

The philosophical curriculum and literature culture: a response to Rorty

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In Rorty's essay, "Professional Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture,"¹ he describes the different sorts of academicians that currently inhabit the American university and discusses how the responsibilities for teaching certain intellectual figures are at present passing from one discipline to another in accordance with the changing winds of the academic world; specifically, he charts the movement of the major figures of European philosophy – Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger *et alii* – out of the philosophy department and into the departments of comparative literature and history. This migration is, according to Rorty, no cause for alarm since on his view nothing is really lost in this displacement; moreover, we need not worry, he assures us, that the absence of these thinkers in the professional discipline of philosophy will greatly hinder the intellectual project, whatever it may be, that we pursue in this field. In this essay, I would like to analyze Rorty's position and what I perceive as its natural consequences with respect to the very concrete question of philosophical pedagogy and the curriculum. By analyzing Rorty's account *vis-à-vis* this concrete issue, I hope, like Rorty, to steer a course around the more ideologically charged issues of what sort of intellectual is really a philosopher and what sort of intellectual activity counts as properly philosophical. Ultimately, I will argue contrary to Rorty that, in fact, the philosophical curriculum gravely suffers if the task of teaching what he calls "the heroes of transcendentalist culture" devolves upon the comparative literature or history departments and that the loss of the European tradition in the canon of philosophy severely undermines our attempts to provide students with a meaningful philosophical education.

My argumentative strategy in this essay will be to expose the problem with Rorty's position by at first provisionally accepting his account of contemporary academic philosophy and then by showing, *via a reductio ad absurdum* argument, the undesirable consequences for philosophical education that follow from the hegemony of professional analytic philosophy at the expense of the history of philosophy which he in his

account sketches. In the first section, I outline Rorty's thumbnail account of the development of American philosophy and his positive assessment of the migration of European philosophy into the other humanities fields. The second section forms an attempt to question the factual accuracy of Rorty's division of the human sciences into professional philosophers and highbrows and suggests a further division. Finally, the *reductio* is completed in the third section where I issue a criticism of Rorty's normative assessment of the positive results of this division by drawing out the negative pedagogical consequences of the displacement of European philosophy.

I. Rorty's account of the professional philosopher and the highbrow

In his essay, Rorty sketches a brief intellectual history of the changes that have occurred in philosophy in its attempt to define itself at the American academy during the course of this century. He distinguishes three different periods in this development: (1) the period prior to the First World War, (2) the "Deweyan period" between the wars and (3) the "professionalizing period" from the end of the Second World War until today. Philosophy during the first period is characterized by Rorty *via* Santayana, as the "genteel tradition," a term which is intended to capture the lingering belief in metaphysics and a search for metaphysical hope and comfort presumably indicative of the age. The second period, dominated by John Dewey, was critical of the abstract metaphysical systems of the past and saw philosophy as playing, instead, a more practical role in the social and cultural life of the nation. Philosophy was to marshal the social sciences in its attempt to apply scientific rationality and methodology to reconstruct the social order. During the professionalizing period, however, philosophers abandoned this mission and turned away from the social sciences. Rorty writes,

philosophers attempted halfheartedly to define their activity in relation to mathematics and the natural sciences. In fact, however, this period has been marked by a withdrawal from the rest of the academy and from culture — an insistence on philosophy's autonomy.²

Philosophers in this period began to abstract themselves from their cultural and public role and set out examining ever more specialized problems that were of interest only to their professional colleagues and not to the wider intellectual community, let alone to the general public at large. Thus, a new sort of intellectual, which Rorty refers to as the "professional philosopher" came to dominate the philosophy departments of the leading research institutions in this country.

