in the sense that the world can *cause* us to hold a belief does not mean that I believe that the sky is falling because an acorn hit me on the head and so physically stimulated my I-believe-the-sky-is-falling neuron to fire.¹ Instead, in one event the world plays the dual role of both affecting us, that is effecting our senses, and legitimating our beliefs which arise in combination of that affect with our current language game. What it means for the world to cause our beliefs in Rorty's mind, is that I believe the sky is falling because I experienced a projectile from above, and that experience in concert with the way I use words like "falling" and "sky" does result in my being justified (according to current meanings of "justification") in believing that our heavenly canopy does not have the vertical stubbornness it once had.

The accident of which glimpses of the world our sense organs have vouchsafed us [acorn from above], and the further accidents of the predicates we have entrenched [that objects from above mean falling skies] or the theories whose proportions please us [gravity], may determine what we have a

¹ Although that seems to be the case when he talks of gamma rays and novelty. (CIS, 19)

right to believe [the sky is falling]. But how could they determine the *truth*? (CP, 12 -- my insertions)

The world can only have the causal effect of creating belief *indirectly*, or maybe more helpfully, *in cooperation* with language systems already in place. The world can only make things true or false once a language standard for what counts as true or false has been established. There is no reason that this establishment need be a formal recognition by all concerned, but it is necessarily prior to the world's justifying the corresponding belief.

Let me repeat the citation from above with a different emphasis in order to introduce my concern with Rorty's description of the separation of the world from language. "The world can, *once we have programmed ourselves with a language*, cause us to hold beliefs. *But it cannot propose a language for us to speak.*" (CIS, 6 -- emphasis mine) My question here is this, what are we prior to programming, if we program *ourselves* with a language? There is a purposeful ambiguity in the phrase "programmed ourselves with a language." The multiplicity of possible meanings rests in the word "with." The sentence may mean that we *give to ourselves* a language, like one would give a gift. Alternately, the intention behind "with" may be that we "use language to program ourselves," like one might use a programming language to direct a computer.

While the context around this section suggests that the primary meaning is probably the former, that we equip ourselves with a language, and then once duly equipped, the world may help us decide what propositions to pronounce true or false within the language system, it also is consistent with Rorty's writings generally to affirm the latter meaning as well, that we employ language

as a programming tool, to make ourselves *by* language. This is not unlike a computer programmer using a programming *language* to change the very language which is currently in use, e.g. using an instantiation of *Cobol* to change the very same instantiation of *Cobol*.

In speaking of the Ironist, Rorty says, "She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being." (CIS, 75) According to Rorty, beings are made human by the acquisition of language, and they are made particular kinds of humans by acquiring particular kinds of languages.

But if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that *the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary*, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that *languages* are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences. (CIS, 7 -- emphasis mine)

Humans are made by being given a language, and they are made particular kinds of humans by being given particular kinds of languages. I will from here on refer to this double-aspect relationship between language and human being as the two-fold linguistic source of human being.

Abnormal and normal discourse, and living and dead metaphors

Rorty uses at least two metaphors to describe changes in language. More accurately, but also, and unfortunately more awkwardly, I should say that

changes take place not in language, as if language is some monolithic, essentially structured something, but rather particular languages evolve and change as do species in the animal kingdom. As species of animals morph slowly into more advanced (read "further along") permutations of the same species and then, indistinguishably, into something we might not feel wholly comfortable calling, for example, feline, so languages, Greek, Russian, Newtonian physics, beat, et. al. evolve into versions of themselves so distinguishable from their ancestry that they share only the name with the earlier version.

While it is not P.C. (postmodernally correct) to insinuate that anyone can say *the same thing* twice, the two metaphors that Rorty uses most regularly to describe the evolution of language are "normal discourse vs. abnormal discourse," and "metaphorical vs. literal." The former terminology is found primarily in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and the latter in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.

Vocabularies change for no good reason, if by a good reason you mean out of conviction through argument or out of clarity of purpose.

Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others. (CIS, 6)

But these changing habits were not changes without causes. The changes in languages have been secured by good-old-fashioned sophistry.²

² To be fair, both to Rorty and to the Sophists, I should amend my characterization of the sophistry described from old-fashioned to "new-fangled

What was glimpsed at the end of the eighteenth century was that anything could be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed...What the Romantics expressed as the claim that imagination, rather than reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change. (CIS, 7)

It may seem that Rorty makes quality of redescription out to be the standard by which one vocabulary finds favor, and renders another hackneyed, but a clever or inviting redescription doesn't *recommend* one language game over another. A useful way of speaking *takes over* by making itself look good. A new metaphor makes itself literal. There are no extra or meta-linguistic criteria which govern the orderly and justifiable succession of what counts as true.

Cultural change of this magnitude does not result from applying criteria (or from "arbitrary decision") any more than individuals become theists or atheists, or shift from one spouse or circle of friends to another, as a result either of applying criteria or of *actes gratuits*. We should not look within ourselves for criteria of decision in such matters any more than we should look to the world. (CIS, 6)

And again, using the "abnormal/normal discourse" terminology.

More generally, Normal discourse is that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it. Abnormal discourse is what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant

sophistry". The new fangle involved is the repudiation of metaphysics. According to Rorty, the pre-Socratics didn't have metaphysics with which to contend, they were merely looking for an "airtight case" (PMN, 157) and so it is anachronistic to suggest that they were beyond metaphysics.

of these conventions or who sets them aside. (PMN, 363)

"True" or "accurate" or "right" is an empty compliment given to those metaphors which, because of their usefulness and resiliency have become literal, that abnormal discourse which has become normal. The compliment "true" may only be paid meaningfully to propositions once they have found their way into normal discourse, which is to say that they have become "dead metaphors" which is to say that they are "literally true."

We have to see the term "corresponds to how things are" as an automatic compliment paid to successful normal discourse rather than as a relation to be studied and aspired to throughout the rest of discourse. To attempt to extend this compliment to feats of abnormal discourse is like complimenting a judge on his wise decision by leaving him a fat tip: it shows a lack of tact. (PMN, 372)

Just as "true" cannot be predicated of abnormally worded propositions, so also abnormal discourse cannot be separated from its normal counterpart without losing its bearings, and rendering its speaker either crazy or ignorant.

The caution amounts to saying that abnormal and "existential" discourse is always parasitic upon normal discourse, that the possibility of hermeneutics is always parasitic upon the possibility (and perhaps upon the actuality) of epistemology, and that edification always employs materials provided by the culture of the day. To attempt abnormal discourse *de novo*, without being able to recognize our own abnormality, is madness in the most literal and terrible sense. To insist on being hermeneutic where epistemology would do--to make ourselves unable to view normal discourse in terms of its own motives, and able to view it only from within our own abnormal discourse--is not mad, but it does show a lack of education. (PMN, 366)

But if it turns out that we are able to say something that is literally meaningless, that is existential, in the sense of being personal and subjective -- if we are able to speak a live metaphor and make it sing for others as it has sung for ourselves, then we have successfully bridged the gap between meaningless idiosyncrasy and genius.

To say that someone is bringing in "subjective" considerations to a discussion where objectivity is wanted is, roughly, to say that he is bringing in considerations which the others think beside the point. If he presses these *outré* considerations, he is turning normal inquiry into abnormal discourse--he is being either "kooky" (if he loses his point) or "revolutionary" (if he gains it). For a consideration to be subjective, in this sense, is simply for it to be unfamiliar. So judging subjectivity is as hazardous as judging relevance. (PMN, 339)

Rorty is very specific regarding what counts as abnormal and what normal discourse. Normal discourses are those which have, as contained within them, set standards for what will count as "true" and "good" and "right."

Normal discourse (a generalization of Kuhn's notion of "normal science") is any discourse (scientific, political, theological, or whatever) which embodies agreed-upon criteria for reaching agreement; abnormal discourse is any which lacks such criteria. (PMN, 11)

The self-justification of abnormal discourse must be what Rorty has in mind when he describes metaphors as "making themselves." There is no pre-existing criteria for what counts as a good or successful metaphor. The metaphor may break every convention thought to obtain, and still create change.

So then, as explanation for the phrase "the contingency of language," Rorty offers both a positive and negative rendition. Negatively, Rorty is denying the "necessity of language," in denying the connection, other than circumstantial between the world and language. If the job of language is no longer seen as "representing the way things really are," then we may be more relaxed in our approach to language.

The positive formulation of "the contingency of language" is the one that compares language changes to Kuhn's model of scientific change. Rorty offers us a positive redescription of how we have gotten where we are as language users. If someone asks him whether he thinks that this causal story is accurate, Rorty will answer that we are better off with this kind of story about the way that languages change, but part of what makes us better off with this new kind of story is that it carries with it an increased lack of interest in questions like "is it accurate?"

Freedom as the "recognition of contingency"

Rorty's conception of the contingency of the self grows out of his description of the relationship between language and the world. His sense of self has already been foreshadowed in the section on the contingency of language, just as he himself foreshadows it in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. Rorty offers the original relationship between language and selves as two-fold. 1.) Humans are made by the adoption of language. And 2.) particular kinds of humans are made by the adoption of particular languages. Which particular language is appropriated in the creation of a given individual is a matter as contingent as any. Therefore, since the person is created and defined by

language, and the adoption of language is a contingent matter -- this matter could be otherwise, both in terms of *whether* a being is made human by the adoption of language, and of *what sort* of human being is produced -- the creation and specification of an individual as this and this sort of individual vs. that and that sort of individual is thoroughly contingent and depends upon what happens linguistically. This is the two-fold origin of the self I mentioned briefly in the previous section.

Although there are other sorts of contingencies which I will mention later, Rorty is primarily interested in linguistic contingency. There are at least two ways to understand the meaning of this sort of "contingency." Rorty says that freedom is "the recognition of contingency." (CIS, 26) And since "contingency" is usually understood in terms of its standard opposite, "necessity" we may meaningfully take Rorty's conception of freedom both negatively, as the negation of necessity, but also positively as the affirmation of contingency. I like this double rendition of freedom because it seems to provide an adequate medium for channeling the spirit of Rorty's thought, while allowing its discussion in traditionally meaningful philosophical terms.

Freedom for Rorty may be conceived as a negative freedom -- a freedom *from*. The negative freedom we enjoy is the freedom from the necessity of any given theory of personhood, and just as we may divide up Rorty's freedom into negative and positive freedom, negative freedom itself is best understood in two ways corresponding to the two-fold creation of the individual as discussed above.

First, the relationship between the individual and the language she speaks is not one of representation or expression or discovery, but of making.

"[T]he human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary." (CIS, 7) Rorty believes neither that selves are entities that exist prior to their enactment within a language, nor that language represents anything, much less some nonsense substantial self-thing.

The second way of construing the negative freedom from this or that sense of self, is to say that a human is not only *created* by dwelling with other humans in a community of language-users, but is *created* as a certain type of human by having been given this or that language. And as such, is free from necessarily being any particular type of human being. Within the context of discussing the ironist's reaction to how she finds herself as human, Rorty makes this clear.

[The ironist] worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. (CIS, 75)

So then, humans are free from necessity with regard to both what it is to be human and what sort of human they must be. But at the same time as we celebrate human freedom from metaphysical necessity in terms of Rorty's linguistic metaphors, we begin to see a new dependency develop -- humans appear to be *dependent upon language* for their very human being and for what sorts of humans they are. We will continue to allow this tension to develop throughout the present chapter until its release is timely.

The negative freedom -- freedom *from* -- that is our recognition of contingency may be construed as type one: the freedom from a metaphysical self, and as type two: the freedom from a substantial and pre-existing personal

type. The self, for Rorty, is no metaphysically substantial something. The self is more like a centerless web of beliefs. (CIS, 42,43) And every web is spun with more or less novelty. This kind of propositionally based description of the self is typical for Rorty and ultimately will account for his appreciation of the ironic hero.

The negative freedom from a metaphysical self

Within the context of contrasting the negative freedom -- *freedom from linguistic necessity* -- of Rorty's "recognition of contingency," with its more positive correlate -- *the affirmation of contingency* --, I have divided negative freedom itself into two types. Type one negative freedom is the freedom from thinking of all humans as sharing metaphysically stable structures, I will call this generic freedom. Type two is the freedom from thinking of any given human being as necessarily being this or that *sort* of human being, I will call this personal freedom.

Consider generic negative freedom: Becoming free is disabusing ourselves of the notion of necessary features of human existence, i.e. the underlying ontological structures common to all humans. Within his discussion of a Philip Larkin poem, Rorty redescribes the efforts of bygone eras to discover humanity's common features, those necessary structures which have been stamped onto everyone, and which can be found out in a transcendental moment.

Think of finding such an impress as being the discovery of the universal condition of human existence, the great continuities -- the permanent, ahistorical, context of human life. (CIS, 26)

He says of priests, Greek philosophers, empirical scientists and German idealists, that...

They were going to explain to us the ultimate locus of power, the nature of reality, the conditions of the possibility of experience. They would thereby inform us what we really are, what we are compelled to be by powers not ourselves. (CIS, 26)

Rorty rejects this sort of project as uninteresting and fruitless. He categorizes the attempt to find the fundamental structures of human existence with all transcendentalist projects. He suggests we quit them all.

To abjure the notion of the "truly human" is to abjure the attempt to divinize the self...It is to get rid of the last citadel of necessity, the last attempt to see us as all confronting the same imperatives, the same unconditional claims. (CIS, 35)

It is in this sense of ceasing to pursue the transcendental project of discovering the underlying structures of human being, that freedom is freedom from metaphysical necessity.

Not only is negative freedom freedom from searching for the human essence, but also type two personal negative freedom: the freedom from believing that there is anything required about what *sort* of human we must be, i.e. *how* we are to describe ourselves as particular tokens of a more general human type. In order to have personal negative freedom we must have generic freedom, since if we did not have freedom from a required and accurate description of what it is to be human, we could not have a clear field in order to make ourselves *radically* new tokens of a new type of human.

What I mean is this, any freedom for personal and private redescription that included a requirement that we accept certain features as generic to all

humans, would not render us as *free* as a personal freedom that allowed us to redescribe not only ourselves as individuals within the boundaries of a human nature or essential human characteristics, but also as individual tokens of a new type of human being.

We might wonder there could be personal individual freedom without freedom from necessary human structures. I can quite easily imagine that Sartre's being-for-itself might be construed as an example of this. In fact, for Sartre, it is fair to say that the only freedom we do not choose is the freedom as to *whether we would be free*. This has been called "radical freedom," and "radical freedom" is a good name for it, since to say that we are "radically free" is to say that we are free *at the root*. But to be fundamentally free is not to be free from fundamentals. Rorty's radical freedom requires freedom from our roots, freedom from any roots, even freedom from being free. Rorty's freedom negatively construed as freedom from *any* requirement implies freedom from freedom itself.

Rorty praises Nietzsche³ as being the first to openly advocate moving beyond a search for the universal truth with regard to humans.

His definition of truth as a "mobile army of metaphors" amounted to saying that the whole idea of "representing reality" by means of language, and thus the idea of finding a single context for all human lives, should be abandoned. (CIS, 27)

³Rorty says that he "owes a great deal" to Alexander Nehamas' *Life as Literature* for his interpretation of Nietzsche. (CIS, 27) And indeed very often, when he mentions Nietzsche, Rorty seems to be talking about Nehamas' Nietzsche.

It is this search for a "single context for all human lives" that Rorty has decided we can better do without. And once we have freed ourselves from belief in common humanity, I am free to redescribe not only *what it is* to be human, but *what it is to be me*.

What generic negative freedom encourages is the Freudian perspective that no one kind of human is privileged over another and that, surface evidence to the contrary, *no particular human is ultimately uninteresting*.

By breaking with both Kant's residual Platonism and Nietzsche's inverted Platonism, he lets us see both Nietzsche's superman and Kant's common moral consciousness as exemplifying two out of many forms of adaptation, two out of many strategies for coping with the contingencies of one's upbringing...For Freud, nobody is dull through and through, for there is no such thing as a dull unconscious. (CIS, 35)

And, what's more, "If we look inside the *bien-pensant* conformist, if we get him on the couch, we will find that he was only dull on the surface." (CIS, 35)

Freedom from this universal description (generic negative freedom) is necessary for the freedom from thinking of oneself as a particular token of a necessary human type (personal negative freedom).

Because the quest for truth and the rigidity of the essentially rich self effect the limitation of possible ways of thinking about the self and oneself, the experience of this negative freedom is perhaps best described as an experience of liberation. The liberation I have in mind is first, a liberation from universal teleological concerns.

The drama of an individual human life, or of the history of humanity as a whole, is not one in which a preexistent goal is triumphantly reached, or tragically not reached. (CIS, 29)

Not only does it free one up from goals like "maybe this is not what I (or we) was meant to do, or to be," but it also frees up the time we as a thinking culture spend trying to discern the fundamental nature of human-being. Time can be spent (and better spent) dwelling on the more *positive* aspects of the recognition of one's own contingency (i.e. one's freedom) and of the promotion of solidarity.

Having said all this, it is tempting to suggest that Rorty's redescription of the self as an incarnated vocabulary or a set of sentential attitudes, or a centerless web of belief, or a lading list ripe for redescription counts as a statement of the necessary structures of human being just as much as Descartes' ghost in the machine and maybe more than Hume's bundle of perceptions. This is the tension to which I referred earlier, that freedom from structural necessity and from the necessity of being any given sort of human seems to remove these requirements only to replace them with another set of more linguistically-oriented necessities. I will argue that to suggest that Rorty is offering his redescription(s) of the human self as one more once-for-all answer to the same old self-hood question is to do him a disservice, but for now the tension must remain -- the time is not quite right for resolution.

Contingency as "time and chance" and as overcoming time and chance

As a transition from the negative freedom from a necessary view of personhood, to the positive freedom of affirming one's contingency, consider the following clarification. Rorty sometimes uses the phrase "product of time and chance" as synonymous with "contingency." This phrase gives expression to the notion of "random" happenings -- forces beyond our control -- that push and

pull us as things "thrown" into the world that the word "contingency" typically conjures -- it could have been otherwise, and would have been had not things occurred as they did. It is this sense of contingency that feels most like determinism.⁴ Under one description it could be said, and Rorty will agree, that everything -- the rainforests, Aerosmith, the '57 Chevy -- is contingent (read "dependent") upon something else.

I can develop the contrast between the idea that the history of culture has a *telos* -- such as the discovery of truth, or the emancipation of humanity -- and the Nietzschean Davidsonian picture which I am sketching by noting that the latter picture is compatible with a bleakly mechanical description of the relation between human beings and the rest of the universe. (CIS, 17)

And although this way of seeing the world may seem deterministic, since there is an interdependency between human things like Aerosmith and non-human things like the rainforests, Rorty suggests that it does not relegate *uniqueness* or *genuine novelty* to the land of unicorns, Euclidean space and religions, i.e. things that make us feel better, but that we don't *really* believe.

For genuine novelty can, after all, occur in a world of blind, contingent, mechanical forces. Think of novelty as the sort of thing which happens when, for example, a cosmic ray scrambles the atoms in a DNA molecule, thus sending things off in the direction of the orchids or the anthropoids. (CIS, 17)

⁴I should make it clear that Rorty may not want to entertain the freewill/determinism debate any more than he wants to pursue the appearance/reality debate; the only place that I am certain Rorty mentions freewill/determinism explicitly and in those terms is in his essay "Two Meanings of Logocentrism." (EHO, 108) There he lists several dualisms as examples of the fact that whenever people speak they employ all sorts of distinctions, some useful and some not, but he lists these without deciding which are useful.

"Novelty" under this mechanical description means, quite literally, "something new." It is not interested in *how* the new thing came to be, whether it is dependent upon something else for its existence, but rather to whether it ever had been before. "The orchids, when their time came, were no less novel or marvelous for the sheer contingency of this necessary condition of their existence." (CIS, 17)

All human things in their time were original -- language, and with it truth and beauty, homelessness, country music -- there was a time when they once were not. It is in this sense of contingent that Rorty suggests that they are dependent upon other *necessary* conditions for their existence. "Necessary" should not be thought of, though, in any sort of sense other than in keeping with the physicalist description being offered. Rorty does not intend to suggest that they *had to be*, nor does he mean to illumine the underlying logical or metaphysical structures of the novel thing's being. "Necessary" here means that the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* album *was necessary* before the Beatles could produce *Sergeant Pepper* in a spirit of one-ups-man-ship.

It is not a category mistake to draw something as situatedly human as *Sergeant Pepper* into our discussion of novelty as a part of the mechanical world. Rorty's point is that it makes no difference whether physical or mental anomalies produce human novelty; it is all of a kind.

Analogously [to the orchid], for all we know, or should care, Aristotle's metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul's metaphorical use of *agapē*, and Newton's metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy -- some obsessional kinks left in

these brains by idiosyncratic traumata. It hardly matters how the trick was done. The results were marvelous. There had never been such things before. (CIS, 17)

There is a difference, however, between physically construed contingencies and those that are the products of human being. The difference is not in kind, but in response. While Rorty is not denying that forces typically considered mechanical have a part in our makeup as persons, built into these mechanical descriptions is the sense that they are things about which intellectuals like Rorty (people who play with words instead of lasers) can do little. It seems that it is just as fruitless for intellectuals to count on gamma rays for religious revolution as it is to blame them for our sexist language.

Rorty admits that there are plenty of contingencies which have nothing to do with language or people as language-users. Within the context of comparing the essence-free self to the essence-free world, Rorty places the self alongside the world as the sort of thing that holds us in its sway.

Both [the world and the self], however, have power over us - for example, the power to kill us. The world can blindly and inarticulately crush us; mute despair, intense mental pain, can cause us to blot ourselves out. (CIS, 40)

Rorty recognizes these contingencies, but he recognizes them as things over which we have little control -- at least they are things over which we exercise limited control *of the sort he has to offer*.

Rorty's story is one about the power of redescription, and he admits that the usefulness of redescription does not extend far into the realm of most of the things we typically consider to be matters of time and chance.

Faced with the nonhuman, the nonlinguistic, we no longer have an ability to overcome contingency and pain by appropriation and transformation, but only the ability to *recognize* contingency and pain. (CIS, 40)

It seems that there are certain things, especially pain, that are unredescribable. The best that we can do with regard to these "nonhuman" (in the sense of being nonlinguistic) events is to admit our helplessness with regard to them. The coping about which Rorty has something to say is the technique of redescription, and the realm of effectiveness for this sort of coming to terms is strictly the realm of those matters that can be tamed by being talked about -- this arena he considers to be the linguistic or human.

It is important that Rorty does not unqualifiedly include within this category of things over which we have no control, the language that we speak. Indeed the very project with which Rorty is concerned is the task of using language to remake ourselves -- and we will see, if we haven't already, that one's self is largely a function of linguistic habits and dispositions.

Now, in order to make sense of this distinction, that the linguistic self is not simply a function of time and chance -- the sort over which we have only the limited control of resignation -- we must make sense of Rorty's view on the difference between physical events and mental events, offered above as the difference between cosmic rays and infant traumata and their results. In order to account for the kind of control Rorty is hawking -- control over our very persons -- we must distinguish between language that is given to us, and language that is created by us. This distinction makes the transition for us from talking about "vocabularies" as those things that whole cultures use and are

handed to us in our infancy⁵, and "vocabularies" as those things that self-creative individuals privately use to remake themselves.

When considered in terms of the two-fold origin of human being, this distinction makes the transition from the sort of linguistic origin that describes human beings as made human by being given a language, to the more personal sort of linguistic origin, that human beings are individuated by being given particular languages. Rorty needs to say that the first type of origination takes place -- that beings are made human by being given languages -- as a matter of the time and chance sort of contingency described above. Just as volcanoes crush us, language visits us and makes us human. And although the discrete languages that we are originally given to make us into humans do make us into particular kinds of humans, *the self-creative individual has the capacity for choosing her own next language* and so has the ability for choosing the next way she will think of humanity and the next sort of human she will be.

There is no need to describe this ability of the self-recreative individual as "transcending" or "rising above" her time and chance contingency. Rorty's self-recreation does not require that the heroine comes to be *causa sui* -- that she pull herself up by her own bootstraps. Just because a language of self-recreation provides for redescriptions of an individual's linguistic past and so

⁵Presumably, we could have more than one of this metaphorical kind of infancy. Every time we are given a new language to speak -- when we make new, "cool" friends, or learn a new hobby -- but do not do it as a conscious act of self-recreation, we are, in a sense, "born again." Clearly, the lines between births are not as clear as the birthing metaphor makes them sound, but we do have considerable confusion regarding beginning of literal life issues surrounding the question of when human being begins as well. And that's all the biomedical ethics you are going to get out of me.

sets her free from it doesn't mean that that freedom came about in some extraordinary manner. It seems perfectly acceptable and reasonable that the self-recreating individual developed that capacity in perfectly mundane, situated and socially and linguistically conditioned sorts of ways. In other words, whether one has the capacity for overcoming one's linguistic contingency is a matter of linguistic contingency.

I have heard it said (mostly by myself) that good parenting is raising a child with the ability to overcome that parenting. This is the sort of relationship that I imagine between the time and chance contingency of being predisposed toward autonomy and the application of that freedom against all the predispositions given by time and chance -- including the predisposition to free oneself from predispositions.

I can summarize the above distinction in the following way: whether we are made human by being given the sort of language that encourages us to use language to undo the power it has over us is a matter of time and chance. Once we have freed ourselves from the demands of language, even though we do it by applying language to language, we have attained the only kind of freedom appropriate to language-using beings, the freedom from the requirements of language.

To realize that we are not the servants of language, except that time and chance has made us into the sorts of people who think that we are, is the recognition of contingency negatively construed -- the realization of freedom from the requirements of a set of underlying structures that must be adequately expressed. To use the space created by that negative freedom to redefine what it is to be human and what it is to be me as linguistically unconstrained is

to *affirm* the recognition of my contingency. It is to exercise the positive freedom *for self-recreation* that comes out of the negative freedom from essentialist notions of the self.

If it appears that Rorty is mixing his contingency metaphors here, that is only because he is. But to put this sort of traditional limitation on how one may use a metaphor, that it is against the rules, or poetically improper, or bad manners, or whatever is to beg the question against Rorty. His metaphorical use of the word "metaphor" is meant to free him from the stranglehold of pre-existent criteria he means to redescribe out of existence.

The positive freedom for affirming our contingency

Having dealt negatively with freedom as freedom from necessity we may now consider the recognition of contingency as the positive freedom for recreating oneself in the space left open by our newfound negative freedom from essentialist notions of the self. This more positive way of approaching the self as a product of contingent factors I call *affirming* one's contingency.

When considered in this light, the contingency Rorty describes takes on a most personal feel. Typically when we think of philosophical contingency we consider it in terms of what may or may not happen, in its opposition to necessity. We are not usually tempted to personalize it and speak of "my contingencies." But when considering the self by Rorty's lights, it seems most natural to look at our history and surroundings along with the story or stories we tell about this character we call "ourselves" and describe it in just such a manner. This is what I mean when I say that part (the biggest part) of the

freedom that is the recognition of contingency is to be found in *affirming one's contingency*.

Affirming contingency means more than merely agreeing to the proposition that the self is the the product of a host of purposeless and seemingly random events, and a by-product of language. It means embracing and redescribing these causes in such a way that one becomes a new self. In order to motivate such an embrace, Rorty borrows heavily on Nietzsche and Harold Bloom.

As Rorty tells it, both Nietzsche and Bloom consider human success to consist in self-creation. (CIS, 28) And self-creation means something like telling the story about oneself, redescribing one's contingency in a way that is to a great degree idiosyncratic. Remember that the account that Rorty offers for the creation of selves and of particular kinds of selves is given in linguistic terms. The self is a function of the language that one speaks. So, it follows that to remake oneself is to remake one's language.

To create one's mind is to create one's own language, rather than to let the length of one's mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind. (CIS, 27)

The world, in the guise of our received languages -- the languages that have originally made us human -- has in a very real sense determined who we are. Rorty's encouragement for the affirmation of one's contingency, for self-creation, amounts to an encouragement to deny the past's authority for descriptively defining ourselves and for determining ourselves' criteria for success or failure, and so to become autonomous.

Rorty is not claiming that the past has no power to define who we are. Indeed this is one of the points for which he argues in section one, and the first part of section two. He is not denying what the facts *are*, that the language of our past controls us, what he is denying is that the facts *must* be this way. He is denying the *necessity* of our current language's claim on us. He is affirming the *possibility* of taking matters into our own hands. Rorty is calling for linguistic autonomy.

[Nietzsche] hoped that once we realized that Plato's "true world" was just a fable, we would seek consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself. More exactly, he would have created the only part of himself that mattered by constructing his own mind. To create one's mind is to create one's own language, rather than to let the length of one's mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind. (CIS, 27)

Rorty's great appreciation for Ryle's work in debunking the notion of mind, and his lengthy denial of the mind as a substantial thinking thing in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is all that we need to be clear that by "mind" Rorty here intends something like Ryle's "dispositions," or even better, the tendencies we all have to describe the world in our own peculiar final vocabularies. Rorty calls these "sentential attitudes." (CIS, 88) We are linguistic selves -- language-based selves who, Rorty says, may take control of our own minds and lives, and the way in which one takes control of language-based selves is by language.

Rorty encourages us to do to the past what it tried to do to us. (CIS, 29) Remember, though, that when Rorty speaks of doing things like changing the

past, he means effecting change in only those areas available for redescription. What the past tried to do (and succeeded, by all accounts and up to this point) was to provide for us default descriptions of ourselves in universal terms purportedly applying to all humans, and in so doing force on us its criteria for human success and failure. What we are to do instead, then, is to redescribe the past as obsolete and ourselves as autonomous, and so determine our own criteria for success and failure. These are criteria that the past and its denizens can in no way live up to since they are, by the unique nature of our terms for judgment, incommensurable with it. These are by the same token, criteria that we alone are uniquely suited for satisfying.

Rorty makes it clear that redescribing the past in our own terms is not denying the influence of the past, but rather is affirming the influence of the past, our linguistic contingency, quite literally *on our own terms*.

But in abandoning the traditional notion of truth, Nietzsche did not abandon the idea of discovering the causes of our being what we are. He did not give up the idea that an individual might track home the blind impress all his behaviors bore. He only rejected the idea that this tracking was a process of discovery. Rather, he saw self-knowledge as self-creation. (CIS, 27)

Causality plays a major role for Rorty, but lest one get overly excited or anxious at this traditional philosophical category, let's make sure that we understand that "causality," like "irony," and "contingency" is to be understood in a manner peculiar to the yarn Rorty spins.

The peculiarity of cause is to be found in its relation to its effect. Rather than the effect being wholly dependent upon the cause, Rorty encourages people, as the effects of linguistic causes to reverse the causal order, and to

make the past be something it never was before. We are to invent new ways for the past to effect us. And in inventing we make it so.⁶ This requires that, by creating new linguistic possibilities we conjure a new self for the past to make us into. Having made new things for people to be, we permit our redescription in those fresh terms.

...the only way to trace home the causes of one's being as one is would be to tell a story about one's causes in a new language...This may sound paradoxical, because we think of *causes* as discovered rather than invented. We think of telling a *causal* story as a paradigm of the *literal* use of language. Metaphor, linguistic novelty, seems out of place when one turns from simply relishing such novelty to explaining why these novelties, and not others, occurred. (CIS, 28)

Rorty is clearly recommending that we engage in the metaphorical usage of causal language when developing the narrative which serves as the situating context for our lives. The proliferation of metaphorical causal stories, i.e. personal histories employing abnormal discourse, and reversing the causal order is the only way to shrug off the encumbering terminological vestiges of our linguistic ancestors, since as long as we tell our stories as continuous with the past's projections for us and in their terms, the most we could do from their perspective would be to be wrong. The least we could do would be to be like them.

⁶Rorty admits that the degree to which we can be self-recreative is limited; I will address in what ways later in the next chapter. Admittedly, there is a tension between Rorty's encouragement toward self-recreation and the degree to which it is possible. I will follow Rorty in talking of self-recreation as something to be encouraged, and therefore possible, except when explicating those passages that deal explicitly with the limitations of this project.

Real change for individuals is no different than change for societies. It only comes through widening the available terminological possibilities, not by *recommending* that we make some or another sweeping linguistic reform based on the old standards of what constitutes grounds for sweeping linguistic reform, but by using old words in new ways. *To recommend* requires recommending in the old language, and with the old criteria for worthwhile change. Changes in personal vocabularies must just be made, and without reference to old word meanings in old word sets.

...any *literal* description of one's individuality, which is to say any use of an inherited language game for this purpose, will necessarily fail. One will not have traced that idiosyncrasy home but will merely have managed to see it as not idiosyncratic after all, as a specimen reiterating a type, a copy or replica of something which has already been identified. (CIS, 27)

Just as in society, the self cannot redescribe herself in old terms without reaffirming an old self, without becoming a token of some previously existing type.

The relationship between the impossibility of becoming a new sort of self by redescription in a received language and the previous discussion of the two-fold nature of becoming human should be clear. When first becoming human we are given a language that makes us 1.) human and 2.) a certain *type* of human. To be made a *type* of human by inheriting a language necessarily implies that the *token* of the type of human being that one has been made previously existed (at least as a potentiality).

To fail as a poet - and thus for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being - is to accept somebody else's

description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program... (CIS, 28)

All that we can do in received terms is to become what someone else has decided we might be. To do this is not to affirm one's contingency, at the most it is to feel the negative force of admitting the lack of necessity in who we might be, while affirming not a new reading of our life's story, but the same one that was told us in creating the conviction of a self in the first place.

To *affirm* one's contingency is to create one's own interpretation of past events in one's own language and then to agree that, based on idiosyncratic standards for success, this is *as it should be*. This is why Rorty appropriates Nietzsche's description of the self-creative individual's attitude toward the past, "Thus I willed it." (CIS, 29) This attitude toward one's past has a doubly affirmative nature. To will one's own past is to do what we have just been talking about, to tell the story of one's own life in idiosyncratic terms. But, by implication, it is also to accept who I am by accepting how I have been remade (as made by myself).

Certainly there is no room for denial, or rejection of every nuance of my being as a personal-language-using human, since I am responsible for the creation of my vocabulary, and so of myself.

