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Pragmatism and Literary Theory

III

A Reply to Richard Rorty: What Is Pragmatism?

Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels

We are grateful to Stanley Fish for demonstrating what "Against Theory" had merely assumed, that the only kind of theory worth attacking is the kind which claims to be more than just another form of practice. Some readers have thought that our arguments were directed against all general reflection about literature or criticism. Others have thought that we were resisting the encroachment on literary study of themes derived from politics, or psychoanalysis, or philosophy. These are plausible misreadings of our intention, since the term "theory" is indeed sometimes applied to any critical argument marked by historical or aesthetic generalization or by the reading of literature in terms of themes derived from other disciplines. But, as Fish shows, neither empirical generality nor thematic novelty is enough to make an argument theoretical in more than a trivial sense, that is, in a sense that marks it as importantly different in kind from other critical arguments. Theory in a nontrivial sense always consists in the attempt "to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without," and this strong ("foundationalist") kind of theory is the kind whose coherence we deny (p. 742). It is also the kind of theory engaged in by the vast majority of those who consider themselves theorists—including many who might prefer to think of themselves as practicing theory in some weaker sense.

At the conclusion of "Philosophy without Principles," Richard Rorty appears to join those who think we are attacking theory in its weaker senses as well as in the strong sense just described. He suggests that eliminating the writing and teaching of theory would deprive literary

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scholars of "an opportunity to discuss philosophy books—as well as novels, poems, critical essays, and so forth—with literature students" (Rorty, p. 464). If this were the only issue between Rorty's version of pragmatism and ours, our disagreement would come to an immediate end, since nothing could be further from the aims of "Against Theory" than rendering a judgment about what books should be discussed in literary classrooms. But our disagreement runs deeper than debates about the curriculum. It involves, first, a fundamental disagreement about language and, second, an equally fundamental disagreement about the nature and consequences of pragmatism.

In a note to his discussion of our account of language and intention, Rorty writes, "It seems to me that Knapp and Michaels do not satisfactorily answer Hirsch's claim that their arguments show only that 'a text's meaning . . . must always be what *an* author intends it to mean' and not that it 'must always be what *its* author intends it to mean' " (Rorty, p. 464 n.6). This objection makes sense, it seems to us, only if one thinks that the distinction between what "*an*" author intends a text to mean and what "*its*" author intended it to mean is a distinction between two different interpretations of the same text—not two different interpretations of two *different* texts but two different interpretations of the *same* text, in other words, two competing interpretations. There's nothing controversial about different texts having different meanings. Controversy arises only when interpreters ascribe different meanings to what they regard as the same text. In our view, in fact, controversy arises only when there is a disagreement about what some particular author meant on some particular occasion, the occasion on which that author produced the text in question. There is never any point in choosing between what *its* author meant and what *an* author might have meant, since interpretive disagreements are never anything else but disagreements about what *its,* the text's, author meant. But Hirsch and Rorty maintain that a distinction between what *an* author means and what *its* author meant is relevant to disagreement about the meaning of a particular text. So they must think that a text remains the same text despite differences in author and occasion. What,

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then, if not the fact of having been produced by a particular author on a particular occasion, do they think confers identity on a text?

One answer might be the formalist one: the identity of a text consists in the identity of a collection of marks. And, of course, a collection of marks does have an identity as a collection of marks, irrespective of its relation to any author. Marks produced by erosion, as in our wave-poem example, might be identical to marks produced by someone writing with a stick. But identity of marks becomes identity of text—marks become text—only when, as we argued in "Against Theory," the marks express an authorial intention. The formalist thinks that a collection of marks is in itself already a text and therefore already has some meaning whether or not it expresses anyone's intention. Neither Hirsch nor Rorty, however, thinks there can be intentionless meanings. Indeed, according to Rorty, *no one* thinks there can be intentionless meanings:

> It seems to me that Knapp and Michaels are wrong in thinking of John Searle and H. P. Grice as "arriv[ing] at determinate meanings by adding intentions [to language]". . . . They are, rather, distinguishing between two sets of intentions—the ones normally had by users of a sentence and some special ones had, or possibly had, by an individual user. More generally, I cannot think of anybody who would deny that one has language only where there is a system of community intentions, of conventions (in the sense analyzed by David Lewis). So I am not sure that there are any "anti-intentionalist accounts of meaning." [Rorty, p. 464 n.4]

If what gives a text its identity as a text is neither, as we think, its relation to a particular author and occasion nor, as formalists (if there are any) think, its meaning as a collection of marks, then what does? The choice between our position and the formalist position is a choice between reading a text as the expression of *its* author's intention and reading a text as the expression of *no* author's intention. But for both Rorty and Hirsch there is, as we have seen, a third possibility: reading a text as the expression of *an* author's intention. (They disagree, of course, about the desirability of this option.) But why does Rorty think that Hirsch's notion of *an* author's intention provides a relevant alternative to our account? According to Rorty, there is a "useful" "logical space" between "what sentences mean and what a given utterer means by them on a given occasion" (Rorty, p. 460). This is what Rorty glosses, in the note quoted above, as the distinction "between two sets of intentions—the ones normally had by users of a sentence and some special ones had, or possibly had, by an individual user." Rorty's notion of a sentence's normal intention corresponds to Hirsch's claim that one can read a text in terms of *an* author's meaning, while Rorty's notion of an individual user's special intention corresponds to Hirsch's claim that one can read a text in terms

of *its* author's meaning. But what makes some intentions normal and others special? Rorty seems to be thinking of the distinction between special and normal intentions as if it were a distinction between *particular* intentions and some other kind.

In our view, however, normal intentions are just frequent particular ones. The "space" between these two sets of intentions is not logical but empirical. A text means what its author intended it to mean whether or not other authors on other occasions use the same marks (or noises) to say the same thing. What people normally mean when they shout "Fire!" might well be that something is burning. On some special occasion, however, someone might shout "Fire!" and mean by it "Discharge your weapon." In the first case, the speaker has an intention frequently had by other speakers on similar occasions; in the second case, not. Indeed, there could be a third case in which a speaker might shout "Fire!" and mean by it something that no one had ever meant before or would ever mean again. But in all three cases the relation between meaning and intention would be the same: the sentence would mean only what *its* speaker intended. The fact that, in the first case, the speaker meant what speakers usually mean by "Fire!" and, in the other cases, what speakers rarely or never mean by "Fire!" does not amount to a distinction between different kinds of meaning (sentence meaning and utterer's meaning, what *an* author intends and what *its* author intended) but only to a distinction between different meanings. Disagreement about the meaning of a text depends not on the possibility of different kinds of intention—on the logical choice between what *its* author intended and what *an* author intends—but only on the empirical difficulty of deciding what *its* author intended.

The distinction between two different kinds of authorial intention thus collapses. The only alternative to the intentionalism of "Against Theory" is a formalism that imagines the possibility not of two different kinds of intended meaning but of meaning that is not intended at all. Such a formalism is, of course, anathema to Hirsch, although, as we argued in "Against Theory," it is the position he is forced to hold. And, insofar as Rorty is seriously committed to keeping open a logical space between language and speech acts (sentence meaning and utterer's meaning), he too is forced to become the formalist whose existence he denies. He must believe that marks and noises can be language "even though nobody ever meant anything" by them. If, on the other hand, Rorty thinks that this distinction reduces to a logically uninteresting (and theoretically useless) difference between frequent and infrequent intentions, then his account of language is identical to ours. He must agree with our claim that, as he puts it, "marks which are shaped like a sentence of English do not count as language unless . . . inscribed by somebody who meant something by them" (Rorty, p. 460).

For Rorty, however, the real issue is not whether we are right or wrong about what makes something language. In fact, for him, the whole point of pragmatism is to render such questions fundamentally irrelevant. There's no point in asking what makes something language, since *anything* can be treated as language: "Anything—a wave pattern, an arrangement of stars, the spots on a rock—can be treated not only as language but as any given sentence of English. . . . 'Linguisticality' is, on this view, cheap." Hence, pragmatists "should not go out on a metaphysical limb" by trying to distinguish between what is language and what isn't: "The question of whether the thing is really a sentence or whether we are simply pretending it is, is just as bad as the question of whether goodness is objective or subjective. Both questions should be eschewed by us pragmatists" (Rorty, p. 460).

