

E. VIŠŇOVSKÝ'S BOOK *RICHARD RORTY AND THE MIRROR OF PHILOSOPHY*

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“Continuing a Conversation“

“Conversational interest of philosophy as a subject, or of some individual philosopher of genius, has varied and will continue to vary in unpredictable ways depending upon contingencies. These contingencies will range from what happens in physics to what happens in politics.”

Richard Rorty: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

A philosophical biography of Richard Rorty, an American iconoclastic thinker and non-systematic philosopher-cum “cultural commentator,” pays a long overdue tribute to a man who has not only questioned and made bankrupt the deceptive mirror-imagery foundations of metaphysical philosophy *qua* epistemology, but also twice visited Slovakia and even managed to inspire a standing fun club as well as noteworthy professional following. The latter’s enlightened enthusiasm for Rorty’s cause of “thinking without banisters” is supremely well manifested by the author of the title at issue Professor of Philosophy Emil Višňovský. Rorty’s admirer and disciple, a keen student of American classical and post-positivistic pragmatism as well as a prolific translator of Donald Davidson, John Dewey, Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill, and Richard Rorty, Višňovský has proved a second-to-none candidature to get embarked on the ambitious project.

In the prefatory pages of his monograph (Bratislava: Kalligram 2015, 355 pp.), the author is quick to avow his intent to keep the reconstruction of Rorty’s meandering and vicissitudinal intellectual journey broadly sympathetic rather than antithetic – a sort of charitable treatment his protagonist must have been not infrequently denied overseas at home. The *enfant terrible* of contemporary American philosophy, Rorty was dismissed by some for his dethroning Truth and rendering it contingent; misunderstood by others in his practicing creative, “creolized” (misreading of philosophy texts, and overtly attacked by still others for his wholesale and sustained critique of professional philosophy. Yet, against all odds, he gained international audience with his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and enjoyed (until his death in 2007) worldwide popularity and limelight. Višňovský’s philosophical-historicist exegesis is both a paean to Rorty’s intellectual bravery and an attempt to bring home to the Central European reader his incontestable relevance to our postmodern circumstance.

In the chapter titled *Postmodernista Rorty?* (Is Richard Rorty a postmodernist?), the

reader is offered an excursus on *postmodernity*, its overwhelming mood of dissatisfaction with the old *system* at large (most acutely perceived in the Central Europe of the end of the 20th century) and on how Rorty found himself on the “controversial list of postmodernists”. Small wonder, but then, the company he used to be lumped together was not all that bad (Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Félix Quattari or Jean-François Lyotard, to mention just the most spectacular disgruntled mavericks with their “abnormal” discourse; they “distrusted” unilinear “metanarratives” and discarded the notion of philosophy as a quest for higher principles and things greater than human Being-in-the-world). As for Rorty himself, he would have most probably preferred, for that matter, to be referred to as simply a “post-Nietzschean” philosopher, to get assigned for himself just one of many places “in a conversational sequence which runs from Descartes through Kant and Hegel to Nietzsche and beyond” ... with no “radical rupture” (Rorty 1991, Volume 2, 2).

More importantly, however, the narrower (and pejoratively charged) “postmodernist” label was not entirely unjustified. For, at first sight at least, Rorty the philosopher did seem a foal kicking his teachers, a destructive Luddite who had finished off the subversive job of deconstructing, and eventually debunking, the pivotal metaphor of Descartes’s contrivance – the mind – as a great mirror that furnishes the accurate representation of the outer world. The smashing of the Mirror inevitably entailed the dismantling of the Kantian picture of philosophy as grounded in epistemology. Višňovský spares no space to trace Rorty’s campaign against modern scientific paradigm and his incisive case against it – the argumentation being in part and of necessity “parasitic” on analytic philosophy and even epistemology itself. The inquiry eventually led Rorty to part ways with philosophy as a theory of knowledge entrusted with the discrimination between “certainty” and “opinion” in the various empirical areas.