The hope of such a poet is that what the past tried to do to her she will succeed in doing to the past: to make the past itself, including those very causal processes which blindly impressed all her own behaviors, bear *her* impress. Success in that enterprise - the enterprise of saying "Thus I willed it" to the past - is success in what Bloom calls "giving birth to oneself." (CIS, 29)

It is literally *self-defeating* to choose one's own birth, in this subtle allusion to Sartre's discussion of radical freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, and then to deny responsibility for and acceptance of it. In the same way it also makes no sense to choose a language that gives birth to a self that one cannot be proud of, to render oneself pathetic and to let someone else be the hero of one's own life's story. Indeed, if we have successfully retold our own story in a unique way, we cannot *but* be our own hero, since telling our story includes, for Rorty, creating the standards by which we are judged. (CIS, 97)

The self-creative individual, however, is not unrelated to the languages of her past. We have already noted that the biggest part of self-creation is not denying the influence of the past, but telling the story of that influence in a novel manner. But there is more. The self-creative individual is like abnormal discourse. Abnormal discourse does not depart entirely from normal discourse in its jargon, lest the abnormal scientist, philosopher, etc. be eccentric, not to be made sense of, and ultimately rejected as nonsensical, rather than revolutionary. Neither does the self-creative individual offer an entirely unrelated set of neologisms for her self-redescription, but rather, like the abnormal conversant, uses old words in new ways.

Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways. A language which was "all metaphor" would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just babble. (CIS, 41)

Further, the project of self-creation is obviously not something that can be completed for two reasons. First, until one's death there are always going to be new events to be interpreted. And second, as a testimony to both our own

finitude and the size of the project, even for the most successful self-creator, there will never be enough time. "...it will remain true that this willing [the willing involved in saying "thus I willed it"] will always be a project rather than a result, a project which life does not last long enough to complete." (CIS, 40)

But neither the fact that our languages (and so our selves) are bound to be largely derivative, nor the fact that our projects of self-creation can never be completed hinders Rorty from recommending the project of self-creation as an appropriate pursuit in the time we have. Rorty's persistence in this matter may give us a clue as to how to ease off the tension regarding the apparent and paradoxical essentialism involved in Rorty's insistence on the linguistically constituted self.

If we understand Rorty's description of the self and his description of self-creation as metaphors that are *thoroughly metaphorical*, then it makes sense that Rorty is bothered neither by his *apparently* essentialist description of what it is to be human, nor the impossibility of the task he assigns us and himself. To say that Rorty is "unrealistic" in his expectations -- to emphasize his admission that we can never manage more than marginal novelty -- is to miss the point. It is inappropriate to complain of metaphors that they do not "fit the facts" perfectly; metaphors never do, that's why we call them "metaphors." The next section is an attempt to emphasize the metaphorical spirit in which Rorty offers the linguistic self so as to predict how we might ease some of the tension I have been alluding to between Rorty's anti-essentialism and his apparently essentialist rendition of the linguistic self.

Rorty's redescription of himself

I have described Rorty's notion of the self all the while deferring the increasing tension between his denial that the self has an essential nature, and the thorough-going dependence on language that his redescriptive redescription requires. I will now suggest a reading of Rorty that is not only justified by careful exegesis, but also by its pragmatic and aesthetic value. Reading Rorty more sympathetically will render *Contingency, irony and solidarity* useful, as an example of self-recreation, and interesting, as a new kind of book.

If we understand Rorty's positive project in the contingency of selfhood chapter as *his own* tracing home of what has made *him* as *he* is, rather than interpret the chapter as an exercise in trying to offer a new set of structural necessities, although linguistic ones, an exercise which reveals itself as self-undermining, replete with inconsistencies and full of attempts to do what he is claiming is problematic, we will render a more interesting, less polemic reading.

Upon first reading, and for some the second and third, the most interesting feature of this chapter, and Rorty's book and recent work in general, is its self-undermining nature. Rorty is saying in the chapter on the contingency of the self that each self, and *a fortiori*, self-expression is an idiosyncratic product of unpredictable and innumerable life events. This chapter, this book, considered as a self-expression, then is merely contingent and describes nothing basic about what it is to be a self. It is merely autobiographical.

This is all true, except the part about it being the most interesting feature, or reading of Rorty's work. I may be able to express my intuition best by making a Rorty-esque distinction between possible meanings of the phrase "self-expression." The essentialist and representationalist meaning of "self-

expression" requires that there is a self prior to the act of self-expression, and that if I state an opinion regarding the pointlessness of political activism, for example, there is a distinction to be made between who I am as a self, and what I say to *represent* that self.

The model I prefer, and the one Rorty advocates, is the one that has the very act of self-expression as an act of self-creation, or at least the verbalization of one of the prior-self-created self's constituting beliefs. Rorty's discussion of the ways that things influence us to act (e.g. out of a need for public acceptance and uniqueness) and the ways that we attempt to achieve this kind of recognition (e.g. via words) is an act of self-expression understood in the second way.

The interesting reading of Rorty is not the one that construes him as one more attempt in the long line of similar efforts to clear things up regarding the self, and to pronounce finally -- once and for all -- what the self really is. Rorty himself is hyper-vigilant about warning the reader, and himself as well, that every author, especially ironist authors, must be aware that theirs is only the latest redescription, and redescriptions are really only good for being re-described themselves. [CIS, 98, 99)

The interesting reading is the one that has Rorty as a character in a story, a narrative that involves ideas and arguments rather than places and conversations. And to this character, who feels the liberation of realizing and admitting how he sees himself, we can relate.

Having said all that and within this spirit I will now attempt to illuminate certain of the personal foibles and biases that creep out through Rorty's writing and choice of metaphors. Rorty has two personal attachments the contingency

of which he can only fleetingly admit, and which constantly motivate and color his discussion of personal contingency. These I will describe as his being "logocentric" and "afflicted with publicity."

Rorty is logocentric

By saying that Rorty is "logocentric" I do not mean anything other than that whereas he criticizes former philosophers for being overly visual in their choice of metaphors and so suggesting a representational "picture of reality," Rorty is so verbally inclined that his metaphor for linguistic and intellectual change (these are nearly one and the same thing) motivates the interpretation that Rorty is one-sidedly linguistic.

Let me be clear about what I am suggesting. I am not saying that Rorty is reclaiming on behalf of language the place of the fundamental structures of human being that he cleared from other metaphysics. I am saying that the metaphors that he chooses for redescribing the self, encourage the unkind interpretation of his work as self-undermining, an attempt to achieve what he pronounced impossible, the essence of the self. Consider his metaphor for change, it is change as *metaphor*. Rorty offers words about words, and his *redescriptive* talk is highly propositionally charged. This is not meant to be an accusation, *per se*, but rather a clue for more healthy interpretation.

Rorty hints at this tendency on his part by admitting that whereas sign-oriented folks (he calls them "intellectuals") use words to reinvent themselves, others do the same thing by considering the unique in their own lives.

...the intellectual (the person who uses words or visual or musical forms for this purpose) is just a special case - just somebody who does with marks

and noises what other people do with their spouses and children, their fellow workers, the tools of their trade, the cash accounts of their businesses, the possessions they accumulate in their homes, the music they listen to, the sports they play or watch, or the trees they pass on their way to work. Anything from the sound of a word through the color of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can, as Freud showed us, serve to dramatize and crystalize a human being's sense of self-identity. (CIS, 37)

But even after having allowed the rest of us to possess a sense of self, he has to put the signifying spin on all that our re-creation is. "[Any such thing] can *symbolize* the blind impress all our behaviors bear." (CIS, 37 -- my emphasis)

In the chapter on "Private irony and liberal hope" Rorty admits that his relationships are not with people but with vocabularies and ways of using them. His heroes are not the authors of the books that he reads, but rather the characters that they conjure. And so the names of the authors of the books become the names of the standpoints onto which Rorty projects personality.

We ironists treat these people [the writers one considers] not as anonymous channels for truth but as abbreviations for a certain final vocabulary and for the sorts of beliefs and desires typical of its users. (CIS, 79)

Rorty's penchant for identifying persons with the languages they use reaches a zenith in the following excerpt. I don't need to italicize anything here to make the reader feel the impact of his anthropomorphism of vocabularies, do I?

For us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary...Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture - for persons and cultures are, for us, incarnated vocabularies. (CIS, 80)

Similarly, Rorty conflates identity with employed word sets. "Simultaneously, we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary."⁷ And the way that we do this is by comparing people (incarnated vocabularies) we know with the vocabularies (people) with whom we have just met.

So our doubts about our own characters or our own culture can be removed or assuaged only by enlarging our acquaintance. The easiest way of doing that is to read books, and so ironists spend more of their time placing books than in placing real live people. (CIS, 80)

Rorty's view of the individual as an "incarnated vocabulary" is clearly meant metaphorically, but this is the point of tension in Rorty's work. Rorty criticizes others for their optic metaphors that encourage our tendency to view the self as a "mirror of nature," but his metaphors are so linguistic that the resulting portrait of the individual is quite a far cry from any kind of flesh and blood person. What we imagine as the manifestation of these "centerless webs of belief" are more like shopping lists of propositions and descriptions.

Rorty begins the irony section of the book by saying that "All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives." (CIS, 73) This claim might seem rather arbitrary had Rorty not spent sufficient time explaining the two-fold linguistic source for human being. Indeed the first line here may be seen as a summary of the first two sections of the book, "The Contingency of Language" and "The

⁷ CIS, 80 -- Lest there be any confusion as to whether Rorty means anything other than simply the possibilities for self-redescription by "moral identity" consider how Rorty construes "moral relevance," "The word 'literature' now covers just about every sort of book which might conceivably have moral relevance - might conceivably alter one's sense of what is possible and important." (CIS, 82)

Contingency of Selfhood." To have a vocabulary is what it means to be human. To create one's own vocabulary is what it means to create one's self.

Rorty has presented us with a redescription of the self as linguistically constituted, and while he never quite makes explicit what he means by phrases like "To create one's mind is to create one's own language..." (CIS, 27) for the individual reader who is compelled by Rorty's account to challenge his own sense of self, one thing is clear. Rorty's self is a propositionally constituted self.

What I have said so far is not meant to be controversial or new -- in terms of interpreting Rorty, not in terms of interpreting the self. *Contingency, irony and solidarity* is nothing like the first time that Rorty's linguistically constituted self comes into play. Consider the following excerpt from "The World Well Lost," a reproduced article in his 1982 collection, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*.

Let the notion of a person be as complex and multiply criterioned as you please, still I do not think that it will come unstuck from that of a complex interlocked set of beliefs and desires, nor that the latter notion can be separated from that of the potentiality for translatable speech. (CP, 10)

No, the idea of considering Rorty's self as linguistically constituted is neither new nor controversial within Rorty studies.

Rorty is afflicted with publicity

By saying that Rorty is "afflicted with publicity," I mean that he is so concerned with the future death of himself and his metaphors (he seems to

want to avoid the former and hasten the latter⁸) that he projects his desire to be "right" onto all philosophers, poets and self-creative individuals. He agrees with Bloom that the re-creative intellectual is motivated by a fear of being a mere token of some previously existing type of individual, that he is moved to self-redescription by the "horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica." (CIS, 29) He accepts the definition of failure that he attributes to Nietzsche: "to accept somebody else's description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations on previously written poems." (CIS, 28)

This is not, itself, enough to warrant my claim that Rorty is "afflicted with publicity." So far I have shown only Rorty's desire to impress the past, not the future. But consider the summation of the section on the self. Rorty admits that just creating oneself anew does not exhaust how he experiences the need for doing to the past what the past tried to do to him. More is needed. What is needed is a public demonstration of one's own self-birth.

We shall see the conscious need of the strong poet to *demonstrate* that he is not a copy or replica as merely a special form of an unconscious need everyone has: the need to come to terms with the blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own. (CIS, 43--*his* emphasis)

⁸Remember that one of Rorty's metaphors for the literalization of metaphors is the "death" of the metaphor. When a metaphor dies it becomes widely accepted and commonly understood. And so, we find people, albeit wrongly, saying things like "I was literally beside myself." Well, no one is literally beside himself, that is a metaphor for a high degree of self-awareness brought on by something disturbing, but we know what the speaker means. The metaphor of being beside oneself has become literal.

The need of his Bloomian hero, the strong poet, to *show* his reconstruction of himself in his own terms corresponds to Rortys' affliction with publicity. But Rorty goes so far as to suggest that *everyone* has this demonstrative need and that it is equal to personal redescription. Rorty has carefully shown the reasonable necessity for the redescriptive individual to include the socially-constructed past within her redescription of herself, since she perceives herself as coming from that public past.

The future must endure personal redescription as well. Or rather, it may not make sense to say that the future will be redescribed since the events and people of the future had never been described in the old terms. The new individual would not see the world through her old word-eyes in order to make the translation into the new language, just as the successful foreign language student garners the impact of the foreign words without having to translate back into her own first language.

Just as the past, being long gone, doesn't have to *appreciate or adopt* Rorty's redescriptions in order to count as having been redescribed, it seems unnecessary that the future should have to be aware of appropriating the self-creative individual's vocabulary in order for the individual concerned to be redescriptive.

There is a necessary difference between the relationship between the strong poet and the past and the strong poet and the future. The self-maker *is* in a very real sense tied to the past. She is not so tied to the future. The strong poet must borrow and steal words from the past in order to remake them into something she can use. She cannot, Rorty points out, create her own

language *from nothing*. To suggest that she may do so is to deny the two-fold human-making process that gave her original birth.

I cannot see why, however, the strong poet must rely on the future the way she does on the past, except for the eventual appropriation of her metaphors by the future, but this is not a matter of *self-overcoming*, but a more public kind of overcoming. And yet Rorty declares that the strong individual is as dependent upon the future as on the past.

...there is no stronger claim which even the
superman can make than that his differences from
the past, inevitably minor and marginal as they are,
will nevertheless be carried over into the future - that
his metaphoric redescrptions of small parts of the
past will be among the future's stock of literal truths.
(CIS, 42)

I can think of no good reason for Rorty to encourage the self-creative to make their personal vocabularies public, and so to do to the future what she kept the past from doing to her. On the contrary it seems that those who have undergone the humiliation of being at the whim of others' redescrptions would do whatever they could from causing that feeling in another. Rorty deals with this criticism in regard to the ironist's potentially humiliating relationship with *current* others by saying that the self-redescriptive individual, inasmuch as she redescrbes others, feels no need to share this potentially disrespectful redescription with the others. She does not, however, seem to have the same respect for future others. Rorty encourages us to do to the future what the past tried to do to us, that is, force our redescrptions upon it.

I cannot imagine what motivates Rorty to encourage the strong maker to force her description on future others, but not on present others. There is no

acceptance *requirement* for self-making. Sure, Rorty recognizes that if our language is influential we will be admitted as geniuses, and if not we will be labeled "eccentric" at best, "dangerous" at worst. But these labels from the dominant socialized language would necessarily bear no impact, since the strong maker is searching for autonomy, for freedom from the defining power of others. I can't imagine why that would not include future others as well as current and past others. Still, Rorty describes the fate of the redescription which makes an impact on the future as *fortunate*.

With luck - the sort of luck which makes the difference between genius and eccentricity - that language will also strike the next generation as inevitable. *Their* behaviors will bear that impress.
(CIS, 29)

Why is this "lucky?" I can see no reason the strong poet needs to be read, nor any reason the superman needs to be understood. Indeed, if what we are interested in is being unique, then what difference does it make that all those many people like us, because they are judging themselves by our standard, just happen to come after?

Rorty, then appears to want to provide the language not only for the past, and for himself, but for the future. He wants understanding, and in order to be self-making and to be understood, requires that *his* language be the common currency, since to be understood requires a language in which all can speak, and to be unique requires speaking one's own language. Rorty cannot speak the self in another's terms since that would be to speak another's self, and yet he wants everyone to be able to make sense of what he says. He appears to want everyone to be like him.

Now, someone may argue that it is not every self-creating individual who is motivated by a desire to be genius instead of lunatic (i.e. to be publicly creative, rather than merely privately so), but only those who share Rorty's logocentrism. This seems obviously wrong. There are plenty of ways of being publicly self-creative that have little to do with language. Some examples may be Madonna, Larry Flynt and Evil Knieval⁹. Many, I might say most, who share Rorty's affliction with publicity, wish to achieve some non-linguistic equivalent of the death of one's metaphors.

These themes of publicity and logocentrism will continue to inform our considerations as we move into a detailed analysis of the Rortean ironist. We will see that Rorty's notion of irony is more or less an extension of his considerations regarding the self, and is highly propositional in nature as well as publicly motivated. In addition, the role of autonomy as setting one's own standards will play a bigger role.

⁹This wonderful example is John Nolt's.

CHAPTER III

AVOIDING THE PROBLEM OF IRONIST THEORIZING

The last thing an ironist theorist wants or needs is a theory of ironism. (CIS, 97)

Rorty's Irony -- the autonomy of the linguistically constituted self

We have begun to develop the theme of the linguistically constituted self in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. We have seen that the very origins of humanity are linguistic since it is through language both that we become human and that we become particular kinds of humans. Whether one is human is decided by whether one uses language, and what sort of human one is is decided by which one of the languages in common currency one uses. If one is human, yet uses a language that is only mildly derivative (the best that we can hope for) then that human has remade itself into a new sort of human.

We have seen that certain types of humans (intellectuals) have been given languages that create them as the sorts of humans who rely on language (or more generally, symbols) to tell their stories; these we call "intellectuals." Other sorts of humans exist, those that use things, events, places and people as coinage for their sense of self. We have noticed that to be self-creative is to generate one's own language, by which that one is meaningfully described. A curious implication of all this is that the only one who has the power of redescription, and so of self-creation, is the one who has been given a sort of humanity that uses symbols in the first place. And of this group, even fewer maintain a self-given language that is self-referential and consciously so. It is

this individual who Rorty celebrates in part two of his book, the *irony* part of *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.

Whereas the previous sections of the book may be seen as an analysis of how languages come into being, how they constitute the self, and how they relate to other languages (selves) as cultures, the chapters under present consideration, chapters four and five, "Private irony and liberal hope" and "Proust, Nietzsche and Heidegger," may be seen as an expansion of the vocabulary that makes up the language that makes up the self, how that vocabulary and attitudes toward it relate to the self, and, especially, how the vocabulary relates itself to itself.

Rorty begins the section on irony by summarizing and invoking the linguistically constituted self of the first section: "All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives." (CIS, 73) Based on what has gone before, we might say, metaphorically of course, that "all human beings *are* a set of words..."

Although Rorty does not, we may offer a provisional distinction between the self as language, the relation of propositions to that language, and the relation between the words in one's vocabulary. In the irony section of the book, by and large, Rorty is going to talk less about *language* and more about *words*. I take this to be a difference only in the scope of concern, and not any real inconsistency or change in topic. Whereas in the previous chapters he has established the contingency of language *in general*, he will now begin to unpack that shorthand into more specific issues. The relationship between those specific issues is well illustrated in his description of selves offered within the

context of giving expression to the gainsayer's fear that with a Rortean notion of self, we place concern for each other on too-yielding ground.

Metaphysics...tries to make sense of the claim that human beings are something more than centerless webs of beliefs and desires. The reason many people think such a claim essential to liberalism is that if men and women were, indeed, nothing more than sentential attitudes - nothing more than the presence or absence of dispositions toward the use of sentences phrased in some historically conditioned vocabulary - then not only human nature, but human *solidarity*, would begin to seem and eccentric and dubious idea. (CIS, 88)

So then, selves are "centerless webs of beliefs and desires." He equates this web of "beliefs" and "desires" with "sentential attitudes" which are the tendency to use or not use certain propositions offered in the terms of a vocabulary.¹

This propensity or disinclination to use certain words to frame propositions is the self. Because Rorty includes in his description the *absence* of a disposition we have a pretty well-rounded sense of a linguistically constituted self.

Not only are we talking about a set of inclinations or dispositions *for* assent to certain propositions, as framed in certain words, we are also considering the self as made up of *disinclinations* of the same sort. The disinclinations that make up part of the self may express themselves when the self is predisposed against a given proposition as "I don't agree with that statement." And the disinclinations may offer themselves as "I would put that

¹I cannot quite make sense of Rorty's use of the phrase "sentential attitudes" with its apparent allusion to Russelian "propositional attitudes. I suspect that at least some of the trouble comes from Rorty's constant, and so sometimes less than discriminating, desire to multiply metaphors for the self. Whether Rorty is confused, or whether I am, the point here is only that Rorty's notion of self is linguistic.

differently," or "here's my version of what I think you're trying to say" when negatively predisposed against the words used to frame the proposition.

While it is true that Rorty mentions "desires" alongside "beliefs" here, and elsewhere, his emphasis is clearly on the more obviously propositional structures of "belief" and "doubt." Although doubts may seem less clearly propositional in nature than beliefs, we will soon see that the doubt in which Rorty is most interested is very closely tied to a belief, rather than a vague uncertainty regarding whether one wishes to assent to a given proposition. Rorty will describe his ironist as positively believing in the contingency of her language, and so *doubting* its worth and by extension, the worth of the beliefs expressed in it. That doubt is not an uncertainty as to the quality of one's belief, but rather a contentful, sure (as sure as anything) belief as to the lack of certainty of belief. More on this paradox in a bit. My task here is to distinguish between languages, propositions and vocabularies.

At the beginning of the chapter on irony Rorty makes a distinction here that he hasn't offered before now. If we were dealing with the self as metaphysically substantial, I would distinguish certain beliefs as more *essential* to the person in question. If we thought of the self in terms of authenticity and inauthenticity, I would say that we were considering those beliefs *authentically* held. As it is, we are dealing with a propositionally constituted self, and in propositional matters we distinguish the relative importance of beliefs in terms of their role in *argumentation*. Beliefs that are logically prior to other, more derivative beliefs and which, as premises, serve as the "bottom line" when the holder is challenged to justify her commitments Rorty calls "final." Propositions that function as the first premises in an argument or justification are ultimately

unjustified, which is to say that if those engaged do not agree on the truth of these premises there is little more that can be said that hasn't already been said.

[This vocabulary] is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. (CIS, 73)

Rorty describes the final vocabulary as the words that express an individual's most heartfelt emotions, thoughts, projects and doubts. One's final vocabulary is the set of words...

...in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. (CIS, 73)

If we play on the the self as a centerless web of beliefs metaphor, we can imagine that the ironist, like anyone, linguistically construed, has many, many propositions to which she would grant assent. Some of these beliefs -- again no doubt for everyone -- would, if ever considered in logical proximity with some others, contradict or undermine the others. Happily, most people allow their beliefs to nestle themselves against other beliefs in their collection with which they more or less get along, or at least enjoy healthy and symbiotic competition.²

Most people do not force beliefs into contradictory company. Those that do are probably artists, self psycho-analysts and philosophers. All three like to juxtapose conflicting beliefs. Some do so in order to eradicate the tension, the

² If Rorty can anthropomorphize whole vocabularies, surely it is not out of order for me to treat one or two beliefs as people for a short while.

philosopher does this by offering finer and finer distinctions. Some eradicate tension by deciding which belief is more primordial; this is the habit of the self-analyst. Some few juxtapose their contradictory beliefs in order to highlight the tension, as in the case of the artist. Those individuals that are conscious about the contradictory relationship of some of their beliefs, and yet don't seem to mind, are ironists.

The ironist, although I do not want to project unhappiness to this situation, has at least one most disagreeable belief that can find satisfactory company not at all. All it does is gainsay. It undermines every proposition with which it comes into contact. And this undermining activity is not limited to beliefs other than itself. Indeed, its ownmost characteristic is its self-referential negating.

This proposition to which the ironist gives assent and whose insidious doubt creeps like kudzu into and around every other belief, all the while living parasitically on itself, strangling itself as it strangles the others is the freedom-releasing admission that "all of my beliefs are contingent."³ The effect of this belief is described in the first of Rorty's three conditions for the ironist. "She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses..." (CIS, 73) I will call this belief the "kudzu proposition." In keeping with his linguistically constituted self, Rorty's ironist may be conceived as a person who carries with her a set of words, some of which are used to call others into question.

³When I wrote this section I was not consciously aware that Rorty uses Kudzu himself in "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing" (CP, 107-ff.) when describing the ironists relationship to other more "normal" thinkers.

To whatever degree the kudzu proposition is consciously, philosophically, considered -- to that degree it is offered in the specialized sub-vocabulary of the ironist. Rorty describes this behavior as reminding the ironist of her own "rootlessness," by using terms like "Weltanschauung," 'perspective,' 'dialectic,' 'conceptual framework,' 'historical epoch,' 'language game,' 'redescription,' 'vocabulary,' and 'irony.' (CIS, 75)

Three conditions for the ironist

At the beginning of chapter four, Rorty describes the ironist by the three conditions she must meet. These three criteria are best understood within the context in which they are given, that of his description of the self as a "nothing more than sentential attitudes - nothing more than the presence or absence of dispositions toward the use of sentences phrased in some historically conditioned vocabulary." (CIS, 88) According to the first of these criteria, the ironist...

...has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by other people or books she has encountered. (CIS, 73)

There are at least two ways to describe the causal link in this condition by which the ironist comes to hold the kudzu proposition; the first is to say that other people or their writings have influenced the ironist, specifically by saying and convincing the ironist-to-be that language, culture and self are contingent and therefore so are final vocabularies and attitudes toward them. In this case the ironist holds the kudzu proposition because someone else (book or person, same thing) *convinced* the ironist of its truth. In this case the progenitor of the

kudzu proposition must be an ironist, or must be just plain mean. I suppose someone could *accidentally* present to the ironist something that, for her counts as evidence of the truth of irony. But this is getting awfully close to the second possible causal interpretation.

The second describable causal connection is that the ironist has become an ironist by the effect on that ironist of the *fact* that others (whomever) have impressed her, so leading her to the *feeling* that still others in the future may do the same. On this model it doesn't matter at all who the persons or their positions were, whether ironists or no (although conflicting absolutisms might work best), but simply that there have been enough well-argued and well-received different views in the past that the ironist feels her own susceptibility to being persuaded, and reacts to that openness by admitting that she will likely be persuaded again in the future and likely in another direction. This admission is more than just a resignation to being influenced by others. It becomes a proposition expressible in terms of her final vocabulary -- the kudzu proposition. She feels convicted that all final vocabularies are subject to change, and this includes her own. And, this challenge goes all the way to her premise-like belief that all final vocabularies are susceptible to being redescribed out of usefulness.

The comparison here to the misology discouraged by Plato in the *Phaedo* is obvious. The discussion comes within the context of the interlocutors' conversation with Socrates regarding the likelihood of the continued existence of the soul after the death of the body. Having gone over a couple of arguments for the immortality of the soul, and getting ever closer to the moment when Socrates must drink his famous hemlock cocktail, but no

nearer a decision regarding whether the soul (and most to the point here, Socrates' soul) will persist after bodily death, the interlocutors express some anxiety at their argumentative frustration. Socrates assures them that arguments are like people, and just because some are untrustworthy, we mustn't lose faith in them all -- that would be no way to live.

I interpret Rorty in this second, misological, manner, although he does not assure us of the worth of arguments in the face of evidence to the contrary. The first reading suggests that we become ironists by reading "The Ironist Today," or some propagandist equivalent (*Contingency, irony and solidarity?*). But it is not in keeping with the spirit of irony to suggest that one becomes an ironist by being persuaded of the truth of the ironist position by an argument, or by exposure to a single--even ironic--perspective.

One becomes an ironist as one becomes convicted of both the effectiveness and groundlessness of arguments in general, not by an argument which says all arguments must fail, or good arguments are convincing, or by a proposition which says that all propositions are not true. Rorty describes this misological conviction as the "realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed" (CIS, 73). This realization is less like the conclusion that comes at the end of a proof and more like a contented exhaustion that comes at the end of an ordeal. Whew.

Further, with regard to "radical doubts:" the "radical doubt" which comes from the experience of being wooed by others is phrased in terms that are part of the ironist's final vocabulary. But that vocabulary is also the one which is being doubted; the final vocabulary has itself as its own object. Now, I take "radical doubts" fairly literally to mean something like uncertainty with regard to the root

beliefs which are expressed in terms of and provide a ground (if not a foundation) for one's final vocabulary.

Rorty makes a distinction between "thin" and "thick" terms, both of which have a place in everyone's final vocabulary. The "thick" terms are the ones that do most of our work for us, that work being justifying ourselves, projects etc. Although these do most of the work, they are also the least flexible and yielding. It only makes sense, therefore, that more of these are needed in everyone's final vocabulary. Some examples of these may be "Volunteers," "Christ," "Dale Earnhardt," "global sustainability," "political correctness," and "authenticity." "Thin" terms are the ones like "good," "true" and "beautiful." And they are common to more different final vocabularies, than are the thick terms. These words seem to be good for peace-keeping, despite the fact that -- probably because -- they are bad at conveying meaning.

It seems fairly clear that the most important doubt of terms within a given final vocabulary is not the constant reconsideration of the thin, universal terms so much as the thick, particular ones. The thinner the terms, the less controversial (e.g., everyone agrees, pace Aristotle, that happiness is good), and the less contentful. These are given content by understanding them in connection with thicker terms, and so the most important doubt is the doubt of the most meaningful terminology. The "radical" doubt language suggests that what is being held suspect are the terms which do most of the work in forming justifications. One of the ironist's thickest terms is that term of "irony" itself.

"Radical doubt" is certainly focused on the ironist's final vocabulary, but it is also the case that the ironist has, as a big part, maybe even a *root* part, of her final vocabulary, the very belief that root ideas and terms are to be

questioned. So "radical doubt" can be thought of as both the root of irony and as focused on the root of irony, i.e. itself. It is this self-referential quality of her doubt that gives the ironist her greatest challenge, the challenge of trying to historicize others while making no claim for her own superiority. I'll deal with this more thoroughly a little later.

The most basic content to give this fundamental doubt is that since "she" is an existing self and selves are linguistically constituted, the doubt that "she" has regarding her final vocabulary is not to be taken as *external*, or in any way *distinct* from that final vocabulary itself. In a very real sense her doubts regarding her final vocabulary are *self-doubts*.

Rorty's second criterion for the ironist is that "she realizes that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts." (CIS, 73) This seems to be true not only because the very notions of underwriting and dissolution seem to imply a neutral meta-vocabulary, but also because the doubts themselves are an important part of the ironists' final vocabulary -- indeed, they are what allow the individual who has them to count as a Rortean ironist -- would that I could doubt myself so. No belief held by the ironist individual escapes the "web of belief" that makes her herself, and this includes the belief that "I have doubts about my final vocabulary," and that "my final vocabulary is, nonetheless, mine and final."

Strict "underwriting" and "dissolution" require a meta-level vocabulary. The very language of *underwriting* suggests a grounding or foundation from which the ironist will shy. Whether the metaphor we use to talk of justifications for beliefs, actions etc. is one of suspension from above as in *meta-level*, or *second-order* talk, or whether it is one of support from below, as in the current

underwriting language, the upshot is the same, even when what is being underwritten are doubts, as in the current case.

The ironist, as one who recognizes the contingency of her beliefs, accepts the kudzu proposition and frequently uses words like "irony" and "Weltanschauung," and has already accepted, internalized, and "dissolved" all the doubt that her vocabulary can consistently express into her proposition set. The reason the ironist cannot dissolve any more doubt into the solution of her vocabulary is because her vocabulary has reached its doubt saturation point, just as once a solvent has dissolved as much of some substance as it can, there will be no net change in the saturation level. The solution remains at maximum doubt saturation. No more dissolution can take place. Dissolution within the metaphor as I am offering it means doubt integrated into the sentential attitudes by the use of words that accommodate the doubt but do not draw attention to it. For example, the ironist might quite smoothly talk of characteristics instead of essences, so remaining consistent with the kudzu proposition without drawing attention to it. By contrast, when her ironist vocabulary fails her, and she feels compelled to say something is "right" or "good," she will offer these compliments, *undissolved* in her statements. These compliments are undissolved like surplus sugar that cannot find a place in the sweet tea solution, and so stays in the glass, tends toward the bottom, and renders saccharine that last sip. When she is challenged, or maybe as unsolicited, she offers an explanation of the undissolved quality of certain of her doubts by saying, "I don't mean capital 'R' right," or "'good' means 'I like it.'"

This is not to say that if we were to add a new element to the solution, that the solution could not accept more doubt. Indeed, the ironist recognizes

that in the past when she wasn't an ironist she probably had doubts, but something changed and her capacity for doubt was increased. What changed though, was that she accepted into her final vocabulary certain new, irony-potential-increasing terms that allowed her doubt to be more radical, more thorough. This does not offer a counter-example to Rorty's condition, but merely elaborates it, since once the new doubt-dissolution-increasing element is *added* to the ironist's final vocabulary it becomes part of it, and is not seen as dissolving *from without*.

The third condition for who will be ironic is an odd one. It suggests that *if* an ironist is inclined to act a certain way (theorize), *to whatever degree* she is disposed to act that way she does so as a nominalist and an historicist.

Insofar as [the ironist] philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old. (CIS, 73)

Clearly, the ironist is not *expected* to philosophize. In fact we will soon see that to whatever degree the ironist does philosophize or theorize⁴ she fails her nominalism, and so to that degree is not ironic. "Nominalist and historicist" is how Rorty re-describes the ironist approach to theorizing. (CIS, 74) Describing the ironist as nominalist and historicist are just other ways of saying that she is inclined to accept the contingency claims offered in the first part of the book.

⁴ Rorty will choose to use "theorize" with connection to ironist attempts at philosophy instead of "philosophize" for its "big picture" connotations. (CIS, 96)

The ironist...is a nominalist and a historicist. She thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence. So she thinks that the occurrence of a term like "just" or "scientific" or "rational" in the final vocabulary of the day is no reason to think that Socratic inquiry into the essence of justice or science or rationality will take one much beyond the language games of one's time. (CIS, 74, 75)

Although Rorty does not separate the terms "nominalism" and "historicism," nor does he explain his use of them, we can offer some interpretive suggestions. By "nominalism", Rorty means to bring out the fact that there are no essences to be found out and expressed by language. Nominalism can be taken as a positive expression of anti-essentialism. And by "historicism" he means to remind us of the contingency of *our* language, that we would speak differently and decide truth claims in different ways if we were the linguistic products of a different time and place.