On one point, we agree: "linguisticality" is cheap. Anything can indeed be treated as an English sentence, as Rorty says, "if one can find some way to map its features onto the semantic and syntactic features of that sentence" (Rorty, p. 460). Anything that looks like English can be treated as language; anything that looks like any language can be treated as language; indeed, something that looks like no existing language can, if it is regarded as the expression of a linguistic intention, be treated as language.[1] Thus Rorty is right to say that anything can be treated as a sentence "whether the thing is really a sentence or whether we are simply pretending it is." We can think that any collection of marks is really being used to express an intention, or we can just pretend it is. But it doesn't follow from this that it makes no difference whether something is really language or not. If you really think that a noise you hear is someone shouting "Fire!" you might call the fire department. But if you are just pretending that the noise is language, you might not want to risk arrest for turning in a false alarm. If to ask whether a noise is really language is to "go out on a metaphysical limb," it is also to ask the kind of "*practical* question" that interpreters ask all the time (Rorty, pp. 460, 463). A position from which such questions would be "bad" could only be a position outside practice itself.

The attempt to occupy a position outside practice is theory. It is also, as we argued in "Against Theory," the attempt to occupy a position outside belief. What Rorty calls going "out on a metaphysical limb," we call having beliefs; his alternative to metaphysics (having beliefs) is theory (not having beliefs). But even *pretending* to believe something depends on believing something else. Pretending to believe that you hear someone shout "Fire!" depends on believing that you really don't. The difference between believing something and pretending (believing something else) is simultaneously a difference in practice and belief. The only point of pragmatism is the inseparability of practice and belief: as Charles Sanders Peirce wrote in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," "Belief is a rule for

action," and "different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise."[2]

From a pragmatist perspective, then, disagreements about language—or anything else—are always practical. (Even the disagreement between pragmatism and theory has one practical consequence: theorists write theory and pragmatists write against theory.) From Rorty's perspective, the practical nature of disagreement sooner or later makes argument pointless, a "game of mirrors," since "all of us who debate these matters" start out with "premises" or "intuitions" that "beg all the interesting questions" and then "go round in circles, defending them in one guise by appealing to them in another." For Rorty, the way out of this "argumentative impasse" is to replace argument with what he calls the "strategy of using narrative" (Rorty, pp. 461, 462). Since "persuasion is as frequently a matter of getting people to drop a vocabulary . . . as of deductive argument," we must learn to "think of philosophy in other ways—in particular, as a matter of telling stories—stories about why we talk as we do and how we might avoid continuing to talk that way" (Rorty, pp. 463, 461–62).

If the difference between argument and narrative is simply the difference between two strategies for getting people to change their views on some particular question (for example, on whether "Fire!" is language or just noise), then it reduces to nothing more than the difference between two styles of argument. Philosophers might be more easily convinced by narrative; literary critics, by deductive argument. There's no reason in principle why a pragmatist should prefer arguments to narratives or narratives to arguments. The essence of Rorty's pragmatism, however, lies in his sense that narrative ("telling stories" or what, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* he calls "conversation") liberates us from a dependence on argument. It provides an alternative vision of philosophical discourse, one that will see "philosophers as conversational partners" instead of "seeing them as holding views on subjects of common concern" and that will "prevent conversation from degenerating into inquiry, into an exchange of views."[3] It provides this alternative because it is immune to the various forms of what he calls Adena Rosmarin's "metaphilosophical question": "How do Knapp and Michaels know" that "language and intention are inseparable"?; How does Richard Rorty "know that there are no direct encounters with objects"?; How does anyone know anything? (Rosmarin, p. 781; Rorty, p. 461). Narrative, or conversation, or what he calls "edifying philosophy" is immune to this question precisely because it makes no claim to know.[4]

How can there be a mode of discourse that makes no claim to know? Since, as we have argued in "Against Theory," a belief is nothing other than a claim to know something, the attempt to imagine a discourse that makes no claim to know must be an attempt to imagine a discourse independent of belief. But there is no discourse independent of belief.