Rorty's model for the professional philosopher seems to be rather straightforwardly the analytic philosopher, whom he characterizes in terms of (1) a specific set of interests and (2) a specific methodology or set of skills. (1) According to Rorty, the professional philosopher is one who has given up on Dewey's dream of a public philosophy that plays a meaningful part in civic life; instead, he is more concerned with abstract issues related to the natural sciences, mathematics and the study of language. With Reichenbach, the professional philosopher shares the belief that only comparatively recently have the proper philosophical problems been adequately delineated and a methodology developed with which they can be rigorously and scientifically treated. As a result, the professional philosopher tends to be ahistorical and to take a dismissive stance toward the history of philosophy. (2) The professional philosophers also pride themselves on their training in formal logic and on what they perceive as their subsequent monopoly of rigorous argumentative skills, which they find wanting in the other humanities disciplines. Their books and journals, written largely in the language of logic, strive to imitate the model of the natural sciences. Thus, the combination of the set of natural scientific interests and logical or argumentative skills serves to set the professional philosopher apart from his or her colleagues.

Rorty goes on to characterize a second sort of academic whom he juxtaposes to the professional philosopher. This type of intellectual, which he calls alternately the "highbrow" or the "cultural critic," seems to correspond roughly to the professor of comparative literature or intellectual history. The highbrow, says Rorty, is the result of an "agonized conscience of the young"³ and has his roots more firmly in literature, specifically in nineteenth century Romanticism, than in the natural sciences. The highbrow, moreover, is one who is sceptical about and suspicious of the success of the natural sciences, regarding scientific theory merely as another sort of discourse about the world, a discourse which is more esoteric and potentially pernicious than most. As a result, this sort of intellectual is critical of the professional philosopher's unreflective attempt to associate the project of philosophy with that of the natural sciences, decrying the purported truth of the natural sciences as merely another form of metaphysical comfort. Instead of being animated by a serious or rigorous interest in science or mathematics like the professional philosopher, the highbrow or literary critic is much more concerned with, above all, literary theory and, at least in some instances, with the towering figures of the literary world; moreover, he, in an amateurish fashion, dabbles in the history of philosophy and takes an interest in particular in philosophers of the post-Kantian European tradition such as Heidegger and Nietzsche who offer long narratives about the history of Western culture, narratives which

the highbrows put on a par with the results of the natural sciences but which the professional philosophers view with disdain as "unscientific" and arrogant.

There has always been, according to Rorty, a tension between these two academic types, and they continue to fight a battle of words along ideological lines in the academic world of today. The professional philosopher, not finding the same deference towards logic and rigorous argumentation in the works of the literary critics as in the writings from his own intellectual camp which he is wont to read, criticizes the highbrow for sloppiness, lack of scholarly seriousness and a low level of argumentative rigor. The highbrow, on the other hand, would find the professional philosopher guilty of irrelevance, logic chopping and *naïveté*. The professional philosophers are caricatured by the highbrows as engaged in futile academic debates about problems of their own making while they assume an uncritical and obsequious posture toward the natural sciences. These conflicts come to a head not merely in high level debates featured in academic books and professional journals but also, and more destructively, in concrete daily events in university life, for example, hiring, grant seeking and budget issues, and thus the conflict is one that, for Rorty, tends to permeate many aspects of American intellectual life in the humanities disciplines.

One point of contention concerns specifically European philosophy – a subject matter or intellectual turf, so to speak, that seems to fall somewhere in the gray area between the two academic camps. For ideological reasons, the professional philosopher often does not regard the standard canon of texts of the European tradition as appropriate subject matter in the modern philosophy department. Rorty accounts for this sentiment in terms of the professional philosophers' critique of metaphysics which, in his view, resulted in an allergic reaction to the history of philosophy. He writes,

They [i.e. the professional philosophers] reacted either by ignoring the great dead philosophers or by reinterpreting them so that they would be seen as addressing properly professional philosophical issues. The result of such reinterpretation was to obscure the presentness of the past and to separate the philosophy professors from their students and from transcendentalist culture.⁴

Thus, the new generation of professional philosophers introduced a new ahistorical canon that no longer included the classics such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Kant, but instead consisted of a new set of classics – Russell, Moore, Strawson and Quine. Hence, for Rorty, professional philosophers tended to move away from the traditional curriculum, and the texts of European philosophy and history of philosophy in general then became largely abandoned and subsequently inherited by other disciplines. The departments of literature, history and politics, peopled by so many

highbrows, were only too happy to incorporate the major figures of the European philosophical tradition into their own courses and respective canons.