We may appreciate the full sense of what Rorty intends when he says that the ironist "does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself" if we again invoke Rorty's notion of the linguistic self. Clearly, if we accept the notion of the self as an "incarnated vocabulary," a set of "sentential dispositions," we easily understand *why* the ironist does not see her vocabulary as "in touch with a power not herself," and why she has nominalist and historicist habits of theorizing -- her vocabulary is herself, and her efforts toward self-recreation have dethroned more objective criteria for justification. Further, she (in the form of her vocabulary) is not in touch with a power (the adjudicating power of the world) not herself. Vocabularies (especially home-made ones) are limited to deciding

matters by reference only to themselves. Does this sound solipsistic? Is that bad?

It is within the context of explaining why the ironist is, and what it means for her to be, nominalist and historicist that Rorty makes the statement that I have repeated and invoked so often in my explication of the linguistically constituted self.

The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. (CIS, 75)

Because the ironist sees the self as linguistically constituted, she is inclined to worry about what sort of language she is, but also in what ways she can meaningfully express her anxiety.

...she cannot give a criterion of wrongness. So, the more she is driven to articulate her situation in philosophical terms, the more she reminds herself of her rootlessness by constantly using terms like "Weltanschauung," "perspective," "dialectic," "conceptual framework," "historical epoch," "language game," "redescription," "vocabulary," and "irony." (CIS, 75)

Now, we may rightly wonder, since Rorty talks so extensively (and it's only going to get longer) regarding the ironist who is inclined to philosophize, what to make of ironists who are not so inclined.

The ironist theorist and the ironist novelist

Rorty offers two generic features of the ironist which he designates as a generic *trait* and a generic *task*. He says, first, that all ironists recognize their self-sufficiency.

The generic *trait* of ironists is that they do not hope to have their doubts about their final vocabularies settled by something larger than themselves. (CIS, 97 -- my emphasis)

And although we might read this trait as being somehow a sort of resignation, when considered in the overall context of the ironic standpoint there is nothing pernicious about the hopelessness of having to be self-defining and self-reliant. Because although hopelessness is the recognition of contingency negatively expressed -- the negation of necessary structures of human existence -- it is this negation that makes room for the more positive *affirmation* of contingency, self-recreation. This doubt, this recognition of contingency, is what provides the motivating term within the ironist's final vocabulary.

Rorty illustrates the thoroughness of this happy hopelessness:⁵ "...she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts." (CIS, 73) If we compare the two passages we understand just how thorough-going ironic hopelessness is. First (CIS, 73) he says what the *ironist's vocabulary* cannot do, which is to provide a language in

⁵It may seem odd that I use the at least *prima facie* paradoxical phrase "happy hopelessness" to describe the perspective of the ironist with regard to the contingency of her beliefs. The reason I use this language is that although I will speak of the ironist as "troubled," "worried," and "angst-ridden" with regard to the grounding of her beliefs, and whether she has (been chosen by) and chosen the "best" vocabulary, the ironist attitude toward that uncertainty is one of contentment. The ironist is happily hopeless and excitedly worried. She pursues and embraces the angst that gives her only "meta-stability."

which to answer her doubt, and next (CIS, 93) he says what *any other vocabulary* cannot do, which is again, to provide the means to answer her doubt. By "answer" I mean to throw into sharp relief the meanings of Rorty's words "underwrite" and "dissolve." Nothing can justify the doubt -- and so answer the doubt affirmatively, "yes, you are justified in doubting." But by the same token nothing can dissolve the doubt and so answer negatively, "no, there is nothing troubling here."⁶ The doubt of the ironist is groundless and without justification from within and without. But this is exactly what it means to recognize the contingency of our beliefs. It means the groundlessness, of *all* our beliefs, including this one about contingency of belief -- where "grounded" means in touch with a reality not oneself, and one's vocabulary.

In addition to the generic trait of recognizing their happy hopelessness, all ironists seek to match the criteria for success with themselves, but not in the traditional fashion of changing themselves to meet the standards as given them, but by transforming *the criteria* for what it is to be human into what it is to be themselves and to live for their own ends,

The generic *task* of the ironist is the one Coleridge recommended to the great and original poet: to create the taste by which he will be judged. (CIS, 97
-- my emphasis)

This imperative offered by Coleridge bears striking resemblance to the more negatively formulated description of the Bloomian strong poet's "anxiety of

⁶Compare Obi Wan Ken-obi's calm, but *forceful* assurance to the Storm Troopers on Tatooine that "these are not the 'droids you are looking for," and the resolution of the doubt that the Imperial henchmen felt and expressed in their hypnotic repetition of "these are not the 'droids we are looking for."

influence," and "horror of finding himself to be only a copy or a replica." (CIS, 24) found very early in the chapter on the contingency of selfhood.

The doubt described in the "generic trait" is doubt with regard to the over-riding validity of one or another way of speaking. The content of Coleridge's suggestion as expressed in Rorty's "generic task" is "doing to the past what the past tried to do to you," and successful taste-making is being able to say "thus I willed it." (CIS, 97) Although the description of the generic task offered above is rendered in the future tense, i.e. the ironist creates the taste by which he *will be* judged, as long as we remember Rorty's affliction with publicity we have no problem with the future tense of Coleridge's recommendation.

These generic ironic features of task and trait really add very little content to our previous discussion of the recognition of contingency as negatively and positively construed. All that we have added is the name "ironist," and the ironist's contentment with and embrace of the contingency of her beliefs and so of her own contingency. Rorty renders the ironist as one who recognizes and attempts to take interpretive control of his contingency, "[The ironist] is trying to get out from under an old final vocabulary and fashion one which will be all his own." (CIS, 97)

In chapter two Rorty called the recognition of contingency "freedom." Here he calls creating yourself through redescribing yourself "autonomy." I would like to suggest the distinction that we call the *negative* recognition of contingency "freedom" -- the recognition of contingency as an awareness of the *lack* of necessary ontological structures for humanity. The more *positive* active recognition and control of contingency, I suggest we call "autonomy." Although

Rorty doesn't make this distinction explicitly, he seems to employ it fairly consistently, and so it will at least make my meanings clearer, if not his.

It is autonomy that Rorty considers to be the goal of irony. In the introduction to the book, Rorty describes the teleological difference in mindset between his way of historicist thinking and more ahistorical, essentialist ways of thinking. "It has helped us substitute Freedom for Truth as the goal of thinking and of social progress." (CIS, xiii) If we understand freedom as recognizing the fruitlessness of essentialist ways of thinking and autonomy as the personal and positive expression of this freedom as an attempt to remake ourselves in our own image, we can see ironists as the heroes of this historicist age. To whatever degree the free individual feels the importance of and is motivated by her own freedom, to that degree she strives for autonomy and is ironic. (CIS, 97)

We will certainly see other differences between irony and simple and intellectual admission of one's nominalism and historicism, but it seems that the phenomenological difference is how and how strongly one reacts to the recognition of contingency. One way of discerning the ironist from others with similar views is how badly they want to become autonomous, and why. Several times throughout the book he mentions that the ironist is motivated by a fear of being someone else's product--a fear experienced as dire.

In this Nietzschean view, the impulse to think, to inquire, to reweave oneself ever more thoroughly, is not wonder but terror. It is, once again, Bloom's "horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica." The wonder in which Aristotle believed philosophy to begin was wonder at finding oneself in a world larger, stronger, nobler than oneself. The fear in which Bloom's poets begin is the fear that one

might end one's days in such a world, a world one never made, an inherited world. (CIS, 29)

He describes the ironist's anxiety over being who she is and accepting her final vocabulary as the first defining characteristic of the ironist. "She has radical and continuing doubts about the vocabulary she uses. (CIS, 73) By "continuing" here Rorty does not only mean that her doubts go theoretically unresolved but that the ironist experiences a daily burden. That doubt is not some passing, intellectual recognition that we are all the product of our environment. The ironist experiences something close to constant angst. "The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe..." (CIS, 75) Because the ironist's recognition of contingency is describable in crisis terminology, it makes sense that Rorty does not contemplate irony as a lifestyle to be encouraged and relished, but as an insidious self-undermining that ultimately acts as its own cure. How this happens will be made clear shortly.

The freedom that every ironist strives for is the disempowerment of those individuals or incarnated vocabularies who have hitherto served as authority figures. All ironists have this in common. This is what Rorty has in mind when he repeats Coleridge's injunction to create the taste by which you are judged. Rorty gives this charge content by saying that "the perfect life will be one which closes in the assurance that the last of his final vocabularies, at least, really was wholly *his*." (CIS, 97) In creating a vocabulary that itself adjudicates claims and offers justifications and praise and blame *and* which is self-certified as the self's own, the self has made itself and so been successful, and more...perfect.

Rorty offers two categories of ironists distinguishable by who plays the role of antecedent authority to be removed from the seat of power and replaced with the ironist himself. I began the last paragraph by describing autonomy as the "disempowerment of those individuals or incarnated vocabularies who have hitherto served as authority figures." It is based on whether the ironist sees himself as reacting against *particular* individuals, i.e. real people, or *universal or universalizable* vocabularies and ideas that Rorty distinguishes between the ironist novelist and the ironist theorist.

The specific difference which distinguishes the ironist *theorist* is simply that his past consists in a particular, rather narrowly confined, literary tradition - - roughly the Plato-Kant canon, and footnotes to that canon. What he is looking for is a redescription of that canon which will cause it to lose the power it has over him. (CIS, 97)

What the ironist theorist is distinguishable *from* is every other kind of ironist. Rorty only clearly identifies one other group of ironists, the ironist novelist.

But either way, whether there are two types of ironist, or a thousand, Rorty's main concern is with the ironist theorist and with what makes him different from the ironist novelist. It seems that Rorty's fascination with the ironist theorist may be interpreted as further evidence of the autobiographical nature of *CIS*, if we take Rorty to count himself among the ironist theorists (which I do), or as evidence that he counts himself as among the ironist theorists, if we accept the autobiographical nature of *CIS* (which I do).

The ironist theorist is to be distinguished from the ironist novelist based on the particular authorities from which he is wresting himself free and so rendering himself autonomous. As exemplars of the theorist Rorty considers

the pair of Nietzsche and Heidegger and of the novelist, Proust -- especially as the author of *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Rorty celebrates Proust's authorship of *Remembrances of Things Past* as the exemplary activity of the ironist novelist. (CIS, 101) Proust was aware of himself as an object subject to definition and critique by the people who populated his world, and Rorty projects onto Proust the universal starting point of the ironist: disgust with being defined by others and the desire for autonomy.

[Proust] wanted not to be merely the person these other people thought they knew him to be, not to be frozen in the frame of a photograph shot from another persons' perspective. He dreaded being, in Sartre's phrase, turned into a thing by the eye of the other. (CIS, 102)

Proust's success in achieving autonomy, and so in being ironic is tied with his ability to remove the authority figures in his life from their seats of power. For Proust, the authorities who held him in their sway were actual people, not "Zarathustra" or "Being," (maybe we can add "Rorty's ironist") but the bodied individuals whom he knew and met in his life.

As a crude way of blocking out the difference between Proust and Nietzsche we can note that Proust became who he was by reacting against and redescribing people - real live people whom he had met in the flesh - whereas Nietzsche reacted against and redescribed people he had met in books. (CIS, 100)

Proust manages this autonomy by showing himself that these people occupy their place of authority only contingently, and so can be removed. If the others who have been identifying and describing him can be rendered impotent by themselves being redescribed as only contingently influential, then freedom has been won.

Proust, too, was interested in power, but not in finding somebody larger than himself to incarnate or to celebrate. All he wanted was to get out from under finite powers by making their finitude evident. (CIS, 102)

The power Proust was interested in gaining was the redescriptive power of the autonomous. Nietzsche, as a theorist, always had something bigger in mind. And this is what marks the ironist theorist as distinct from the ironist novelist, and what marks him as inferior.

In a passage cited above, Rorty says that the theorist is identifiable by his reaction against the Plato-Kant canon, or European thinking, or the history of Being. These are particular examples of the "something bigger" with which the ironist theorist identifies himself. Rorty summarizes these all under the heading of the Plato-Kant canon -- probably because as much as he himself is a theorist it is against the Plato-Kant canon that he reacts. Now, remember that Rorty takes names of philosophers to be a kind of shorthand for the vocabularies they espoused rather than as the names of individual people, and although we have rehearsed this matter, it will not do to miss the point.

By the "Plato-Kant canon" and its "footnotes" Rorty means the *dialectically* or theoretically connected sequence from the earliest instantiation of the appearance/reality distinction in Plato through the Copernican revolution effected by Kant that began its incarnation in Hegel. He explains what it means to be theoretically connected by contrasting Nietzsche's canon of figures with Proust's random bunch of individuals.

What is important [the important difference between people and ideas] is that whereas the collection of people whom Proust met, who described him and whom he redescribed in his novel - parents,

servants, family friends, fellow students, duchesses, editors, lovers - is *just* a collection, just the people whom Proust happened to bump into. The vocabularies Nietzsche discusses, by contrast, are linked dialectically, related internally to one another. (CIS, 100)

Rorty uses necessity language to describe how the ironist theorist feels about the Plato-Kant canon. The ironist theorist appears to be powerless when considering what constitutes the canon against which she reacts. Specifically, Rorty contrasts the necessity that the theorist experiences with regard to the history of metaphysics with the way Proust reacts to the group of people that just happened to run into him during the course of his life. To say that the standpoints considered are experienced as dialectically related is to say not only that as a matter of fact they react one to another in order, but that to the ironist it feels as though they must.

...in the narratives of ironist theory, Plato *must* give way to Saint Paul, and Christianity to Enlightenment. A Kant *must* be followed by a Hegel, and a Hegel by a Marx. (CIS, 101)

It should be clear that Rorty does not mean to suggest that the figures and themes considered in the Plato-Kant tradition *must* be taken as necessary, but that as a matter of fact this is how the ironist theorist takes them. Further it is this very sort of interpretation that makes him a theorist instead of a novelist, it is for this reason that Rorty pronounces the theorist as incomplete in his nominalism, and so less of an ironist than the novelist. (CIS, 100)

Rorty only clearly identifies one type of ironist (the ironist novelist) other than the ironist theorist, and even if we count Derrida as his sole example of a third kind of ironist -- the ironist fantasist -- (and I will so count him), we can

only come up with this one more category. And this one is not strikingly different from the other two. The ironist fantasist has ties both to ironist theory, since this sort of fantasy is the *end product* of ironist theory, (CIS, 125) and to the ironist novelist, since the ironist fantasist treats figures in the metaphysical canon as *people* in their lucubrations. (CIS, 126) I will argue that Rorty's linguistic conception of the self precludes the inclusion of wildly other (non-linguistic) ways of self-recreation as forms of irony, and so any additional proliferation of forms of irony is greatly curtailed, if not entirely excluded.

Nothing "once and for all" -- The double-aspect problem of the ironist theorist

Rorty understands the connotations of *theoria* as suggesting "taking a large stretch of territory from a considerable distance." (CIS, 96) The large stretch of territory that the ironist theory approaches has several names: it is "the tradition of metaphysics," "the Plato-Kant canon," (CIS, 96) "history, Western man, metaphysics" (CIS, 101) etc. What it amounts to are the "classic attempts" of "the great metaphysicians to see everything steadily and see it whole." (CIS, 96) The ironist theorist as theorist has this history as the particular set of contingencies from which he emerges as a human individual. "What he looks back on is not things in general but a very special sort of person, writing a very special kind of book. The topic of ironist theory is metaphysical theory." (CIS, 96) But as ironist, she also has a desire to overcome that contingency by redescription. And so, Rorty identifies the ironist theorist as a self-recreating individual who counts the past, against whose authority he reacts, as "the books which have suggested that there might be

such a thing as an unironizable vocabulary, a vocabulary which could not be replaced by being redescribed." (CIS, 98)

It is not enough to say that the ironist theorist has metaphysics as his topic of interest. That would make every philosopher, strictly considered, an ironist theorist. No, the thing that distinguishes the ironist theorist from the rest of philosophy is that the ironist theorist looks to understand not just the history of metaphysics, but the very metaphysical urge that is responsible for it. The ironist theorist feels the pull of metaphysics, this is why the Plato-Kant canon and not the Aristotle-Newton-Heisenberg canon counts as the past from which she attempts to break. But the ironist's interest -- inasmuch as she is ironic and not metaphysical -- is an interest in understanding *that pull* itself.

Many people are perfectly happy being metaphysicians. Kant seemed especially so, and Aristotle projected his desire to know onto everyone. To hear Descartes go on about having removed himself from all distractions so that he has time to meditate (not to mention the way his heater seems to have excited him) one would have to have incredible redescriptive skills in order to render Descartes as anything but happily metaphysical. And whereas the metaphysician's project is to understand reality, the ironist's project is to understand the metaphysician in herself. And although the project of understanding the metaphysical urge is open to metaphysicians as well as to ironists, the metaphysician is not seeking to understand why we wish to philosophize in order to remove the desire; the ironist is.

So, since the theorist's past is constituted by the vocabularies of metaphysicians and since what it is to be ironic is to attempt autonomy, then, to be an ironist theorist is to attempt to get out from under the inherited

vocabularies of metaphysicians. The problem, however, is that in the ironist *theorist* the desire to be free expresses itself in the form of a grand redescription that makes sense of (explains, theorizes) the urge to theorize. The urge to be free of the metaphysical urge to theorize by explaining it is itself a metaphysical urge. For the theorist it is not enough to get *out of range* of the metaphysician, but he feels compelled to render their ammunition sterile, and so prevent anyone else being captured and ravished by the aggressive universalist.

...the problem of finitizing while exhibiting a knowledge of one's own finitude...is *the* problem of ironist theory. It is the problem of how to overcome authority without claiming authority. That problem is the ironist's counterpart to the metaphysicians' problem of bridging the gap between appearance and reality. (CIS, 105)

Rorty sets up a comparison between the ironist theorist and the metaphysical theorist. And although the parallel seems simple enough, there is a double meaning to the word "problem" that betrays that simplicity. The most obvious comparison between the ironist and the metaphysician has to do with the respective individuals' projects. The search for a solution to the *problem* of how to illuminate the relationship between the phenomenal and the real is the metaphysician's project. Anyone who searches for this connection participates in metaphysics. And the search for a theoretical solution to *the problem* of how to gain autonomy from those metaphysicians who have come before without accepting on their own behalf the trophy for producing the end of theorizing is the project of the ironist theorist.

But the word "problem" has another meaning besides the defining project of one's standpoint. "Problem" also means trouble. The desire to remove one's theoretical predecessors from power is a kind of illness, since the very intervention used against the past is the one that the past has given, that of trying to get to a higher vantage point from which to view things steadily and as a whole.

Because the theorist wants to see rather than to *rearrange*, to rise above rather than to manipulate, he has to worry about the so-called problem of self-reference - the problem of explaining his own unprecedented success at redescription in the terms of his own theory. (CIS, 104)

As long as we attempt to undo the past using the inherited theoretical vocabulary we are playing the past's game, and so failing Rorty's self-creation criteria of doing to the past what the past tried to do to us. Instead we are allowing the past to live on through us, all the while congratulating ourselves on redescribing them in a way that prevents re-redescription. This is the sort of personal challenge that Rorty admits early on in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.

The difficulty faced by a philosopher who, like myself, is sympathetic to this suggestion - one who thinks of himself as auxiliary to the poet rather than to the physicist - is to avoid hinting that this suggestion gets something right, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things really are. (CIS, 8)

It is as theoretical therapy for Richard Rorty that I read *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. By writing a book about irony, he is trying to admit and understand his own urge to theorize in order to be rid of it.

And so to find a way out of the theoretical loop is the issue for the ironist.⁷ Again "issue" is to be taken in both senses of that word -- "issue" as intellectual and as therapeutic concern. The ironist theorist wishes to make intellectual sense of the issue, and she wishes to be rid of the urge to make sense of it. This tension is not conceived as a permanent fixture of the individual's redescription -- not as the concern and project for an entire life -- but is intended to be a kind of therapy that some day will end. "What he is looking for is a redescription of that canon which will cause it to lose the power it has over him - to break the spell cast by reading the books which made up that canon." (CIS, 97) We might say the ironist theorist is also an ironist self-therapist.

The ironist theorist is not happy about his theoretical penchant. What he does, then, is to turn his urge against itself. He theorizes about theorizing. Ironist theory is not a lifestyle to be embraced, once and for all, nor is it a standpoint to be rested in comfortably, and this is why it does not itself encourage its own theory, a theory of irony, as Rorty noticed at the top of this chapter. Once the ironist understands what she needs to understand in order to

⁷Hopefully the reader has by now noticed the tension within my description of Rorty between his status as an ironist theorist and an ironist fantasist. I have intimated, just a couple of pages ago, that Rorty's project sometimes appears to be to rid the world of metaphysics. But this task seems obviously universal in scope, whereas my reading of Rorty is that he is desperately trying to prove himself to be concerned only with finitizing his own life's authorities. Most of the time Rorty seems to be on the road to ironist fantasizing, but as I understand ironist theorizing as coming before ironist fantasizing, to be on the road to ironist fantasizing *is* just to be an ironist theorist. Although Rorty seems to shift back and forth (and so, does my characterization), I take it that writing *Contingency, irony and solidarity* was his (ironic) attempt at ironist theorizing, and so his "theoretical therapy."

theorize about theorizing, she has exorcised the demon (or maybe she sees the ontological split pea soup that she has been spewing for what it is) and cannot anymore be motivated to bother. Anyone who produces a theory of irony is not free of the urge to theorize and so, is not himself fully ironic.

The goal of ironist theory is to understand the metaphysical urge, the urge to theorize, so well that one becomes entirely free of it. Ironist theory is thus a ladder which is to be thrown away as soon as one has figured out what it was that drove one's predecessors to theorize. (CIS, 96-97)

There is no need for the ironist to consider the pros and cons of theorizing.

There is no need for the ironist theorist to scold herself for her desire to examine the bigger picture from further away. Irony as theory is an all-consuming fire that burns away at the metaphysical urge and in so doing realizes that what has been consumed was the fire itself, the ironist's passion for theory. Theorizing about one's own urge to theorize is the poison and the cure in one. Once the theory is gone, all that is left is the irony as residual autonomy.

Put in a different way, irony only serves possibility, and never actuality. The ironist, *qua* ironist, does not consider what she *is* in terms of her actuality as an expression of and clue for understanding the necessary ground for Being or Humanity but only *how free she can become* to consider new possibilities for becoming. All the while, the ironist, *qua* theorist, considers the conditions or ground for what will count or account for such and so actuality. It is the ironist theorist's goal, *qua* theorist, to force, by the power of description, her own redescription, which she gains *qua* ironist, on all past, future and present powers and potential powers. She tries to bracket not only all that was or is,

but all that could possibly be, and not only for herself but for everyone else as well. Rorty describes the tension that the ironist theorist feels between her self-redescriptive proliferation of possibility and her theoretical service of actuality.

An ironist theorist is caught in a dilemma between saying he has actualized the last possibility left open and saying that he has created not just a new actuality but new possibilities. The demands of theory require him to say the former, the demands of self-creation require him to say the latter. (CIS, 108)

This tension between the possibility of irony and the actuality of theory is one way of offering *the problem of ironist theory*.

Sublimity vs. beauty

As usual, Rorty offers another way of characterizing the problem of ironist theorizing. He summarizes the ironist theorist's *double problem*, his attempt to *affiliate himself* with something larger if only to rearrange it, and his *conflict of interest* in serving both possibility and actuality all with the search for *sublimity*. He contrasts the search for public, lasting, unre-describable *sublimity* with the creation of personal, finite, re-describable *beauty*. The less theoretically one successfully pursues self-creation, the more she approaches beauty. The less personally one searches vainly for the unironizable theory of self-recreation, the more he seeks sublimity.

The double problem is represented in terms of the pursuit of the sublime by identifying this penchant with the theoretical urge.

To try for the sublime is to try not just to create the taste by which one judges oneself, but to make it impossible for anybody else to judge one by any other taste. (CIS, 106)

The reasoning seems to be that if you can account for every *possible* account that might be given for *your actuality*, you have actualized more than yourself, and your own new possibilities, but also you have, in principle, *actualized all possible actualities as well*. This attempt for a grand redescription, one which deals in Grand Characters, and which pre-figures and so renders impotent all future redescriptions, is what Rorty dubs the pursuit of *sublimity* and is one more rendition of the problem of ironist theorizing.

The figures I am using as paradigms of ironist theorizing...have in common the idea that something (history, Western man, metaphysics - something large enough to have a destiny) has exhausted its possibilities. So now all things must be made new. They are not interested only in making themselves new. They also want to make this big thing new; their own autonomy will be a spin-off from this larger newness. They want the sublime and ineffable, not just the beautiful and novel - something incommensurable with the past, not simply the past recaptured through rearrangement and redescription. They want not just the effable and relative beauty of rearrangement but the ineffable and absolute sublimity of the Wholly Other; they want Total Revolution. (CIS, 101)

This movement towards the sublime is what caused Hegel, Heidegger and Nietzsche to ultimately fail as ironists. They wanted to close the gap between themselves and something bigger. They saw themselves as reaching out of their contingency, beyond their vocabulary and toward the eternal, permanent, infinite even if only to destroy it. To the degree that they reached out beyond themselves to rearrange once and for all, the wholly other -- to that degree they were philosophers stricken with the metaphysical urge to theorize.

By contrast [with beauty], sublimity is neither transitory, relational, reactive, nor finite. The ironist

theorist, unlike the ironist novelist, is continually tempted to try for sublimity, not just beauty. That is why he is continually tempted to relapse into metaphysics, to try for one big hidden reality rather than for a pattern among appearances - to hint at the existence of somebody larger than himself called "Europe" or "History" or "Being" whom he incarnates. The sublime is not a synthesis of a manifold, and so it cannot be attained by redescription of a series of temporal encounters. To try for the sublime is to try to make a pattern out of the entire realm of possibility, not just of some little, contingent, actualities. (CIS, 105)

Beauty is what sublimity is not, it is the synthesis of a manifold perceived as a synthesis of many little things, not the reclamation of some big something from the error of vicissitude.

The beautiful fantasy

The very thing that makes Derrida an ironist, but not a theorist, is his interest in the beautiful and not the sublime. Whereas the pursuit of the sublime is ironist theorizing, and the ironist novelist is one example of the pursuit of the beautiful, another is ironist fantasy. So, now we have a third instantiated form of irony to go along with the ironist theorist and novelist. But it is wrong to think of fantasy as the third leg of an ironist triangle. The fantasist is not distinguishable from the ironist theorist and the ironist novelist as they are distinguishable from one another, on the grounds of the *respective objects* of their rearranging, since the ironist novelist shares a past (and so shares objects of redescription) with the ironist theorist. And the ironist's past is the object of rearrangement. But neither is the ironist fantasist distinguishable from both by *the scope* of his redescriptive endeavor, since he, like the novelist wishes to

rearrange the little things in his own peculiar existence. The fantasist shares something with both, and so is best made sense of within the context of all three, but not as categorically equal to the other two. The fantasist shares scope with the novelist, but he shares a past with the ironist theorist. In fact, since the fantasist rearranges the particular things of his own life, and since the particular things of his own life make up the grand history of theory against which the theorist rails, the fantasist seems to be who the ironist theorist turns into once he has undergone the therapeutic movement of his own ironist theorizing described above.

Once the purification of ironist theory has done its own self-recreation, all that is left is the autonomy that was gained by the ironic movement in the ironist theorist. That freedom now, rather than expressing itself and struggling for autonomy in theory against previous philosophers and philosophies as *ideas*, exists as redescription of philosophers as the old friends (and enemies) whom one has long known. He no longer sees former philosophers as ideas dialectically linked and in need of final redescription. Whereas Nietzsche, Hegel and the earlier Heidegger are Rorty's examples of the theorist, and Proust is his example of the novelist, the later Jaques Derrida is Rorty's paradigm of what it is to be a fantasist. The freedom that once struggled against itself as theory now comfortably exists as fantasy. But this fantasy is not fantasy about just anything, the ironist fantasist has his *background* -- his relevant past -- in ironist theorizing, and so his fantasies are populated by the philosophers who used to *loom so large* back when he was a theorist.

The later Derrida privatizes his philosophical thinking, and thereby breaks down the tension between ironism and theorizing. He simply drops theory - the

attempt to see his predecessors steadily and whole -
in favor of fantasizing about those predecessors.
(CIS, 125)

And although the ironist fantasist is *more like* the ironist novelist in that both appreciate the small, finite, particular and effable, the fantasist bears a special relationship to the theorist, in that from the ashes of one comes the other. When theory has done its self-recreative therapy it changes not only the theorist, and makes him humbler, but it also shrinks the objects of the theorizing and leaves them as privately significant as any flesh and blood individual one might meet on the avenue. It is through fantasy that the theorist solves the *problem* of ironist theorist.

The problem is solved, but not in the theoretical sense. It still is no more clear how to finitize one's predecessors without providing the means of one's own finitization than how to make a square circle, or solve Russell's paradox, or prove the existence or non-existence of God. But it is no longer more interesting than these projects either. So although the double-aspect, self-referential problem of the ironist theorist is no closer to being resolved *intellectually*, it has been resolved personally and practically -- in terms of the second meaning of problem, not as an intellectual puzzle, but as an issue suitable for therapy. The ironist theorist is *in* ironic therapy, trying to find a way out of the self-referential paradox. The ironist fantasist has gone through therapy and is rid of her *concern* for the problem.

...Such fantasizing is, in my view, the end product of ironist theorizing. Falling back on private fantasy is the only solution to the self-referential problem which such theorizing encounters, the problem of how to distance one's predecessors without doing exactly what one has repudiated them for doing. (CIS, 125)

As one example of what it is to be an ironist fantasist, consider the person of Richard Rorty playing at being philosophical author. We will consider Rorty's own exemplar of fantasist behavior, Jacques Derrida, later.

Rorty as redecriber, the rest of us as redescrined

Having discussed what it is to be human, and what it is to be a self-creative human, the obvious, although queer, thing to notice regarding ironism generally is that only intellectuals can be ironically self-creative.

Remember that Rorty defined intellectuals as "just a special case" a particular kind of human, "one who does with marks or noises what other people do with their spouses and children." (CIS, 37) What the intellectual does with "words or visual or musical forms" and everyone else does "with their spouses and children, their fellow workers...etc." is to be self-creative, to manage to say "thus I willed it." (CIS, 36, 37)

So far there is nothing in this to give us pause. Surely, and on anyone's view, not everyone would have to be creative in the same way. Some people, intellectuals, define and redefine themselves by their scratchings, etchings and musings. Other people, people who are not intellectuals, make themselves by their goings, happenings, lovings and longings. By these various human endeavors, humans make and remake themselves. There is nothing exclusive in Rorty's view, everyone has her own way of making herself human, or does she? Remember, Rorty considers beings to be made human by language and to be made particular kinds of humans by particular languages. And so in order to count these non-intellectuals as human, we must insist that they have been given and use a language.

This matter is only mildly problematic. Some may balk at the inference that those beings who have human morphology and origins but who don't use language in any clear way are not human. But some may not. Personally, I'm not sure what this sort of being might be like, but I don't think that they are *uncontroversially* human.

What is uncontroversial though, is that Rorty insists that all humans use symbols to define themselves and all self-creative individuals use symbols to engage in their acts of self-creativity. It betrays either a spirit of exclusion, or a lack of realism to say that these individuals cannot be self-creative *unless* they employ language to do it, and that everyone who is self-creative does so as an act of *significance*. And although Rorty isn't *overly* obvious regarding his view that whenever humans remake themselves, they do it by employing symbols, we have already noticed and it is clear that this is the case.

For example, within the section on the contingency of selfhood the content that Rorty gives to self-creativity is this.

By seeing every human being as consciously or unconsciously acting out an idiosyncratic fantasy, we can see the distinctively human, as opposed to animal, portion of each human life as the use *for symbolic purposes* of every particular person, object, situation, event and word encountered in later life. This process amounts to redescribing them, thereby saying of them all, "Thus I willed it." (CIS, 37 -- my emphasis)

It is not clear to me that everyone who counts as human is mentally (consciously or unconsciously) manipulating the events, objects and people in their lives, *as representatives of anything*, themselves or something else. I can agree that we people who spend lots of time with books start to see the world

and our experiences in it as *meaning something other* than what they are, even if the other that they *mean* is something very close to what they would mean as uninterpreted. If this tendency toward hyperinterpretation is not pathological, it at least does not seem to account for the wide range of phenomena that should count as *human* experience.

What I mean is this. I live in an apartment complex. And although the complex policy insists that no one maintain his vehicle in the common parking areas, at least one person does. There is a guy who owns a nice beige flare-side pick-up, and who tinkers with it every day. And every day I am tempted to make the observation, that "it ought to be running by now," apparently because *my truck*, although I like it fine, doesn't seem to hold the same centrality in my self-description as his truck does for his. I project onto him, because I read too much Rorty, that he sees his truck as a term in his final vocabulary. I have it that his truck helps him individuate himself from his fellow humans, and that his truck means something like "freedom" or "self-expression." It kind of gives new meaning to *auto-nomy*. I guess (I describe myself as "too chicken or too respectful to actually ask him") that if I were to suggest any of this, if I were to say "what does your truck symbolize, or mean to you?" I suspect that he would say, "it's my *truck*, you know? It is what it is." To suggest as Rorty does that everyone recreates themselves either consciously symbolically or unconsciously symbolically strikes me as begging the question as to whether humans are linguistically constituted, and assumes that everyone either views himself as linguistically constituted or is wrong.

For Rorty human individuals are all language users, and those who do not conceive of and recreate themselves in that way either do not recreate

themselves, or they are *wrong* about what they are *really* doing when they think that they find independence in non-symbolic ways. Let's be clear, I am not suggesting that Rorty says that people who are not *intellectuals* (those who use words or art forms as means of self-expression and creation) cannot be self-recreative, Rorty seems to indicate that they can. What they cannot be is *self-consciously* recreative. Rorty is going to look at my neighbor and say that he is unknowingly using his truck as a symbol and working on it as an act of working on his own individuality. People who do not conceive of their everyday experiences as symbols to be interpretatively manipulated cannot be *self-consciously* self-creative. In other words they cannot be aware of their acts of redescription.