Rorty was able to arrive at his anti-representationalistic, anti-essentialistic, and anti-foundationalistic conclusions, the author rightly insists, by first having mastered (under his logocentric teachers) the metaphysical tradition and raising in the wake his battle standard against a general theory of representation – the backbone of post-Kantian metaphysics. This debasement of the notion of philosophy as a foundational discipline, which warrants whatever knowledge-claims, and the embrace of the idea of the former “queen of sciences” being as merely philosophy without epistemology, was remarkably co-extensive with the Wittgensteinian notion of language as tool rather than mirror.

What was more, by the domino effect, the stark contrast between Aristotelian binary oppositions – including that of “life” and “spirit” (which corresponds in Rorty to spirit-nature distinction and, in the final effect, to that between hermeneutics *qua* inquiry into spirit and epistemology *qua* inquiry into nature) – lost its substantiation. There was suddenly an explanation to how these two so starkly antithetic metaphysical principles can forge a productive partnership. Obviously, Rorty had a lot of lead work executed by his predecessors – and Višňovský carefully catalogues his protagonist’s intellectual debts – who had started to break, at times unwittingly, the “crust” of ossified metaphysical beliefs which barred the traditional philosophy from the carnivalesque “carousel” of human ex-

istence and the bizarre bazaar of other legitimate constituents of culture.

The author's wide-ranging treatment of said Hegelian supersession typical of the history of ideas readily brings back a textbook example of trans-generational collaboration in breaking free of the constraining *Ge-Stelle* (enframing) metaphysical paradigm during the historic encounter between Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos. The former gave there an additional presentation (which Rorty could have much appreciated) on „*The Opposition between 'Spirit' and 'Life' in Scheler's Philosophy*“. The complaint of the recognized professor was about “the great antithesis between ‘Nature’ and ‘Spirit’, or consciousness; about the polarity of ‘life’ and ‘knowledge’ which his day’s philosophers construed as “implacably opposed”. Conversely, Cassirer, the author of the monumental *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, could not have missed the signs of the reconciliation and cooperation as a hard fact of life “in all creative expressive activity – whether mythological, linguistic, artistic, or scientific – because human expression always takes place within an ‘in-between’ realm beyond the dualism of interior consciousness and external impulse” (Gordon 2010, 119-120).

The aside from our focal point is designed to confirm Višňovský's consciously employed historicist and continual stance advanced throughout the book – in a bid to present Rorty as growing out of the tradition and at the same time overgrowing it, while “weakening” its traces through time-conscious reinterpretation. On the strength of the above, it is just fair on behalf of the author to claim (and on behalf of the reader to acquiesce) that Rorty's critique of the metaphysical foundations of knowledge and the war he declared on all “certainties” catapults him into another stellar cohort topped by such philosophical figures as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey (Rorty's pragmatic mentor) who, the author proceeds pressing his historicist case, have equipped Rorty with the take on philosophy's new, pragmatic ends (creation of ever more inclusive vocabularies and provision of a form of life). Whatever the company or affinities, though, the author is never tired of accentuating that Rorty's overarching intent would ever remain predominantly “therapeutic and metaphilosophical”, viz., that of transforming philosophy into a programme (also Henri Lefebvre's take on metaphilosophy), a blueprint for philosophical engagement with life (Višňovský 2015, 49).

But first things first. True to his quasi-Foucauldian genealogical principle, the author commits himself to canvassing the timeline of Rorty's philosophical trajectory and giving Rorty's story its chronological bones: from the *Birth of a Philosopher* (1931 – 1979) through his *Mature Period* (1979 – 1998) to the *Later Years* (1998 – 2007). Copiously referenced, tacked up with argumentative detail and packed with illustrious names (at times even to the point of fault), Višňovský's mapping out of the landscape of ideas – both sides of the Atlantic into which Rorty was “thrown” is staggering in scale and scope. Predictably enough, the author is quite particular about zeroing in on the idiosyncrasies of the American philosophical thought at large (which, incidentally, commendably augments and spells out rather a reductive grasp of the American political mind in Europe). The author thus highlights the American philosophy's relevance to life (praxis), its meliorism (Baconian aim “to relieve and benefit the condition of man”), pro-futurism, pluralism

