On a Man Who Died from Reading Too Much

Heidegger, or Richard Rorty as a Reader

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If, as is sometimes held, Wittgenstein wrote as if he had read nothing, while Heidegger wrote as if he had read everything, then the common opinion about Richard Rorty is that he wrote as if he had read everybody. In my paper, I will try to show that in order to assess whether that opinion is right, it is imperative to have at least some knowledge of the different hermeneutic strategies Rorty distinguished, endorsed, and deployed. What I am also going to do is explain what reading Heidegger had to do with Rorty’s death.

“He was born, he worked, and he died.” So goes Martin Heidegger’s famous biographical remark on Aristotle, and while this formula is in principle applicable to Richard Rorty too, in his case it might as well say, “He was born, he read, and he died.” This is how important reading was to Rorty, on both a personal, and a scholarly level. This essay will deal primarily with the latter, but I would like to begin with the former, taking as my starting point Rorty’s “Intellectual Autobiography,” published in the volume of the Library of Living Philosophers dedicated to his work. As its cautious readers should remember quite well, that narrative opens with the words, “I have spent my life rummaging through libraries,” the liminal position of which certainly gives them a ring of defining statement.

That statement was by no means an exaggeration on Rorty’s part. Indeed, we have all sorts of evidence to confirm that his existence from a very early age onward was that of a dedicated bookworm who “obsessively” consumed gargantuan quantities of books of fantastically different kinds. To get a sense of how early he must have started, consider that, as Neil Gross stresses, “[w]hen he was six,” Rorty himself “wrote a play.” Its topic was “the coronation of Edward, Prince of Wales” and he staged it in front of “his parents’s friends,” an audience that “might well have included” none other than the famous poet Allen Tate. True, given who Rorty’s parents were, one might expect their son to have rather bookish hobbies. But this still does not diminish one’s sense of astonishment upon learning that the twelve year old Richard had already been acquainted with Leon Trotsky’s History of the Russian Revolution (or parts thereof), botanical
literature on wild orchids, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Or that at the time when some kids enthuse about their first pair of rollerblades, Rorty did so with his, as he himself put it, “first pair of philosophers” – Plato and Nietzsche – and spent his days pondering how he could achieve a fusion of the two.

This life among texts seems to have continued until Rorty’s very last days, or at least this is suggested by his 2007 essay entitled “The Fire of Life.” There he confessed that, having been “diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer,” he found consolation neither in philosophy, nor, God forbid, religion, but in poetry, and stated that he wished “he had spent somewhat more of [his] life with verse.” In this context, it will perhaps not be inappropriate to mention that he tried to defuse the dreadfulness of his illness with a joke that was also book-related, and which he actually borrowed from his daughter. Referring to the fact that just a few years earlier Jacques Derrida had died from the same type of cancer, Rorty quipped, in a personal letter to Habermas, that the illness “must [have] come from ‘reading too much Heidegger.’” If making such jokes, and expressing such regrets, on one’s deathbed is not the ultimate proof of being a complete, hopeless, and dedicated bookworm, then it is hard to imagine what is.

Given that, as is clear from the above, Rorty saw his life, and death for that matter, through the prism of books, it should come as no surprise that he looked at other thinkers in the same way. Derrida serves as a good reference point again, for not only did Rorty feel a certain kinship with the latter as far their favorite authors were concerned, he also recognized in him a fellow passionate reader – i.e. somebody “who began devouring books as soon as [he] learned to read,” somebody “whose li[fe] w[as] saved by books.” This is expressed nowhere more clearly than in Rorty’s contribution to the symposium on “Deconstruction and Pragmatism” that took place in Paris in 1993, where Rorty compared Derrida invidiously to Michel Foucault by saying: “Derrida intensely admires the great authors who stand behind the texts he glosses; he has no doubts about his or their authorship … he has no interest in dissolving the books in which great human imaginations have been most fully themselves into anonymous, rootless, free-floating discourses. Whereas Foucault cultivates aloofness, Derrida throws himself into the arms of texts he writes about.”

In fact, Rorty relied on their respective reading habits to compare not only individual thinkers belonging to the same tradition, but also whole philosophical traditions themselves. Consider Rorty’s conviction that one of the main differences between analytic and continental philosophy lies precisely in what kinds of texts their practitioners surround themselves with. The desk of an average analytic philosopher, on this view, is “strewn with marked-up offprints” of articles written, by contemporary authors, for “The Journal of Philosophy, The Philosophical Quarterly, and Philosophical Review,” while that of a continental philosopher is weighed down by fat volumes penned by deceased giants such as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger. Without denying the existence of philosophers who are “ambidextrous” – that is, well-