But self-consciousness in redescription seems to be necessary for increasing ironic distance between one's self and previous authority. We seem to need to know that we are increasing our freedom in order to enjoy it to the fullest degree, and so, in order to experience ironic autonomy, subjective freedom. When speaking of Proust and Nietzsche's self-recreation he emphasizes Nehamas' recognition of their self-consciousness in self-recreation.

He points out that they had in common not only the fact that they spent their lives replacing inherited with self-made contingencies, *but described themselves as doing exactly that.* (CIS, 98 -- my emphasis)

If self-consciousness is required for counting an individual as ironic in a Rortean sense, there is likely to be little damage done. If I were to tell my neighbor that this guy named Rorty wrote a book and denied to him and his truck any ironic status, I don't think his feelings would be hurt. He would either not care, or

would not agree, or would not understand. But let's say his feelings were hurt, and my neighbor went to Davis-Kidd and bought a copy of *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. Let's say that he read, and made sense of the book. Let's even stipulate that he enjoyed it and found himself to be one of those people who "take naturally to the line of thought developed in the first two chapters of this book." (CIS, 74) Well then, there would still be no complaint, since at that point the fellow would pronounce himself "ironic" and "symbol manipulating," having savored Rorty's metaphor, and he would be right. Rorty would now call him an ironist, since he rearranges the little things in his life in an effort for self-recreation and does so self-consciously and symbolically. My neighbor would have been affected by Rorty's redescription of him, and would have come to see himself in the same way.

When I was in high school I was on the "morning announcements team." This meant that I would go to the school office while everyone else in the school was in homeroom, and I would read any school news to them over the P.A. system. I would read about awards and sporting events and I would read about organizational meeting times and places. Once, when reading an announcement that began "attention football players..." I took it upon myself to redescribe them for my own sake and for the amusement of anyone who thought of athletes in general and football players in particular as "dumb jocks." So not only did I read the announcement in my best animal-like dumb jock voice, but I read it *twice -- slowly --* with a caveat in the middle suggesting that they might not have understood this perfectly straight-forward announcement the first time. Well, needless to say the football players were none to happy with this...*at least the ones that figured it out for the insult it was.*

Jim Hawersat was on the football team, in my Honors British Literature class, and no dummy. When he came into class that day and began threatening behavior toward me I quickly launched into the following sort of reasoning. "Look, Jim, this really shouldn't be upsetting you. *No one's* feelings should be hurt. Those who understand the insult are obviously not the butt of the joke since they do not count as *dumb* jocks and should not be insulted. Those who didn't get the joke were the ones at whom it was aimed and can't be hurt, since they don't understand. It is the *perfect* harmless prank. Further, and clearly, the joke was not meant towards you since here you are threatening me as fully informed. See, no harm done?" Jim looked at me with an expression that I remember alternately as either clearly impressed or mildly disgusted. Whether he left me alone because he was overtaken by the clarity and force of my argument, or because he was tired of listening and decided that my having to be me was punishment enough, or because my girl-friend was pleading with him not to hurt such a "pathetic" and "weasley individual" I'll never know.

We might suggest that Rorty, by limiting the range of what counts as human to symbolically manipulative beings, may have been insulting someone or may have been wrong. Rorty himself deals with this issue in chapter four within the context of considering the question as to how well or poorly the ironist is suited for public life in general and liberalism in particular.

...there is at least a *prima facie* tension between the idea that social organization aims at human equality and the idea that human beings are simply incarnated vocabularies. (CIS, 88)

Rorty can envision a critique leveled against the ironist and focused on whether it is appropriate or even possible for an ironist to play a public role in liberal society. He notices that it seems odd for someone who holds the view that the self is nothing more than a bunch of attitudes toward propositions to be much of an advocate for "human rights," since to have rights, it would appear, depends upon or is at least historically linked to having a "human nature." The criticism is that thinking of the human self as a centerless web of beliefs does not provide the foundation for *common* courtesy, much less a common concern for maintaining a cruelty and humiliation free society. And while it seems clear that irony will advocate on behalf of making room for individuals to be self-recreation and aesthetically recreative, irony has little to say regarding the more "mundane" concerns of the common individual.

This sense that the connection between ironism and liberalism is very loose, and that between metaphysics and liberalism pretty tight, is what makes people distrust ironism in philosophy and aestheticism in literature as "elitist." (CIS, 89)

Rorty admits, that although more metaphysically laden world-views have been put to bad use sometimes, there was clearly a time for each that they did some good. With regard to irony and ironic ways of being, the same is not so clear.

...even when we are mindful of the use made of Marxism by gangs of thugs calling themselves "Marxist governments," the use made of Christianity by the Inquisition, and the use Gradgrind made of utilitarianism, we cannot mention Marxism, Christianity, or utilitarianism without respect. For there was a time when each served human liberty. It is not obvious that ironism ever has. (CIS, 89)

Rorty suggests that much of the anti-liberalism projected onto irony is a function of what irony is and where it may flourish. Irony is a reactive moment,

which is to say, it *by definition* rebels against and rejects whatever counts as the authority of the times. And since Irony can only thrive and express its existence publicly in a society *open* enough to tolerate it, then it is clear that irony most often and most obviously will find a voice in a liberal society. Irony is not, according to Rorty, anti-liberal. It is, though, anti-currency.

The ironist is the typical modern intellectual, and the only societies which give her the freedom to articulate her alienation are liberal ones. So it is tempting to infer that ironists are naturally antiliberal. (CIS, 89)

But having explained that irony is not anti-liberal *per se*, Rorty recognizes the destructive capacity in irony. He admits that irony can be hurtful when considered from the perspective of the individuals who hold the world-views and senses of self that the ironist unflatteringly redescribes.

But most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms - taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. (CIS, 89)

He likens the feeling of being redescribed by another to the hurt experienced by a child whose childhood fantasies are debunked by the older and "wiser." This sense of loss is expressed in mitigated fashion in the song lyric from Courtney Love's grunge rock group *Hole*, "I don't really miss God, but I sure miss Santa Claus." Rorty recognizes that in suggesting the contingency of everyone's final vocabulary there is a real risk for humiliation.

There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless. (CIS, 89)

Rorty sees that this form of humiliation is contained in potentiality within the relationship between his autonomy-seeking self-redescribing, symbol-manipulating, marks and noises-rearranging intellectual and other, more ordinary human creatures. "The same sort of thing sometimes happens to nonintellectuals in the presence of intellectuals." (CIS, 90)

Having noticed the hurt potential in his redescriptive self-creation -- the cost borne by the other who is redescribed -- Rorty offers two reasons that this shouldn't matter. One is something of a *tu quoque* sort of argument. The other is not only more interesting, but gives us a real insight as to how to read CIS. First, Rorty says that although irony does have this humiliation potential, so *does metaphysics*. The only difference is that whereas the ironist admits that her redescription has no priority over anyone else's, including those of the other person being redescribed and the metaphysician, the essentialist suggests that his position *is* privileged, that it comes closer to being in a right relationship with the way things are, and so is empowering, rather than weakening. Rorty suggests that the metaphysician is engaging in a kind of argumentative smoke screen, calling his inferential redescription "education" while the ironist, of all people, is much more straight-forward in her propagandist technique.

So why do ironists arouse *special* resentment?...Presumably the relevant difference is that to offer an argument in support of one's redescription amounts to telling the audience that they are being *educated*, rather than simply reprogrammed - that the Truth was already in them and merely needed to be drawn out into the light. (CIS, 90)

Rorty characterizes the ironist as more honest, and therefore less reassuring, about what our situation is, and what our options are. The ironist is clear that

the realm of free expression is limited to the space created by the recognition of our contingency. She is also clear that her redescrptions of these matters bear no special relationship with anything so large and comforting as "Truth" or "the World" or "the Way Things are."

When she claims that her redescription is better, she can not give the term "better" the reassuring weight the metaphysician gives it when he explicates it as "in better correspondence with reality." (CIS, 91)

Rorty's recommendation, then, is that the ironist may be a liberal, just not the kind of self-assured liberal that may call himself "dynamic" or "progressive" because he enjoys the blind courage of his convictions. (CIS, 91)

The second, and more pertinent, difference between the liberal ironist and the liberal metaphysician is that whereas the metaphysician looks to motivate public action by private conviction, the ironist recognizes a gulf between private redescription and public social concern. It is the ironist's disinterestedness in making public her private redescrptions of herself, and so of the other people that play a role in her self-narrative, that leaves the potential for humiliation unactualized.

For my private purposes, I may redscribe you and everyody else in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or possible suffering. My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business. (CIS, 91)

The part of her final vocabulary that is relevant to her public actions, though, she will share readily. And to the parts of other's private fantasies that pertain to increasing freedom, she will readily attend. This is what Rorty means when

he says that philosophy is a means of private perfection and politics is an arena for public concern.

For public purposes, it does not matter if everybody's final vocabulary is different, as long as there is enough overlap so that everybody has some words with which to express the desirability of entering into other people's fantasies as well as into one's own. (CIS, 92-93)

The overlap that Rorty hopes for, and the ironist liberal encourages, is in those terms that encourage room for self-exploration and recreation.

On [the ironist's] conception, human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one's world - the little things around which one has woven into one's final vocabulary - will not be destroyed. (CIS, 92)

Specifically, Rorty sees what all humans have in common is not a common nature, essence, some ontological structure nor even a common language but the feeling of being vulnerable.

[The ironist] thinks that what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but *just* susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans - humiliation. (CIS, 92)

It is regarding this specific matter where we need the overlap mentioned earlier in order to have a common project of suffering elimination. This shared project does not express his private ironism, however, but his liberality. The point is that inasmuch as the liberal ironist is *ironic*, she will keep her potentially humiliating redescriptions to herself.

Contingency, irony and solidarity as ironic fantasy

Having said all this, what lessons may we learn about Richard Rorty and what clues may we garner as to the best reading of his book? I began this discussion by mentioning a couple of examples of how redescrptions can humiliate the non-intellectual by not accounting for or belittling his final vocabulary which lacks self-conscious self-description as a term. I mentioned my neighbor and his truck and a high school experience. Both were situations where the people concerned were being ironically redescrbed, and so were in danger of being humiliated by the alternate redescrptions. In my earlier (and, I must admit, more metaphysically minded and attention greedy) high-school days I felt somehow compelled to share my redescrptions in a public forum. And even though my verbal *gymnastics* got me out of a pummeling (I admit I do not know whether it was out of respect for my form, or of the degree of difficulty of my routine) I am not sure whether I myself buy the argument I was selling. We can read Rorty as offering the same, but more thoroughly ironic, sort of justification.

The problem I intimated earlier regarding Rorty was that by redescrbing all humans as verbal beings, and by considering all acts of self-creation symbolic acts, and by counting the most interestingly self-creative people to be self-consciously redescrbingly ironic, Rorty shows a lack of respect for those many individuals who don't see things this way, who wouldn't choose to describe their disagreement with him in terms of "final vocabularies." These people neither see human nature as contingent nor see all acts of self-recreation as linguistic acts. I accused Rorty of humiliating in just the way that he admits irony is apt to.

Since the accusation against Rorty is the same one against which he defends irony in general, we might suspect that he would offer a similar apology for himself. I have spent considerable time rehearsing Rorty's argument that irony is not guilty of the charge of humiliation. The more interesting portion of that argument played on the public/private distinction in Rorty's final vocabulary. The usefulness of ironic redescription is limited to the sphere and project of private perfection. And since redescriptions which have no public forum cannot humiliate inasmuch as they remain unknown by those whom they redescribe, and since those who are ironic do not conceive of their redescriptions of others as humiliating, or at least no more humiliating than they are to themselves, then no -- or practically no -- humiliation occurs.

Rorty's defense could be that *Contingency, irony and solidarity* is an exercise in personal recreation and not to be taken as work for public projects of increasing solidarity, except as solidarity related to the private realm of irony. The gainsayer will respond that publishing one's fantasies seems less than private. Rorty may claim that although the forum for his book appears to be a public one, it is *practically* private, that he counts as within his own conventicles anyone intelligent, interested and odd enough to read, understand and apply his book. He mentions several times in the book that a certain section may appeal to some part of his readership, and that others will not. This gives the reader the feel that Rorty is somehow taking him into his confidence. Besides, philosophy works in general do not enjoy a wide readership, and there was no reason for him to think otherwise for this one. So Rorty might argue that *Contingency, irony and solidarity* is, not unlike Derrida's *Envois*, an example

and celebration of private fantasy to be used as encouragement toward the sort of recreation he speaks about.

So then, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. And for the one who hears, the book was written. And for the one who doesn't, there is no harm done. This is essentially the same argument that I offered to Jim Hawersat when I was in danger in high school. The message of the book betrays the literal content in such a way that the intelligent and sympathetic reader discovers *edification* and not *education* to be its outcome. Anyone able to read and understand the book and anyone inclined to make sympathetic application of the book will discover encoded in it an encouragement to apply it *by rejecting it*, not a demand for its literal interpretation and straight-forward acceptance.

This is how Rorty avoids, or himself prefigures and so accounts for the sort of criticism consistently offered against him, the one with which he explicitly deals in the chapter on "Proust, Nietzsche and Heidegger" and with which I dealt in a previous chapter -- that if we take Rorty (or any ironist) seriously we must ignore him. This criticism, although leveled by intelligent readers⁸ shows a lack of application ability or sympathy or both. It may be that the reader cannot apply the propositions offered within Rorty's text to this text itself. Some people can't avoid reading things for their self-referential opportunities and inconsistencies, and some people not only *can* avoid this sort of reading, but have a difficult (and usually unpleasant) time engaging it. Other people

⁸Although *Contingency, irony and solidarity* is thoroughly readable and lucid (these features along with its being short and bearing that nice picture of its author on the cover are among its most recommending qualities), a reader able to manage not only to perceive but to give expression to the self-referential problem must be well enough versed in matters intellectual to count as one.

manage very well to read things for their internal consistency and self-referentiality, but lack a certain kind of sympathy.

These latter sorts of people get so excited at apparent contradictions that once some inconsistencies are found, or --joy of joys!-- once the entire project appears to be self-undermining they are taking notes, scratching in margins and alerting publishers. These sorts of people have no patience to let the text come to them. They cannot be still and make room in their minds for new or special kinds of books or ideas. These sorts are constantly the aggressors, they treat the text as Elliot Ness (Kevin Costner) treated the prohibition gansters in *The Untouchables*, when he suggested "Gentlemen, let's take the war to them." These sorts of people we call "professional philosophers."

Rorty prefigures this issue as to how the writer relies upon the reader to interpret his work sympathetically within the context of admitting that although ironists and strong-poets strive for self-creation, the best that they can manage is a sort of marginal novelty -- a mode of self-recreation that is only largely parasitic upon normal discouse. But self-makers are not only dependent upon those whom they have read and been influenced by, but also upon those *who read them*.

Every poem, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, presupposes a lot of stage-setting in the culture, for the same reason that every sparkling metaphor requires a lot of stodgy literal talk to serve as its foil. Shifting from the written poem to the life-as-poem one may say that there can be no fully Nietzschean lives, lives which are pure action rather than reaction - no lives which are not largely parasitical on an un-described past and *dependent on the charity of as yet unborn generations*. (CIS, 42)

I may, at this point wish to mitigate my earlier claim that Rorty is *afflicted* with publicity. It is not that I want to take it back; if I did I would just go back and edit it out like I did that last sentence. It may be, though, that to admit that what I was calling his attempt to do to the future what the past tried to do to him, may be more holistically and sympathetically conceived as a call to us, his future readers, to read him sympathetically, and to apply his *lessons*, not only his *words*.

All of this fits nicely with my ongoing reading of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* as Rorty's self-recreative narrative employing his own half-formed new vocabulary in a personal attempt to understand and overcome the urge to theorize. When I read the book that way I see what Rorty is doing and encouraging us all to do is to find a way, our own way, to make ourselves new. He does not think of himself as pronouncing the essential structures of what it is to be human (linguistic), and to be self-recreatively human (ironic). He is pronouncing and demonstrating *his* final vocabulary. And *his* final vocabulary includes the terms "final vocabulary" and "redescription" and "narrative" and "irony."

Rorty's encouragement should not be construed to be "see the world as I see it, and create yourselves as I create myself," for to encourage such a thing would be to encourage us to *remake ourselves in the image of Richard Rorty*. And although I have asserted that he is afflicted with publicity and would like for us to follow his lead, the lead he seems to wish for us to follow is toward self-recreativity, and not a blind acceptance of *his* way of accomplishing the goal. This is at least the only meaningful use to which I can put his book, and so I find this interpretation most useful and interesting. And because I have come

under the influence of the aesthete and the pragmatist, I find these two criteria for interpretive worth most compelling.

If it seems that Rorty has managed to do what he keeps saying is impossible and problematic to attempt, that he has accounted for all possible ways of recreating oneself, since the human self is linguistically-construed, and since he is encouraging us all to find our own manner of self-becoming, then we have not missed the point, but the edification. The *content* of Rorty's book is clearly that the self is linguistically construed, and that the self-creative individual is the one who uses language (e.g. marks, noises, drives home, sports teams) to remake himself in his own image and as his own judge. But the *encouragement* of Rorty's book, an encouragement offered not by propositions, but by his own example, is that we might find a way to be in the world unique to ourselves and so make ourselves unique. But this requires more than taking Rorty's word for what it is to be human; we cannot start with his linguistic notion of the self, and end with a unique individual, since we would have to accept most of *his* final vocabulary as final in ours in order to remake ourselves linguistically.

In order to be self-creative we must realize our own final vocabulary, and that final vocabulary cannot have Rorty's "final vocabulary" as one of its central terms. Indeed, to attempt a *linguistic* self-creation at all is to, to some degree, play Rorty's game. Now, clearly some of us are indeed intellectuals in his sense of someone who gains his sense of self mainly or largely by the manipulation of symbols. And for us, any self-creation will involve crafty rearrangements of words and words and *words* and words and ~~words~~ and ♦◻◻◻♦. To be self-creative we will have to be craftier than that. Some of us

will have to find a way to involve language just as we have to find a way to involve our lovers, pets, hobbies, friends, friend's lovers and pets, muddy fields, marble table-tops, legos, richard rortys and yips and yaps. But some of us won't. In the following section on camp, I hope to indicate an alternative manner of being self-referentially and self-consciously self-creative without, in Rorty's language, including the linguistically constituted self as a term in one's final vocabulary.

The real function of Rorty's book is to encourage autonomy, freedom, subjectivity, personal expression, independence or whatever you want to call it. Not only does he say this this throughout, but reading the book as an example of freedom and about freedom is freeing. The downside of Rorty's conception of irony is the same downside of Kierkegaard's. Although both Rorty and Kierkegaard celebrate the vertigo, dizziness, lightheadedness, or *svimmelhed* of personal release from previous authority, neither seems motivated to write for that purpose. Both have other agendas. Rorty's is solidarity and Kierkegaard's is faith.

CHAPTER IV

MOTIVATING THE TENSION: RORTY, KIERKEGAARD, AND THE APPEARANCE/REALITY DISTINCTION

So far, I have allowed Rorty and Kierkegaard to develop their themes more or less independently. My purpose in doing so was complex. I did not wish to confuse matters too early by showing too many similarities and differences between the thinkers, nor did I wish to mingle or mitigate the associations built up around each. Although my overall purpose in dealing with Kierkegaard and Rorty is to show how thoroughly each relates to the other so as to motivate the tension in Rorty's thought between his anti-representationalism and his irony, to do so too early, it seems to me, may raise the tension only to let it grow slack before any interesting resolution could be offered. In other words I did not wish my tension to ease through the organic stretching of our limber minds.

Similarly, my thesis is that because the word "irony" has the representationalist associations that come with its attachment to the appearance/reality distinction, and since Rorty is anti-representationalist, he might like to avoid it. And since in order to succeed in my project I must establish that irony actually has these associations, I found it necessary to treat Kierkegaard thoroughly and separately so as to make the historical/conceptual ties between irony and representationalism strong and obvious independent of my discussion of Rorty. Since I have, if I am going to, established all the right

associations, and outlined all the theories/redescriptions, it is now time to get on with the tension-motivating comparisons. In this chapter I will concentrate on the tension between Rorty's anti-representationalism and his chosen characterization of self-recreation as irony. In the next chapter I will heighten the tension by pointing out some of the interpretive confusions that "irony" encourages.

In spite of some striking similarities between Rorty and Kierkegaard with regard to irony, there is at least one significant difference -- a difference that, if taken seriously, may give Rorty reason to rethink how he wishes to refer to his heroes. The important agreement that I need to illustrate here in order to motivate a certain tension in Rorty's notion of irony is that when considering irony both Kierkegaard and Rorty are talking about the same phenomenon and personal freedom. I will argue that not only does Kierkegaard engage those interested in irony, and account for all the moments that we take to be ironic (COI, 262), but he also, contra Rorty, effectively redescribes irony as having the fundamental structure of relying and playing upon a version of the appearance/reality distinction -- one too rich for Rorty's anti-representationalism to permit, but one that Rorty imports into his narrative sense of self when he talks of the self-referential behavior of the linguistically-constituted self as "irony."

For Rorty, irony is the search for autonomy enacted by the individual who recognizes her contingency. For Kierkegaard, irony is "infinite absolute negativity" historically situated in the subjective thinker. Although these two conceptions as definitions may seem to be worlds apart, the two taken as descriptions of the experiences of existing subjects describe the same thing.

The common ground between Rorty and Kierkegaard is not how they view reality, it is not even whether they believe in something like "reality," or whether they might be comfortable using that word. The common ground for Rorty and Kierkegaard is much more down to earth, *real* (taken in an utterly non-metaphysical way), and *significant* (taken in an utterly non-semiological way). The common concerns for Rorty and Kierkegaard do not include the transcendental conditions for being ironic. Rorty and Kierkegaard have a common interest in what it is like to be ironic and what irony is good for.

They each, however, resolve these concerns in a different way. Kierkegaard wants to understand irony to answer what it *is* to be ironic, and Rorty wishes to understand irony so as to get beyond such transcendental questions. Whereas Kierkegaard muddles through the phenomenal data in order to produce *the concept of irony*, Rorty celebrates the happy muddling in phenomenal data as *what it is to be* ironic. Although the two may not agree on anything else, that on which they will agree is *what counts as the phenomenal data*. Kierkegaard and Rorty agree as to which special events in the life of a person are ironic.

Now, that claim is itself more interesting than it may at first appear, since we are not talking about something so ordinarily construed as "what counts as an apple," or even "what counts as irony, ordinarily construed." Not only is "irony" a very special sort of thing (I mean nothing by the word "thing"), but both Rorty and Kierkegaard use the word to denote a very special sense of this very special thing. Throughout my discussion of Kierkegaard and Rorty and their respective notions of irony and personal freedom, even though I have stuck with the terms the authors used, employing variety only for its own sake, the

reader has surely already noticed a certain symmetry. Now I will try to make explicit how the very slightly different terminology in Rorty and Kierkegaard describe the same phenomena rather nicely when considering what it is like to be ironic.

Irony experience in both authors takes the form of the thinking individual's negative reaction to his or her past. The individual finds him/herself situated within a community to which he or she can no longer relate. The moment of irony occurs when the ironist breaks free from the control that his or her past has hitherto exercised upon him or her. Irony is the intensification of that negative freedom to the point of personal release. And although the thinkers' terminologies are different and although how they handle the theoretical portion of their analyses differs greatly, they are clearly talking about the same phenomena.

This similarity raises the issue of influence. While it may be the case that Kierkegaard has influenced Rorty with regard to irony, I know of no place where Rorty suggests as much. Intellectual genealogies become more and more important as we adopt a more Rortean approach to self-recreation, since self-recreation becomes, in Rorty, a matter of telling and re-telling the story of one's influences in a new and self-recreative way. And although I admit that I see connections between Rorty and Kierkegaard, my thesis demands as much, I also admit that the connections I see probably say more about me than about either Rorty or Kierkegaard. It may be that I see Rorty and Kierkegaard as Derrida sees Heidegger and Freud (CIS, 130), as two great thinkers whose paths never quite crossed, but whom I have made speak to one another. And although it would certainly seem appropriate for me to tell a story about how

Kierkegaard and Rorty have an indirect relationship through their both being in-laws with Heidegger, I see myself as telling a story more about myself, or about the sometimes magical word "irony," than about the person, even the figure, of Richard Rorty. The question about whether the concepts and associations involved in a study of irony interests me more than the one about Rorty and Kierkegaard's relationship.

Kierkegaard and Rorty and the phenomenon of irony

Kierkegaard describes irony as "infinite absolute negativity." By "negativity" he refers to the commitment-destroying activity of the subjectively free individual. He says that irony is negative in that it only negates, (COI, 278) which isn't particularly helpful until we invoke the example of Socrates. Kierkegaard describes negativity as the Socratic *standpoint*, indicating the depth of his negativity. Socrates' standpoint of negation is exemplified by his trust in and expression of his own authority as an individual, as opposed to the objective authority of the Greek state that counted as the era's defining authority, or the "given actuality of the day."

As we have previously seen, Kierkegaard characterizes the conflict between Socrates and the state as one of standards and linguistic practices. He says that from the perspective of the state Socrates was "predicateless," (COI, 205) which is to say that nothing could be said of him. But Socrates likewise could say nothing about or to the state. (Kierkegaard 1968, 77) Because it was the defining objective authority of his time, and because Socrates was himself subjective, Socrates could not say what was his to say in the voice of objectivity. This is what Kierkegaard means when he says that

Socrates displays an attitude of "indifferentism" toward things public and universal, and instead pursues the particular, solitary life of the uncommitted.

Kierkegaard identifies Socrates' subjectively negating moment with his deference to the personal authority of his daimonion and his disregard for the objective authority of the polis. By negation, Kierkegaard means the act of breaking ties with what is, or with what is actual. And *what is* varies.

The word 'actuality' must primarily be taken to mean historical actuality, that is to say, the actuality given at a certain time and under certain conditions. (COI, 276)

Kierkegaard recognizes that although what counts as the given actuality changes with the historical epoch, what does not change is that there is a given actuality -- there is something against which to react.

The ironist finds himself in a curious (Kierkegaard calls it "tragic") position. Because the given actuality of the day *is actual* it has authority. "The given actuality of a certain age is valid for a people and the individuals constituting that people." (COI, 277) Kierkegaard is not claiming that the actual has no authority, but that it has no authority over the ironist -- the ironist has lost his sense of the actual. He has adopted a posture of "indifferentism." "For the ironic subject the given actuality completely lost its validity; it has become for him an imperfect form which everywhere constrains." (COI, 278) Since the actual has authority it is *justified* in condemning the ironist. But, by the same token, since what is *is not* for the ironist, he is under no obligation (obligation is an experienced thing) to the actual. Here is the tragedy. The ironist has no choice whether to obey the authority of the actual since for him it *is not*, but the

given actuality of the day is justified in condemning the ironist for his disregard, since for it the ironist's authority is mere rebellion.

Hence one actuality here collided with another, and herein lies the deeply tragic aspect of world history. An individual may be world historically justified and at the same time without authority. Insofar as he is the latter he must become a sacrifice, while insofar as he is the former he must triumph. (COI, 277)

The reason that the justified¹ ironist is a sacrifice and not simply outlaw or apostate is because, although he doesn't know it, his currently destructive activity will be justified (in a World Historical sense -- *is already* justified). This is what Kierkegaard means by describing the conflict of ironist with culture as the collision of two *actualities*. One of the actualities is current, the given actuality of the day, but the other is an actuality which is yet to become authoritative. And although every actuality is pre-figured and ushered in by an ironist, not every ironist is exonerated by actuality. "[W]hether irony is justified or not can only be adjudicated by History." (COI, 280)

Kierkegaard requires that the ironist not know whether he will one day be justified. This is what he means when he says that "[irony] is absolute because it negates by virtue of a higher which is not. Irony establishes nothing, for that which is to be established *lies behind it*." (COI, 278 -- my emphasis) We get a picture of the ironist standing on the timeline of history along with everyone else, but whereas the others have their backs to the past and are moving forward, justified and defined by what has come before, the ironist has his back

¹For more on the paradoxical notion of justifying the apparently unjustifiable, and wholly negative ironist, see my chapter one, and Kierkegaard's chapter, "The Truth of Irony."

to the future and looks clearly, and scornfully at the past and the present. The ironist cannot see ahead, nor does he move forward (for him it is backward) with the crowd, since that which propels them is no motivation for him and he cannot see what lies ahead to be made of the space he clears. He is still and his stillness destroys.

The ironist's is not an active destruction that aggressively gains power over the previous authority, but the more threatening kind of calm that denies authority by disdain and neglect. When speaking of the Socratic manifestation, Kierkegaard describes irony as a sort of unmoving hazard that the ship of state manages to slam itself into.

...we have an irony carried through to its utmost limit,
an irony that allows the objective power of the state
to crush itself against the rock-like negativity of irony.
(COI, 221)

But when we talk of whether the ironist will be justified by an absolute which is not and from whence the ironist's power comes we are moving beyond the phenomena, and so away from Rorty.

Rorty prefigures the limit of his similarity with Kierkegaard in regard to the possibility of justification, when summarizing and criticizing what he calls the "existentialist' view of objectivity."

...objectivity should be seen as conformity to the
norms of justification (for assertions and for actions)
we find about us. Such conformity becomes dubious
and self-deceptive only when seen as something
more than this - namely as a way of obtaining
access to something which "grounds" current
practices of justification in something else. (PMN,
361)

As this applies to Kierkegaard we see that the limit of agreement between Rorty and Kierkegaard is with the phenomenal. Both thinkers consider objectivity to be a certain kind of conformity, Kierkegaard calls it "continuity" with the commonly accepted standards and linguistic practices of the day and identifies it with the possibility of predication within those practices. But where they part company is, again, once the *significance* or *meaning* of the subjective is to be divined. Rorty does not perform the existentialist inversion on the subject/object distinction:

This [to think that a ground is not in need of justification since it is accepted as a philosophical foundation] is self-deceptive not simply because of the general absurdity of ultimate justification's reposing upon the unjustifiable, but because of the more concrete absurdity of thinking that the vocabulary used by present science, morality, or whatever has some privileged attachment to reality which makes it *more* than just a further set of descriptions. (PMN, 361)

Whereas Rorty will say that attempting justification by something other than vocabularies is absurd owing to its being impossible to finally ground to reality, Kierkegaard will say that "subjectivity is truth," and that it is due to this absurdity that commitment is required. Kierkegaard wants to recommend subjectivity by equating it with the absolute. The issue between them is whether those principles accepted by both as "philosophical foundations" are anything more than one more set of linguistically embedded criteria, as Rorty would say, or whether they might apply universally as fundamental structures of being or truth or faith.

Let the following serve as a summary of Kierkegaard's conception of irony. The ironist reacts negatively (i.e. asserts his subjectivity) against the past (the given actuality of the day) and so increases his subjectivity and subjective freedom (self-hood and personal freedom).

Compare the phenomenon of Rortean irony with the Kierkegaardian moment described above. For the Rortean individual what is most significant is one's linguistic contingency. We are made human by language and made particular kinds of humans by having been given particular kinds of languages. This received language counts as the past against which she reacts. The ironist is the one who is able to look back on her contingency² and recognize it for what it is. According to Rorty, what the ironist's contingency *is*, especially the ironist's contingency as it includes the authority of the figures of the relevant past, is finite. With that recognition comes a feeling of negative freedom that mitigates the hold her past has on her. This is the negating activity of the Rortean ironist. And as in Kierkegaard, whether the ironist's "half-formed new vocabulary" will be made "true," -- whether her metaphors will be made literal -- this is a matter decided historically. Until the matter is decided in favor of the ironist, according to both thinkers, the ironist has much in common with those society dubs "insane." Kierkegaard says the ironist at first appears as a "madman."

²Here is an example of the tendency to use the Rortean notion of contingency as personalized. When I think of "my contingency" I think of my background, my relevant past and the time and chance occurrences that helped shape me, and over which I, as a self-recreative individual, must exercise the limited control of redescription.

The irony of Socrates makes use...among other things, of a form of speech which sounds in the first instance like the speech of a madman. (Kierkegaard 1968, 77)

And Rorty has it that the practitioner of abnormal discourse appears "kooky," until history decides the matter in his favor.

To say that someone is bringing in "subjective" considerations to a discussion where objectivity is wanted is, roughly, to say that he is bringing in considerations which the others think beside the point. If he presses these *outré* considerations, he is turning normal inquiry into abnormal discourse--he is being either "kooky" (if he loses his point) or "revolutionary" (if he gains it). For a consideration to be subjective, in this sense, is simply for it to be unfamiliar. (PMN, 339)

And whereas Kierkegaard describes the ironist who is as a matter of fact *not* justified by history as "unwarranted," (COI, 280) Rorty counts the potential visionary who turns out to be eccentric as "unlucky." (CIS, 29)

For both thinkers, irony is a thorough-going negativity that does not provide the ground for the ironist's own re-commitment. Rorty characterizes the ironist as constantly challenging her own commitments, even her commitment to her constant challenge. Inasmuch as she is an ironist she does not replace that contingency with one more ready-made conception of reality, but rather maintains her own tentatively-held self-derived, self-defining *and self-doubting* vocabulary.

I call people of this sort "ironists" because...their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies puts them in the position which Sartre called "meta-stable": never quite able to take themselves seriously... (CIS, 73-74)

and

[The ironist] has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered. (CIS, 73)

Kierkegaard has the ironist as someone who has cleared all commitments from his own life and whose constant doubt creeps into the lives of those around him, albeit less pervasively in others than it has in himself -- presumably because these doubts are not organically grown within the second-hand doubter.

In this way he freed the individual from every commitment, freed him in the same way that he himself was free. The others however, could not enjoy this freedom in ironic satisfaction as could Socrates, and it therefore developed in them desire and longing. Whereas his own standpoint culminates in himself, the same standpoint when assimilated into their consciousness is merely the condition for a new standpoint. (COI, 201)

Whereas the ironist disciplines him or herself from offering positive constructions once the clearing work of irony is done, others clear only so that they may build anew. Both Rorty and Kierkegaard describe the discipline involved in limiting oneself to the possible and avoiding the actual, Rorty identifies the temptation for embracing actuality as the problem of ironist theorizing and Kierkegaard calls the ironist's vain attempts to describe himself as an ironist as the ironist's "supreme thesis."

