Reading Derrida Politically (Contra Rorty)

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by Rick Roderick

Source:
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""Taking a position in philosophy: nothing 'shocks' me less . . . Why engage in a work of deconstruction, rather than leaving things the way they are?"
Jacques Derrida

My own understanding of Derrida has been greatly enhanced by what I take to be one of the most radical and uncompromising interpretations of his work yet to be presented to Anglo-American philosophers. I am speaking of the interpretation of Derrida offered by Richard Rorty—an interpretation that is still not as radical and uncompromising as the project he has undertaken to explain to us. Yet my paper will attempt to show how, in what ways, and to what extent, Rorty occludes the critical power of Derrida. In particular, I argue that Rorty misses the revolutionary political thrust of his work. I will begin with two distinctions proposed by Rorty which will help to place my remarks in philosophical space and to bring out some important themes in Derrida.

Rorty has distinguished two approaches to theory. One approach models theory upon the sciences, seeing philosophy as a kind of research which attempts to provide accounts that are ever and ever closer approximations to an independently existing reality. The second approach models theory upon literature, seeing philosophy as a kind of writing; not an attempt at ever closer approximations to reality, but rather an ongoing tradition of interpretation and reinterpretation delimited only as a specific literary genre characterized by the reading and re-reading of certain texts. Under the first approach, the choice of vocabulary or description is never completely optional since it is dictated by the subject matter talked about or described. The subject matter in question (truth, goodness, beauty, and so on) is timeless and independent of our interpretations so that it may be located and revealed. Under the second interpretation, the subject matter is an artifact (historical, cultural, social, linguistic) dependent on our interpretations. As such, it is made, not found; and thus may require re-making.

In terms of this distinction, Rorty has located one, if not the, central feature of the realignment of our thought called for by Derrida. The central claims associated with his work involve a recognition of the "textuality" of all human enterprises: science, religion, morality, art, philosophy. Thus, Derrida's famous comment: "there is nothing outside the text". Rorty glosses this remark by saying that texts do not refer to non-texts because any specification of a referent will be in some "vocabulary," which means one is really comparing two descriptions of a thing and not a description with an
independent thing. Rorty has pointed out two radical implications of this view, a view he appropriately calls "textualism." First, textualism wants to demote both philosophy and science to the status of (self-deceptive) literary genres. Second, textualism involves an attack either on certain features of Western reason or on reason itself which may, in part, explain its refusal to back up its claim by what most Anglo-American philosophers would understand as argument. Paradoxically enough, there are "reasons" for this attack on reason—a point I will turn to later.

Rorty draws a further distinction between "strong" and "weak" textualists that serves to distinguish Derrida from most of his American progeny in literary criticism, as well as from hermeneuticists like Gadamer. The weak textualist still claims to have deciphered the secret of the text, to have broken its code, to have gotten at what it really says in a way missed by previous interpreters. The strong textualist makes a claim that is similar—the claim to have gotten more out of the text than the author or the intended audience could possibly have found there. But unlike the weak textualist, the strong textualist does not believe there really is a secret code, or that the notion of getting the text "right" makes any sense at all. This is because the idea of the right interpretation is the idea of an interpretation that could bring interpretation to an end. But there can be no such final interpretation. Interpretation always involves further interpretation, reinterpretation, and so on in a process that is strictly, and in principle, incompleteable. From the strong textualist perspective, the very idea that there could be anything like the right, final, definitive interpretation is a self-deception. They believe that interpretation is creation and not discovery, the violent imposition of a "grid" on the text to use Foucault's expression.