(“polytheism”), historicism as well as openness to new influences and ideas (2015, 52). All this adds up, in fact, to the idiom of the American philosophical pragmatism, which Rorty would be trying to revive. A fine outline of pragmatism *qua* the truly American and “naturally” *anticartesian* (2015, 68) way of philosophizing, meant to lay bare the roots of Rorty’s disappointment with the philosophy of mirrors, perfectly meets the commission. The author thus underlines his protagonist’s imbeddedness in pragmatism’s legacy of an unassuming, casual (as acid tongues would have it, “cavalier”) “pragmatic” approach to theory and to the technical interpretation of thinking – an approach which goes hand in hand with flouting all respect for philosophy conceived as an armchair reflection. This pragmatic birthmark will allow Rorty to utter more than once his celebrated (or notorious): “I don’t think there is a problem” (Rorty 1980, 7) or conceive (following Heidegger) the quest for objective truth as merely one human endeavor among many others (the latter being on a par with the epistemological one).

Rorty’s formative philosophical years, however, initially took him, the narrative goes on, in other direction than pragmatism or analytic philosophy. Reading Hegel “gave him the delights of the narrative, temporality, and historicity, but, yet more importantly, dissipated his earlier Platonian cravings for the absolute, for certainty, and for eternity” (2015, 76). He would be mocking before late his own “Platonic hope to ascend to a point of view from which the interconnections with everything could be seen” – essentially a God’s-eye interpretation of the realm of possibilities (Rorty 1991, Volume 2, 11). To this effect, acclaimed biologist Arman M. Leroi cracks a joke in his book on Aristotle as a scientist by first offering a pompous contention: “If we discover a complete theory, it would be an ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we should know the mind of God” and asking in the wake: “Platon? No, Hawking” (Leroi, 2015, 27). As for Rorty’s absolutistic illusions, these were shortly ousted, Višňovský’s philosophical travelogue proceeds, by Rorty’s interest in “the linguistic turn” and analytic philosophy. In Rorty’s case, though, the latter was from the very outset “qualified by his metaphilosophical approach – ever on the lookout for parallels, innovations, and conversations with other schools of thought: originally with pragmatism, later on with the Continental philosophy (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Foucault, Derrida, and Habermas). In all his academic or cultural-intellectual pursuits, the author underscores, Rorty would remain, after the *Mirror* – ever and above all – a ‘philosopher of philosophy’, a philosopher ‘inside’ philosophy – a ‘metaphilosopher’ (2015, 93), complete with his conversational argumentative style and imaginative humanistic approach to reading philosophy texts.

The apex of Rorty’s intellectual and professional maturity and mutiny, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, performs the entire Luddite job all right. Višňovský’s meticulous account of his mentor’s *magnus opus* leaves nothing to be desired in terms of both philosophical argumentation and exhaustive coverage. For one thing, you come away from Višňovský’s book with a heightened awareness of Rorty’s Nietzschean philosophical audacity. The ambition of Rorty’s book is, the author indulges in a lengthier quote, nothing other than “to undermine” the reader’s confidence in “the mind” as something about which one should have a “philosophical” view, in “knowledge” as something about

which there ought to be a “theory” and which has “foundations”, and in “philosophy” as it has been conceived since Kant (Rorty 1980, 7).

Also, in a bid to ensure a better appreciation of his philosophical hero’s feat of the compelling reappraisal, Višňovský is left with no choice but that of taking the reader for a ride (on “a downward escalator”, making thus himself wind up with the Greeks) across the vast theoretical-philosophical terrains once inevitably crisscrossed by the “renegade” himself (with a view of getting to know his adversary better). All of a piece with Rorty, Višňovský dwells on some more immediately relevant stretches at considerable length: at Descartes and Hobbes as first harbingers of modern philosophy, albeit the reader is made in no doubt that it was not until Kant that the clear-cut watershed was drawn between philosophy and science (following the interpretation of philosophy’s main content *qua* theory of knowledge – allegedly somehow superior to that of other sciences). Since then onwards, the upward-escalator-metaphor-driven history of philosophy will be treating “philosophy” as “distinct from and sitting in judgement upon both religion and sciences” (Rorty 1980, 131). The arrogant claim has attained currency. Rorty put an end to that.

