

THE CONTINGENCY OF RORTY'S SOURCES:

A POETIC EXAMPLE

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I

Contingency is a distinctively central theme of Richard Rorty's philosophy but the roots of this theme can certainly be traced to earlier pragmatist thinkers. Peirce, James, and Dewey expressed it by affirming that reality is in the making and is thus governed by changing probabilities rather than absolutely fixed necessities, and their views can in turn be traced to Darwin's evolutionary theory whose twin engines were natural selection and variability through contingent mutations. Contingency is a vague concept that admits of differing degrees or shades of meaning, depending on what it is being contrasted to. In perhaps the most basic sense, what is contingent is contrasted with what is not absolutely necessary, what could have been otherwise. In that sense, one can say that all the events in our probabilistic universe are contingent, since they are not governed by absolute, unchangeable laws that admit of no possible exception or interruption or change.

Another, closely related sense of contingent is what is not essential or necessary for a given thing to be what it is; it may be essential for a human being to have blood or linguistic competence but it is contingent as to which blood type or language the person speaks, just as it is contingent what gender or race or birthday or education the person has. In Aristotelian language these non-essential features were described as accidents rather than essences, so the notion of contingency has long been associated with the accidental; and since the notion of accidental also includes a sense of being not only not necessary but also unexpected or coincidental or atypical, contingency also includes a sense of being mere chance or idiosyncratic happenstance, something like the whim of fortune. Rorty's account of contingency

of self seems to move from the rejection of a universal fixed essence of self to a contingency of mere chance and idiosyncrasy that skips over the possibility of selves being composed of relatively fixed regularities that are to a large extent governed by physiological laws and social norms that while not being necessary or immutable in the strict sense are nonetheless regularities that are deeply entrenched. This idiosyncratic view of the self and its construction by language has led Rorty not only to ignore the body and the physiological dimension of self-construction and self-cultivation but also to neglect the value of the social sciences for improving our self-understanding and our means for self-flourishing.

Having argued these points at length in a number of earlier texts,¹ I will instead very briefly consider here how Rorty's affirmation of this radical notion of contingency as mere chance or idiosyncratic accident has sometimes impacted his writing through his use of sources. I will use only one striking example where this use of contingency became vividly clear to me, drawing on a revealing personal exchange I had with Rorty concerning this use. In sharing this episode of my personal interaction with Rorty and his methods of philosophical writing, I hope to illustrate an aspect of its distinctly pragmatic and Emersonian character that might seem shocking in terms of conventional notions of scholarly writing and philosophical interpretation.

This personal revelation of an incident relating to Rorty's creative process should be prefaced by confirming once again my great respect for his achievement, even though I often depart from his specific views. Had I not met

¹ See, for example, Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), "Pragmatism and Textual Politics: From Rortian Textualism to Somaesthetics." *New Literary History* 41.1 (2010), 69-94. Rorty's most explicit and vehement response to my critique can be found in Richard Rorty, "Response to Richard Shusterman," in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.), *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 153-157.

Rorty, I would have never become an American pragmatist philosopher who wrote on such unconventional topics as rap and somaesthetics (even though Rorty disdained them both). I would have remained the conventional, Oxford-trained, Israeli analytic philosopher that Rorty met in Beer-Sheva in 1984, quite contingently, while he was on a brief lecture tour in Israel.

When I first met him I knew very little about pragmatism but shared my analytic mentors' disdain for what we regarded as its mushy way of thinking. Rorty soon convinced me, through conversation, correspondence, and his exemplary new writings, that the American pragmatist tradition (and especially John Dewey) had a great deal to offer a philosopher like me who was especially interested in aesthetics, the arts, and culture. I was surprised that a famous American philosopher like Rorty would pay so much attention to an unknown young lecturer in peripheral Israel. But, as I eventually learned, I was not at all exceptional in receiving such kindness. It was characteristic of Rorty's open-minded largesse to notice and help academics like me who worked in the margins (that is, outside the power centers of the Anglo-American philosophical world), people that he came to know by the mere contingency of meeting them on one occasion and finding some common interest that he thought worth pursuing in correspondence, long before there was the ease of email.