Rorty takes this new strong textualism as a sign of the bankruptcy of the Western philosophical tradition in general. The strong textualists do not so much argue against this tradition, rather they try to displace and overthrow it. They call for a new way of reading and writing as an alternative to the "logocentric" (that is, centered on the logos: speech, logic, reason, the Word of God) Western tradition through rhetorical strategies, games, fictional histories, dirty jokes, and propaganda. From Rorty's perspective, they are not terribly different from those earlier figures of Enlightenment, the French Philosophes. They too did not offer counter-arguments against the arguments of the scholastics with their traditional modes of discourse and their feudal world-view. They simply by-passed them and, through their propaganda on behalf of the modern world-view, attempted to show the utter sterility and bankruptcy of the older forms of thinking and living. Only through such historical comparisons has Rorty been able to draw out the really interesting implications of the work of Derrida. Rorty, however, remains trapped within much of the liberal humanistic ethos that the "post-modernism" of Derrida attempts to overcome.

Rorty believes that the serious objections to textualism are not epistemological, but moral. They are directed against the attempt to eliminate the author of the text and to substitute nonhuman intertextuality for human influence. Rorty wants to retain echoes of moral philosophy in his positive
attitude toward the common democratic moral consciousness upon which he rests his case for what he calls his own “post-modernist” bourgeois liberalism. Rorty recognizes that even our cherished liberal imagination and democratic ethical goals are “temporary historical resting-places.” But he cannot bring himself to deliver the struggles of finite human beings over to “some mighty inhuman force” which obliterates the very concept of “man.” Rorty admits that his preference for at least the moral dimension represented by his own textualist version of pragmatism cannot be backed up with argument, or even with a precise account of the relevant differences. But, if this is the case, how is it even remotely possible for Rorty to stop short of the most radical conclusions that can be drawn from the work of Derrida and the other strong textualists? It is not possible. If our ends and values can only be understood from within some discursive practice, and only as some optional textual interpretation, then we have a way of stating what our ends and values are, but no way of justifying those ends or values themselves. Finally, we are delivered up in the spirit of modernity to Weber’s battle between “gods and demons” of incommensurable and competing world-views, ideologies, interpretations, and discursive practices.

The difference between “modernism” and “post-modernism” may be understood, in part, in terms of the attitude one takes towards this struggle of discourses, this conflict of interpretations. For modernism, this proliferation of discourses and interpretations is an occasion for anxiety, fear, and alienation. A nostalgic wish to return “home” runs as an undercurrent in modernism; a wish to bring this proliferation under the control of Western reason. This attitude is perhaps clearest in the work of Jürgen Habermas. On the other hand, post-modernism joyfully affirms this proliferation as the creative “play” of interpretations, and no longer wishes for the “home” that was always already lost. These are the two interpretations of interpretation which Derrida contrasts at the end of his post-modernist manifesto “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science.” Rorty affirms this “play,” but sees it as the occasion for a kind of Sartrean freedom for human beings to adopt any of the competing discursive practices, to interpret any way we like, to choose one of the optional vocabularies, as long as it gets us what we want. This latter point Rorty sees as common to both Nietzsche and William James and is constitutive of his own textualist pragmatism which views theory (of any kind) as a way of coping.

But what Rorty misses is clearly half the point. For Derrida, what our language does to us is as important as what we do to our language. Our discourses speak us as much as we speak them. There is simply no room in the strong textualist perspective for the liberal humanist ethos of the autonomy of individual choice. Because Rorty misses this point, he is able to domesticate the political thrust that belongs to Derrida. I will now briefly discuss this political thrust in contrast to Rorty’s post-modernist bourgeois liberalism. I am well aware that in what follows that I am drawing out implications from Derrida’s work that he himself has been very hesitant to draw. I can see no possible objection to thus making use of Derrida’s work, at least from the perspective of a strong textualist.
For Derrida, and other strong textualists like Foucault, Western reason is identified with an oppressive and totalitarian way of life and an ethocentric cultural imperialism in which reason equals power. To quote Lyotard, "reason and power are one and the same . . . you can dress up the first with prognoses or with the dialectic, but you still have the other dished up intact: prisons, prohibitions, selection processes, the public good." This move of identifying reason with power and domination was already carried out by Horkheimer and Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment. And this move gives the political point to the esoteric philosophical strategies adopted by Derrida and other post-modernists such as Foucault and Lyotard. In terms of the French political scene, it can perhaps be traced back to the project of the Situationists in the 1960s to disrupt the entire order of the bourgeois "spectacle" by any means necessary, from cartoons and films to public agitation. The following quote from a Situationist pamphlet sets the context for a political reading of Derrida:

If it seems somewhat ridiculous to talk of revolution, this is obviously because the organized revolutionary movement has long since disappeared from the modern countries where the possibilities of a decisive transformation of society are concentrated. But everything else is even more ridiculous, since it implies accepting the existing order in one way or another. If the word "revolutionary" has been neutralized to the point of being used in advertising to describe the slightest change in an ever-changing commodity production, this is because the possibilities of a central desirable change are no longer expressed anywhere. Today the revolutionary project stands accused before the tribunal of history—accused of having failed, of having engendered a new alienation. This amounts to recognizing that the ruling society has proved capable of defending itself, on all levels of reality, much better than revolutionaries expected. Not that it has become more tolerable. Revolution has to be reinvented, that's all.

In "Preface to a Situationist Dictionary", Khayati explicitly connects this political project to a new practice of interpretation: "Since any new interpretation is labeled misinterpretation by the authorities, the situationists are going to establish the legitimacy of misinterpretation and denounce the imposture of the interpretation given and authorized by power." From this perspective, the point of Derrida's critical project is not to invent a new game called "deconstruction" for the amusement of literary critics or world-weary philosophers like Rorty, but rather to liberate us from an oppressive order of discourse whose "logocentrism" is expressed in "phallocentrism" and, ultimately, in the ever-expanding nuclear phallus. For Derrida, as for Rorty, the Western tradition is at a dead-end as, one after another, its goals and its ideals come under suspicion: Truth, Goodness, Reason. Unlike Rorty's attempt at containing the defense of misinterpretation within a liberal humanism, Derrida's strategy remains revolutionary in so far as it is directed at the overthrow of the bankrupt way of thinking and living maintained by the dominant system of power. Strong textualists like Foucault and Deleuze make this point as clearly as one could wish in the following exchange:

Foucault: Women, prisoners, conscripted soldiers, hospital patients, and homosexuals have now begun a specific struggle against the particularized power
that is exerted over them . . . the generality of the struggle specifically derives from the system of power itself, from all the forms in which power is exercised and applied.

Deleuze: And which we are unable to approach in any of its applications without revealing its diffuse character, so that we are necessarily led—on the basis of the most insignificant demand—to the desire to blow it up completely.\(^\text{11}\)

It is at this point that Derrida takes very seriously a problem that Rorty bypasses—how is an attack on reason possible? This problem is understood in French philosophy under the heading of “the problem of enunciation.” I will now discuss several permutations of this problem and its political implications. An example which illustrates what I mean by the problem of enunciation is the following. In the opening pages of the *Science of Logic* Hegel states that the work to follow, his own work, is “the presentation of God as he is in his eternal being before the creation of nature and of finite mind.”\(^\text{12}\) This declaration by Hegel transforms the logic into an impossible text which cannot have been written by a man. The only author possible of the text would be God or Divine Reason, the Logos. But if it is God who speaks in the *Logic*, why then is it signed by Hegel? Is it perhaps that Hegel thinks that he is God? If so, he is certainly mad. But perhaps Hegel thinks of himself as a finite human who through his thinking and his writing may become as God. Then he is no longer mad, even if he is very close to madness. In either case, Hegel’s text announces its own impossibility of being enunciated as a rational discourse which is only possible as a discourse by God—and thus not humanly sayable. This problem of enunciation, the problem of a text announcing its own impossibility, with its themes of reason and madness, has held a particular fascination for French thinkers. I will take my next example, however, from German critical theory in order to highlight its political dimension.

In Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the critique of the capitalist rationalization of social life expands into a critique of the very structure of reason.\(^\text{13}\) Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Enlightenment project of liberating humanity from myth and the unknown had, by becoming an end in itself, turned into its opposite—a new and more powerful force of domination. The old terror before the unknown becomes a new terror: the fear of anything that cannot be calculated, standardized, manipulated, or instrumentalized. Enlightenment progress in scientific-technological knowledge (=power), while creating the objective possibility for a truly free society, leads instead to the domination of external nature, society, and inner nature. The reification of consciousness is the price the potential subjects of liberation paid for the progressive overcoming of material necessity. Throughout the course of Western civilization, the rationality of myth, as well as the Enlightenment which replaced it as reason only to become a myth itself, exposes reason as a destructive force. Reason abstracts, conceptualizes, and tries to reduce the concrete and the non-identical to identity, to destroy the otherness of the other. Horkheimer and Adorno locate the irrationality of what Weber analyzed as capitalist rationalization at its deepest source—the fundamental structure of reason. Human liberation can be conceived, if at all, only as a complete break with reason.
But how can such a thesis be enunciated? How can a critique of the totality of reason proceed except through the use of that very reason, a move which, by Horkheimer and Adorno's own account, could only reproduce domination? Under the direct identification of reason with domination, even the very method of critique is, in Adorno's phrase, "dragged into the abyss by its object."¹⁴ No justification for this critical enterprise is possible since under the presupposition of universal distortion, any such justification would itself be suspect. As Thomas McCarthy states, "The radical critic, like the radical skeptic, appears to be condemned to silence."¹⁵ The attack on reason in Dialectic of Enlightenment simply cannot be enunciated without paradox. It marks the final stage of the radical articulation of the critical theory of the Frankfurt school. But the problem of enunciation also arises in radical French theory which takes a different attitude toward the Marxist tradition. My next example will come from this context.

The problem of enunciation can be viewed again in its political setting in Jean Baudrillard's The Mirror of Production which gives expression to a broad tendency in radical French theory that rejects Marxism because it is deeply implicated in a repressive and theoretically outmoded order of discourse.¹⁶ Baudrillard's central argument is that Marx remains trapped within the very discourse of production of the bourgeois political economists that he attacks. By conceiving a revolutionary transformation in terms of the dialectic of forces and relations of production, Marx actually reinforces an oppressive view of human beings as workers. Marx's conception of the revolutionary movement as a consummation of production, rather than as the total overthrow of a life based on production, does not represent the end of exploitation and alienation, but rather their totalization. A truly revolutionary theory would conceive capitalism not as a mode of production (based on the laws of the economy), but rather as a mode of discourse (based on what Baudrillard calls "the terrorism of the code"). The attack on the prevailing modes of discourse undertaken by the strong textualists belongs to this conceptual move in radical French theory, a move that belongs to the attempt to "reinvent revolution."

Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Baudrillard identifies the "ideology" of advanced capitalism with reason itself as a seamless web of repression. The needs generated by this massive productive apparatus are distorted in their totality. The code itself (the prevailing mode of discourse and discursive practice) is total, powerful, and ubiquitous. Baudrillard states that "whatever one does, one can only respond to the system in its own terms, according to its own rules, answering it with its own signs."¹⁷ How then is Baudrillard's own critique possible? What linguistic resources can he draw on except the code itself? And, if this is the case, how can he avoid reproducing the very code he attempts to disrupt? Where distortion is total, then even the critic of distortion cannot escape it. Baudrillard's text faces the same problem of enunciation as the text of Adorno and Horkheimer. How can one speak against reason except through giving reasons? The only option seems to be to speak for madness. And this extreme strategy is in fact adopted by Foucault in Madness and Civilization.¹⁸

In "Cogito and the History of Madness," Derrida raises the problem of
enunciation against Foucault’s attempt to carry out this defense of madness.\textsuperscript{19} 

Derrida selects a very brief passage for attention, where Foucault claims that “the Cartesian formula of doubt is certainly the great exorcism of madness.”\textsuperscript{20}  

In this passage, Foucault accuses Descartes of repressing madness by excluding it from the field of reason circumscribed by his method of doubt. Foucault sees in this move an attempt on the part of philosophy to shunt aside, cover over, and “forget” madness in the name of a repressive, totalitarian Reason. This theoretical move justifies and makes possible the political move of actually excluding the mad, the deviant, by shutting them away in institutions.