Kierkegaard's "supreme thesis" and Rorty's problem of ironist theorizing

Within the discussion of the self-referential problem facing the ironist theorist, we have already noticed in some detail Rorty's view regarding the relationship of the ironist to possibility and actuality. He considers the ironist *theorist* to be attempting the paradoxical actualization of the last of the currently available possibilities while expanding the realm of what is possible.

An ironist theorist is caught in a dilemma between saying he has actualized the last possibility left open and saying that he has created not just a new actuality but new possibilities. The demands of theory require him to say the former, the demands of self-creation require him to say the latter. (CIS, 108)

The insidious urge of the theorist seems to be to prefigure every *possible* account that might be given for *her actuality*, and so to actualize more than herself, and her own new possibilities, but also in principle provide for the *actualization of all possible actualities as well*. The advantage that the ironist novelist and fantasist have over the theorist is that they do not try for the sublimity involved in accounting for everything -- every possibility -- they only attempt to rearrange the little things. The novelist and fantasist try to maximize, but not actualize with any finality, their possibilities.

Kierkegaard's pure ironist, like Rorty's fantasist, recognizes the pitfalls of dealing in actualities. In fact, we have defined the paradigmatic Kierkegaardian ironist as one for whom all existing actualities have lost their validity, and one who has the self-discipline not to pursue the positivity of actuality, but only the negative freedom of possibility.

With irony the subject is negatively free. The actuality which shall give him content is not, hence he is free from the restraint in which the given

actuality binds him, yet negatively free and as such hovering, because there nothing is which binds him. It is this very freedom, this hovering, which gives the ironist a certain enthusiasm, for he becomes intoxicated as it were by the infinity of possibles; and should he require consolation for all that has passed away, then let him take refuge in the enormous reserves of the possible. But he does not surrender himself to this enthusiasm; on the contrary, it merely inspires and nourishes the enthusiasm for destruction already within him. (COI, 279)

Rorty apparently thinks of Kierkegaard as one of these negatively oriented thinkers -- here he calls them "edifying" -- who cannot be coaxed to build, who cannot be tempted to embrace actuality.³

...there are great philosophers who dread the thought that their vocabulary should ever be institutionalized, or that their writing might be seen as commensurable with the tradition...The later Wittgenstein and the later Heidegger (like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) are of the latter sort. Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments. Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms. They know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over. They are *intentionally* peripheral. Great systematic philosophers, like great scientists, build for eternity. Great edifying philosophers destroy for the sake of their own generation. Systematic philosophers want to put their subject on the secure path of a science. Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause - wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is *not* an accurate representation of what was already there, something

³This characterization is at least paradoxical, since Kierkegaard (at least the later Kierkegaard) saw himself as positively concerned, and even has a work entitled *Edifying Discourses*, which employs the word "edifying" (one of Rorty's favorite words to describe the *negatively* oriented thinker) to show his positivity.

which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained
and can barely be described. (PMN, 370)

For both thinkers the ironist must not give him or herself over to the positivity of construction that comes along with explaining how things are--*even or especially with regard to irony*. To offer such an account for Rorty is to offer a theory of irony, the last thing the ironist "wants or needs." And to offer such an account for Kierkegaard is to say something positive--the *first thing* an ironist cannot do. We might wonder why Rorty chooses the obviously constructive word "edifying." Within the context of the last few chapters of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty's project is to recommend hermeneutics over epistemology. Rorty's recommendation is that we construct community through hermeneutics, rather than systems through epistemology.

I describe positivity as the *first thing* an ironist *cannot do* following Kierkegaard's description of the ironist possessing the Idea as a *limit*. To pursue positivity in the form of a pronouncement regarding what it is to be ironic, and especially whether the speaker or writer himself is ironic is a form unavailable to the negatively oriented subjective thinker. To allow the awareness that one cannot offer such an idealized statement while remaining ironic to prevent one from being positive is what Kierkegaard means by "possessing the Idea as limit."

Although saying that the ironist possesses something so metaphysical as an Idea sounds awfully positive, it will help if we think of the ironic appreciation of the Idea as a limit as the kind of winsome appreciation that the rejected individual has for the organization from which he was denied membership or as

the kind of negative appreciation the jilted lover has for his beloved. The ironist knows the Idea inasmuch as he knows *he doesn't possess it*.

Thus we have in Socrates not the apparent but the actual zenith of irony, because Socrates was the first to arrive at the Idea of the good, the beautiful, and the true as a limit, that is, to arrive at ideal infinity in the form of possibility. (COI, 221)

Irony finds itself four-square in the realm of the phenomenal, the appearances, and in the service of the possible and not in reality or serving actuality or necessity.

As does Rorty, Kierkegaard recognizes the self-referential problem involved with pronouncing what it is to *be ironic*. He describes the realm of autonomy as a sort of kingdom over which the ironist reigns. That freedom is mitigated and self-rule ended when the ironist moves beyond the entirely negative, and pronounces positively.

The fact is that when irony is about to set forth a supreme thesis, it proceeds like every negative standpoint: it expresses something positive, and this is the seriousness of what it says. For irony nothing is an existent, it does as it pleases *ad libitum* with everything. But when it attempts to express this, it says something positive and with this its sovereignty is at an end...The difficulty here encountered is essentially that irony in a strict sense can never set forth a thesis, because irony is a determination of the being-for-himself subject, who, with perpetual agility, allows nothing to endure and because of this agility is unable to consolidate himself in the total view that he causes nothingness to exist...In the last analysis the ironist must always posit something, but what he posits in this way is nothingness. (COI, 286)

The pronouncement that Kierkegaard describes as the ironist's "supreme thesis" is his own positive expression that he is ironic and how exactly he is

ironic, that for him "nothing is an existent" and that he "does as he pleases" with the utmost liberty. With this straight-forward expression of what it is that the ironist does and is, the ironist removes himself from irony and irony from himself.

Rorty describes the limits of irony alternately as "the problem of ironist theorizing," the ironist theorist's search for "sublimity," the problem of "how to end the book," and the exhaustion of "possibility."

Because the theorist wants to see rather than to *rearrange*, to rise above rather than to manipulate, he has to worry about the so-called problem of self-reference - the problem of explaining his own unprecedented success at redescription in the terms of his own theory. He wants to make clear that because the realm of possibility is now exhausted, nobody can rise above him in the way in which he has risen above everyone else. There is, so to speak, no dialectical space left through which to rise; this is as far as thinking can go. (CIS, 104)

It is not hard to translate Rorty's description of what it is like to reach the upper limit of thinking in the self-referential problem of the ironist, into Kierkegaardian terms of "possessing the Idea as limit." Where Rorty would say that the ironist theorist *fails* as an ironist inasmuch as he attempts the positive construction of a theory of irony, or if not of irony then of something else, Kierkegaard says that the ironist succeeds as long as he maintains his negative status and does not pronounce what it is to be *anything*. And although Rorty certainly would have no truck with metaphysical "idea" talk as contained in Kierkegaard's formulation of the "Idea as limit," we can be assured that the two are talking about the same sort of experience -- the what's-it-like-to-be-ironic of irony, what it is like is to say "nothing" just when you want to say something most.

Kierkegaard and Rorty as ironists

Kierkegaard -- just as we have already discussed at length in a previous chapter with regard to Rorty -- seems to recognize the instability of *his own place* in the history of ironist theorizing. And although Kierkegaard is not so forthcoming as Rorty is when admitting that the issues regarding how much the ironist can say about his own irony, and how positively he can say it, apply not only to other ironists, but also to himself (CIS, 8), he still manages to make us wonder. We wonder whether Kierkegaard had his own writing in mind when he said of irony, "It is like a riddle and its solution possessed simultaneously." (COI, 265) It is an odd thing, but -- following his reasoning outlined above -- it is Kierkegaard's own silence as to his ironic status that encourages us to interpret him as an ironist.

Silence alone is not enough to make us wonder, or else everyone who *doesn't* claim his own irony would be candidates for it, but the writer *on* irony invites speculation anyway. And Kierkegaard is on record above as saying that the ironist cannot claim his own irony. Conversely, if the writer on irony denies his own irony, then we begin to wonder whether his denial of irony is itself ironic. The bottom line is that writing on irony invites ironic interpretation. These issues are nothing new. This kind of occasional interpretative problem is exactly the sort of thing that Kierkegaard addresses, and we have discussed, as one of the manifestations of oratorical irony (one of the less thorough-going, and less interesting forms of irony) in the chapter "For Orientation." Either way -- if he is not ironic we wonder why he doesn't make that clear: if he is ironic, our uncertainty because of his silence is the only interpretive clue we have -- we wonder.

Kierkegaard's overall project can be seen as ironic if we understand that he could not offer positive content, and that he clears the way for us to build our own irony. What "clearing the way" means is negating the given actuality of the day. What "the given actuality of the day" means is related to objectivity. It may seem as though objectivity and the given actuality of the day are synonymous since irony and subjectivity come awfully close to being synonyms and since they stand in similar negative relationships to actuality and objectivity respectively (COI, 260-ff, 190, 192, 280).

Although he consistently conflates actuality with objectivity, we have already noticed in the section on subjectivity that the two are, at least theoretically, distinguishable. If we separate actuality from objectivity -- and if we can't then there is little use in having two terms or of using them in different contexts (objectivity in the subjective/phenomenal realm and actuality in the historical/conceptual realm) -- then we see that irony is not one with subjectivity, but merely the negation of the given actuality of the day, *whatever that is*. For Socrates the given actuality was the dominance of the Greek state, and so his expression of irony was also his expression of subjectivity. For someone else, irony would express itself in some other way.

In this way, Kierkegaard's notion of irony accommodates itself to changes in the way actuality expresses itself historically. It may accommodate itself to Kierkegaard himself as ironist -- it may be that Kierkegaard as ironist is reacting against whatever counts for him as the given actuality of the day.

Someone might say that all of this is more speculative than even philosophers can stand, since Kierkegaard never quite claims irony for himself. But for him to make this claim would be for him to make his point positively --

to offer "the supreme thesis," -- something an ironist can never do. What the ironist can do and what Kierkegaard does do, however, is lead the reader up to the point of understanding, and then let *him* supply the moment of ironization in all its negative richness.

We might wonder then, if he were an ironist what would count as the given actuality for Kierkegaard?⁴ The easy answer is "Hegelian metaphysics." One reason, aside from it being obvious, that this is the "easy answer," is because it is a reading of Kierkegaard that has currency in the literature. One example of an author who argues for Kierkegaard's ironic undermining of Hegel in *The Concept of Irony* is Louis Mackey in *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard*. The following passage suggests just how we might try to motivate an ironic reading of Kierkegaard's thesis with Hegel playing the part of the given actuality.

The Concept of Irony, written in Hegelianese, is anti-Hegelian. But it is impossible to write Hegel's language without writing Hegel's philosophy. In order to attack Hegel, therefore, Kierkegaard's essay on irony has to undercut itself. Ironically. (Mackey 1986, 1)

Kierkegaard agrees with this assessment of how the ironist must proceed.

As the ironist does not have the new within his power, it might be asked how he destroys the old, and to this it must be answered: he destroys the given actuality by the given actuality itself. (COI, 279)

If, e.g., Kierkegaard were describing an ironic treatment of Hegel he would construe the ironist's behavior as engaging in a relation of opposition, where the

⁴ Here, as ever, I have in mind the early Kierkegaard -- the Kierkegaard of *The Concept of Irony*, and not the later Kierkegaard who seemed more compelled to react against the current state of Christendom than against Hegel.

ironist appears to accept the validity of the actuality (here Hegelian metaphysics and dialectic) with hyperbolic enthusiasm and an eye towards allowing the system that has for him lost its validity to implode on its own terms.

In all these instances it is the ironist's pleasure to seem ensnared by the same prejudice imprisoning the other person. (COI, 267)

Kierkegaard believes that if the ironist plays the game defined and validated by those advocates for the given actuality, their bloated sense of self-importance will blind them to the ruse and they will actually *help* the ironist in his mitigation of their power. The ironist, then, is...

...in relation to a superabundance of wisdom, to be so ignorant, so stupid, to be as much of a bumpkin as possible, yet always so amiable and eager to learn that the landlords of wisdom take pleasure in letting one poach on their well-stocked preserves. (COI, 267)

Now, although to the ironist the given actuality of the day must have lost its validity, not every ironist writes, speaks or otherwise operates ironically. This is the difference between the ironic standpoint and the ironic method. To proceed ironically, for Kierkegaard for example, he would not only maintain an entirely negative relationship to Hegel, but he would maintain this through a Hegelian method.

Because the subject regards actuality ironically, it does not follow that in asserting such a conception of actuality he also proceeds ironically...The more this occurs, however, so much the more certain and inevitable is the destruction of actuality, so much the greater the preponderance of the ironic subject over the actuality he wishes to destroy, and so much the greater is his freedom. In the utmost stillness he performs the same operation as the irony of the world. He allows the existent to exist though it has

no validity for him, yet he pretends that it has and under this guise leads it on towards certain dissolution. (COI, 281)

Although an ironist in standpoint need not *proceed* ironically, to whatever degree he is aware of his negative purposes and committed to them, to that degree he will strive for thorough irony, irony in method as well as perspective. This is what I meant when I said that in order to motivate the reading of *Concept of Irony* as an ironic reduction of Hegel I must be able to redescribe him as *thoroughly* ironic. Kierkegaard may be giving us a hint why *he* proceeds dialectically and yet negates Hegel every step of the way in the way he describes Socrates' constant irony.

It has been sufficiently shown in the preceding part of this essay how the irony of Socrates was constituted. The whole given actuality had lost its validity for him, and he had become estranged from the actuality of substantiality. This is the one aspect of irony: the other is that he employed irony even in destroying Hellenism. His behavior towards it was always ironical... (COI, 281)

Maybe we can say of Kierkegaard as he says of Socrates that "he employed irony even in destroying Hegelianism. His behavior towards it was always ironical." In case we missed some of the more theoretical clues, the ones that require us to do a bit of deduction in order to tease them out, Kierkegaard, again within the context of speaking of Socrates as that first moment of subjectivity, offers a much broader clue for interpreting himself as ironic.

In a much later age, however, after these Ideas have acquired their actuality, personality its absolute fullness, when subjectivity again seeks to isolate itself and infinite negativity once more exposes its abyss in order to engulf the actuality of this mind or

spirit, irony will then exhibit itself in an even more dangerous and precarious shape. (COI, 221)

The reason I needed to motivate the similarities in Rorty and Kierkegaard with regard to the impossibility of the positive ironic project, and how that applies to them as writers on irony, was to bring to light a certain tension in Rorty's ironic scheme. The tension we are after here is that between Rorty's anti-representationalism and his ironism.

Motivating the tension: Rorty and the appearance/reality distinction

Rorty and Kierkegaard both recognize the trouble involved in positive construction by and about ironists, but whereas Kierkegaard thinks of the appearance/reality distinction as necessary for successful standpoint irony, Rorty rejects the distinction and the representationalism that it invokes as a big part of the problem. One way that Rorty tries to retain and enhance the freedom that comes with separating oneself from the past is by retooling ourselves for the job of edifying philosophy or "hermeneutics" with its connection-making (PMN, 360) instead of *epistemology*, with its representationism and essentialism. (PMN, *passim*) In other words, Rorty suggests we drop our essentialism, representationalism, realism, etc. in favor of irony, therapy, fantasy, helpfulness and happiness.

There is a passage in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* where Rorty suggests that we let the ironist out of the self-referential loop he describes in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. In *Contingency, irony and solidarity* the problem of how to offer an unredescribable redescription is characterized as "the problem of ironist theorizing." In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* it is

referred to as the "paradox of the edifying philosopher" (PMN, 370) or the problem of "historicist theorizing." (PMN, 366) Rorty suggests that we deal with this issue, whatever its name, by dropping the project of epistemology in general and the appearance/reality distinction in particular. Further, Rorty's interaction with Frank Farrell is an example of Rorty's attempt at enacting the program suggested in the passage mentioned, i.e. letting the epistemological project fall into disuse. I will now turn to these matters in the hope of bringing the tension between Rorty's anti-epistemology/pro-hermeneutics and his ironism to bear.

Rorty consistently demonstrates his disdain for the epistemological project and its representationalist ways of construing the relationship between language or thought and the world and its essentialist ways of talking about the world. We may think of this generally as Rorty's anti-epistemological tendency, even though he himself would probably reject that language as perpetuating the epistemological argument with its appearance/reality, and subject/object distinctions, as well as its realism/anti-realism, and representationalism/anti-representationalism debates. The way that recommending *against* epistemology perpetuates the use of these distinctions and the attention to these debates is that it keeps the issues alive and makes them seem to be promising topics of concern by illustrating that Rorty, at least, finds the topics interesting, important and fruitful enough to keep on about it. Further, to *argue* against epistemology, in any traditional way, is to assume the criteria for success or failure in debate that have been established, in large part, thanks to epistemology.

Under the general rubric of anti-epistemology I count Rorty's disdain for such topics as "representationalism," "essentialism," "realism," "the correspondence theory of truth," etc. As examples of the sorts of dualisms that perpetuate these conversations I count "necessary/contingent," "scheme/content," and "appearance/reality." Now, if philosophy has managed anything in the last couple of thousands of years it has managed to show us that these topics and contrasts, though clearly related by the common project of epistemology, are not reducible to one issue. With this Rorty will not disagree. He describes the efforts of traditional philosophers as attempting to make finer and finer distinctions between concepts in order to resolve certain tensions which arise within the terminology. He doesn't seem to want to argue that philosophers are not good at making these distinctions, nor that representationalism and essentialism, for example, are indistinguishable. What he does wish to do is to cast doubt on the general worth of such terminological proliferations and the project of epistemology that motivates them.

In addition to the questions of "self-referentiality," "How I can end my book" (CIS, 104), and "ironist theorizing" (CIS, *passim*) one more way that Rorty describes the problem of historicist theorizing, and the way that best hints at its connection with anti-essentialism, is by describing the challenge faced by the "edifying philosopher." In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty distinguishes the edifying philosopher (even though he admits that that terminology is paradoxical) from the traditional, systematic philosopher by saying that whereas the systematic philosopher "centers in epistemology" edifying philosophy "takes its point of departure from suspicion about the

pretensions of epistemology." (PMN, 366) Rorty characterizes the edifying philosopher in this way:

They [edifying philosophers] have kept alive the historicist sense that this century's "superstition" was the last century's triumph of reason, as well as the relativist sense that the latest vocabulary, borrowed from the latest scientific achievement, may not express privileged representations of essences, but be just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described. (PMN, 367)

The problem for the edifying philosopher is that as a philosopher he is in the business of offering reasons, arguments, justifications for what he espouses. Also as a philosopher he is expected to offer these in the form of an answer to the question of how his new way of thinking will make more sense with reference to the way things are. But as edifier what he espouses will be "better" is that we give up trying to delineate our ideas' connection with anything like the essence of "the way things are."

The problem for an edifying philosopher is that qua philosopher he is in the business of offering arguments, whereas he would like simply to offer another set of terms, *without* saying that these terms are the new-found accurate representations of essences (e.g., of the essence of "philosophy" itself). (PMN, 370)

The careful reader will quickly see parallels between the "edifying philosopher," the "ironist theorist" and Kierkegaard's "subjective thinker." Each posture has its historicism: the "irony," the "edification" and the "subjectivity." Each posture has its approach to the absolute, the "theory," the "philosophy" and the "thinking." And each posture has the tension described by the conflict of the personal with the theoretical. But it is only here, in his discussion of the

problem of the edifying philosopher that Rorty resolves the tension *in terms of* dropping essentialist and representationalist approaches to thinking.

He sets up the problem in this way within the context of distinguishing the edifying revolutionary philosopher from the systematic revolutionary philosopher.

Whereas less pretentious revolutionaries can afford to have views on lots of things which their predecessors had views on, edifying philosophers have to decry the very notion of having a view, while avoiding having a view about having views. (PMN, 371)

Whereas most people stuck in this quandary might appeal to making finer and finer distinctions regarding the seemingly smaller matter of what it is to have a view, ultimately, Rorty wants to challenge what it is to do philosophy, and let that change our notion of what it is to have a view.

His suggestion is that we see edifying philosophers as "conversational partners" as an "alternative to seeing them as holding views on subjects of common concern." (PMN, 372) Instead of counting the paradigm of philosophy to be to seek for ways of representing reality that are closer and closer to the way things essentially are, Rorty suggests that we count the wisdom loved in philosophical circles as the "attempt to prevent conversation from degenerating into inquiry, into a research program." (PMN, 372) And the edifying philosopher's role in this matter is "never to end philosophy," but to "help prevent it from attaining the secure path of a science." (PMN, 372) In order to manage this, we must drop our notion of truth as in alignment with reality, and our notion of...

...correspondence for sentences as well as for thoughts, and see sentences as connected with other sentences rather than with the world. We have to see the term "corresponds to how things are" as an automatic compliment paid to successful normal discourse rather than as a relation to be studied and aspired to throughout the rest of discourse. (PMN, 372)

Clearly, just as Kierkegaard cannot claim his own irony, and Rorty's ironist cannot successfully argue for her vocabulary in the terminology of her predecessors, Rorty's edifying philosopher cannot argue that thinking of the relationship between thought or sentences and the world as one of representation *is not accurate*. If she is to be successful she must be so by some standard other than accuracy. She must develop a new standard, one she creates as she makes her metaphor literal.

Edifying philosophers, unlike revolutionary systematic philosophers, are those who are abnormal at this meta-level. They refuse to present themselves as having found out any objective truth (about, say, what philosophy is). They present themselves as doing something different from, and more important than, offering accurate representations of how things are. It is more important because, they say, the notion of "accurate representation" itself is not the proper way to think about what philosophy does. But, they then go on to say, this is not because "a search for accurate representations of...(eg., 'the most general traits of reality' or 'the nature of man') is an *inaccurate* representation of philosophy. (PMN, 371)

Rorty doesn't want to say that which we all seem very tempted to say that he says, which is that he is not telling us anything new, he is only describing what philosophy *has been doing all along*. This sort of claim by Rorty or his edifying philosopher would be one that betrays an abiding essentialism with regard to

what philosophy is *and always really has been*. This sort of claim would void any moving beyond our current conventions for objectivity that Rorty could possibly claim for himself or his edifying philosopher. Happily this is one view that Rorty does not hold.

Let us be clear here as to what has been said, and what is at stake. Rorty's suggestion, in the mouth of his "edifying philosopher" is that we might try looking at philosophy as *trying to look at things differently*, instead of as the search for absolute truth. He recognizes the difficulty involved in getting philosophers to try something new without an outline of precisely what recommends this new way of thinking as drawn up within the old terminology. He also, though, recognizes that in order to say something genuinely new (remember that this only means "marginally parasitic") he cannot employ the old reasons for actions or assertions as justification. The specific old ways of offering reasons for actions and assertions on which Rorty must pass, in order to manage some novelty, are those that justify by reference to *an accurate picture of the way things are*. As an example of what it means to view philosophy differently in the way Rorty suggests, I will now consider his encounter with Frank Farrell.

Rorty and Farrell: I'd rather be happy than right

Rorty's most recent discussions of epistemology consist mainly of expressions of a strategic lack of interest in the subject. In the 1995 collection of some of the more relevant criticisms to his work, *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, Rorty's responses are consistent with and predictable by his earlier, more theoretical, disinterest. Whereas Rorty used to

positively recommend that we cease pursuing most of the classic philosophic questions, lately he has been taking his own advice, and has begun treating traditional philosophical questions regarding truth, realism, and knowledge generally by avoiding them.

His response to Farrell's, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism - The Rediscovery of the Word*, reprinted in the volume as "Rorty and Antirealism", can be seen as representative of Rorty's new tack in dealing with subjects he considers better left alone. Rorty's response can be described as an attempt to relax our model of intellectual encounter by example and suggestion. By "relax" here I intend to invoke two things. First I mean to suggest that Rorty's thesis in this response is that intellectual encounters will benefit if we relax the false standard of objectivity to which we have hitherto tried to hold it. In addition, I mean that the self-deprecating *relaxed tone* of Rorty's response to Farrell supports his thesis. Rorty is self-deprecating in his display of humility with regard to the quality and significance of his own work. Rorty first praises the *sort* of book that Farrell offers. Next, he admits that his own use of Davidson neither gets him *right* nor needs to. Finally he decides that his past outspoken anti-realism has had the unfortunate effect of perpetuating the whole realism/anti-realism debate.

The matter under scrutiny in Farrell's article is Rorty's notion of the self. Farrell's suggestion is that whereas Rorty accuses the realist of retaining a theological conception of nature or the world as holding man in its interpretive sway, and *requiring* certain acts of epistemological devotion and obedience, like "fitting the world," and being true to "the way things are," it is Rorty and not the moderate realist who is guilty of performing one more ill-advised reversal on the

theological standpoint while maintaining its essential power structure. This alleged reversal amounts to the exaltation and attendant empowerment of the subject *over the object*, with the effect that instead of worshipping the *world*, the self is now to be worshipped as the world's linguistic creator. Farrell's criticism is that Rorty has de-emphasized the dependence of the self to the world with the effect of putting the subject in charge over it. In particular, Farrell attempts to drive a wedge between Davidson and Rorty, so that the lesser thinker (Rorty) cannot ride the coat tails of "one of the most honored of contemporary analytic philosophers." (RP, 155)

Rorty's apparent interest in responding to Farrell was to exemplify his strategic disinterest in, and so relax, the conversation regarding the subject/object dualism.

Lately I have been trying to mark out a position that does not take sides between subject and object, mind and world, but that instead tries to erase the contrast between them. I have, so to speak, been trying to lose *both* us and the world. Whereas Farrell reads me as trying to glorify us at the expense of the world, and hopes to rectify the balance with a "modest realism," I want to stop using the us-world contrast, and thus to get rid of the realism-antirealism issue. (RP, 191)

But this recent declaration of what we should get over,⁵ and what we should not

⁵If it appears that Rorty's statement here is inconsistent with his hope for freedom, it may seem less so, if we emphasize that Rorty's clearest statement regarding what freedom is, is when he says in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* that "freedom is the recognition of contingency." And what this recognition amounts to in the negative is disabusing ourselves of thoughts that there is some right and necessary way that our words and conceptions about ourselves *line up*, or should line up, with the way we *really* are. One way of ridding ourselves of these mistaken notions of the self is to rid ourselves of any important notion of the self. This is what he is recommending and illustrating in

talk about has the advantage of being imbedded in a rejoinder to an individual who not only thinks subject/object talk is interesting, but important; and that rejoinder itself can be read as an attempt to distract Farrell from the argumentative details regarding the subject/object distinction. In this way Rorty takes his own advice, and refuses to get drawn into a straightforward argument on a traditionally construed topic.

Rorty's first line of response to Farrell has the effect of relaxing the pretended rigors of objectivist inquiry. The way he accomplishes this is itself two-fold. He demonstrates the vanity of trying to treat Davidson in a philosophically fair manner, i.e. "objectively," and he offers new criteria for quality intellectual interaction. He does these in reverse order, apparently so as to ease into the discussion with Farrell by relaxing their personal tensions before relaxing their professional ones.

First, Rorty praises Farrell's book as an example of the sort of work of which he approves -- relaxing the tension between their own theoretical differences by showing how much they are personally alike. Here it seems that while "greasing the skids" with Farrell, Rorty is also employing his new criteria by which we might judge books and people of whom we might "approve" and "disapprove." The old criteria, under which Farrell tries to operate, have to do with whether we agree with *the thesis* of the work and find it well grounded. Rorty's new standard for judgment is whether we found the work interesting and sufficiently inclusive. Rorty changes the criteria by saying:

[Farrell's] is the sort of book I hope we get more of -
one that moves easily back and forth between Hegel

his latest interactions.

and Davidson, and between Dennett and Derrida, while maintaining a consistent point of view and developing a strong, focused line of argument. (RP, 189)

Although it may seem that he is praising Farrell on the traditional grounds of his quality of argument, we must remember that Rorty approaches argument differently than do traditional philosophers, as one rhetoric among many. Rorty addresses himself primarily not to Farrell's thesis, but to his methodology and project. Of the methodology Rorty approves. Of the project, Rorty is tired. But what is important is that Rorty reorients the discussion away from who gets Davidson and the relationship of the individual to the world "right" to what jobs are worth doing, and in what way they are worth doing. Rorty relaxes the tension between them by de-emphasizing their theoretical differences and highlighting their more personally agreed-upon heros and methods.

The second way by which Rorty looks to relax the tension between himself and Farrell is to mitigate the importance of objectivity. He does this within his discussion of who is being true to Davidson. He himself pleads "guilty" to the charge of "not fitting the facts" with regard to his exegesis of Davidson, all the while downplaying the significance of the charge.

Farrell is quite right that I often take a Davidsonian doctrine and extrapolate from it in directions Davidson does not go, and in which (for all I know, and for all my readers should care) he may not wish to go...But I do not think it matters whether Davidson would or would not be sympathetic to such an extrapolation. If you borrow somebody's good idea and use it for a different purpose, is it really necessary to clear this novel use with the originator of the idea? (RP, 189-190)

And all the while Rorty pleads guilty to the misdemeanor (if it is even that bad) of using Davidson to his own ends, he subtly incriminates Farrell of the same thing.

I think that Davidson's position allows him to go either Farrell's way or mine, and that the evidence is ambiguous...But there is little point in trotting out such competing texts, or in either of us trying to wrap ourselves in Davidson's mantle. (RP, 190)

The overall effect of Rorty's response to Farrell with regard to the accusation that he is not being true to Davidson is that of relaxing the standard of "fitting the facts." Rorty manages this relaxation by admitting his own interested interpretation of Davidson, and by counting Farrell equally purposeful, and then by asking "what interpretations are without subjective purpose?" The obvious answer is none.

The relaxation of the tension between Rorty and Farrell is not the sort of calm that comes after a greatly anticipated battle is over and one or the other has won. The relaxation of the tension comes as a function of Rorty's deciding before the lines are drawn that he is not so very sure that there is anything worth fighting about.

Having defused the immediate conflict between himself and Farrell in a way appropriate to their particular situation by addressing alternate issues, and so calling into question the very validity of the standard of "objectivity," Rorty describes his adopted strategy as "benign neglect."

Whereas Farrell sees the interesting choice as between a modest realism and an anarchic subjectivism...I see it as between continued worry about realism versus antirealism and benign neglect of traditional religious and philosophical topics. (RP, 195)

This is the strategy that Rorty has been touting for years and finally finds himself in a position to effect. He is attempting in dialogue that which he has been suggesting at least since the seventies⁶: he is changing the subject. In the introduction to *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, Rorty aligns himself with the pragmatist whose behavior he describes as trying to get the philosophers to talk about something other than the same old tired epistemological conundrums in the same old ways. The problem (the same one we have met again and again in Rorty) is that if the pragmatist (or the edifying philosopher, or the ironist) uses too philosophical language to suggest this change, he will be doing the very epistemology of which he wishes to be rid. If he tries a too new approach he will be ignored as not addressing the issues.

When [pragmatists] suggest that we not ask questions about the nature of Truth and Goodness, they do not invoke a theory about the nature of reality or knowledge or man which says that "there is no such thing" as Truth and Goodness. Nor do they have a "relativistic" or "subjectivist" theory of Truth or Goodness. *They would simply like to change the subject.* They are in a position analogous to that of secularists who urge that research concerning the Nature, or the Will, of God does not get us anywhere. Such secularists are not saying that God does not exist, exactly; they feel unclear about what it would mean to affirm his existence, and thus about the point of denying it. Nor do they have some special, funny, heretical view about God. They just doubt that the vocabulary of theology is one we ought to be using. Similarly, pragmatists keep trying to find ways of making antiphilosophical points in nonphilosophical language. for they face a dilemma: if their language is too unphilosophical, too "literary,"

⁶"The World Well Lost" was first published in 1972.

they will be accused of changing the subject; if it is too philosophical it will embody Platonic assumptions which will make it impossible for the pragmatist to state the conclusion he wants to reach. (CP, xiv)

The particular way in which Rorty attempts to change the subject with Farrell is from construing spiritual behaviors as the search for the transcendent to thinking of them as the promotion of happiness. Remember that Farrell's criticism was that Rorty was performing one more reversal based on theological power structures between people and the world.

But there is a sense in which I agree with Farrell that the question at hand is ultimately spiritual, and that the adoption of my view would be a real change in people's self-image...I think that if we could get rid of *both* Farrell's sense that we are meaningless unless we are getting something not ourselves right, *and* the Nietzschean sense that we are meaningless unless we create a world in our image...then our spiritual state would be better than it is right now. (RP, 195)

But by "spiritual" Rorty does not mean what Farrell means. Whereas when Farrell talks of "theology" he is interested in the underlying structures of the movement, Rorty redefines the "spiritual" concern as the attempt to be happy, and so manages to change the subject from what counts as the underlying structures that make possible a right relationship with the world to whether we'd rather be happy than right. (RP, 195) Rorty seems to take the spiritually superior person to be the one who sees that most traditional philosophical questions are so useless to our project of securing happiness that they are not worth asking.

We may consider the way that Rorty addresses Farrell's criticism that Rorty is being inconsistently theological as representative (in an entirely non-optical manner) of his most recent strategy for dealing with such criticisms and

reproaches in general. In those arenas and on those topics where Rorty wants to encourage debate -- those which have not demonstrated their uselessness for our contemporary freedom-enhancing projects -- Rorty will talk at length. One need only pick up some of his social commentary of late (e.g., in the *New York Times* or *Harpers*) to see an example of such debate-encouraging behavior. But in those arenas or on those topics which strike him as particularly unhelpful, or as having gotten their share of the attention, Rorty practices what he here calls "benign neglect." This behavior is consistent and predictable in terms of his earlier, more expository, period of encouraging that we all allow representationalist, essentialist, realist correspondence theories of truth to wither and die from lack of attention.

Ironist weaklings or strong metaphysics

So Rorty's chosen metaphor for self-recreation has representationalist associations that he would rather be without. So what? We might wonder why Rorty cares if his words have certain "unfortunate" associations. Can't he just claim the word "irony" as an old word used in a new way and choose, almost cafeteria style, which associations he will take and which he will leave? "Let's see, I'll have the freedom associations, and the vertigo as well. And oh yes, let me have a big helping of that self-referentiality that looks so good. No thanks, no appearance/reality for me; you are what you speak, you know."