Although the conflict has its origins at the highest ideological level, it also becomes apparent as a problem primarily in mundane decisions about pedagogy and the curriculum. Rorty writes, "I have heard analytic philosophers get furious at comparative literature departments for trespassing on philosophical turf by teaching Nietzsche and Derrida and doubly furious at the suggestion that they might teach it themselves."⁵ Although the professional philosophers were content to forsake the European tradition, nevertheless when these practical matters come up at least some of them are defensive and suspicious of other disciplines teaching these thinkers due doubtless to differing opinions about methodology and argumentation. These debates about curriculum thus become a lightning rod for more far-reaching ideological disputes. Regardless of one's abstract theoretical concerns, it is important, in my view, to get straight about the proper position with respect to this concrete pedagogical issue which I try to do below.

Rorty tries to effect a reconciliation between these two competing camps by putting up what he sees as a defence for the highbrows and for literary culture.⁶ He thinks that the conflict is simply between two incommensurable paradigms whose respective practitioners simply talk past one another instead of genuinely trying to come to terms with the fundamental tenets of the opposing camp; yet, the discourse or reigning paradigm of both factions is of equal importance and relevance. In his defense of the literary critics' form of understanding, he writes,

Dewey had still attempted to tell a great sweeping story about philosophy from Plato to himself, but philosophers in the professionalizing period distrusted such stories as "unscientific" and "unscholarly." So they were, but they also form a genre of writing which is quite indispensable.⁷

The point is that the highbrows also have a legitimate research program that, although differing markedly from that of the professional philosophers, has its own merits and therefore still deserves to be taken seriously. At bottom here is what many regard as Rorty's relativism – his willingness to give up the notion of truth in any weighty sense and his advocacy of the maximal amount of interpretative plurality possible. In the midst of this relativism, the ideological concerns outlined above simply seem obtuse or parochial since both views are in a sense correct and legitimate. Thus, concerning the debate between the highbrow and the professional philosopher, he writes, "I want to claim that this is not a conflict which we need view with any great concern nor try to resolve."⁸ Rorty believes, at

least in part correctly I think, that these rhetorical disputes at the ideological level are relatively benign and can be safely ignored; however, along with this reconciliatory stance comes a tone of complacency as well which seems less appropriate and covertly pernicious, especially with respect to practical matters concerning the curriculum and philosophical didactics.⁹ Due to his relativism, Rorty is not concerned about analytic philosophy's carrying on about its business and forsaking the European tradition: "It may be that American philosophy will continue to be more concerned with developing a disciplinary matrix than with its antecedents or its cultural role. No harm will be done by this, and possibly much good."¹⁰ Rorty assumes here not merely a reconciliatory posture but even a complacent one: which at times borders on a wholesale *apologia* of analytic philosophy. Although we can perhaps ignore the disputes between the two camps with impunity at the abstract level, nevertheless, as I wish to show below, we can ill afford to be ambivalent about the issues at the practical level, specifically with what concerns questions of curriculum and pedagogy.

By his claim that much good might come from professional philosophy carrying on in the direction it has been going and abandoning transcendentalist culture, Rorty refers to what he sees as the fruits of analytic philosophy and particularly to the analytic method which he believes is a good and useful one not just in philosophy as a discipline but for other fields as well.¹¹ He sees the analytic method as a valuable skill which is transferable to other spheres of activity. He writes,

Indeed, where style is the kind of argumentative skill I have described, it is enough to make it socially valuable. A nation can count itself lucky to have several thousand relatively leisured and relatively unspecialized intellectuals who are exceptionally good at putting together arguments and pulling them apart. Such a group is a precious social resource.¹²

One of philosophy's contributions to the academic world or the general public at large, if indeed it has one to make, is, he thinks, in this method or acuity in argumentation. Not only is the analytic method thus good for its civic ends, but, moreover, Rorty thinks that it has also produced many gains in the field as a whole — gains which he does not spell out in any detail. In fact, as was mentioned above, Rorty defines the professional philosopher in part by this analytic method and thinks that it is what picks out the professional philosopher from other sorts of academics. In any case, this claim about the usefulness and value of the analytic method is at least part of what underlies his complacency and his approval of the academic *status quo*.