Within a few years, through his inspiration and encouragement, I moved to the United States (my country of birth) and established myself as an American pragmatist philosopher. Because so much of my philosophical work was indebted to Rorty, so much of it was also polemically engaged with determining and justifying my differences from his views. With characteristic generosity, Rorty remained very supportive of my work despite my frequently sharp criticism. He almost never took occasion to respond to such criticism in print. My wife (whose field was fashion

design not philosophy) wondered why I should be so critical when I admired him so much, indeed admired him so much more than other contemporaries to whom I was kinder in print. I explained, of course, that philosophers celebrate through critique and that one needs to articulate and defend one's differences from one's philosophical exemplars and heroes in order to enable one's own views to be recognized as a legitimate contribution to philosophy's conversation rather than just an exercise in intellectual mimicry (even if such mimicry is in some sense unavoidable and is often an essential, constructive part of finding one's voice). But gradually such justifications lost their hold on me, and I lost my taste for criticizing Rorty, especially since so much philosophical criticism of him seemed to me petty and unproductive.

Too often Rorty's own views and interpretations have been rejected or demonized because he was very free in his interpretation of the thinkers he used to formulate and advance his ideas. Though he was incredibly sharp and making fine-grained analytic distinctions, Rorty was primarily interested in big ideas, and he did not worry about details. I now turn to the personal exchange that illustrates this point, just as it illustrates his commitment to contingency and to interpreting texts by the lights of his own philosophical agenda.

II

In his major pragmatist monograph *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty begins his crucial chapter on "The contingency of selfhood" by quoting a short passage of poetry from Philip Larkin. The chapter starts as follows:

As I was starting to write on the topic of this chapter, I came across a poem by Philip Larkin which helped me pin down what I wanted to say. Here is the last part of it:

And once you have walked the length of your
mind, what
You command is as clear as a lading-list
Anything else must not, for you, be thought
To exist.

And what's the profit? Only that, in time
We half-identify the blind impress
All our behaving bear, may trace it home.
 But to confess,

On that green evening when our death begins,
Just what it was, is hardly satisfying,
Since it applied only to one man once,
 And that man dying.²

Rorty then interprets this passage to make his case for pragmatically construing the philosophical quest for self-knowledge in terms of the more poetic quest for original self-creation. Rorty describes this pragmatic reconstruction as a move away from the Kantian project of defining oneself (and living one's life) in terms of a universal human essence and instead adopting the Nietzschean project of stylizing oneself as a distinctive (unique, idiosyncratic) individual. Rorty moreover follows Harold Bloom in describing this project as that of the strong poet, someone who strives to "become an individual in the strong sense in which the genius is a paradox of individuality" (CIS 24), someone who turns her contingent idiosyncrasy into a distinctive life as a work of art. Rorty then tries to combine the distinctive, individualist self-stylization of the strong poet with the ever curious, ever changing self-fashioning of the liberal ironist who is skeptical that any vocabulary that she learns, uses, or develops is finally definitive and irreplaceable.

In *Pragmatist Aesthetics* I critically analyzed Rorty's ideas of self-creation, self-enrichment, and self-creation in order to develop my own pragmatist view of ethics as an art of living, I tried to show the tensions between the liberal ironist and the strong poet and I contested Rorty's preoccupation with language, his insistence that the body did not matter. But in order to analyze Rorty's argument that was generated by Larkin's poem, I also had to quote most of the poetic passage he used. When my book was in production with Basil Blackwell in 1991, the copyeditor told me that in one of the lines of Larkin's

poem I quoted there seemed to be a punctuation mark missing. It was the close of the line ending in "lading-list", and, grammatically, it could have been either a comma or a period. I was asked to supply the missing punctuation mark, but when I consulted Rorty's text I found that I had copied it exactly; namely, that there was no punctuation mark at the end of that line in Rorty's own citation of the poem. So I naturally thought of turning to the original Larkin poem.

But here I ran into a problem. Which poem was it? Rorty's book supplied no reference or explanatory note to indicate the poem's title, or its first line, or even the title of the collection in which it was found. Since Larkin had a very large corpus and no digital search engines were then available, I thought I would simply phone Dick Rorty and ask him from which Larkin poem he took the lines on which he based his chapter. When I posed my question, Rorty chuckled teasingly and replied that he hadn't the faintest idea of the poem's title and that he in fact did not take the lines from a Larkin book, since he was not a real reader of Larkin. My shock must have been audible, for Rorty continued by explaining that he got those lines from a newspaper obituary on Larkin that he just happened to read when he was visiting England to give a few lectures, coincidentally at the time of Larkin's death. In short, Rorty simply copied the lines from the newspaper and incorporated them as the foundation of his chapter on the self, never bothering to check the accuracy of the lines or investigate their role in the larger contexts of the entire poem and Larkin's wider corpus.