First, even though Rorty very often seems to play fast and loose with language, choosing thoroughly slanted phrases over more traditionally appropriate language, when he does so it is for the sake of avoiding connotations or baggage that a certain, possibly more literally apt, term might

have within a given conversation, although at sometimes his reasons are more obvious than at others. Alternately, Rorty may be trying to summon a certain provocative force imbedded in the associations of his chosen vernacular. In other words, Rorty may be slippery, but he is not sloppy. He chooses his words for a reason, and that choice is always informed by his perception of the word's associative power. Rorty knows full well that our linguistic spread is less *ala carte* and more like a potluck where everybody brings something to the table, that every wordy dish has its own history, family recipe, tricks and secrets, and that the words concocted of this alphabet soup are not self-contained and sterile, but rather open to contamination in some way, so that when we choose a word we choose its history. To suggest, then, that Rorty can purify the word "irony" simply by constantly denying any truck with representationalism is, once again, to fail to interpret Rorty within his own vitally contextual context. I will continue to develop this line of thought, that the associations of marks and noises matter, in the next chapter.

But also, and this too I will flesh out in the next chapter, Rorty's attachment to "irony" encourages the unsympathetic reading of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* that I have recommended against. Certainly *Contingency, irony and solidarity* is a provocative book. So much so that that last sentence seems almost to be wasted on a truism comparable to "all bachelors are unmarried men." It is nearly impossible to converse with someone about Rorty, to give a talk about the book, or even to celebrate one's own contingency

without being made constantly aware of the "self-undermining pitfalls to which Rorty, clever though he may be, seems unaccountably blind."⁷

Although I make fun of Rorty's gainsayers, there is a reason that they say "gain." The thoughts and feelings that are typically conjured when we describe ourselves as "ironic" seem to rely on either a rich juxtaposition of appearance against reality, or are so mundane as to cease to count as irony in any life-changing sense, and make us wonder, "what is so wonderful about mere word games and verbal parlor tricks?"

When we ask someone what they think of when they hear the word "irony" the standard response is something like "saying the opposite of what you really mean." "Believing in the contingency of your beliefs," has a similarly linguistic, but also a similarly everyday quality. And although I can make sense of my paraphrase of Rorty's notion of irony on this meaning, since irony for him is certainly imbedded with notions of linguistic paradox, that doesn't account for Rorty's strong recommendation of irony. It seems like more than mere word play is required in order to serve as the motivating force in one's life.⁸

But if more than mere word play is involved, then what? Rorty's anti-essentialism and anti-representationalism rules out anything so rich as Kierkegaard's "infinite absolute negativity" or even the less rich, but still self-referential and vertigo-producing "being-what-you-are-not." Rorty cannot import these rich notions of irony without also importing their equally rich notions of *the*

⁷To be read in that lethargic sing-song voice that we reserve for repeating the tired old qualms of those we find hopelessly backward.

⁸One may react that the language of "motivating force" is too strong, but I consider it mild when considering the ironist theorist's near obsession with understanding the urge to theorize.

way that things really are, or at least who I am, really, versus who I appear to be. Rorty clearly needs a sense of irony rich enough to motivate and give meaning to lives moving toward subjective freedom, but the subject that he describes, this insubstantial web of dispositions toward the use, disuse and abuse of propositions, seems to wilt under the hard light of ironic transformation.

What then? Are we left without options? Is there really a dilemma between a weak sense of irony or a weak sense of freedom? I wouldn't ask that question if I thought the answer might be "yes." In the next chapter I will offer a Rorty-esque recommendation of a vocabulary that offers a very strong, albeit strongly anti-essentialist, sense of self along with an equally fulfilling, yet anti-representationalist, mode of self-expression that provides ample opportunity for vertiginous paradoxical freedom while positively discouraging troublesome essentialist and representationalist interpretations.

CHAPTER V

HEIGHTENING THE TENSION: ALTERNATIVE SELVES AND ALTERNATIVE SELF-RECREATION

In the preceding sections I have developed a tension in the recent work of Richard Rorty. The problem that I have highlighted has to do with Rorty's obvious desire for the academic world (non-academics have never really allowed this problem to slow them down) to stop wasting time with epistemology, or, as he characterizes the subject, the inquiry into the relationship between language, or thought, and the world. And although, until fairly recently, he was very vocal regarding his desire to drop the whole debate, and argued vociferously for the worthlessness of prolonging our epistemological inquiries, Rorty describes his most recent approach to these problems as "benign neglect." The way Rorty works out this "benign neglect" in practice amounts to strategically displaying a lack of interest in the issues, and so both avoiding the conversation *and* encouraging others by his example to do the same.

The tension is motivated when we juxtapose Rorty's benign neglect of representationalism with the notion of irony developed by Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Irony*. Kierkegaard's description of the phenomenon and purpose of irony is close enough to Rorty's rendition of the same to make us feel compelled to deal with the discrepancies between their descriptions. The main

issue between Rorty and Kierkegaard is to be found in their different attitudes toward the appearance/reality distinction. Whereas Kierkegaard finds the appearance/reality distinction necessary in order to engage in the pure irony with which he is interested, Rorty suggests that dropping the appearance/reality distinction is necessary for loosening the ties of representationalism and the epistemological project generally.

"Irony" and Rorty's linguistic metaphors for the self

It won't do to say that Rorty misapplies the term "irony." It is just as easy to offer a Rorty-esque reason for his unusual use of the word "irony" as it is to criticize him for his unusual use of the word "irony." We might say that the term "irony" has a long and fairly stable history of use within philosophical circles as something like "saying the opposite, or something other than, what you mean," and that Rorty's redescription of "irony," as "believing that all of your beliefs are contingent," or something like that is simply out of place. Someone might say that Rorty just doesn't seem to know, or maybe care, what irony is, and that he exploits this confusion for the sake of using a term that has a place of honor within the philosophical vocabulary. Instead of calling his heroes ironists maybe he should just call them *his heroes*.

However, Rorty and Kierkegaard are too close in the way they describe and categorize ironic acts and attitudes to simply say that Rorty is *wrong* about irony without suggesting that Kierkegaard's use of the word is off as well. But Kierkegaard labors long and hard to illustrate that his conception of irony accommodates our central intuitions regarding what irony is.

Not only are Kierkegaard and Rorty clearly talking about the same thing, but also, it won't do to tell Rorty that he misapplies the term, since his anti-representationalism motivates him very little in the direction of "getting things *right*" More importantly, Rorty's Kuhnian notion of how words change meanings from time to time, not by predetermined criteria for what counts as worthwhile change, or by bringing them closer to the *way things are*, but by playing the new off against the old, leaves him unconcerned by the charge that he is using old words in new ways.

If we are able to make Rorty feel the tension of the discrepancy I have noticed, the way we will do that is by suggesting that Rorty's choice of words in choosing "irony" is problematic not because he misapplies the term, but because it brings with it connotations and philosophical baggage he would rather avoid. Rorty is very careful about his choice of words. Whereas we have seen that his recent *negative* procedure is strategically to ignore certain discussions, the encouragement of which he finds counter-productive, his *positive* method of late is to choose words that have the connotations he wishes to invoke so as to let the sounds and associations of his words do some of the work for him, or at least not get in his way.

Rorty's rejection of "relativism," for example, is largely the rejection of the associations that come along with the word. The way he sees the history of "relativism" is as an epistemological reaction against realism. He wishes to avoid the positive epistemological baggage, and so he uses other words to describe his lack of interest in the realism/anti-realism debate. (ORT, 24) Rorty doesn't use the word "relativism" because he doesn't find it useful to hitch his wagon to that falling star.

Again, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, within the very context of describing the advantages of hermeneutics and the disadvantages of epistemology, while explaining the efficacy of choosing the right words, Rorty illustrates the point he is making by listing his reasons for choosing the associatively rich terminology he does. In making sense of why he prefers *hermeneutics* over *epistemology*, Rorty suggests that instead of "epistemology," we use the word "edification" to describe our search for meaning, coping skills, and community, but not system, building. "Edification," Rorty admits, is chosen, not based on its propriety, or denotative accuracy, but on an altogether more connotative criterion.

Since "education" sounds a bit too flat, and *Bildung* a bit too foreign, I shall use "edification" to stand for this project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking. (PMN, 360)

My reason for raising this example is to suggest that Rorty's demand that we avoid any hint of representationalism may be effectively undermined by his choice of the term "irony," a word that -- as a matter of fact -- imports the epistemologically rich appearance/reality dualism into his attempt at a post-epistemological redescription of the self, and its ways of getting free. The tension is within Rorty's own choice of terminology, his own final vocabulary. It is between his choice of "irony" as a word with which to describe his *anti-representationalist* heroes and the *representationalism* inherent in the history and associations of that word. And because of Rorty's own suggestion that we change the sorts of standards by which we choose our words from accuracy of representation criteria to the usefulness of metaphors, we cannot let this issue slide and say that it was merely a poor choice of words on his part. The

reason Rorty uses one set of words over another is at least partly because they bring with them the connotations he wants, and so to hold him to this standard is criticizing him in his own terms.

But let me be clear. I am not only complaining about Rorty's choice of words. This is not a matter that can be settled mechanically, by searching for each occurrence of the word "irony" in the Rorty corpus and replacing it with some other word that avoids appearance/reality baggage, and imports the *right* kind of associations, those more fitting for a neo-pragmatism such as Rorty's. Neither am I suggesting that Rorty's problem is that he doesn't know what "irony" means. In fact, it is rather fitting to call Rorty's brand of self-recreation "irony."

Rorty's consideration of how one can be self-recreative rests on his metaphors for the self. And his metaphors for the self (as "a centerless web of belief," an "incarnated vocabulary," a set of "sentential attitudes," etc.) themselves not only encourage a description of what it is like to be self-recreative in such linguistic terms as "irony," but they very easily lapse into some sort of exclusivity that is hard to see as anything but elitism. Further, his metaphors for self-recreation also bolster the unsympathetic reading of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* which I have rejected as violating the edifying spirit of Rorty's writing.

The term "irony" has always had a history tied very closely to the literary and rhetorical traditions. And has always involved the self-referential juxtaposition of appearance and reality. From its earliest days as simple "dissembling," through the laundering of Aristotle where it was still a sort of deceit, but one performed by a magnanimous soul as "mock-modesty", to

Cicero and Quintillian where it finally took on the more *sophisticated* and modern meaning of "saying something other than what you mean," irony has had paradoxical and linguistic associations. Among the myriad versions of irony Kierkegaard offers, even *natural irony*, the least linguistic irony, depends on its *interpretation* by one with an eye for ironic meaning. Gregory Vlastos, who suggests several contemporary distinctions, offers only verbally oriented ones. We can have "simple irony" which is meaning the contrary of what one says, "mocking irony," a put-down or joke "wreathed in a cerebral smile;" then there is the riddling irony we call "ostensive irony," and finally "complex irony" where the speaker both means and doesn't mean what is said.

If we consider only briefly what Rorty means by self-creation, the fit between irony and Rorty's linguistic self bears out the appropriateness of the historical and linguistic associations. Rorty's redescription of self-creation is obviously tied to his linguistic metaphors for the self: "To create one's mind is to create one's language, rather than to let the length of one's mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind." (CIS, 27) To be self-recreative is, first, to recognize that the languages in which one has described oneself are not tied by a necessary relationship to the world, nor to oneself. Next, the self-recreative individual frames her own relationship to the past and its ways of speaking by framing a *new language* in which to speak that relationship. Once this new language has been implemented the self is a new self, and new *by her own voice*: the linguistic self is linguistically self-recreative.

With metaphors for the self that suggest images of the self as a character in a story, a walking dialect or a belief-built spider's funhouse, and with a similarly language-oriented redescription of what it is to take control of

your life, it is only fitting that Rorty should choose a word for self-recreation that not only recognizes the self-referentiality involved, but also continues the consistent linguistic motif. And "irony" is the word that fits.

In addition, the way that Rorty formulates irony as a certain attitude toward beliefs (i.e. that all of my beliefs are only contingently my beliefs, including this belief about my beliefs) makes it appear as though a linguistic notion of self is practically, if not metaphysically, required. It is hard to imagine what Rortean irony would be like adopted by someone who thought of themselves as something other than a set of attitudes toward propositions. If it does not require such a reading, this apparent necessity encourages the less than sympathetic interpretation that many people give *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. That unsympathetic reading is the one focuses on the paradoxical quality of Rorty's redescription of the self, and of the world as eminently redescrivable. The unsympathetic reader is the one who demands that Rorty's feet be held to the fire for the purpose of extracting from him a confession that by saying that the self, or the world, is no way, what Rorty is *really* saying is that "the way the world, or self, *really is*, is that it is no way." Clearly, Rorty doesn't want to say this. The unsympathetic reader demands that this is the only way to make any sense out of what Rorty says in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.

The reading I have attempted to motivate is the one that has Rorty as following through on the sort of project he outlined in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. In that work, Rorty recommends that we give up epistemological/metaphysical projects, such as pronouncing what the world, or self, *is really*, and concentrate on the more edifying tasks of figuring out new

ways to relieve suffering and build community. On this interpretation, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* is a call, not only for solidarity, but also for autonomy. Rorty provides us with an example of how to go about finding a way to break with the linguistic domination of the past by finding a new sort of self to be, a sort of self that never occurred to the past.

My problem with "irony," then is not only that it brings with it some unfortunate associations, but also that by its apparently inflexible attachment to linguistic metaphors of the self, it unfortunately encourages the more epistemological, essentialist and less edifying reading of *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.

Further, it seems that Rorty's linguistic metaphors for the self, the same ones that misleadingly encouraged reading the contingency of the self section in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* as promoting some new, more accurate answer for what the self *really is*, carry such a clear and univocal message that the self is linguistically constituted, that they may encourage an equally and unnecessarily limited view of self-recreation. In other words, only intellectuals can be thoroughly self-creative, because only they have the power over words, and only they are self-conscious about their recreation. Because Rorty's selection of metaphors is linguistic and because he chooses to describe the people who act as he does as "intellectuals," someone might charge him with "elitism," and "exclusivity." And while I am the first to admit that his metaphors mixed with his enthusiasm do tend to make us think that he is trying to "educate" us, let's remember his discussion of the difference between metaphysics and irony with regard to "education."

Within the context of identifying the potential for humiliation in ironic redescription he argued that both the ironist and the metaphysician engage in redescription, and that the difference between the two is that whereas the metaphysician thinks of his job as "education," the more honest ironist thinks of herself as simply offering an alternative; sure, it's one that she would like to see adopted, but it is also one that she recognizes is no more grounded in trans-human reality than the metaphysician's.

And just as, in chapter two of this work, I answered the charges that Rorty was offering an alternative set of underlying structures of the self in the chapter on "the contingency of selfhood," by recommending an ironic reading of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* that redescribes it as an autobiographical work offered as an illustration of the sort of self-recreation that one can do, I will now suggest that while Rorty's linguistic terminology matches his language-bound metaphors for the self, to take him as recommending that we all adopt his metaphors and his final vocabulary is to miss the point. Like the rock-throwing guru in Tom Robbin's novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, Rorty, by his frustratingly self-referential pseudo-arguments and his apparently limited sense of *who* can be self-recreative inspires us, if only negatively, in reaction against his apparent bravado and ego-centrism, to find new ways of doing to the past (in this case it may be Rorty) what the past has done to us.

It seems obvious, based on the two-fold origin of human being we have noticed within Rorty's description of the relationship between selves and languages (i.e. that beings are made human by language and particular sorts of humans by particular sorts of languages) that the ways of recreating oneself are limited only by the ways of thinking of one's species and one's self. There is

one group of people who have found a way to be self-recreative in the ways most important to Rorty, while adopting a slightly more inclusive notion of the self. It seems that for Rorty, to be self-recreative in the way he describes as irony requires that the individual breaks from the powers that have previously given him his sense of what it is to be human, and therefore have also defined the possibilities of how one may be a self-recreative human. To be self-creative is to *recognize* your contingency, and to *redescribe* what you can. We need to reconfigure what humans are so that we are not bound by old versions of how self-recreation can be enacted.

Camp, queer and Moe Meyer

A certain sub-group of the people who have traditionally and rather clinically been called "homosexual" have found a way to incorporate new, and less essentialist conceptions of the self into a unique self-referential and self-conscious brand of self-recreation. I will call this sub-group "queer." And I will call this operation of self-recreation "camp." I choose the word "queer" following both the current wishes of the vocal "gay" community, but especially following the use of the word "queer" outlined in Moe Meyer's introduction to the book he edited on camp. I will develop his use of the word "queer," and the difference that he sees between "queer" and "homosexual" as a preliminary act of self-recreation.

What I mean is this: Meyer's article strikes me as a perfect example of the sort of self-recreation that results from the increase in interpretive possibilities that Rorty's example inspires. I read Meyer as redefining what it is to be human. And, as a double function of that redescription of humanity, Meyer

changes both what it is to be a particular sort of human, and what it is to be self-recreative, since to recreate oneself is to recreate oneself as a particular token of the new type of human recently made available. But more than that, I read Meyer's attempt at self-recreation as an improvement over Rorty's, inasmuch as the queer redescription of the self does not have the unfortunate side-effect of importing latent essentialism or elitism into its version of self-recreation. Rorty's linguistically-constituted self, with its reliance on metaphors of irony for self-recreation, does.

Meyer's article takes the form of a polemic reclaiming for the queer community the term "camp." He focuses his polemic on the socio-historical writing of Andrew Ross as one of the currently most important camp contributions and clear intellectual descendent from Susan Sontag's seminal *Notes on Camp*. Meyer does not argue that non-queer individuals¹ have *no right* to use the term "camp" to describe their behaviors of ironic reappropriation, but that when anyone other than queers think of themselves as camp they are not only misunderstanding what it is to do "camp" or to be "campy," but they are inadvertently, by appropriating the necessarily queer behavior, playing the queer. But all this will come out in time. Let's give some account of the academic history of the term "camp."

Although its underground history extends back much further, the term "camp" has emerged in the realm of public theoretical discussion in 1964 with Sontag's aphoristic *Notes on Camp*. More recent queer theorists like Moe

¹I will refer to these sorts alternately as "non-queer," "straight," and, following Meyer, "compulsorily reproductive heterosexuals" -- the meaning of this cryptic term will become manifest shortly.

Meyer view camp's mainstream emergence in Sontag and its perpetuation by people like Ross as a violation of the counter-cultural roots and meaningfulness of "camp," and bristle at its use by non-queer individuals.

Sontag designates "camp" as a certain "sensibility." She uses "sensibility" for its looseness and by it means something like a capacity, propensity or disposition that expresses itself in a certain taste.

Taste has no system and no proofs. But there is something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste. (Sontag 1983, 106)

What makes the consistency is not any set of pre-determined rules, but the situated personal tendencies of the individual in whom a sensibility resides.

By "sensibility," then, Sontag seems to mean something like a way of seeing the world, not primarily in terms of categories, but as driven by a disposition for seeing one or another *side* of things. For example, one endowed with the cynical sensibility focuses on those features of the world that encourage a nihilistic (if she doesn't believe in God) or a conspiratorial (if she does) view of the world. But just as the cynic does not *set out* to see the world nihilistically, and does so only as the result of her disposition to select certain characteristics of the world as interesting (e.g. entropy) over other characteristics (e.g. reproduction), so also an individual endowed with the camp sensibility does not set out to see the world as an inherently laughable place, he is just inclined to notice the hyperbolic sincerity of most of our human doings, and so his way of seeing the world is comically colored.

Since camp is a kind of sensibility, it is fair to ask, "of what is it sensible?" If cynicism, in some forms at least, finds the world replete with

examples of pointlessness and futility and looks at them with a scowl, then camp looks at the earnest and transient values and projects of human beings with a smirk. "Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of "character"..." (Sontag 1983, 119)

Camp is precisely concerned with the realm of human valuing and interpretation. For one thing "Nothing in nature can be campy," (Sontag 1983, 108) since unless one projects earnestness, purpose and some degree of failure onto God's handiwork we cannot celebrate the failed seriousness necessary for camp appreciation. The articles that make up the changing camp canon are sometime seriously valued items which have passed into disuse, disinterest and disvalue, only to be raised again, now, as items of interest and value. Camp valuing, though understanding why the article was originally valued, and even more, feeling or having felt that pull, appreciates the camp article for a reason slightly other than the reason the item originally found favor.

The main reason articles become camp icons is because, although they could not now be, they were once icons of our *serious* projects, and the camp eye is able to see the sincerity with which we valued them. Camp comes to grips with the changableness of human interests in the current camp object. And the camp appreciation for the vicissitude of human valuing is, in a sense, projected forward, into the future and onto the articles of our current and serious appreciation. By extension, the camp individual is forced to realize the at least potential revaluation and reinterpretation of her currently and seriously adored icons and projects. By this realization she is not able to take her current and heartfelt attachments *too* seriously. Camp is a celebration of

failure, transience and contingency. It enjoys the fact that we continue to try, value and raise to significance certain projects over others, and camp has hope (because it is not cynicism) that we will continue to value in spite (or because?) of our constant failed seriousness.

What are the objects of camp? Without a doubt the best way to learn what camp is is by ostension. These examples are a collection of some of my own, Sontag's, Meyer's, and Ross'. Although not all camp articles are camp to everyone, and while each reader as well as each author mentioned will disagree to some degree, either theoretically, or simply by not seeing it, all of these make some sense to me as examples of camp. Some of these are articles of Sontag's "naive" camp, and some are examples of "deliberate," and so not all of them will make sense as "failed seriousness." My intent here is merely to invoke the common feeling of all kinds of camp; to teach camp is easiest by ostension.

- Grease (the movie)
- Batman (the 1960's T.V. show)
- Leisure suits
- Dark Shadows (the 1960's Soap Opera about vampires)
- "Schoolhouse Rock"
- The rock group *Queen*
- Stag movies seen without lust (Sontag 1983, 107)

- Most early '80s music videos (Blondie, Flock of Seagulls, Billy Idol)
- the paintings of *Henri Rousseau*
- Joan Jett Blakk's Mayoral candidacy (Meyer 1994, 5)
- Farrah Fawcett-Majors
- George Romero's horror movie *The Night of the Living Dead*

- Tiny Tim (the ukelele strumming "singer.")
- Quisp* cereal
- John Waters' films
- The Brown Derby restaurant on Sunset Boulevard in L.A. (Sontag 1983, 107)
- ABBA

Because she saw camp as a sensibility, and because she saw sensibilities as things that are slippery and elusive to the theoretical grasp,

Sontag admitted her qualms about being overly systematic in its treatment.

Camp in particular is the sort of self-referential sensibility which when treated as a topic quickly makes fools of its friends, and so Sontag admitted her hesitation at being too serious in its presence.

To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful, one must be tentative and nimble. The form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claim to a linear consecutive argument), seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility. It's embarrassing to be solemn and treatiselike about Camp. One runs the risk of having, oneself, produced a very inferior piece of Camp. (Sontag 1983, 106)

And because her looseness in method becomes an issue in the later camp studies to which I will attend, I will not try to force systematicity onto Sontag's informalism. I will allow the meaning of the word to shape itself within my treatment more or less in keeping with its organic growth within the literature. My interest now is only to provide the reader with the leanest of suggestions as to what everyone is fighting about. In order to do that I will attempt to reduce Sontag's fifteen page description of camp into a condensed form that both indicates the phenomenon of camp, and prefigures some of its points of contention.

Camp, according to Sontag, is a liberating apolitical way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. Camp originates in homosexual culture. It is apolitical as a function of its celebration of style over content. Camp is interested in style, and in the highly stylized and exaggerated. Its affection for extremes includes extremes in earnestness and enthusiasm. Hyperbolic earnestness is appreciated in our past attachments, and in our present

attachments that are so extreme or laughable that we maintain some distance from them.

Camp appreciates things for reasons other than or contrary to their traditional or intended appeal, but that contrary appreciation does not manifest itself purely as disdain for its original value. When an article, person, way of speaking or thinking is seen as camp by someone other than its manufacturer, practitioner or self, then camp is said to be "naive," otherwise it is "deliberate." And although much of camp can be said to reside in the "eye of the beholder," there are some things that by virtue of their perceived importance or quality are not camp fare. (Sontag 1983, 108)

Having offered a preliminary explication of camp through Sontag's 1964 article, I will now develop the reactive and anti-essentialist camp reading of Moe Meyer as an example and extension of Rortean self-recreation. My intent is to illustrate how Meyer's processual metaphors for the self are an improvement over Rorty's linguistic notion of the self when considered by the criteria of encouraging both anti-essentialism and self-recreation verbally *and* by example. In other words, Rorty encourages us to purge epistemology in general and essentialism in particular from our lives and conversations, yet he uses metaphors for the self and for self-recreation that smack of epistemology, representationalism and essentialism. Meyer similarly encourages a move away from essentialism, but his metaphors for the self and self-recreation *do not* reinstate it by implication.

Possession is 9/10ths of the flaw

All these discourses are therefore like sections in a telescope with the one account terminating ingeniously in the next, all the while bubbling forth so lyrically that it is like drinking wine in artistically cut crystals, since it is not merely the sparkling wine that is so intoxicating but also the infinite refraction, the pool of light that presents itself when looking down into them. (COI, 79)

Moe Meyer offers his explication of camp as a sort of *apologia* for camp as a standpoint available exclusively to the queer. Meyer dedicates his book's introduction to "*Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp*," and counts non-queer individuals who have previously considered their own activities of revaluation as "camp" as missing the significance of their actions and descriptions. His thesis is that when non-queer people consider themselves as "camping" they are inadvertently playing the role of the queer. And since the role of the queer, under Meyer's performative redescription of the self, *is* the queer, the naive straight camper allows the queer shadow or trace back into the mainstream of discourse from which the queer was previously excluded.

...because Camp is defined as a solely queer discourse, all un-queer activities that have been previously accepted as "camp," such as Pop culture expressions, have been redefined as examples of the appropriation of queer praxis. (Meyer 1994, 1)

Additionally, the way Meyer would have it, many who have heretofore considered themselves "straight" may discover that they should describe themselves as "queer," and conversely, some who have thought of themselves as "queer" are better described, according to Meyer, as "straight." What is at stake for Meyer, as it turns out, are at least some of the same things that are at

stake for Rorty: the rejection of essentialist models of self and the proliferation of re-creation opportunities. I will argue that Meyer's frustration is more with essentialism than with sexual preference or with politics typically construed.

I read Meyer's article as a delicately woven attempt to use currently available non-essentialist metaphors for the self, i.e. the self as performance or process, to redescribe first, what it is to be human, in terms of these metaphors, next, what it is to be "queer," then, what it is to be "political" and finally, what it is to do "camp." Eventually, what we notice is that having unpacked the other, more commonly used words by his own self-recreative agenda, Meyer repacks his redescriptive results in the relatively fresh terminology of "queer," and especially "camp." In so doing, Meyer not only employs newly available anti-essentialist metaphors to his own autonomous advantage, but also changes "queer" and "camp" nomenclature into standpoints with more social importance than they have previously enjoyed.

Now, by "queer" Meyer doesn't mean "gay" nor does he mean "lesbian," nor even does he mean "gay and lesbian." Meyer rejects all these labels on the grounds that "gay" and "lesbian" and "gay and lesbian" terminologies suggest that there is something essential about one's *morphology* and *sexual practices* for deciding whether someone is *queer* or not. Within the traditional interpretive framework, "gay" meant men who engage in same-sex sexual activities.

But, according to Meyer, "'Queer' does not indicate the biological sex or gender of the subject." (Meyer 1994, 1) "Gay" and "lesbian" characterizations of what it is to be "queer" misses the anti-essentialism involved in apparently post-modern attempts like Meyer's to make sense of what it is to "be" queer, or

to "be" human for that matter. Meyer wants to take advantage of (or maybe claim responsibility on behalf of the queer community for) the post-metaphysical movement away from an integrated metaphysical notion of self. He does not make the Rortean move of identifying the self with a centerless web of beliefs, sentential dispositions, or a character in a novel. Instead, Meyer adopts metaphors of the self as a *performance of the very self it is*. Meyer thinks of the self as its own performance, without a hint of dualism between the self-expression and the self. The expression is the self. I will continue to develop this newly odd notion of self as I develop Meyer's notion of the "queer" self.

The "queer" nomenclature is meant to identify a group of performers/performances who shun essentialist identities and pursue their selves as they pursue their lives. I do not mean that they pursue their selves *in the same way* that they pursue their lives, but rather *in the same moment* that they pursue their lives. And by "moment" here I do not mean only as a moment *in time*, but also and especially *as the self-same* activity and perspective. It is because he wishes to give life to this processual metaphor that Meyer frames his discussion of the queer in terms of behaviors, actions and praxis. To be "queer" is to *behave* in certain ways. Those certain ways of behaving, it will turn out, are ways that encourage interpretations of anti-essentialism. To be queer is to enact an enacted self.

Just as Rorty admitted that the power he is touting is limited in its application, Meyer accommodates what are, within Rortean terminology, certain

apparently unredescribable "facts" within his redescription.² For the queer these may be the queer's alternative lifestyle, social marginalization because of that lifestyle, and desire for redescription as a paradigmatic, or at least less peripheral member of the human race. Because Meyer wants to make room for the sort of self who is anti-essentialist and socially marginal, while *giving* that marginal self a public presence he previously was missing, he will describe the queer anti-essentialist performance as a *political* performance.

The process of finding a new way to be human has to bow to certain unredescribable facts. For Meyer's queer, it is impossible to deny that he feels marginalized yet it is also undeniable that he wants a voice -- a public presence. Meyer will mediate these unredescribable contingencies by changing what *is* in his power, his sense of the self. He will change this by adopting metaphors that redescribe what it is to be a human self to performing a self. Further, on this model, what it is to be a particular kind of human is to act a particular kind of self. For the queer, the kind of self that the queer enacts is an enacted self. Meyer's queer is extremely self-conscious of his self as the enactment of an enacted self. Meyer will then show that since the queer thinks

²It may seem odd here that I'm using the Rortean language of "redescription" to describe Meyer's activity. After all, Meyer's is a language of performance and process, not of redescription and language. But if (this is a big "if" -- it would require an interpretation I have not offered, and am in no position to flesh out) Meyer is performing himself in his writing, then he is doing so linguistically and so the redescription language is appropriate. This may illustrate some of what recommends Meyer's language of performance over Rorty's language of redescription; Meyer's performances can formulate themselves easily as linguistic performances without violating the fundamental performative nature of the process, but Rorty's redescrptions are harder to construe as performances first without betraying the linguistic nature of the self. And so, in this way, performance seems easily to accomodate redescription, but redescription does not accomodate performance with such facility.

of himself as a performance (he will call this performance "camp") and since others who have a public presence (straights) take on that performance when they camp, the queer is performed in public. Queers are given an indirect avenue into the straight (public) world.

Meyer introduces the articles in the book he edits by a clarification and a definition.

These writers [the ones in his book] suggest that Camp is not simply a "style" or "sensitivity" as is conventionally accepted. Rather, what emerges is a suppressed and denied oppositional critique embodied in the signifying practices that processually constitute queer identities. (Meyer 1994, 1)

Meyer clarifies: Sontag and those who follow her are wrong to call camp a sensibility. He reacts against Sontag's characterization of camp as a sensibility or style, not because it leaves the matter ill-defined, but because camp so construed as style or taste has no room, in fact is incommensurate with its political application. And the repoliticization of camp is only slightly to one side of central in Meyer's project. Meyer is apparently reacting against Sontag's second aphorism.

To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized - or at least apolitical. (Sontag 1983, 107)

I will eventually suggest that we interpret camp as the sort of activity that is more inclined to *disregard* the dualisms of style and content, and so will not emphasize one *over* the other, but will ignore the distinction, in a sort of Rortean "benign neglect." But let's first motivate the tension between Meyer and Sontag before we relieve it.

Meyer's overall project in the essay and for the collection of essays is the post-metaphysical repoliticization of camp activity. He will argue that camp has always been a political activity, not so much because those who have camped have been strictly *self-consciously* political, but because camp is, by nature, a critique. That critique, although fundamentally an "ontological critique" finds expression as a "class critique" - a critique of a certain social class' ontology. What emerges from Meyer's article is that camp's political critique is indistinguishable from its ontological challenge. And the ontological challenge motivates a re-evaluation of our notions of what it is to be a human self.

This re-evaluation of the human self will push us headlong away from essentialism in the direction of anti-essentialism. And once freed from essentialist conceptions of human being, we are ready to remake ourselves. In this way Meyer's work is an example and extension of Rorty's freedom-encouraging metaphors of self and self-recreation. Meyer's anti-essentialist processual metaphors for self recommend themselves over Rorty's linguistic ones to the degree that they encourage *self-overcoming*, both in the sense of remaking one's self in one's own image, but also in the sense of overcoming the very *idea* that there are right and wrong ways of conceiving of the self -- overcoming the idea of a subsisting self. While Rorty manages to *tell* us to move beyond our essentialism, he doesn't *show* us how to do that quite so thoroughly as Meyer does.

Meyer's performative metaphors can more easily accommodate those individuals who don't spend all their time thinking and writing, and so are less susceptible to charges of intellectual snobbery. Part of the problem I have noticed with regard to Rorty's ironist metaphors for self-recreation is that it is

tied very closely with a linguistic sense of self. Ironic self-recreation is universally described as a linguistic activity. To be self-recreative is to rethink one's final *vocabulary*, or to tell a different causal *story* about the influence of the past, or to *redescribe* those things open to redescription. Rortean self-recreation is limited only to those who think of themselves as linguistically constituted, and those who have marks and noises as their medium of self-expression.

On my reading of Rorty this is not so much a criticism of his narrowmindedness, as it is a reminder that *Contingency, irony and solidarity* is not a pronouncement of what it is to be a human, and what it is to be self-recreative. That work is rather Rorty's call for each individual to break with the past and remake him or herself in whatever metaphors speak to him or her.³

Just as Rorty's "irony" played on linguistic metaphors for the constitution of the self, Meyer's "camp" trades on a processual metaphor for the constitution of the self. Having offered a sort of intuitive explanation of what Meyer says, and why it may be important to our projects of autonomy, I will now ground this discussion more closely in Meyer's own explication. Meyer's article is a series

³Rorty himself recognizes a practical limitation with regard to the widespread adoption of the ironist posture. "But even if I am right in thinking that a liberal culture whose public rhetoric is nominalist and historicist is both possible and desirable, I cannot go on to claim that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is *ironist*. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization." (CIS, 87) Rorty is not marking the limitation as between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, the limitation he notices is one that implies instead the necessity of the sort of "host" vocabulary, against which the ironist juxtaposes hers, and on which the ironist is dependent for a sort of anti-identity. I will say more on this in the next chapter when I motivate the similarities between Rorty's characterization of Derrida and the camp attitude.

of identifications offered in the form of an intricate polemic. The polemic, we have noticed, is against non-queer use of camp language. The identifications remain to be made explicit. In order to make sense of Meyer's conception of camp, we must unpack both his notion of the processual constitution of the self, and his idea of what it is to be queer. Without poisoning the well, allow me to foreshadow by saying up front that the end of a careful analysis of the terms "processual self," "queer," and "camp," will show that the terms are all closely related to anti-essentialism.