Rorty, in the passage cited above, also indicates that "no harm will be done" by the hegemony of the analytic or professional philosopher in the philosophy department. This is so, he believes, because the heroes of

transcendentalist culture such as Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger are not, in fact, casualties of this development as one might think since they will still be read and taught although not by the professional philosophers. He writes, "The dialectical dramas which began with Plato will continue. They will be enacted, if not by people paid to teach Plato, then by others. These may not be called 'philosophers' but something else, possibly 'critics'."¹³ For Rorty, no harm is done here since the subject matter that used to belong to philosophy has simply been innocuously passed on to other fields such as literature or intellectual history. On this view, the elements of the academic landscape have changed places, but none of them has been lost in the move. The end result is that students are still able to read the classics of the philosophical tradition and receive instruction on them and that, for Rorty, is the important thing.¹⁴ The cultural critic and the professional philosopher are thus able to live and let live since they do not share any real common ground which would be a potential source of conflict or competition.

II. An alternative view of the American academy

Instead of this split between two sorts of intellectual strictly divided by methodology, subject-matter, academic interests and ideology, I would suggest that a spectrum with at least a tripartite structure better mirrors the reality of the situation. On the one side of the spectrum we find the analytic philosopher or what Rorty refers to as the "professional philosopher," and on the other side we have the professor of comparative literature while in the middle I would make room for a third group which, in my view, is different in relevant respects from these first two: namely, the Continental philosopher. By this I mean very generally someone with philosophical training who does philosophical work on the major figures of the European tradition and is able to place them in their historical context. Rorty does not carve out any particular niche for European philosophy in his scheme and seems at times, by means of his vague term "transcendentalist culture," simply to equate the European philosopher straightaway with the professor of comparative literature. This seems to me, however, to smooth over some important differences between the literary critic and the European philosopher.

First, deconstruction, the current trend in literary theory that dominates both graduate programs and research agendas in comparative literature in this country is, at least in its practice, profoundly ahistorical and, in this respect, it differs markedly from the tradition of European philosophy from which it sprung. By this I do not mean to imply that as a philosophical

movement, deconstruction has no history since clearly it can be placed in the general tradition of hermeneutics and literary criticism, and, to be sure, Derrida can be seen as another thinker in the line that runs from Schleiermacher to Dilthey to Gadamer. Further, I do not wish to imply that at its most theoretical levels, deconstruction is ahistorical since obviously its most celebrated theorists are aware of their philosophical forerunners and generally have a thorough grounding in the history of philosophy. My claim here is a much more modest one; namely, that the practice of deconstruction is by and large ahistorical. The theoretical grounding of this is to be found perhaps most obviously in Derrida's concept of *différance*. Derrida's notion of the indefinite deferring of meaning is intended to undermine all attempts to arrive at a final interpretation of a text and removes the priority that used to be given to interpretations that tried to understand a work in the context of its particular time period or in accordance with the author's intentions. For Derrida, an interpretation that reconstructs the text in connection with its particular age or the author's particular bent of mind enjoys no interpretive privilege. All interpretations are simply leveled off, each possessing some sort of meaning but none better than the other. With this theory of interpretation, it is hardly surprising that departments of comparative literature have in large measure become ahistorical and have ceased to read actual works of literature. Reconstructing a work in the context of its own period is arduous labor, and if this painstaking reconstruction does not enjoy any interpretive advantage over the most superficial assessment, then it is not clear why one should bother to expend such an effort. Thus, it is not infrequent that students of comparative literature, given their training, are simply not familiar with the traditional lines of interpretation of what used to be regarded as the standard works of the canon, e.g. Shakespeare, Milton, *et alii*.

