Richard Rorty begins this, his final book, with a sober word of warning: “Readers of my previous books will find little new in this volume. It contains no novel ideas or arguments” (x). On the whole, this is true; much of the ground covered in Philosophy as Cultural Politics is indeed familiar, well-trod turf. With Rorty as cicerone, readers will glimpse the death masks of the once-mighty (Plato, Descartes, Locke, Kant); stroll past quaint ancient ruins (realism, representationalism, scientism, foundationalism); and saunter through a pantheon thronged with heroes (Hegel, Nietzsche, James, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sellars, Davidson, Brandom, Fine). The entire tour, moreover, is conducted in Rorty’s suave patois: a style that is at once polished and colloquial, knowing yet hopeful, erudite but seductive.

Is this a roundabout way of saying that Rorty has multiplied books beyond necessity? By no means. In my opinion, there are at least three good reasons to read Philosophy as Cultural Politics. To begin with, there is the sheer range of the collection. The volume contains thirteen papers grouped under three headings: “Religion and Morality from a Pragmatist Point of View” (four papers); “Philosophy’s Place in Culture” (four papers); and “Current Issues Within Analytic Philosophy” (five papers). As these labels suggest, the spectrum of issues and themes is colourful and broad. Romanticism, God, justice, loyalty, consciousness, truth, inferentialism, naturalism, quietism, holism, communism, cold war liberalism, Kant’s moral philosophy, Wittgensteinian schisms – Philosophy as Cultural Politics weighs in boldly on these topics, among others. Few books have such breath-taking breadth; fewer still are written from such a distinctive and unified point of view.

A second attractive feature of this collection is that the positive, forward-looking side of Rorty’s thought is prominently exhibited throughout. Among analytic philosophers, it has long been common practice to portray Rorty as a destructive thinker who has nothing better to do than subvert the projects of modern philosophy. However, the author of these essays is an unabashed Yea-sayer less interested in old polemical squabbles than in imagining a future for philosophy. That future lies in the practice of what Rorty calls “cultural politics”: the on-going project of coming up with ever-better ways of talking, where “better” is understood with reference to the pursuit of our sociopolitical
goals. Hence to say, with Rorty, that “cultural politics should replace ontology” (5) is to say that the philosopher should seek to enrich her culture’s conversational repertoire without asking whether her new-fangled language cuts Nature at the joints. Relevance – not representation – is all.

Thirdly, Philosophy as Cultural Politics provides a very clear statement of Rorty’s oft-misunderstood meta-philosophy. The following five theses, many of them markedly historicist, leap off the page: (1) the vocabularies in which philosophical problems are formulated are not timeless intuitions of pure Reason, but historically conditioned artefacts; (2) such vocabularies are to be assessed not by whether they mirror reality, but by how well they serve our interests; (3) the representationalist vocabulary of modern philosophy is decidedly more trouble than it is worth; (4) philosophers should work at forging more fruitful and useful vocabularies; and (5) since this poetic task of vocabulary-creation is potentially endless (unlike that of representing reality, or that of solving a fixed set of perennial problems), no “end of philosophy” is in the offing.

While Rorty’s book thus has many substantial virtues, novelty is not among them (as he himself admits). This puts a reviewer in a slightly ticklish position; for where there is nothing new, there is obviously nothing new to praise or damn. However, since the unifying theme of this wide-ranging volume is the function of philosophy, and since Rorty’s views on that subject flow from the controversial meta-philosophy outlined above, some critical reflections on the latter seem in order.

As is well-known, Rorty contends that we can transcend epistemology and metaphysics by eschewing representationalism. Many notable analytic philosophers – Thomas Nagel is an outstanding example – find this totally unconvincing; as they see it, there are certain epistemological and metaphysical problems from which we are not free to walk away, because their pre-suppositions are not “optional” or factitious. Rorty’s standard response to such doubting Thomases is a nice example of cultural politics: he tells us that our culture has a better chance of becoming better – happier, more liberal, humane, tolerant, just – if we change the subject and stop talking in the archaic ways favoured by representationalists. This rejoinder raises many questions, not the least of which is whether it is coherent.

The source of this worry is the unresolved tension between two commitments: Rorty’s meta-philosophical pragmatism, on the one hand, and his ultra-radical anti-representationalism, on the other. According to the former doctrine, vocabularies are to be assessed for their utility; but to say that a given vocabulary is useful (or that it is not) is to say something about the consequences of its adoption, and thus to make putatively factual claims about how things stand in the world. As Robert Nozick once put it: “Sooner or later, it seems, a proponent of Rorty’s position must claim and affirm that certain things will in fact lead to other things, that this will indeed occur in the world, given the way the world is.” And there’s the rub; for Rorty’s uncompromising anti-