"Camp," "queer," and anti-essentialism

Consider first what meaning we can give to the processual constitution of the self. Meyer's metaphor of processual identity renders selves as "discontinuous," and "performative" (Meyer 1994, 3) relying on specific and "stylized repetition" of "enactments, embodiments or speech acts" (Meyer 1994, 4) to "locate identity within a performative nexus." (Meyer 1994, 4) This performance is not expressive of, but rather itself creates in a self-reflexive manner a social identity. (Meyer 1994, 4) The performance *is* the identity. And the identity *is* the self. To constitute oneself through one's actions as a performance of an identity that self-reflexively creates that identity is to rely upon a processual conception of self.

These sorts of considerations quickly conjure images of existentialist selves. The difference between Meyer's kind of self-enactment and what appears to be a very similar and more fully explored sense of processual self that is found in the existentialist tradition is that within the existentialist tradition the human self is typically thought of as *necessarily* being self-constituted.

There is nothing that I can find within Meyer's conception of self that suggests that the self is *necessarily or correctly* considered as processually constituted. If someone else thinks of herself as a centered, substantial being, that doesn't make her *wrong*, it seems, but it does make her *straight*. We will soon come to see that for Meyer what it is to be "queer" is to think of oneself as processually constituted.

Having mentioned what seems to be intended by the notion of a processually constituted self, let's consider the particular processual constitution of "the queer self." The queer self, processually rendered, is the stylized repetitive performance of certain enactments, embodiments or speech acts *that oppose essentialist conceptions of self*. (Meyer 1994, 4) Most of the definition I have here offered is simply a concatenation of precisely what Meyer says, but this last italicized part is not a reorganization of Meyer's exact words, but an inference drawn from certain statements he makes while discussing what it is to be queer. Let me try to share my intuition.

Consider what Meyer says when trying to give the term "queer" content within the context of how the younger generation of gays and lesbians use it .

The emergence of the queer label as an oppositional critique of gay and lesbian middle-class assimilationism is, perhaps, its strongest and most valid aspect." (Meyer 1994, 2)

"Gay and lesbian middle-class assimilationism" is the way that some younger gays and lesbians negatively view how older, pre-AIDS gays and lesbians relate to mainstream society. Specifically what the younger group is reacting against is the older group's apparent acceptance and assimilation of bourgeois values. I purposely use the exceedingly vague term "values" so as not to beg

the question as to precisely what is involved here. What is important is that although Meyer finds a notion of "queer" that rests on the *generational* axis to be divisive, the constructive aspect of the rejection of gay and lesbian bourgeois assimilationism, according to Meyer, is the attitude as an expression of a *class critique*.

But once the uncritiqued ageism of current definitions has been revealed and discarded, what remains - the critique of class - is of definite value and can be used to formulate what might be at stake in both the terms "queer" and "Camp." (Meyer 1994, 2)

Meyer's notion of a class critique is a very specific one that has profound implications for the discussion of what it is to be queer. For Meyer, a queer class-critique means quite simply the rejection of essentialist identity theories which are associated with bourgeois individuals. Meyer identifies queer anti-assimilationism and anti-essentialism.

In the sense that the queer label emerges as a class critique, then what is opposed are bourgeois *models of identity*. (Meyer 1994, 3 -- my emphasis)

Without the previous explanation it is difficult to see through his statement that a class critique is anti-essentialist, but once we see that Meyer associates essentialist conceptions of the self with bourgeois class, the class opposition to essentialism becomes less opaque. Queer models of identity, according to Meyer, are processually anti-essentialist ones and Bourgeois models are essentially essentialist ones.

What "queer" signals is an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts. (Meyer 1994, 3)

And

...queer identity is more accurately identified as...its,
by now overly rehearsed, oppositional stance to
essentialist...models [of identity.] (Meyer 1994, 3)

So then, to summarize my reading of Meyer on the processually construed meaning of "queer": to be "queer" is to construct one's identity in repeated moments of opposition to essentialist conceptions of self. Clearly, Meyer's conception of the processual constitution of the self in general and his construal of the queer self in particular are very nearly identical.

Now, let us turn to camp. Whereas it took some careful observation to note the near identification of "queer" with a processual identity, Meyer is explicit about his attitude toward the relationship between camp and queer.

I define Camp as the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility. (Meyer 1994, 5)

And, as we have already noticed, to be queer is *to act queer*. To be queer is to act queer, and to enact a queer identity is to do camp, so camp is queer and queer is camp. And although it may seem that defining "enactment" as the production of *social* visibility sets it apart from other forms of *private* or *personal* forms of behavior, Meyer intends no such distinction.

[The above definition] means that *all* queer identity performative expressions are circulated within the signifying system that is Camp. In other words, queer identity is inseparable and indistinguishable from its processual enactment, or Camp. (Meyer 1994, 5 -- his emphasis)

So then, camp is queer and queer is an example of and nearly identical with the processual constitution of the self.

The implications of Meyer's near identification of queer, camp and process as regards all those who have done, or thought of themselves as doing camp since Sontag are not lost on the author, nor is the boldness of his claim.

This expanded definition of Camp, one based on identity performance and not solely in some kind of unspecified cognitive identification of an ironic moment, may come as a bit of a jolt to many readers. It means that *all* queer identity performative expressions are circulated within the signifying system that is Camp. (Meyer 1994, 5)

Not only is all queer activity camp, which is what Meyer points out as jolting, but even more shocking, and to the point, is that *all camp is queer*. His identification of queer with camp implies that to whatever degree an action can rightfully be called "camp," to that same degree the activity is also a queer performance.⁴ And what counts as "rightfully considered camp," are those camp activities which take place *outside* "bourgeois epistemological frames," i.e. outside of essentialist ways of considering the self. (Meyer 1994, 3). Camp

⁴It is easy at this point, having bush-wacked our way through some fairly dense terminology, to wonder why we have conflated all of these otherwise distinguishable terms. But it is frustrating only if we forget the overall project of creating a new way to think of what it is to be human, and then to identify ourselves as the world's best example of that new sort of human. Meyer has done this job beautifully for the queer. He has taken a metaphor for what it is to be human (the self as a process) which carries with it certain desirable associations (the appeal of anti-essentialism) and he has offered a redescription of what it is to be campy (to perform the queer) that seems to begin to get to some of the things that we feel are necessary to call something camp, (to be performative -- to act out) while allowing those who are queer to see themselves as paradigmatic examples of what it is to be this new kind of human, even if what it is to be human in this new sense means something close to "being without paradigms."

is queer is self-enactment is processually constituted self is self-enactment is queer is camp.

Obviously, if our interest were in whether Meyer has got hold of something clarifying, or accurate, or if we were interested in increasing the sorts of ever finer distinctions that Rorty attributes to typical philosophy, we would be dissatisfied by his line-blurring reductions. But within the more Rortean context of using old words in new ways for the purpose of gaining autonomy, we may redescribe Meyer's distinction-breaking analysis as changing the standards for how humans may be considered and for how they may be considered *successful*.

Take for example Meyer's use of the concept of "gender." Meyer's analysis suggests that our traditional use of the word "gender" is a clumsy and question-begging tool for making moral judgments rather than for giving people interpretive options. He argues that gender questions typically construed are frustratingly complex. Since gender is traditionally decided upon "material sexual practice" it assumes a conception of self-identity as abiding and with at least the appearance of solidity, rather than discontinuous and amorphous. By "material sexual practice," Meyer means something like one's sexual history, i.e. how many times and how recently you have slept with a man versus with a woman. The complexity involved in calling it a complex question is viewing sex as sexual activity rather than as sexual activities -- it is perceiving an important connection among each of our discrete sexual adventures as an *identity defining history*. Meyer would separate actions into individual performances. He would then disregard action over time as a consideration, since the processually constituted self reenacts itself at every moment, without necessary

continuity between this moment/self and the last. As a lyrical expression of this kind of sexual occasionalism consider the Ani DiFranco song "In or Out:"

Their eyes are all asking are you "in" or are you
 "out?"/ And I think, "Oh man, what is this about?"/ I
 mean, tonight you can't put me up on any shelf /
 Because I came here alone, and I'm gonna leave by
 myself.

Meyer offers a redescription of "gender" that disregards sexual history by reducing "sexual history" to discrete events connected only by their perceived common quality of being sexual. It doesn't matter, if the self is a continuous enactment of itself, whether one seems to have continuity in his sexual (or any other) behavior. The self is constantly being reenacted as something new.

Further, "gender" is itself a kind of constant affective performance. Meyer follows Judith Baker's description of gender as "instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self." (Meyer 1994, 4) Meyer's overall concern with regard to gender, but also in general, is to redefine what it is to be a human away from continuity and consistency toward constant redefinition and spontaneity.

The two-fold advantage that Meyer's performatively constituted self has over Rorty's linguistically constituted self with regard to the metaphysical/epistemological debate which Rorty wishes to drop, is that whereas Rorty's metaphors for self-recreation import representationalism and his metaphors for the self encourage accusations of essentialism, Meyer's self as performance, and self-recreation as camp not only make similar accusations

more difficult, but avoid them *in principle*. Camp is taken to be a performance of a self, not in the sense that there exists a real self prior to the performance, so that camp is the *representation or appearance* (accurate or otherwise) of the previously-existing self. Camp as a performance of a self breaks down the appearance/reality distinction, not by saying that appearance *is* reality, but by framing the conversation in terms of enactments that cut right across the appearance/reality distinction.

Similarly, Meyer's self as an anti-essentialist performance explicitly denies charges of essentialism by its very formulation, but also by the fact that it is not offered as a pronouncement of *what it is to be human* really. Meyer's notion of the self rests on the sense of self one has about him or her self, not on a once-and-for-all pronouncement that what it is to be a person is to be a performance. In these ways Meyer's metaphors of the self as process and self-recreation as camp render the epistemological/metaphysical debate, categories and dualisms that Rorty recommends avoiding as simply inappropriate. With regard to Rorty, I have had to work long and hard to motivate a reading that even hints at a way he can avoid self-referential paradox.

Meyer will make use of his blurring of the lines between "anti-essentialism," "queer," and "camp" by showing that any essentialist who engages in camp-like activity is admitting the undermining queer presence into the mainstream, since to "camp" is to play the queer, and to *play* the queer is to be, in a certain sense, "queer."

Contra Ross -- the camp repoliticization project

I said earlier that Meyer's overall project was the repoliticization of camp. I will now address that project. Meyer's attempt at the repoliticization of camp takes the form of a polemic against "the dominant order" as represented in the person and writing of Andrew Ross. Meyer recognizes that Ross has been "influential" (Meyer 1994, 13) and in a note says

I use Andrew Ross's essay as the basis for a critique of Pop appropriation of Camp precisely because it has had such a major impact upon Camp theorizing. After Sontag's "Notes," Ross's "Uses of Camp," in my opinion, stands as one of the most significant contemporary documents on the subject. (Meyer 1994, 21 note)

Ross characterizes the camp moment as a reappropriation and transvaluation of past and forgotten significance. He describes camp as the sort of thing that happens when some object of production, way of being, speaking or thinking reaches obsolescence and has been laid upon the cultural trash heap. Camp "resurrects" these found articles and breaths into them new life.

In liberating the objects and discourses of the past from disdain and neglect, camp generates its own kind of economy. Camp, in this respect, is the *re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor*. (Ross 1989, 151)

The classic example is that of the gay fascination with "Hollywoodiana." When gay men take the film stars of the Louis B. Meyer-MGM-Hollywood Star System era as their heros and, more importantly, heroines, it is perceived as the quintessential camp moment.

The way that the camp significance in this appreciation is usually cashed out is by emphasizing the impending obsolescence of the manufactured Star-quality individual, and by suggesting that by hyperbolically reappropriating the traditional female icons of the straight male gaze (e.g. Greta Garbo, Judy Garland and, later, Marilyn Monroe) as the paradigms of glamour, beauty and sexuality the gay male emphasized the distance that he experienced between himself and these "standards" of desirability. But he also emphasized the difference he felt between himself and straight standards in general. Ross' explication of Pop camp has it that anyone who feels the sort of distance from the outmoded standards of taste of society can camp so as to illustrate that distance as an act of hyperbolic appropriation.

The content of Meyer's polemic seems to be that Ross and those of the dominant order whom he represents have effected the erasure of the queer from camp. Meyer's tricky critique is that by treating camp as a behavior available to everyone, queer and straight alike, Ross and Sontag, et. al. *have erased the queer by treating the performative critique that is camp itself as the appropriated object in a camp moment.*

Relocating the queer to a past era by defining him/her as a discontinued mode of production is not the neutral act of identification it is made out to be. Rather, it is a dominant performative gesture of incorporation meant to muzzle an opposing voice by substituting the act of appropriation itself as the referent of camp (Meyer 1994, 14)

Meyer is complaining that Ross, Sontag, et.al. have done camp to camp, and in so doing have relegated the source of camp (i.e. the queer) to the grave, since, according to Ross, camp is the appropriation and reassignment of value to an

object (here camp itself) which has been abandoned by the past. (Ross 1989, 151) In order to consider an object (camp) abandoned, Meyer reasons, its owner/producer must be missing or even dead.

It is never suspected that the act of appropriation itself has killed off the queer. In order to account for the absence, the conclusion is that the previous owner of the object must long since have passed away. (Meyer 1994, 14)

Meyer's suggestion is that the queer had not finished with camp by a long shot and what Pop campers considered a yard sale was just an unlocked queer door.

What Ross and his like did not count on, according to Meyer, was the *pre-parody* always already performed on the mainstream culture by the marginalized, yet eminently appropriatable queer. "The power of Camp lies in its ability to be conscious of its future as an appropriated commodity." (Meyer 1994, 17) The parody was pre-formed in the original queer adoption of a processual critique of the dominant paradigm. By adopting a processual identity and by performing that identity in camp (the activity of reappropriation), the queer has forever insinuated him/herself in any reappropriative camp behavior. As Meyer has it, whereas Ross thought that camp was bereft of any contemporary agent or interpreter, as a matter of fact the action and interpretation that is camp *is* the queer self itself. And so the unwitting *straight has put on* and is now playing the queer.

The bourgeois camp cognoscente "liberates" the queer's oppositional signifying practices from their queer identity and substitutes himself as signified. But because the queer constitutes him-/herself processually, the un-queer is now unwittingly performing the queer. The final effect is the

reproduction of the queer's aura by the un-queer camp liberator who has been transformed into a drag queer with no choice but to lipsynch the discourse of the Other. (Meyer 1994, 17)

The reason that this pre-parody is effective is because one of the flaws (and a pretty annoying one) of the mainstream is its penchant for appropriation.

It may appear contradictory for Meyer to complain that Ross and his like have killed off the queer and then to celebrate the trojan horse-like victory over straight appropriation. After all, if the queer is dead, then who is enjoying the celebration? The queer is dead! Long live the queer! But first, remember that Meyer's suggestion is not that pop camp rejuvenates or resurrects the queer, but that it admits only the queer *trace*. He could just as easily, and meaningfully, have said that pop camp is possessed by the queer ghost. And second, consider that Meyer may be suggesting that whereas the pop camp individual thought that the queer was dead, and so *treated* him as dead, since to be queer is to do camp, the queer is really alive as long as camp is.

Now, I am less interested in whether Ross is guilty of the charges Meyer levels than I am in the interesting way that Meyer levels them. But for two reasons, which I will only outline, Ross may be found "not guilty" of these allegations. 1.) Ross, himself, is not doing camp, and so he cannot be described as reappropriating camp as a "found" object. Although all these subjects are contained within the pages of his book, Ross neither writes campily on camp, coldly on the cold war, nor pornographically on pornography. What Ross *is* doing is description, and even Meyer himself recognizes as much. "Ross brilliantly described the techniques and motives of appropriation that underlie the formation of Pop camp." (Meyer 1994, 13) Ross does not hint,

wink and flirt with camp interpretations of his own work, neither does he appropriate anything, what he does is *narrate a clear story with American society as its subject and camp as its theme*. Ross' book is an examination of "intellectuals and popular culture" written as a straightforward sociological interpretation of the relationship.

2.) Similarly, even if Ross were doing *straight* or Pop camp, those straight individuals who describe themselves as camping do not seem to perceive themselves as doing camp *to camp*, they are not necessarily camping "by substituting the act of appropriation itself as the referent of camp" (Meyer 1994, 14) as Meyer finds offensive and effective because it at once erases the queer and then lets him back into the mainstream through appropriation. These Pop campers are, after all, too straight for that! If any are doing this, Ross at least gives no indication of such behavior.

What Ross does do, however -- and this is the part that finally offends Meyer -- is to approach the whole matter from a more or less traditional point of view, one that does not hold up one or another form of camp as legitimate, and the other as derivative.⁵ Ross doesn't explicitly share Meyer's anti-essentialism and it is his *apparent* essentialism that ultimately distances Ross from Meyer.

So then, what have we seen? My efforts in discussing camp have been directed 1.) toward coming to an appreciation of the recent and published history of the camp concern, 2.) toward understanding the most interesting

⁵Obviously, since Meyer is anti-essentialist (at least with regard to the self), by "legitimate" he does not mean essentially correct or accurate. Meyer calls for a legitimacy referring to something thoroughly imbedded within the praxis of human interaction, just as an anti-essentialist can say that the behaviors of Hitler, or the southern slave-holders were illegitimate.

version of the conflict between popular camp and queer camp 3.) toward motivating the associations of anti-essentialism with the queer self and anti-representationalism with camp as I motivated the associations of essentialism with Rorty's linguistic self and representationalism with irony, and 4.) toward approaching a sense of *what camp is* in spite of its amorphous nature and through developing points one, two and three.

Camping together: Sontag, Meyer, Rorty and reversals

And where does this leave us? We have motivated the differences between the Sontag/Ross and the Meyer camp strains in terms of ontology/politics, but we have not resolved the tension that we have created, neither have we decided to whom camp properly belongs. In the next section I will suggest a modest revision of Sontag's description of camp that will not only relieve most of the tension between Sontag/Ross and Meyer, but will also render this modified notion of camp a more apt vehicle for a sort of Rortean self-recreation.

The tension between Sontag/Ross and Meyer is with regard to politics. Sontag's description of camp as "apolitical" offended Meyer because he wants to motivate a reading of camp that renders it a political/ontological critique. The reason that Sontag considered camp *apolitical* was because of its celebration of style over content. (Sontag 1983, 107)

To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized - or at least apolitical. (Sontag 1983, 107)

By saying that camp emphasizes style over content, Sontag leaves open the reading that camp performs a reversal on the style/content distinction traditionally construed. If we read Sontag in that way, at least a couple of considerations arise. First, it is not clear that people, especially aesthetically inclined individuals such as might develop the camp disposition, have formerly considered the hierarchical relationship between the two as *content over style*, as would have to be the case if the result of an inversion were to yield *style over content*. Second, although Sontag seems to constantly employ distinction-reversing language throughout *Notes on Camp*, she also hints at a possible camp way of dealing with dualisms that involves ignoring, instead of reversing traditionally significant dualisms. Sontag says, for example, with regard to whether camp makes good into "bad" and bad into "good":

Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different - a supplementary - set of standards." (Sontag 1983, 114)

Although it is not always clear that what Sontag has in mind is the rejection of inversion *per se*, to extend the disinterest reading to the passage where she seems to back off of the reversal as soon as she offers it is not a violation of the spirit in which Sontag writes, since we have just seen that Sontag herself at least hints at the disinterest reading. This is the reading I suggest. It is easy to read 1964 Sontag as prefiguring the movement away from simple and across the board reversal, but doing it only haltingly and suggestively.

The more interesting postmodern (and more Rortean) stance with regard to reversals is to disregard, rather than to reverse the hierarchies and value-marked dualisms that motivate them. If we are able to motivate the disinterest

reading over the inversion reading of Sontag, we will render camp a more ready metaphor for the sort of self-recreation that Rorty recommends.

Rorty seems to regard the technique of reversal in general as betraying limited thinking. Rather than reversing the old dualisms of appearance/reality, subject/object, realism/idealism, Rorty, in his posture of "benign neglect" recommends something like, albeit more strategic than, Sontag's neutrality with regard to the good/bad axis cited above. Rorty's main misgiving with Nietzsche, and the reason that Nietzsche is finally, according to Rorty, merely an ironist theorist, is that Nietzsche seems to offer nothing more than a *reversal* on Plato. (CIS, 35, 101) Rorty celebrates Freud over Nietzsche on this matter for giving us something other than "inverted Platonism." (CIS, 33)

Rorty finds the simple reversal of dualisms so unsatisfying that he feels it necessary to distinguish his hero, the later Derrida, from the earlier Derrida and Paul de Man on just this point.

On my account, de Man (and the constructive and argumentative strain in early Derrida - the strain that produces notions like "trace") represents merely one more *inversion* of a traditional philosophical position - one more "transvaluation of all values" that nevertheless remains within the range of alternatives specified by "the discourse of philosophy." (EHO, 117)

And although not all dualisms are rightly considered philosophical dualisms (EHO, 108, 111), and so not all reversals count as the sorts of things that matter to Rorty, the way to deal with the ones that do matter is to display disinterest, not disgust.

We have already noticed elsewhere that Rorty's method for dealing with unfruitful dualisms in general is to treat them with "benign neglect," which is to

say he deflates the antagonism by ignoring it. And so, it seems clear that how Rorty would deal with such dualisms as the style-content distinction in Sontag that is somewhat troublesome when comparing Meyer and Sontag would be to drop the distinction and so ease the tension.

In this chapter I have begun to outline the history of the camp concern. In the next chapter we will continue to develop the camp theme, finally applying it particularly to Rorty's hero, Jacques Derrida.

CHAPTER VI

RELIEVING THE TENSION: DERRIDA AS CAMP

The traditional means for going beyond straight seriousness -- irony, satire -- seem feeble today, inadequate to the culturally oversaturated medium in which contemporary sensibility is schooled. Camp introduces a new standard: artifice as idea, theatricality. (Sontag 1983, 116)

In the previous chapter I have outlined the phenomenon and intellectual history of camp. I have offered at least two explications of what camp is without deciding which is camp rightly, or more interestingly, considered. Sontag's description of camp as an aesthetic appreciation for the extremes in human endeavor has something to recommend it, but Meyer's expression of frustration with popular applications of a standpoint so utterly meaningless understood in "bourgeoise" frameworks is compelling enough to require some refutation if it is to be rejected.

Also in Meyer's favor in the overall context of the present project is his very powerful example and extension of Rortean self-recreation in terms of Rorty's two-fold origin of human being. First, Meyer redescribes what it is to be human as a self-performance, and then he outlines a particular kind of self-performance, camp, that provides a marginalized population the chance at centrality.

Sontag's discussion, though suggestive and entertaining, lacked the sort of depth and explanatory power we normally require in theoretical pursuits. Conversely, Meyer's highly theoretical redescription of the processual queer self

remaking itself as a constant performance of itself enjoys the depth Sontag misses, but doesn't indicate much of what it is to *do* camp. All we know from Meyer is that to camp is to be queer and to be queer is to be as an anti-essentialist.

Happily, it requires an only very slight modification of Sontag to allow Meyer his anti-essentialism. The modification that we require to allow Sontag and Meyer to "play nice" really only amounts to insisting on a certain interpretation of Sontag -- one that she herself indicates within the text. If we interpret Sontag as saying that camp doesn't perform reversals on old tired dualisms, but rather ignores the very dualism in question (whether style/content or good/bad) by giving importance to another criterion altogether, Meyer's complaint is much less troubling. There is really no need, then, to choose between Sontag/Ross and Meyer.

It is easy enough to suggest that Sontag/Ross have got the phenomenal elements of what it is to do camp close enough, but that Meyer limits the camp nomination to those individuals who, as part of their camp enactment, suggest their own interpretation as anti-essentialists. It was never with the behaviors Sontag and Ross described as camp behaviors that Meyer took issue, it was only with whether the behaviors should be thought of as political. But we quickly saw, through a careful reading of Meyer, that what he means by saying that camp is inherently "political" is that camp is a critique of bourgeoisie class values, and that what he has most importantly in mind by "bourgeoisie class values" is *essentialism*.

Further, if we follow Meyer's redescription all the way through, we end up with two kinds of camp behavior: queer camp, performed as anti-essentialism,

and pop camp, performed by essentialists who unknowingly are acting the queer and so giving the queer a public voice by their appropriation of the camp performance. This is not *incommensurate* with the Ross/Sontag view; it only relegates one kind of camp performance (pop camp) to the place of the derivative, inferior and self-deceived, and exalts the other (queer camp) to the place of power, primacy and self-consciousness.

I read Meyer's exposition as a sort of hypothetical-imperative-type moral argument: *if* you don't want to act queer (anti-essentialist) and so compromise your own sexually defined identity (essentialism), and at the same time permit the queer trace to enter into mainstream dialogue, *then* don't reappropriate camp behavior. I'm not sure that Meyer wants to, or could if he wanted to, offer an imperative stronger than that. And I'm not sure that many members of the so-called "straight" community wouldn't embrace this camp way of mitigating their own essentialism and allowing marginalized voices to find amplification. Meyer's polemic only has teeth if we assign negativity to the "queer" or "anti-essentialist" labels. I do not. But more importantly, neither do I think that Rorty or his hero Jacques Derrida would rather be called straight than queer. In fact, as part of redescribing Derrida as a camp figure, I will demonstrate that in "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing" and *Contingency, irony and solidarity* Rorty uses anti-essentialist sexual metaphors in ways very similar to the way Meyer does.

By outlining the brief history of the camp concern we have allowed to emerge certain assumptions, associations, standpoints and behaviors that will now permit me to recommend camp as a way of gaining freedom from the past, as Rortean irony does, without relying so heavily upon the representationally

rich metaphor of "irony." My Rortean method will be to make the "camp" vocabulary look appealing by redescribing Derrida's behavior as camp, and in so doing, allow the camp themes of reappropriation and preappropriation, playfulness, sexual deviancy, anti-essentialism and parasitic reaction to the past to emerge from that redescription.

In keeping with the amorphous qualities both of Derrida and of camp, this redescription will depend less upon an argumentative rhetoric and more upon a sort of intertwining of the camp texts with Rorty's reading of Derrida. I will first offer Rorty's distinction between an early and a late Derrida in order to 1.) make it clear that Rorty is primarily interested in the later Derrida, and 2.) motivate a Rortean reading of certain Derridean themes.

Then, I will discuss Derrida as an example of camp of the sort discussed by Meyer and Sontag. And although I will invoke Sontag's discussion of naive and deliberate camp as well as Meyer's redescription of queer, processually constituted camp selves, my aim is not to *prove* that Derrida is *really* doing camp instead of as doing irony. My goal is rather merely to hint strongly enough at significant similarities organically occurring within the two previously uncomparing discussions that associations between camp and Derrida begin to form.

Derrida as fantasist, early and late

Because my project is to relieve the tension I have motivated in Rorty's thought, and although I am certain that there is much in Derrida that Rorty does not address that is open to a camp reading, my task here is to redescribe the behaviors, passages and postures of Derrida with which Rorty is concerned so

as to make camp appear a good way of speaking about the sort of projects of self-referential autonomy that Rorty recommends. And so, I will concern myself only with Rorty's consideration of Derrida.

It is necessary, in order to make any sense of Rorty's Derrida, to make the distinction that Rorty does between an earlier Derrida and a later one, not unlike the early/late Wittgenstein or the early/late Heidegger. Rorty wants to roughly and provisionally align the early Derrida with the early Wittgenstein and the early Heidegger as (unfortunately) more professional and professorial. Rorty describes the movement in Derrida as a movement away from first, a method commensurate with the "standard rules of philosophy" (EHO, 128) and second, a transcendental project of pronouncing the "conditions of possibility of all previous theory." (CIS, 123) Rorty's suggestion is that Derrida has moved away from this business-as-usual philosophy and toward a more privately idiosyncratic play with marks and noises for the purpose of self-recreation. In other words, Derrida is an ironist fantasist.

Rorty sees that Derrida has learned his lessons about marks and noises from the later Heidegger, but that in Derrida's later incarnation, to put it in Rortean terms, the recognition of the contingency of anyone's and hence, a *fortiori*, of his own final vocabulary has taken root, and is bearing dialectical and idiosyncratic fruit.

Derrida learns from Heidegger that phonemes matter, but he realizes that Heidegger's litany is just Heidegger's, not Being's or Europe's. His problem becomes, as he says at the end of "Différance," to think the fact that "there is no unique name" or, more generally, no definitive litany - without nostalgia, that is, outside the myth of a purely maternal or paternal

language, a lost native country of thought." (CIS, 122)

The advantage that Derrida has over Heidegger, is that he is able to finitize his own efforts at finding a language beyond Being, and so to move on away from positive, universal and public construction (even if in the form of de-construction) and toward what Rorty describes, following Gasché as "wild and private lucubrations." (CIS, 125)

Rorty criticizes the earlier Derrida for allowing his writings to be interpreted as attempts at constructing a positive philosophy of deconstruction. In *Contingency, irony and solidarity* he admits that the readings of early Derrida by people like Rudolph Gasché, who describe him as attempting to find a "system beyond Being," do seem somewhat justified, but that contradictions in that attempt seem obvious.

There is much in Derrida's early work which encourages this reading [Derrida as constructive and argumentative], and I shall not take up the question of the accuracy of Gasché's description to Derrida's early intentions. But there is an obvious problem with any such reading, namely, that the whole idea of "undercutting" and of "conditions of possibility" sounds terribly metaphysical. (CIS, 124)

Rorty does not explicitly decide the matter of positive construction *against* Derrida, he merely chastises the early Derrida for *encouraging* this interpretation by his semi-consistent and seemingly programmatic use of words like "trace," and "sign." In "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing" Rorty offers the complaint in this way:

...there is a side of Derrida which looks unfortunately constructive, a side which makes it look as if he in the end succumbs to nostalgia, to the lure of philosophical system-building, and specifically that of

constructing yet another transcendental idealism.
(CP, 99)

The matter, finally, turns in Derrida's favor, as Rorty recognizes "Différance," which came directly after the apparently constructive *On Grammatology*, as signalling a sort of self-finitizing movement in Derrida.

Différance, unlike *trace*, has no more to do with signs than it does with things or gods or minds or any of the other things for which Kantian philosophy has sought the unconditioned conditions. *Différance* is a name of the situation which the dialectical philosopher starts from - the wish to revolt against the eternalization and cosmologization of the present vocabulary by creating a new vocabulary which will not permit the old questions to be asked. (CP, 103)

In *Contingency, irony and solidarity* Rorty has redescribed Derridean *différance* in his own more American terminology as the "urge to theorize." Rorty's indebtedness to Derridean *différance* for his own notion of the theoretical urge should be obvious: Rorty describes the ironist's urge to theorize as the difficulty involved in trying to actualize the last remaining *possibility* while striving for *new* logical space in which to be self-recreative. And in the passage cited above Rorty describes *différance* as "the wish to revolt against the eternalization and cosmologization of the present vocabulary by creating a new vocabulary which will not permit the old questions to be asked."

At the end of this self-referential problem of ironist theorizing, is fantasy. But by saying that fantasy is the *end* of ironist theorizing, Rorty is not making a normative claim -- saying what *should* or should *not* be the case. Rather Rorty is making an empirical claim: The sorts of people who are burdened with the desire to recontextualize all prior and potential recontextualization often unburden themselves by theorizing with regard to that desire. And if that desire

has run its course, if they have allowed the urge to theorize to play itself out in their persons, what is left is not the *theory* part of ironist theory, but the *ironist* part. Specifically, the ironism involved is taking seriously the contingency of one's beliefs, including one's beliefs regarding the contingency of one's beliefs. Not only does Rorty display his indebtedness to Derridean *différance*, he also redescribes what he perceives as the later Derrida's movement toward self-finitization as his exemplar of ironic "fantasy."

Earlier I developed the Rorty of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* as his own example of ironic fantasizing -- using the figures in the philosophy canon as characters in one's own idiosyncratic attempt at a self-recreative affirmation of contingency for the sake of autonomy. But if Rorty's work is interestingly viewed in this light, it must also be understood as his attempt to achieve something like the playful redescription that he ascribes to the later Derrida. If Rorty is his own example of self-recreating fantasy, this is only because he took Derrida as exemplar of the sort of thing that can come out of ironist theorizing.

As we have discussed in some detail in the context of my redescription of Rorty as an ironist fantasist, Rorty draws up the superiority of the ironic fantasist over the ironist theorist in terms of the search for beauty instead of sublimity. The ironist fantasist, remember, is the one who treats his own self-recreation as a project with limited application. The fantasist's search for beauty is the personal attempt to come out from under the figures who represent the fantasist's linguistic and social contingencies (the only contingencies that yield to redescription) -- those figures who have previously served as the defining authority in his or her life. The fantasist who was once a theorist is rid of the urge to theorize, fantasy is the end of that urge's rule in

her life. Fantasy is not the attempt to pronounce the end of theorizing in principle and for everyone, but merely in *particular and for the fantasist*.