This ahistorical type of intellectual in comparative literature stands in sharp contrast, I would argue, to the European philosopher who is by nature always historically oriented. Most all of the major figures of the European tradition – Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger – have a story to tell about the history of philosophy and their place in it, and one cannot study them or effectively evaluate their works without an understanding of that history. The story that deconstruction tells about the history of philosophy is, on the other hand, always a dismissive one. This is not to deny that deconstruction is an outgrowth and continuation of European philosophy, which doubtless it is. The point at issue is rather to distinguish between two sorts of intellectual, both in the European tradition, one which is historically oriented and one which is not.

Second, a great number of European philosophers in the United States share a good deal with their analytic colleagues with respect to presentation

and methodology despite the disparity in interests and subject matter, and in this respect as well they differ from their counterparts in literary theory. In fact, many Continental philosophers in this country, having been trained in the analytic tradition, have successfully applied the tools of analytic philosophy to an assessment of the figures and movements of the European tradition at times to such a degree that the end result is closer to analytic philosophy than European philosophy.¹⁵ To make this point clear, I need only mention the body of Anglo-American Kant scholarship¹⁶ which differs so markedly from European Kant scholarship. Others have produced informed works on European philosophy at a greater distance from analytic origins while yet still employing analytic tools and forms of presentation.¹⁷ Thus, I think that the notion of a Continental philosopher in the United States is a more elastic one than is generally recognized, and, moreover, seen in this regard, the split between European philosophy and analytic philosophy is often overstated, with entirely too much being made of the purported difference in methodology or level of argumentative rigor. Clearly, analytic philosophy is not the sole domicile of rigorous argumentation in the human sciences, an illusion of which one will be quickly disabused by the most casual survey of the journals of classical philology. Hence, in so far as most Continental philosophers in the United States have to some degree been influenced by the analytic method, they are to this degree to be distinguished from the highbrows who show nothing but disdain for such a method.

These arguments, I hope, are enough to demonstrate that there are important distinctions to be made between European philosophers and literary or cultural critics all of whom Rorty unhappily places under the single umbrella concept of "transcendentalist culture." I forego a detailed analysis of the distinction between the European philosopher and the analytic philosopher since I take it to be relatively unproblematic at least for Rorty. By avoiding hard and fast distinctions and insisting on the image of an intellectual spectrum, I have tried to demonstrate that there are both important similarities and differences to be noted among all three academic sorts. My argument here has simply been that, although European philosophers and literary critics hold some important things in common, there are relevant differences between them that Rorty seems to overlook, and thus we must make room in our schema for the European philosopher as a third academic type. By lumping the European philosopher and the high brow together, Rorty fails to perceive the danger to our curriculum and to responsible philosophical pedagogy that would come about when the standard texts of European philosophy become usurped by other humanities fields.

III. The danger to the curriculum

I wish in this section particularly to take issue with Rorty's claim that no real harm is done by abandoning certain authors in the European tradition to other disciplines; specifically, I wish to argue that, in fact, the ahistorical tendency in modern professional philosophy, as in contemporary comparative literature departments, has disastrous results for our curriculum in the human sciences as a whole and consequently for our students. Let us examine the case of one hero of transcendentalist culture whose *corpus* is gradually making the move from the philosophy department into the literature department in the American academy.

The work of Martin Heidegger is a paradigm case for what Rorty designates as "transcendentalist philosophy" or "cultural criticism." (1) It is couched in an esoteric, most unscientific style which places it clearly on the side of literature and distances it from analytic philosophy. (2) It concerns themes such as death, anxiety and despair, all of which appeal to the "agonized conscience in the young" and all of which repel the professional philosopher. (3) It seems to contain nothing of the argumentative rigor found in the analytic classics and which is a prerequisite for philosophical writing among the professional philosophers.¹⁸ In short, Heidegger's philosophy seems, on the face of it, to lend itself quite well to the cultural view, and to the literary highbrows. But it is precisely here that, in my view, we find the tension. If we look more closely, we realize that Heidegger is, in fact, engaged in a philosophical project that is thoroughly rooted in the Western philosophical tradition and his work only superficially resembles something genuinely literary. As a part of his own constructive project, Heidegger offers a critique of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and Descartes, just to name a few, and, thus, in order to understand him, one must first understand the tradition and not just the quasi-literary way in which he uses the language.