Albeit arduous at times, this “potted” history of Western metaphysical enterprise, facilitated by the author’s elaborate mediation, makes a delectable opportunity to rub shoulders – at once – with Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey as well as Sellars, Quine, Davidson, Ryle, Malcolm, Kuhn, and Putnam. Rorty’s turn to the study of language (in a critical dialogue with the aforementioned “linguistified” pragmatists and analytic philosophers) is classified in the book as the key to his embrace of practice-oriented metaphilosophy. For Rorty had come to understand, the author is led to conclude, that “the linguistic turn” as a philosophical project resting on analytic philosophy, which analyses or describes some ahistorical formal structures, has led philosophy astray as a form of representationalism in the matters of both knowledge and language. Most importantly, it has also proved of little social utility; and worse yet, was guilty of “propensity to generate dualisms and pseudoproblems which cannot and need not be solved, but be, rather, merely dropped. The best way how to do this is by redescribing the offending concepts, forging a new discourse about them, a new vocabulary – a nonrepresentationalist one” (Višňovský 2015, 123).

The section of the book titled *Consequences of Pragmatism* depicts Rorty’s portrait as a mature thinker, free – as a consequence of his “pragmatic turn” – from the constraining philosophical “luggage”, open to a new type of philosophizing, ready for the job of resuscitation of American pragmatism and for “running together, in one philosophical and life project, public and private fulfilment” (Višňovský 2015, 185). Obviously, this sort of Nietzschean “philosophy of the morning” was not to everybody’s liking. In giving responses to the detractors of pragmatism, Rorty made a special point of rebutting the charges of relativism. Taking sides with his protagonist, the author argues that “associating pragmatism with relativism on behalf of critics of pragmatism is the consequence of incomprehension of the difference between philosophy and life, the abstract and the specific, or foundationalism and antifoundationalism. By refusing to play the foundationalistic

language game, pragmatists dismiss the entire problem of relativism. They have been anxious instead that particular questions of life and praxis be resolved sensibly and efficiently (Višňovský 2015, 191).

Having refused to further “polish” the useless Mirror, Rorty – ever conversational and “hoping” – comes up with a more pro/future metaphor to make up for the quarrel. What he imagines in his “mind’s eye” (those ocular metaphors do keep us captive!) this time is the metaphor of “crossroads” which is being approached from one direction by analytic philosophers, while Continental ones marching up from the opposite end – with pragmatists awaiting in the middle for the both parties to converge... Such “pragmatization” might result in a sort of “post-philosophical culture” – center-less, system-less, without the good old objective Truth no one seems to miss, but complete with a new role for philosophy and its practitioners to play. Clearly in accord with Rorty, Višňovský puts his point so: “A philosopher in such culture is an intellectual who practices philosophy as understanding of ‘how things relate to each other’... It is not a philosopher who has answers to all questions, nor is he a layman, though. He is a versatile cultural critic who monitors similarities and divergences between different ways of comprehending things. He will speak of how these interpretations, in his opinion, bear together, but never of how they must do so (Višňovský 2015, 194).

One of the many assets of this book on the “Voltaire of postmodernity” is the author’s virtually “poetic” engagement with the whole of his protagonist’s persona, including Rorty’s “cultural criticism”, literary preferences, public activism as well as his political worries and hopes. This otherwise welcome authorial strategy will, alas, more than once take the author on the really thin ice. A couple of examples to flesh out the blame might be in place.