The specific Derridean fantasies which Rorty offers give content to the claim that Derrida exemplifies what it is to be a fantasist. To be an ironist fantasist is to have worked through the urge to theorize. And the urge to theorize comes from having been made by language into the sort of human who finds projects of grand and final recontextualization compelling. This particular sort of human (one among many) is created by having "grown up" with the works, problems and figures of the philosophical canon as one's standard and language setting authorities. In "Two Meanings of Logocentrism," Rorty makes this point with himself as example by comparing himself to two others to whom he feels similar:

Having myself cathected the discourse of philosophy when young, I find Heidegger and Derrida among the most powerful and fascinating writers of my time. They speak to my condition. But I doubt very much that they speak to a universal human, or even a universal Western, condition. My own imagination is filled with the same images as fill theirs: Socrates and Phaedo, shifty Matter and stalwart Form, dubious mind-dependent redness and reliable mind-independent squareness, the starry a priori above and the grimy a posteriori below, Nietzsche's tarantulas, and Quine's rabbit stages. These are powerful, but not universally compelling, images. Their power over me, I take it, comes from the way I happened to acquire them, the way they happened to interlock with, and eventually to symbolize, my own idiosyncratic hopes and fears. Their power over Heidegger and Derrida, I assume, is a result of similarly idiosyncratic interlockings. (EHO, 108)

The specific fantasies which Rorty ascribes to Derrida, and which he offers in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, as substantiation for his claim that Derrida is

exemplar ironist fantasist are first, Derrida's treatment of several philosophically important pairs in the "Envois" section of *The Post Card* and second, his (in)famous interaction with John Searle in *Glyph*.

Consideration of Rorty's treatment of Derrida in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* will lead us naturally to several other texts where Rorty celebrates Derrida. I will redescribe the two examples in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* as open to a camp interpretation, with each corresponding very roughly to one of the two available camp moments as described by Sontag. I will render Rorty's redescription of Derrida's reinterpretation of the philosophical duos as an example of the camp sensibility's response to articles of naive camp. And I will read Derrida's interaction with John Searle as an example of the camp sensibility's attempts at camp self-expression that Sontag calls deliberate camp. Eventually, motivated by intertwining all the Rortean texts, a reading of Derrida will emerge that is strikingly similar to Meyer's anti-essentialist queer camp self.

Later Derrida as philosophical camp

On the one side there are the people who admire Derrida for having invented a new, splendidly ironic way of writing about the philosophical tradition...The former emphasize the playful, distancing, oblique way in which Derrida handles traditional philosophical figures and topics...Roughly speaking, [they] are content to admire his manner... (EHO, 119)

Rorty's celebration of Derrida in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* begins with his appreciation for Derrida's finitizing treatment of those figures in the history of philosophy who are central to his philosophical canon and so have served as Derrida's defining authorities. In the "Envois" portion of *The Post*

Card, Rorty discovers Derrida at his redescrivingly playful best. The playful treatment that these figures receive at Derrida's hand may be seen as a manifestation of the camp sensibility that Sontag calls "naive camp."

Naive camp, as I have indicated before, is the camp sensibility expressed in appreciation of an article that the camp sensibility does not appreciate *seriously* because the features that were responsible for its serious valuation are now hopelessly dated or passé. In fact what I mean when I say "taken seriously" in this context is something very close to taking things as they were originally taken.

It is because the item emphasizes the distance between what we once valued and what we now value that the article is camp. When we fill our world with articles of naive camp we are continually reminded of the impermanence of our values and interpretations. This reminder comes as a function of the proximity of our non-serious valuation of the camp item to our constant and seemingly unstopable tendencies toward new and serious valuation and interpretation. This juxtaposition creates a feeling of vertigo that the camp sensibility finds pleasant. The vertigo is a by-product of the awareness of our past values' transience that creates an awareness of the unavoidable *future* revaluation of our current values and interpretations. In this way, camp accomodates Rorty's problem of ironist theorizing. The camp sensibility is aware of and needs to feel both the impermanence of the past's attempts at recontextualization *and* the similar, but only projected, transience of its own camp attempt at recontextualization.

The naive camp moment is well illustrated by the camp sensibility's creative appreciation of a thrift store find. Someone walks the aisles of a

cluttered junk shop until, "Aha, a copy of *K.C. and the Sunshine Band's* first album, *and on 8-Track: Mine!*" The fact that *K.C. and the Sunshine Band* was quite earnest about their music and its production on such a dated (but for its time, very popular) medium as *8-track* tapes is very important to their camp status. It is the relative quality and the sincere appreciation of both the music and the medium that makes it a good camp example. *K. C. and the Sunshine Band* was not successful at its prime *in spite* of its being *disco* music and on *8-track*, but *because* of these.

In naive camp, according to Sontag, one important feature is the unsuccessful earnestness of the person who produced or performs the naive camp article.

In naive, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails. Of course, not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as Camp. Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive.
(Sontag 1983, 112)

In naive camp, producers or performers are quite serious in their intention. There is none of deliberate camp's *trying* to create an article of "bad taste." The naive camp article is not meant to be a "joke" or "quaint" or an article of camp at all.

By "proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate and the naive," I don't think Sontag has anything so formulaic in mind that we could offer a *recipe* for what would count as naive camp. By "proper mixture" Sontag must mean something much more mundane, like *including* naivete, exaggeration, passion and fantasy to *some* degree and in *some* combination. It would be incommensurate with Sontag's misgivings at the outset of the article

regarding systematicity with regard to sensibilities to interpret her otherwise.

(Sontag 1983, 106)

Derrida is aware of the sincerity of those philosophers who have come before and of the seriousness with which they were appreciated. But earnestness is not enough; in addition to their sincerity, these thinkers have also failed, and *they have failed with flair*. The common and quite serious project of the Plato-Kant tradition, as Rorty describes it and vaguely put, was to give the *final account* for the way things really are. We could be more specific as to how that played itself out in each thinker, but the point is not what they did, but whether they were serious about doing it, that they failed at some level and whether they did what they did with flair. Inasmuch as no one has ever managed to offer an unredescribable redescription, all who sought such a thing failed. Their failure, according to Rorty, is attributable to, and even *amounts to*, the fact that their projects and methods display a blindness with regard to their own situatedness and potential for redescription. And so they failed. But they failed with flair!

It may seem odd to say that thinkers as stolid as Kant, Descartes or Aristotle have *flair*, or that they have shown exaggeration, passion and fantasy. Now Kierkegaard, Plato and Hume -- they show *pizazz* -- but Kant, Descartes and Aristotle? To hear Rorty tell it, the common and defining mark of writers of influence is that their metaphors are found "savory" by the following generations. Further, Rorty is not talking about the personalities of the thinkers themselves when considering who is tasty (Kant). Nor is he even talking about their writing *style* (Spinoza). Rorty is more concerned with the spice of their thoughts and of the verbal stews their names have come to represent.

As Rorty implies -- by including him with Heidegger as someone who shares Rorty's passionate background in philosophy -- Derrida also at one time took the philosophers in the Plato-Kant tradition *seriously* enough to count them as worth getting over. This seems to imply that he appreciated philosophers like Plato, and Heidegger for the same qualities for which they are seriously appreciated. Within our camp redescription we might say, then, that it is the very qualities in the figures considered for which they were once taken seriously that Derrida emphasizes in order to feel the freedom that comes with recognizing the transience of our valuations and interpretations in a camp moment. These once seriously valued qualities, in Rorty's account, are something like the *projects of explaining* why there is something rather than nothing, or this rather than that and the *rigorous manner* in which they pursued these projects.

Although it is tempting to describe the camp sensibility as "making fun," It is important to note that Derrida's camp appreciation for the philosophical projects and methods of the past is not simple cynicism, or as Sontag put it "if it is cynicism, it's not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism." (Sontag 1983, 119) Derrida, in order to count as having a camp appreciation for traditional philosophy must enjoy some *limited* distance from it, which means that he must be, to some degree and in some way, *close* to traditional philosophy. But by "close" I do not mean close in method or project, but close as in having affection toward. "Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as 'a camp,' they're enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling." (Sontag 1983, 119)

So, by "limited distance" I mean camp loves what it camps on. "Limited *distance*" seems to emphasize how far away we have gotten from the thing upon which we camp. To emphasize the closeness, we might alternatively call the relationship between the camp sensibility and the camp article "detached love." This detached love is often expressed as a certain attachment to the past, and while camp is not nostalgia, it does betray a fondness for outmoded ways. "It's not a love of the old as such. It's simply that the process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment - or arouses a necessary sympathy." (Sontag 1983, 113)

It should be clear that although camp items are not necessarily items from the past, out-dated icons serve most easily and readily as camp articles, articles of detached love, since the one-time advocates of the practice, style, fashion, fad, way of thinking, speaking or doing are no longer *currently* and *seriously* invested in the article, but still have feelings of attachment and positive associations. It seems clear, though, that especially with regard to philosophical camp, the more quickly we render intellectual trends *aufgehoben* the more readily those items will be available for a camp reading. Just as the latest dance craze (monkey, hustle, lambada, achey-breakey heart, macarena) almost immediately becomes a joke, Rorty seems to think that western society generally is getting faster and faster at rendering obsolescent certain ways of thinking. (CIS, 7) And rapidity of obsolescence makes us better and better at opening modes of thought to camp interpretations.

Rorty renders *The Post Cards* in a way that highlights Derrida's feeling of distance toward the method and projects of traditional philosophy while maintaining as a theme the necessity of overcoming their influence. This

feeling of or search for separation combined with the awareness of a lingering connection is the *limited distance* or *detached love* described by the camp attitude. And in the service of his freedom, but in deference to his love of philosophy, Derrida displays the camp disposition by showing, as Rorty has it, "that there are other things to do with philosophers than argue with them." (CIS, 135)

Rorty emphasizes the incommensurability of the work's form (written on the backs of innumerable post cards) with the books of the figures with whom the text of the post cards deal -- figures who make up for Derrida the relevant past. Whereas books encourage the feeling of resolution at their completion and yet demand that we find some way to frame the work, its scope, topic and what counts as its success or failure, post cards read as inherently (and happily) incomplete, meandering, ill-defined and occasional. (CIS, 104; EHO, 93) And since Rorty takes the "Envois" section of *The Post Card* to be "the text which best illustrates what [he] takes to be Derrida at his best" I will summarily refer to Derridean writing as "post card writing." I do not mean to suggest that *all* of Derrida's work of which Rorty approves is written as post cards; it isn't. I *am* suggesting that the issues that come out as a result of this writing-as-writing-a-post-card (in particular the problem of ending a book, and the emphasis of the material and accidental features of signs) are those that represent the Derridean concerns with which Rorty is most interested. And since it is only with Rorty's Derrida that we are here concerned, it is only appropriate that we take the text that Rorty called "the best" as representative of Derrida, or at least of Rorty's Derrida.

The success of the post card lies in its ability to avoid the problem that Hegel had -- that of *how to end one's book*. Rorty counts the problem of how to end one's book as identical with the problem of ironist theorizing. (CIS, 104)

And along with the post card's apparent success at avoiding a literal ending, Rorty is also, and most importantly, impressed with the way that the post card deals with the more theoretical self-referential issues of how to end one's book *qua* the problem of ironist theorizing, i.e., the problem of actualizing the last possibility while making room for new possibilities in the arena of self-recreation. Possibilities are multiplied in post card writing by the way that they encourage the reader (and writer) to treat meaning as a function of associations and connotations and not as a matter of strict, literal and symbolic reference. Rorty attributes the success of the intermittent post card to its emphasis on the *how* of writing:

The only way to evade the problems about how to end books, to escape self-referential criticisms that one has done what one has accused others of doing, will be to transfer the weight of one's writing to those "material" features - to what has hitherto been treated as marginal. These associations are necessarily private; for insofar as they become public they find their way into dictionaries and encyclopedias. (CIS, 131)

Rorty here invokes his previous distinction between the ironist theorist and the ironist novelist (or here "fantasist") that whereas ironist theorists write books that attempt to summarize and recontextualize the findings of those who have gone before *while* protecting themselves from recontextualization, fantasists are perfectly happy offering one more expression of situated contingency rendered in marks and noises and added to the ever-increasing pile of idiosyncratic

redescriptions. The place for such passing fancies (or fantasies) is on the backs of humble, transient post cards. The post card is neither the beginning nor the end of inquiry, it accepts its place of temporary and contextual significance.

But how does the post card transfer the weight of one's writing to the material feature? By explaining "material" in terms of "what has been treated as marginal" Rorty seems to want to tie the "material" features of writing, the "marks and noises" of writing, in with the "accidental" associations and connotations invoked when words are used, not as *opposed to* the more "essential"¹ denotative² "meanings," but rather *in concert* with these meanings. I am using the word "meaning" in scare-quotes here because Rorty, especially in "Texts and Lumps," demonstrates his preference for words like "significance" to convey his view that words have efficacy as a function of their relationship to other terms, and not as a function of their linking up with *the world*, as he thinks the word "meaning" implies. I will continue to use the word "meaning" in this context in connection with denotations for the sake of highlighting the contrast between the literal, "essential" meaning and the associative significance understanding of words.

Rorty, like Derrida, and in keeping with his benign neglect for dualisms that have not shown themselves useful, does not want to encourage the strict distinction between the serious and non-serious or the literal and accidental

¹Rorty seems to be using this word as something closely synonymous with "literal," an understanding weaker in metaphysical import than "essential" first appears.

²Understood in the sense of *sense*, as opposed to *reference*.

efficacy of words. But, as we have shown with regard to other dualisms, to elevate the so-called accidental over the literal would be to do just that; to elevate non-serious or accidental would be performing one more tired inversion on a clumsy dualism. So, rather than *contrasting* the material efficacy with the more symbolic/literal function, that which is *typically* construed as the meaning of a word, Rorty *conflates* the use of literal sense with the efficacy of accidental connotations. The way that he does this is by characterizing the literal as *associations which have found their way into dictionaries*. (CIS, 131) This move reduces *literal* meanings to *associations that have common currency*. Notice that literal meanings are not distinguishable from the connotations, accidental or material effect by anything except how common the associations are. Those associations that are common parlance make up its central, i.e. literal, significance, and those associations that are more private are its material associations. But they are not different in kind.

Rorty sees the precedent for his emphasis on the material and accidental features of signs in Derrida. Rorty has suggested that from Heidegger, Derrida had learned well the lesson that "phonemes matter." (CIS, 122) Rorty sees Derrida as continuous with Freud and Heidegger, and his post card form as an indication of Derrida's interest in the more material and performative aspect of how people get things done:

In Freud's account of the uncounscious origins of jokes, and in Heidegger's (largely fake) etymologies, we get the same attention to what most of the books of *la grande epoque* have treated as inessential - the "material" and "accidental" features of the marks and noises people use to get what they want. (CIS, 131)

As Rorty sees it, by writing on post cards, Derrida is blurring the lines between getting things done with words by relying on their "symbolic" power and achieving objectives by playing on a word's more material associative potential.

Meyer's performative metaphors for the self and Rorty's interest in the material and accidental have a common project, that of encouraging an anti-essentialist and anti-representationalist sense of self. To one who appreciates emphasis on the material and accidental, Derridean post cards are as apt a method for performative constitution of the self via writing as Meyer's processually constituted self is an appropriate metaphor for the self via public performance.

Consider the earlier description of Meyer's processually constituted self as "discontinuous," and "performative," relying on specific and "stylized repetition" of "enactments, embodiments or speech acts" to "locate identity within a performative nexus." Derridean post cards are discontinuous in the same way that stylized repetitions are discontinuous. Neither has a necessary connection to what [action or writing] has come before. Post cards, through their emphasis on the material and accidental features, are strikingly like the performative self's reliance on enactments, embodiments and speech as acts in that neither implies that there is something deeper, more important, abiding or non-contextual *behind* the act or the text, or *remaining* after the text. Just as for Derrida all there is is text, for Meyer all there is is enactment.

Derrida's post card writing seems to be both an *apt vehicle* for pursuing the performatively constituted self that Meyer recommends, as well as *being well-motivated* by this sort of ill-defined, spontaneous, stylized, repetitive and discontinuous sense of self. Whichever direction we go, whether we try to find

a way of writing that performs the self well, or whether we try to find a sense of self that is most commensurable with our commitment to Derridean writing at its best, the fit between post cards and performed selves is a good one.

Derrida as deliberate camp

Derrida's interaction with John Searle in the pages of *Glyph I* and *Glyph II* may be taken as an example of the more self-conscious brand of performance that Sontag calls deliberate camp, the sort of thing that Meyer identifies, when enacted outside of bourgeoisie ontological frameworks (essentialism), with the processual creation of a self. Whereas in naive camp, the camp sensibility rests in the appreciator of the sincerely produced camp article, in deliberate camp the sensibility belongs to the one who makes the camp object or performs the camp activity.

As we move from considering the "Envois" section of *The Post Card* to Derrida and Searle in *Glyph*, we move from Derrida as the camp sensibility expressing itself as appreciation for the hyperbolic earnestness of others in a moment of Sontag's naive camp to making *himself* part of a deliberate camp article.

In *Glyph I* there appeared an article by Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in which he criticizes Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* for distinguishing between the serious and non-serious use of words. Austin offered the distinction for the sake of summarily discounting the importance of the non-serious as data in trying to ascertain how words are used. In that same volume Searle, an Austin devotee, offered "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida." In that essay, Searle defended Austin generally, saying that

It would be improper to count Derrida's reaction against Austin as the clash of two great philosophical traditions because he gets Austin so wrong that what might have been a "CLASH!" is more of a "clink." One of the things that Searle says Derrida gets wrong with regard to Austin, and the thing of which Rorty makes heavy weather, is that Derrida neglects the rule of quotation marks. In *Glyph II*, Derrida, as Rorty put it, "replied by raising doubts about the utility and scope of the distinction itself - doubts which were exasperatingly irrelevant to Searle's complaints." (CIS, 132)

Derrida's response seemed "irrelevant to Searle's complaints" since, as Rorty has it, Searle was insisting on the dilemma that one must make clear and obvious distinctions between treating writings, and people, seriously and philosophically or "psycho-analytically" and as a "figure in your own fantasies, giving free reign to a set of associations..." (CIS, 132) As Searle saw the situation, Derrida's associations "have no relevance to Austin's projects." (CIS, 132) Rorty will agree with this much: he will agree that Derrida's lucubrations are in a sense incommensurate with Austin's projects, *but* rather than agree that Derrida is simply and explicitly (Derrida never would quite say what he saw himself as doing) treating Searle psycho-analytically or as literature, Rorty prefers to describe what Derrida does as refusing the necessity of the dilemma upon which Searle was insisting:

I take it that Derrida does not want to make a single move within the language game which distinguishes between fantasy and argument, philosophy and literature, serious writing and playful writing... (CIS, 133)

Derrida wanted to treat Austin neither philosophically nor psychoanalytically. Derrida wanted to treat Austin Derridean-ly. This way of writing, according to

Rorty, had no precedent, and so could neither be pigeon-holed by Searle's dilemma, nor could it be held up as accountable to some previously existing set of standards for what would count as success or failure.

Rorty characterizes Derrida's performance in *Glyph* as "trying to create himself by creating his own language game... He is trying to get a game going that cuts right across the rational-irrational distinction." (CIS, 133) The other distinctions across which we have already noticed Rorty counts Derrida's interactions with Searle as cutting include the fantasy-argument, philosophy-literature and serious-playful distinctions. All of this distinction-cutting may be summarized in terms whose relevance to Rorty, Derrida and to camp we have noticed over and over: Rorty celebrates in Derrida his unwillingness to choose between horns of a dilemma and his penchant for treating as non-negotiable the unuseful philosophical dualisms that go along with them by striking a new way to be with regard to the authors and texts that populate our philosophical lives.

This new way to be, we have seen, is a combination of autonomous and peripheral. Rorty ties these two issues together:

Derrida's attitude toward all such rules [e.g., use/mention] is that it is, of course, necessary to follow them if one wants to argue with other people, but that there are other things to do with philosophers than argue with them. (CIS, 135)

The other things that Rorty sees in Derrida's example to do with philosophers is not limited to but certainly includes "finitizing the authority of..." We have seen over and over that by "autonomy" Rorty means redescribing the authority figures in one's life. And although I'm not sure that Searle counts as an authority figure in Derrida's life, Derrida may be treating him as a living

representative of those more important, and yet dead, authority figures who just refuse to exit the grave and fight back for themselves.

We have seen how Derrida may be rendered as the camp consciousness appreciating an article of naive camp and also how he may be rendered as an example of the camp consciousness expressing itself as deliberate camp through his behaviors. Now consider the parallels between Rorty's parasitic interpretation of Derrida and its similarity to Meyer's description of the queer performance of camp.

Derrida and Meyer's queer

Although Derrida's freedom is enacted by his production of a written way to be free with respect to his past, and although Derrida's autonomy rests in his preventing others' pigeon-holing, Rorty is clear that the reactive writing in which people like Derrida, and Rorty too, engage is necessarily parasitic upon more "normal" efforts. In "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," Rorty identifies "normal" writing with "Kantian" writing and considers them both as providing the requisite *standard* against which "abnormal" or "dialectic" writing reacts.

By "Kantian/normal writing" Rorty means the sort of theorizing that attempts to minimize the role of language by offering a description of the world that is so clear as to be self-evident. "Kantian philosophers would like not to write, but just to *show*. They would like the words they use to be so simple as to be presuppositionless." (CP, 105) In fact, normal writers would rather offer such profound *demonstrations* that words are rendered entirely unnecessary.

In normal physics, normal philosophy, normal moralizing or preaching, one hopes for the normal thrill of just the right piece fitting into just the right

slot, with a shuddering resonance which makes
verbal commentary superfluous and inappropriate.
(CP, 106)

Abnormal, dialectical, thinkers need to "set the stage" before they can offer their demonstrative performances, whereas for normal theorists the stage has been so sufficiently set by others that they may enter directly into performance mode, and so appear both timely and a good fit. But the excitement that these qualities of punctuality and propriety bring with them is as predictable and ordinary as they are.

Rorty appropriates and extends Derrida's comparison of writing to sex. "Writing, as Derrida says...is to this kind of simple 'getting it right' as masturbation is to standard, solid, reassuring sex." (CP, 106) Seeing as how this comment comes just on the heels of the last one cited above, we may guess that it was something about "just the right piece fitting into just the right slot" that made him think of Derrida's comparison. For whatever reason, though, Rorty spends the last several pages of "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing" weaving a yarn of dialectical/abnormal writing, now as "improper" sex, now as a parasitic kudzu vine, both relying on their more stable "normal" hosts for structure, and identity. Rorty, although always given to metaphorical language, relies especially heavily on these metaphors themselves, apparently for the purpose of lightening the tone of the discussion, while not mitigating the importance.

The Freudian distinction between the normal and abnormal, drawn with the concreteness which is given by Derrida's exhibition of the sexual overtones of most metaphilosophical debate, seems to me just what is needed to be properly playful about the difference between the Kantians and the

dialecticians. If one thinks of this difference as that between the partisans of Eternity and of Time, or those of Theory and of Practice, Nature and History, Permanence and Change, Intellect and Intuition, the Sciences and the Arts, it all looks too momentous, too much as if there were a serious and debatable issue around. The issue between Kantian and non-Kantian philosophy is, I think, about as serious as the issue between normal and deviant sexual practices. (CP, 106)

This is not to say that the difference between normal and abnormal philosophy *does not matter*, but that it matters in the *same way* that the difference between normal and abnormal sex matters. Some people find *both* issues to be of central importance with regard to the development of an appropriate sense of self.

It is, to be sure, an issue upon which men may well feel their identity and their integrity depend. ("Men," rather than "people," since taking how and what one does in bed as definitive of one's being seems a specifically masculine trait.) (CP, 106)

Meyer calls these same people, those who require that their sexual practices *line up* with their morphologies, and think of themselves as an *integration* of their identities, their bodies, and their practices "compulsory reproductive heterosexuals." (Meyer 1994, 3) These are the ones whom he excludes from participation in camp behavior, since their sense of an abiding, integrated self will not permit them to perform a self except inside essentialist signifying frameworks. Rorty makes the comparison of the compulsory reproductive heterosexual with the Kantian thinker.

The Kantian versus non-Kantian contrast now appears as that between the man who wants to take (and see) things as they are, and thus make sure that the right pieces go in the right holes, and the

man who wants to change the vocabulary presently
used for isolating pieces and holes. (CP, 107)

Just as the Kantian and the compulsory reproductive heterosexual are analogues, so too are the non-Kantian and the queer. Meyer's queer, remember, is not identified by his material sexual practice, and so his identity doesn't depend on who he has sex with, or with which pieces go in which holes when and how often. His identity is merely equivalent to the disintegrated, sporadic performance of that identity.

And just as Rorty's non-Kantian, dialectical thinker requires a Kantian, non-dialectical thinker, so too sexual deviancy requires a sense of propriety.

We cannot just let Kantians have their (self-eliminating) kind of writing and the Hegelians their (self-extending, kudzu-like) alternative kind. Being conciliatory in this way would obscure the fact that these traditions live each other's death, die each other's life - the same relation which holds between normal and abnormal sex. (CP, 107)

Just as Rorty's abnormal individual (sex or writing) describes his behavior in bed or on paper in terms of a new vocabulary, and requires the normal individual for relief and at least apparent structure in his reaction against normal standards, Meyer's queer locates his behavior within the anti-essentialist "signifying system that is camp" (Meyer 1994, 5), and exploits the non-queer for his tendencies toward appropriation. It is through non-queer appropriation, remember, that the marginal and parasitic queer voice finds amplification in the straight world. The queer counts on the straight tendency toward the theft of more creative and original others' ways of being in the world, and so the queer performs camp acts of reappropriation as always already reappropriated, or as I have said earlier, "preappropriated," by his straight counter-part.

Rorty pursues the compulsory reproductive heterosexuality/normal writing analogy in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. He compares writing post cards with love for its own sake, and writing books with love for the sake of making babies. The post card, like eros, is its own private reward, but when books are written they are expected to go out and speak on their own. Similarly, we hope the children, who are the end of compulsory reproductive sex, may grow up to be self-sufficient. The effort, apparently, in normal writing and normal sex is to make something that will survive its creator's death.

Children, like the universal public truths (or privileged descriptions, or unique names) which metaphysicians hope to hand down to posterity, are traditionally thought to be a way of evading death and finitude. (CIS, 128)

The hope Rorty describes seems to be the desire to live on through children and books, and to have them speak once we are silenced by death. But as Rorty sees it children and ideas do not speak on their own and for the sakes of their parents, but rather as one more parasitic vehicle to speed the inevitability of death, either literal or in terms of one's intellectual influence. "But children and the succeeding generation of philosophers, tend to patricide and matricide." (CIS, 128) Meyer's queer in contrast to the compulsory reproductive heterosexual is like Derrida, Rorty's example of the writer who writes for the writing, in contrast with one who writes for the finished product.

Summaries

What have I accomplished, then, in this chapter? This is not merely a rhetorical question. Success for the final portion of this project would be having managed a reasonably thorough and therefore reasonably compelling

redescription of Derrida as camp. I have tried to motivate a reading of Derrida's "The Post Card" as an example of Sontag's naive camp. I hope that his interaction with John Searle now appears to be an occasion of Sontag's deliberate camp. And it should be clear that the metaphors Rorty chooses for comparing Derrida and dialectic philosophers generally with more 'normal' or Kantian thinkers bear a striking resemblance to the "queer" and "camp" ways of speaking.

What have I accomplished, then, in this work? I hope that I have motivated a reading of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* that is more Rortean in spirit; and by that I mean *edifying*. I meant to do that by showing how Rorty's chosen metaphors, although lively and life-changing (much of this dissertation has been my poorly veiled personal testimony to the latter) have the unfortunate side-effect of practically, though not logically, undermining his program.

I hope that I have managed to juxtapose Rorty's metaphors for the linguistic self and ironic self-recreation with Meyer's metaphors of the performative self and camp so as to recommend these latter as the sort of recreative pursuit Rorty encourages. I do not mean to suggest that when Rorty talks of "irony" he really means "camp," but rather that when Rorty recommends the project of personal self-recreation he means to urge the individual to find a metaphor (even if she doesn't call it a metaphor) that resonates with her so as to motivate her own autonomy. I am no more recommending camp than I interpret Rorty as recommending irony. All suggestions are instead for self-renewal.

Conclusion -- Grover's problem: The monster at the end of this book

Grover, you might remember from the preface, is the monster in my favorite childhood book.³ Grover's problem was that he was very worried about the monster mentioned in the title of the book ("The Monster at the End of this Book"). Grover's anxiety was so great that he did everything he could think of in order to avoid meeting the monster. Grover employed force; he tried to fasten the pages of the book together so that the reader was physically prevented from turning the pages. Grover used persuasion; he pleaded with the reader to avoid turning the pages and getting nearer to the end of the book. It turned out, as you know, that Grover was the monster of which he was so afraid.

Well, here you and I are at the end of this "book." No matter how densely I tangled my descriptions, you bushwacked through. I locked up meanings in endless confluences, and you used your philosophical bolt-cutters to distinguish meaning from meaning, page after page. Torturous sentence construction held you back not at all. Undaunted, you persisted to this, the end of the book.

The obvious question then, is *who or what is the monster?* The obvious answer, in keeping with the resolution of the issue in the *Sesame Street* book is: *me*. Maybe the monster at the end of this "book" is John Zavodny (Ph.D?). And if I am, like Grover, the monster at the end of the book, then I have, also like Grover, always already been the monster, but not necessarily the monster

³Incidentally (but what does "incidentally" mean, other than of less than central significance) my other favorite book from the same period of my life was "Where the Wild Things Are." It too had monsters in it -- these, however, were pretty scary monsters, not nice like Grover.

Ph.D. I have accompanied the reader since the beginning. That we have dealt with irony, that I have written more-or-less propositionally, that I chose this reading over that, that I have illustrated my points with examples ranging from Ani Difranco to Quentin Tarrantino, from Tom Robbins to K. C. and the Sunshine Band, from Grover to Grover -- in all of these choices I have been present.

If I am a monster, in what ways have I been Groverean? Maybe I have been, by my sympathetic reading of Rorty's anti-representationalism and anti-essentialism, keeping you away from the Truth that the monster is me. And maybe what makes me a monster is my keeping you from realizing my monstrosity. But if I, by my protests and distractions, enact myself as monstrous, I only hope that you perceive me as *thoroughly* Groverean, which is to say, I hope that the monsters at the end of this book are all harmless, non-threatening, entertaining and fuzzy blue.

Not only did I provide physical and intellectual entanglements that might have prevented you from meeting the monster at the end of this book, I warned you in my own way as well. I have mentioned more than once, always with reference to someone else, that to write on irony is to invite accusations of irony oneself. And since I have written on irony, these accusations have always applied to me. Well, I now answer the accusations by denying them. I am not being ironic. But, as I mentioned with regard to Kierkegaard, this denial really doesn't amount to much. If I say "I am not being ironic," I am *recognizing* the possibility of ironic interpretation, and by recognizing the possibility I *admit* that I have thought about it. Having admitted that I have thought about it, a

natural question to ask of the writer on irony who says he is not ironic is "are you being ironic now, as you say you are not being ironic?"

Monsters are unnaturally occurring specimens of being. They typically are created by the dark dreams of another. Frankenstein built his monster, Dracula assembled his army of the night, and zombies make more zombies by eating the minds of the quick. If I am the monster at the end of this book, then there must have been a ghoul or evil genius before me.

Many thinkers today would agree that Richard Rorty is monstrous. He makes a good monster, since monsters are usually considered to serve their own desire for unnatural survival by feeding off of and destroying others. Rorty projects his own unholy desire to "survive" onto all self-creative individuals by describing the self-creative individual as being motivated by the horror of living on someone else's terms. Rorty's self-creative individual comes to reject others' terminology and the notion that one description of the world is privileged over all others. There are no privileged descriptions since no way of speaking gets to the way that things *really* are; there is no way that things are really if by "really" you mean independent of language. Rorty's belief that there is no "way things are" certainly has an *unnaturalness* to it. We might express Rorty's anti-essentialism by saying that since the things that make up the world have no naturally occurring essences with which to contrast and correct our descriptions and redescriptions of them, we might be better off without the concept of essences.

Rorty is hell-bent on the dissolution of traditionally and epistemologically construed questions, and this tendency certainly has a *destructive* quality to it. As he freely admits, Rorty's own project of self-recreation through negation

requires a more positive counterpart, a more constructive *host* endeavor, from which he gains reactive currency, and against which he may contrast, and so identify, himself. Rorty, then, is something of a philosophical zombie, perpetuating his destructive intellectual life by feeding off the more positive pursuits of other, more traditional, philosophers. We might borrow Kierkegaard's description of Socrates' treatment of the Greek state, and apply it to Rorty's treatment of philosophy:

Indeed, his attack must be regarded from the standpoint of the state as of the utmost danger, as an attempt to suck the blood out of it and transform it into a phantom. (COI, 203)

But if Rorty is a monster, and if he is a monster who makes other monsters, then how does the monstrosity get transferred? Vampires leave nothing where the life's blood once was. Zombies eat the brains of their prey. Dr. Frankenstein purposefully created his monster from the remnants of others who had gone before. How does Rorty create his intellectual hellspawn? It is through devilish marks and noises that Rorty increases his army of darkness.

If Heidegger is Merlin, then Rorty is Barnabus Collins. Heidegger employed the abracadabra of phonemes for the sake of getting in touch with the power of elemental words and conjured "Being" as a matter of ultimate concern. Rorty, instead of relying on the philosophical hocus pocus of magical terminology, presents and represents his descriptions and redescriptions in a compelling, sometimes convincing, telling and retelling of the stories and histories of marks and noises, of associations and connotations so as to hypnotize his prey (you are getting very sleepy). This associative brainwashing renders us willing victims to populate his global village of the damned.

Rorty, in his treatment of Derrida, madman though he is, suggests an interesting way of avoiding Grover's problem. Derrida may have given Grover a way of avoiding the monster at the end of the book: *don't write a book, write post cards instead*. With post cards Grover would never have to finish the book, and so would never have to face the monster. In fact, according to Rorty, and following Derrida, to suggest that books ever do end, in the sense that they ever really provide a final resolution to the issues with which they deal, is to mistake our achievements of idiosyncratic beauty for pronouncements of universal sublimity. It is the philosopher's mistake to think that he can ever do more than render private fantasies employing the figures of the relevant past. It is the philosopher's paradox, and the problem of ironist theorizing, to wonder "How can I end my book?"

Maybe the monster is
the end
of the book.

ABBREVIATIONS

Rorty

- CIS *Contingency, irony and solidarity.*
CP *Consequences of Pragmatism.*
ORT *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers vol. 1.*
EHO *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers vol. 2.*
PMN *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.*
RP *Rorty & Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics.*

Kierkegaard

- COI *The Concept of Irony*

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