As we have seen above, the great problem with comparative literature with respect to these issues is that it is rather ahistorical in its practice. The sort of ahistorical training that is presently offered by most comparative literature programs is clearly insufficient to provide one with the historical background requisite for profitably reading a philosopher such as Heidegger. The tendency is, in the absence of this historical training, simply to concentrate on internalizing Heidegger's own language so that one can make use of it when convenient. However, as is clear to all, the ability to disassemble one's lack of comprehension and to feign a knowledge by the well-timed employment of a few catchphrases or bits of jargon is a far cry from genuine understanding of an author or a text.

One might argue that the minority party in the literature camp -- the

group that still reads the important works from the literary tradition -- that we might call for the sake of convenience *littérateurs*, might be in a better position to understand the texts of European philosophy than their colleagues in literary theory. I would agree with this general statement; however, "to be in a better position to understand" does not necessarily imply "to understand," and, I would still harbor grave reservations about even this group's ability to come to terms with the complexity of a thinker such as Heidegger. Although they still read texts from the tradition, the classics that they are expected to master form a part of a different, albeit at times overlapping, canon of texts. Instead of learning Aristotle and Descartes, they learn Shakespeare and Goethe, which is as it should be. And even when the texts do fortuitously overlap, the *littérateur* concerns himself with a set of problems quite different from the issues treated by the philosopher. Thus, it is far from clear who is left in the comparative literature department whose training would allow him or her to approach a figure such as Heidegger with the same philosophical acumen as his or her colleague in the philosophy department.

Literary training is, moreover, in an important sense philosophically superficial. Seen from a philosophical point of view (although certainly not from any absolute perspective), it is superficial in that one is not formally trained to evaluate arguments *per se*, which despite what Rorty says, are to be found in the writings of the great European philosophers. In order to understand a text such as Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, not only must one first have a solid familiarity with the history of philosophy, but also one must possess the ability to interpret and reconstruct arguments which as a skill differs markedly from interpreting symbols and metaphors. Our transcendentalist colleagues in comparative literature, where Heidegger's migration seems to be destined, lack precisely this sort of training in interpretation and logical analysis, and they cannot be reproached for lacking it since they learn to employ a different set of interpretive skills. The skills, if any, which they are called upon to master involve interpretation not of arguments but of literary devices. Again, this is not meant as a critique of transcendentalist culture in general or of comparative literature in particular since for all their philosophical weaknesses, the highbrows make up for with literary strengths that the professional philosophers lack almost to a man. The point here is simply that there are very different kinds of interpretive skills employed in the various human sciences, and what is useful and appropriate for one field is not necessarily so for another.

The problem that comes about for our students and the damage that this migration of European philosophy has effected on our curriculum is easy to discern and can be seen in terms of a simple question about the appropriate deference held for specialization. By leaving Heidegger, Nietzsche,

Kierkegaard and the rest in the hands of the literature department, we are effectively expecting that these difficult authors be taught by professors who lack the correct training and whose areas of specialization are in fact quite remote. The results of this sad misappropriation of university resources are the pedagogical disasters, with which we are all familiar. Here, I think that we could be accused of operating with a double standard with respect to the issue of specialization if we were to go along with Rorty. That philosophy has become a highly specialized field is a point that is so obvious that it hardly bears repeating. The philosophical faculties of all the leading institutions are populated with research specialists whose prime pedagogical responsibility is to teach courses in their respective areas of specialization. This tendency toward specialization is, I think, generally regarded, with some qualifications, as a positive development for philosophy as a professionalized discipline. How then can we square this with Rorty's implicit expectation that the literature department will have the requisite personnel such that it can absorb the new subject matter that the professional philosophers have forsaken when the training that one receives in literature only in the vaguest sense resembles that received in philosophy and has not visibly changed to meet the demands of the new subject matter? Clearly, this offends our instincts as specialists, according to which one must have a certain level of expertise in an area before deigning to offer a course in it. Thus, there seems to be a double standard at work in Rorty's assumption: we believe that specialization is good and useful for philosophy but not for the other humanities fields.

