On the Idea of Philosophy as *Bildungsroman*: Rorty and his Critics

Christopher Voparil

The appearance of several new works and a multivolume critical anthology devoted to Richard Rorty casts in bold relief the surprising lack of sympathetic interpretations his work has generated over the past few decades. After examining the complex nature of the critical reaction to Rorty, this essay reviews two new introductions to his thought that attempt to approach him in a spirit of hermeneutic charity. I argue that Rorty’s somewhat neglected idea of treating philosophy as a *Bildungsroman* may shed some light on the problem of how to read Rorty usefully.

To include Richard Rorty alongside Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida as the most widely read philosophers of the late twentieth century no longer seems a stretch. Few living intellectuals can match Rorty’s interdisciplinary breadth of influence. Rorty criticism has gone beyond a cottage industry: Richard Rumana’s (now three year-old) annotated bibliography of the secondary literature on Rorty boasts over 1200 entries, some 80 representatives of which have been republished by Sage in a four-volume collection devoted to Rorty’s work, edited by Alan Malachowski. New books and anthologies on Rorty now proliferate faster than one can keep track, much less fully digest; in addition to their edited works, Rumana and Malachowski have each authored monographs of their own.1

Despite the added clarity and perspective these new works provide, there remain a number of unexplained complexities connected with the broader reception of Rorty’s work. Most significant here is how precious few of the hundreds, nearly thousands, of writings on Rorty portray him in a positive or sympathetic light. Drawing on two new treatments of Rorty by Rumana and Malachowski, my central claim in this essay is that the small minority of positive treatments of Rorty are best understood as instances of treating philosophy as an edifying *Bildungsroman*, an idea developed, albeit sporadically and insufficiently, in Rorty’s thought itself. Drawing an intimate link between philosophy and the selfhood of its practitioners, the idea of philosophy as
Bildungsroman coheres with the pragmatist framework of Rorty’s thought more generally and rests on the historicist and antitranscendentalist assumption that philosophers or the words they use are not “authorities on something other than themselves,” nor are they “closer to how things are in themselves.” They are only, as Rorty puts it, “closer to us,” the culturally-constituted individuals who employ them.

1. The Puzzle of the Rorty Phenomenon

Oddly, for all his omnipresence and international renown — Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, for instance, has been published in twenty-two languages — there are no Rortyan schools of thought, and no cadre of Rortyan “followers” scampering to churn out Rortyan tracts and fulfill the promise of his project. Unlike Foucault and Derrida, one would be hard pressed to locate a single thinker claiming to be a Rortyan. Yet there is no doubt that Rorty’s work, with its sheer erudition, clarity, and characteristic wit, has proved highly engaging and enlightening to many over the past three decades. For one, it is now commonplace to cite Rorty as single-handedly responsible for the recent resurgence of the tradition of American pragmatism. But Rorty’s influence has long transcended the discipline of philosophy; true to his Deweyan heritage, he is quite adept at writing for wider audiences. A New York Times book review recently referred to him as the American philosopher most talked-about outside of philosophy departments, and Harold Bloom famously dubbed him “the most interesting philosopher in the world.” Add to this that Rorty himself is a consummate collaborator, enthusiastically promoting the work of others and always willing to generate responses to responses to foster vigorous ongoing debates, and the surprising lack of converts to Rortyanism becomes even more perplexing.

These new works reveal a second peculiarity about the Rortyan secondary literature — namely, that so much of it is unambiguously hostile. Indeed, the greatest as yet unsolved puzzle surrounding the Rorty phenomenon may very well be the question of why so much of the secondary literature is negative or hyper-critical in nature. In the introduction to his bibliography, Rumana notes that of the 1200 plus entries, “only a small percentage are friendly to Rorty,” and enumerates the two articles and three books, including his own, that are on the whole positive. Several more books and articles are “respectful,” he continues, and one is “descriptive and noncommittal.” Rumana perorates, “Nearly all the rest are negative reactions to his work” (ix).

Even Rorty’s most sympathetic readers seem at a loss to explain why so little of the voluminous secondary literature is positive. Acutely aware of this oddity, Rumana begins his introduction to the massive bibliography with the quip, “If one is known by the enemies one makes, then Richard Rorty is,