Derrida’s first criticism concerns Foucault’s reading of Descartes’ intention to exclude madness. Derrida claims that Foucault misses the true radicality of Descartes’ procedure. Descartes refuses to consider madness not because it is too alien and frightening, too \textit{mad} to have a place in philosophical discourse, but rather because madness is not nearly mad enough for Descartes’ purposes. As Derrida points out, Descartes’ method requires that the philosopher must doubt \textit{everything} that can be doubted. Madness is not nearly radical enough for this purpose; not because the madman is wrong so often, but because he is right too often. The madman, after all, occasionally correctly identifies cups, clouds, and sandwiches; but radical doubt must make it possible for us to be wrong about simply everything. As Derrida remarks, Descartes’ method of doubt must in principle be madder than any possible madness. To meet his purpose, Descartes comes up with the hypothesis of the “Evil Genie,” a being as wicked and deceitful as he is powerful, a being that could make it be the case that we are always in the wrong when we think and, moreover, a being that could possibly, at least possibly, exist.

Derrida’s point is that this radical doubt does not repress madness, but totalizes it and sets the stage for philosophy’s almost impossible escape by means of the Cogito. My purpose here is not to analyze Descartes’ Cogito or his method of radical doubt. Rather, I want to suggest with Derrida that Foucault’s reading of Descartes’ intentions raises the problem of enunciation. Derrida uses the Descartes passage in Foucault to raise the question of the conditions for the possibility of writing a text like Foucault’s \textit{Madness and Civilization}, a text which purports to make madness “speak,” to argue for the rights of madness, to defend madness against reason from the perspective of, and in consort with, the non-discourse of madness itself. But how, Derrida asks, is such a text possible? How can Foucault make what is silent by definition and exclusion speak? How can he \textit{argue for} madness except with the tools of reason and argument—the very powers against which Foucault claims to represent the viewpoint of madness? How can this project be carried out by a well-argued, rational, empirically significant historical critique such as Foucault’s? Derrida shows how the conditions for the possibility of Foucault’s text are at the same time the condition for the impossibility of the very same text. Derrida’s argument is conclusive. A history of madness cannot be written from the perspective of madness. A reasoned defense of madness remains just that, a reasoned defense, which through its very reasonableness, undercuts the thesis it tries to advance.
Derrida's own project represents the most consistent recognition of the problem of enunciation as it applies to the critique of reason. If, as the radical post-modernists agree, reason is the problem, then such a project cannot be avoided or carried out with less extreme measures than those adopted by Derrida. And what is at stake is political in the last analysis—the overthrow of current modes of thinking and living, the "reinvention of revolution."

Finally, for the radical post-modernists, the problem of enunciation as a political problem arises because the language used to denounce, destroy, decenter the equation "capitalism = reason = domination" is itself both product and producer of this same equation. No doubt this equation is too simple as Habermas, among others, has reminded us. Further, the post-modern destruction of the subject may turn out to be a dubious legacy of structuralism and finally indefensible. But the freedom of the autonomous subject exalted by Rorty to interpret any way we like, to simply pick up and use optional vocabularies, to enter into a variety of discursive practices is a liberal illusion. Who writes or speaks, how, where, when, and with what authority and effect is limited, conditioned, and, often, determined in manifold ways by the dominant system of power. To interpret Derrida politically is to try to find a use for his project for radical theorists guided by the interest in overturning this system.

NOTES
11. From: *language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, 1977) p. 216-217. Comments by Reginald Lilly convinced me to abandon an earlier example in favor of this one.