Even telling stories about language (myths about its origins, legends about its growth, prophecies of its end) involves having beliefs about what language is, what it's for, and what it can do. Even if it were true, as Rorty suggests, that all such beliefs could be reduced to nothing more than unjustifiable intuitions, they could not for this reason be discarded. They could not be discarded because they would remain embedded in every form of practice, including every strategy designed to avoid them. The attempt to discard them is Rorty's attempt to escape practice and, by preserving the theoretical project that pragmatism exists only to oppose, to escape pragmatism.[5]

Our point is not really to accuse Rorty of being less pragmatist than we are. Our point is that no one, in practice, can ever be more or less pragmatist than we are. Our arguments from the start have taken the form of showing that whatever positions people think they hold on language, interpretation, and belief, in practice they are all pragmatists. They all think language is intentional, and they all think their beliefs are true. In theory, they may distinguish between speech acts and language, between having beliefs and claiming to know, between having true beliefs and really knowing. To think the distinction between these things matters or even to think that it doesn't matter—just to think there is a distinction—is to be a theorist. In practice, there are no such distinctions and, in practice, there are no theorists.

1. This lines up with our earlier remark that someone can use a noise to say something even if no one has ever before used it to say the same thing. Our further point here is that noises or marks can function as language even if no one has ever before used them to say *anything*. Together these remarks amount to the assertion that the prior existence of linguistic conventions is irrelevant to the question of whether something is language. Hence it is not necessarily true that, as Richard Rorty asserts in a note already cited, "one has language only where there is a system of community intentions, of conventions (in the sense analyzed by David Lewis)" (Rorty, p. 464 n.4). (The notion that conventions as analyzed by Lewis are essential to language has recently been criticized by Donald Davidson; see *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* [Oxford, 1984], pp. 276–78.) Our insistence in "Against Theory" that language is always intentional is no more than the positive side of the denial that preexisting forms, rules, or conventions are essential conditions of language.

2. Charles Sanders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. A. W. Burks, Charles Hartshorne, and Paul Weiss, 8 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1931–58), 5:255.

3. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 1979), p. 372.

4. Ibid. On this point Rorty's position is strikingly similar to that of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., despite the fact that each defines his views in opposition to the other's. Pragmatism, according to Rorty, makes no claim even to know whether it is itself true. Instead, the "question of whether the pragmatist view of truth—that it is not a profitable topic—is itself *true* is . . . a question about whether a post-Philosophical culture is a good thing to try for" (*Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)* [Minneapolis, 1982], p. xliii). And Hirsch, denying that any "decisive ground could be put forward" on behalf of either his own "realism" or what he takes to be the "idealism" of "Foucault, Heidegger, Rorty, Derrida," maintains that the

debate between these positions is, in the end, "a political, not an epistemological, issue. . . . What sort of culture do we want to foster?" ("The Politics of Theories of Interpretation," in *The Politics of Interpretation,* ed. W. J. T. Mitchell [Chicago, 1983], pp. 329, 330). For Hirsch and Rorty both, political and ethical choices replace beliefs about what is true. But how can we have any idea of what sort of culture we want to try for without already having a great many beliefs about what is true? Indeed, isn't any claim to know what culture is worth trying for already a claim to know what is true?

5. At one point in "Consequences," Stanley Fish identifies pragmatist "antifoundationalism" with what we have called "negative theory" (see Fish, p. 439). He goes on to observe that some writers "who profess" "antifoundationalism" nevertheless remain committed to their "own version of 'theory hope' ": the hope that antifoundationalism will free us "from the hold of unwarranted absolutes so that we may more flexibly pursue the goals of human flourishing or liberal conversation" (Fish, pp. 441, 439, 440). In our view, antifoundationalists who maintain this version of theory hope are not really antifoundationalists at all; hence we would differ from Fish in insisting on a sharp distinction between antifoundationalism and negative theory. It is in the latter category that Rorty's position clearly belongs.