One might respond that specialization is not always necessary for teaching a course at the undergraduate level, but rather mere competence is sufficient. I would agree with this claim in the abstract but would argue that given the training received in comparative literature departments *vis-à-vis* that in philosophy, even a minimal level of competence with the difficult texts of European philosophy is too much to expect from most literary critics or even from old school *littérateurs*. Perhaps a brief example will help to elucidate the criticisms further. A graduate student in the comparative literature department, in the course of the routine duties as a teaching assistant in a Western civilization program, was given the task of teaching Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Instead of analyzing Hume's arguments by putting together premises with conclusions, she did what her literary training had prepared her to do, analyzing Hume's metaphors and symbols. Once again, the point is not that there is anything particularly wrong with this sort of literary training since it is entirely appropriate for understanding a great number of books, indeed, even some philosophical books. And, to be sure, philosophers often make the corresponding mistake, seeking detailed arguments in Vergil or Blake. The

problem is, of course, that these books were never intended to be understood in this way and to attempt to understand them thus will often cause us to miss the point of the text in question. I do not wish implicitly to imply some sort of interpretive foundationalism, according to which there is at bottom a single point or correct interpretation to be found in Vergil, Blake or even Hume, which we miss when we approach them with the wrong interpretive tools. The meanings of these authors are manifold, and even with an agreed upon interpretive approach it is not clear that we will ever reach a consensus about the meaning of their works. These works do, however, belong to different traditions with their own network of issues and modes of expression and thus must be approached with the appropriate set of interpretive tools. We need to be sensitive to this if our goal is to understand an author inside of his or her historical context, and I think this, indeed, ought to be our goal, at least in part, in the classroom.

One could, of course, argue that new meanings and interpretations will be revealed as a result of the literary approach. Perhaps in Hume's *Dialogues* we will be able to uncover a rich network of imagery that was hitherto unknown and neglected by philosophers. This is certainly possible, but regardless of whatever new meanings we might come up with, the point is that we will lose the *philosophical* meaning which was clearly intended, and this loss, although perhaps a matter of indifference to the literature department, represents a substantial loss to the philosophy department.

The other scenario of the literary critic in the philosophy classroom would be a deconstructionist approach to Hume which, it seems to me, would be likewise unhelpful and uninformative to most students. Such an interpretation might tell us a great deal about deconstructionist theory and methodology, but it would, I submit, tell us little or nothing about Hume. For established schools of interpretation such as deconstruction, Marxism, Freudianism, etc. the text becomes after a short time a matter of indifference, and in the end it is used merely as an occasion for learning more about the interpretive method that is being employed. Hence, in this case as well, we would lose the philosophical meaning of Hume's text. Thus, it seems to me that, with literary training being what it is, the possibilities of effective philosophical pedagogy coming from a literary critic are quite remote.

Not only will the meaning of a great number of philosophers from the tradition be lost, but philosophy itself, left in the hands of the ahistorical professional philosophers will have lost its own history. As has been argued,¹⁹ we not only miss good pedagogical opportunities by forsaking the history of philosophy, but we also abandon whatever chance we might have at self-understanding since it is only through an understanding of the history of philosophy that we can gain an inkling about the meaning of our current

philosophical practice. Even if we as professional philosophers believe for whatever ideological reasons that the major figures of the European tradition were simply wrong about certain fundamental issues, we must at least be in a position to show precisely where they went wrong and why in order to vindicate our own research program which presumably corrects the shortcomings of the past; moreover, any misunderstanding or error so great that it could mislead entire schools of thought or traditions must in any case be instructive for students as a lesson of an error not to be repeated at any cost, and in this we can find the justification for the inclusion of these, perhaps error-laden, texts of the past in our curriculum. Thus, regardless of whatever one takes to be philosophy's relation to its past, we cannot afford simply to dismiss it altogether.