So then, Rorty positively gives up on philosophy as modelled on science, but the scientific rigor is, regrettably and infrequently, replaced with “empty rhetorical tropes”, as his opponents (including Richard Bernstein) would justifiably deplore, to advance his utopian hope in the possibility of a Deweyan “democratic culture”. What Rortyism does ultimately purport to be then is a manner of philosophizing that supplies political answers and discourses of “social utopia”. So far so good. And yet ... *In pace*, scanning Višňovský’s rendition of Rorty’s concerns and pronouncements about the “current global situation of humankind”, “utopian social hope”, conception of “cosmopolitan” and “global” utopia (Višňovský 2015, 278), or “vision of pan-planetary global democratic utopia” (ibid.: 210) invites – especially if the reader happens to be not entirely appreciative of the recent U.S. international political “vocabulary” so ambivalently contributing to the advent of more humane societies – at any rate two queries. Firstly, how come that someone of Rorty’s intellectual stature could have been so innocent of the *aporiae* of the political world order at the onset of the new millennium, with the USA emerging as a political and military empire and the all too obvious demise of the Deweyan-type democracy; also, so cheerfully forgetful of the existence of unmet “ethnocentric” “desires” beyond those of his own nation? Second, one cannot help but get puzzled what has made Rorty’s expositor – a fine Central-European philosophy professor and a public figure of note, well cog-

nizant of the discrepancy, too – leave the abovementioned platitudinal generalities and “impotent poeticisms” uncontextualized. The same goes for the pages on Central European anti-Communist upheavals of the late 1980s, with a thrust on former Czechoslovakia. Rorty opines that “students and workers” then joined hands in a bid “to topple over tyrants”; that Havel, whom Rorty admired, was a “hero who has done away with Leninism” (Višňovský 1915, 187). Does this ring a familiar bell? Quite so, Marx’s ideas of long-ago framed metaphysically and, unrevised, applied to postmodern moment of digital capitalism with its fuzzy class divisions. The expositor stays imperturbable.

Lastly, the abortive fruit of Rorty’s poetic-metaphoric impulse (Bernstein) – the ill-coined dualism of “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids” (Višňovský 2015, 246) – a metaphor designed by Rorty to capture the incommensurability of the private and the public will most probably be a hard sell in Europe for obvious historical considerations. Višňovský seems to see no wrong. By way of venturing a sort of excuse, one might be inclined to suggest that, in reverence for the Master, he, under his disciple’s hat, simply chooses to turn a blind eye. Then again, his monograph-*apologia* of Rorty is without a doubt a labor of love – for philosophy, for Rortyism, if you will – and love is believed to go, at times, blind.

More charitably, what Višňovský deserves, *inter alia*, to be particularly credited with is the persuasive power of his own philosophical “vocabulary”: as such, it stands all good chances, via promoting Rorty’s metaphilosophical pragmatism in Slovakia, to trigger a broader and animated discussion on post-epistemological philosophy as well as on post-philosophical culture and the necessity to re-visit the “workload” of the philosophical profession. To add more stress to this agenda, Višňovský indulges in a dollop of metaphoricality, proposing at the very end of the book that “Philosophers should become the salt of culture or its spice ...” (Višňovský 2015, 312). Or “self-consciously amateurish cultural critics”, as opponents of this great liberal ironist might want to add. The Rorty Višňovský has painstakingly jigsawed for the Slovak reader is up to the prescription: a philosopher who was consistently changing the “philosophical game having already been played by the very same rules for 2000 years ... he started putting up a mirror to it.” (Višňovský 2015, 312).

If the point of Višňovský’s inquiry was to vindicate Rortyism as the project edifying rather than downgrading philosophy; as the one pleading for the ontological primacy of the social rather than the one that heavy-handedly damages the analytic tradition and denigrates its contribution to revealing many useful truths about language; as an appeal for *vita activa* rather than the adoption of the contemplative ideal, then this stimulating piece of philosophical work has fully met its commitment. Were the Rortian “conversational” interest of and in philosophy as a subject rekindled in Slovakia in near future, a good deal of the credit for the boost might well go to this inspired and inspiring volume.

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