My disappointment in not having my question answered was largely compensated by this revelation of how seriously Rorty took his philosophy of contingency not only in theory but also most boldly and unabashedly in his writing practice. Though baffled and frustrated by his ignorance of the Larkin source, I consoled myself that this was the fault of his text not of mine, and eager to complete my correcting of page-proofs, I simply kept the matter to myself, while discretely adding (on the basis of

² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 23; hereafter CIS.

my own sense of poetic punctuation) a period to end the line in question (on page 248 of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*).

Now, with the aid of Google and through the stimulation of *Pragmatism Today's* invitation to write on Rorty, I have finally revisited the question of these lines and can offer some factual information for Rorty scholarship. First, the title of the Larkin poem is "Continuing to Live" and its full twenty lines (divided into five quatrains) goes as follows.

Continuing to live -- that is, repeat
A habit formed to get necessities --
Is nearly always losing, or going
without.

It varies.

This loss of interest, hair, and
enterprise --
Ah, if the game were poker, yes,
You might discard them, draw a full
house!

But it's chess.

And once you have walked the length
of your mind, what
You command is clear as a lading-list.
Anything else must not, for you, be
thought

To exist.

And what's the profit? only that, in
time,
We half-identify the blind impress
All our behavings bear, may trace it
home.

But to confess,

On that green evening when our death
begins,
Just what it was, is hardly satisfying,
Since it applied only to one man once,
And that one dying.

After twenty-years of ignorance, I learned I was right to add the period after "lading-list" that Rorty's citation mistakenly omitted. I was also not surprised to learn that his citation wrongly inserted an extra "as" in that same line, making it somewhat more discursive and prosaic than Larkin intended. I gladly provide these facts about Larkin's poem to set the record straight. But my purpose is not to condemn Rorty for his insouciant infidelity to his sources. Such critiques (with respect to his interpretation of Dewey, Sellars, Davidson, and others)

are legion, and they are precisely the kind of criticisms that miss the point of Rorty's hermeneutics. His method of interpreting was that of the Bloomian strong reader who uses the text to say what he wants to say, who is willing to read the text against itself and against its traditional and conventional interpretations. Rorty had an Emersonian impulse to see and write things his own way, to be a non-conformist, to follow his whim in seeking and articulating insights, and then to use his enviable powers of prose to convince his readers to forget conventional scholarship in the excitement of exploring new ways of thinking, a fresh relationship to the text or issue at hand.

With respect to Larkin, Rorty indeed recognizes that the poet's explicit argument in the poem seems in opposition to what Rorty asserts is the true voice of poetry – the celebration of idiosyncrasy as the genius of individuality. "Larkin is affecting to despise his own vocation on the ground that to succeed in it would merely be to have put down on paper something which 'applied only to one man once / And that one dying.'" Rorty thinks Larkin is only "affecting" dissatisfaction because no "poet could seriously think trivial his own success in tracing home the blind impress borne by all his behavings - all his previous poems," because since the Romantics "no poet has seriously thought of idiosyncrasy as an objection" (CIS 24). In short Rorty reads Larkin as "suggesting that unless one finds something common to all men at all times, not just to one man once, one cannot die satisfied." Larkin's poem, Rorty concludes, "owes its interest and its strength to this reminder of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy, the tension between an effort to achieve self-creation by the recognition of contingency and an effort to achieve universality by the transcendence of contingency" (CIS 25).

Without denying the interest and ingenuity of Rorty's reading, we should recall that there are in fact post-Romantic poets (such as T.S. Eliot) who truly critique (rather than merely affect the critique of) the romantic

celebration of idiosyncrasy.³ Likewise, if we look at the whole of Larkin's poem, we see that its dissatisfaction is directed not so much at the person's individuality but rather at the person's mortality, which is not a contingent matter, but rather a universal condition that Larkin (like most men) finds unhappy or disturbing. Indeed, besides (if not beneath) the blind impress of the individual's idiosyncratic contingencies, there looms a cluster of general human conditions that are themselves far from satisfying: the repeated need to procure the "necessaries" that we as embodied creatures continuously need to continue living, the fact that habits that are necessary for living also structure (and limit) much of our behavior (even its creative and idiosyncratic dimensions), and that our lives (after a certain age) are essentially a matter of losing ("interest, hair, enterprise," energy, strength, memory) rather than expressing only continued, self-cultivating growth, so that in continuing to live we are continually also moving toward death – the great, universal leveler. This theme of individual mortality (at once particularly personal and essential to the entire human race) is common to art and philosophy, and it presents a proper ending for this paper and an occasion to declare again my deep regret that Rorty could not continue to live and provoke us with his own eclectic idiosyncrasies and stimulating romantic interpretations.

³ On Eliot's critique of romanticism and its celebration of radical individuality, see Richard Shusterman, *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).