When authors such as Nietzsche and Heidegger are abandoned by the philosophy department and become adopted by comparative literature, then we lose a great deal since we lose the very meaning of those authors. As Rorty says, they will still be read, and students will still have the chance to learn about them, but it is hardly a matter of indifference, as Rorty thinks it is, *how* these authors are read. It is true that the authors of the transcendentalist tradition will continue to be read, but will they be *understood*? If they are read inappropriately or are taught by instructors lacking the requisite philosophical training, then it is not clear what really remains of these authors in the final analysis. Although, as Rorty says, there is no point to the useless rhetoric between the two sorts of intellectuals about who the real philosophers are and about what really counts for philosophical inquiry, nevertheless we need to make sure that the sort of intellectual who has the ability to understand these historically-based philosophical texts in a philosophical way does not disappear from our faculty in philosophy, for if we reach a point where philosophers can no longer read and understand the works of the classics from the philosophical tradition, and these authors are only a matter of discussion in comparative literature departments, then philosophy as a discipline will have become greatly impoverished and we will have cheated our students out of some of the most important learning experiences that a philosophical education has to offer.

Notes

1. Rorty, Richard, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture," in his *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 60-71. All references to this essay are from *Consequences of Pragmatism*. (This work was first published in *The Georgia Review*, XXX, 1976, pp. 757-769 and was later reprinted under the title "General Syntheses, Professional Analyses, and Transcendentalist Culture" in the proceedings of the Bicentennial Symposium - *Two Centuries of Philosophy in America*, ed.

- Peter Caws, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, pp. 228-239.)
2. Rorty, Richard, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture," *ibid.*, pp. 61-62.
3. Rorty, Richard, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture," *ibid.*, p. 66.
4. Rorty, Richard, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture," *ibid.*, p. 69.
5. Rorty, Richard, "Philosophy in America Today," in his *Consequences of Pragmatism*, *ibid.*, p. 225.
6. Cf. Fisher, Michael, "Redefining Philosophy as Literature: Richard Rorty's 'Defense' of Literary Culture," in *Reading Rorty*, edited by Alan Malachowski. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp. 233-243. Fischer argues, correctly I think, that Rorty's "defense" of literary culture, when analyzed more closely, in fact does little credit to literary theory.
7. Rorty, Richard, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture," *op. cit.*, p. 65.
8. Rorty, Richard, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture," *ibid.*, p. 65.
9. As one writer puts it, Rorty is a conservative who "favors the political *status quo* in the human sciences." Davempot, Edward, "The New Politics of Knowledge: Rorty's Pragmatism and the Rhetoric of the Human Sciences," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 17 (1987), p. 382.
10. Rorty, Richard, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture," *op. cit.*, p. 69.
11. Cf. "The analytic style is, I think, a good style." Rorty, Richard, "Philosophy in America Today," *ibid.*, p. 217.
12. Rorty, Richard, "Philosophy in America Today," *ibid.*, pp. 220-221.
13. Rorty, Richard, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture," *ibid.*, p. 69.
14. Rorty, Richard, "Philosophy in America Today," *ibid.*, p. 225.
15. For a discussion of this issue see Wilson, Margaret, "History of Philosophy in Philosophy Today: and the Case of the Sensible Qualities," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 101, No. 1 (January 1992).
16. E.g. Strawson, P.F., *The Bounds of Sense*. London: Methuen, 1966; Bennett, Jonathan, *Kant's Dialectic*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974; Allison, Henry, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983.
17. E.g. Taylor, Charles, *Hegel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975; Hoy, David Couzens, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History and Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Danto, Arthur C., *Nietzsche as Philosopher*. New York: Macmillan and London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967. Wood, Allen W., *Hegel's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
18. Cf. "Analytical philosophers, because they identify philosophical ability with argumentative skill and notice that there isn't anything they would consider an argument in a cartoon of Heidegger or Foucault, suggest that these must be people who tried to be philosophers and failed, incompetent philosophers." Rorty, Richard, "Philosophy in America Today," *op. cit.*, p. 224.
19. Cf. Dougherty, Jude P., "The Uses of History in the Teaching of Philosophy," *Teaching Philosophy*, 3:1, (Spring 1979), pp. 13-21.