

HOLDING ONE'S TIME IN THOUGHT

Rorty characterizes his thinking by recourse to a wide variety of self-descriptive terms. Thus he calls himself at various times, a "nominalist," a "historicist," a "nonreductive physicalist." In more colorful language, he claims to be a "post-modern bourgeois liberal," a "lonely provincial," a "new fuzzie." The first two of these self-descriptions are definitely the most significant. In this chapter we will discuss the manner in which Rorty's style of thinking and his mode of argumentation are shaped by his claim to be a "nominalist historicist." What we shall find is that a nominalist historicist doesn't argue by recourse to dialectical or analytical tools. What he does, rather, is to tell a story, to construct a narrative in order to contextualize his claims about the way things are and the direction they ought to take. A responsible exposition and critique of Rorty's thinking requires that we, first, ask after the character and implications of his narratives and then suggest alternative narratives as a means of providing a context for the critical assessment of his views.

RORTY'S GRAND NARRATIVE

Rorty claims that everyone has the right to hold forth on his own peculiar justification for the "spirit of the age." This exercise of "holding your time in thought" (Hegel's advice) means "finding a description of all the things characteristic of your time of which you most approve and with which you unflinchingly identify . . . a description of the end toward which the historical developments which led up to (your) time were means."¹ This activity involves the production of narratives (*geis-*

tesgeschichten) which help to shape the official canons that define intellectual culture. The philosopher, working within a historically volatile field, is actually engaged in the attempt to say who does and does not count as a philosopher or, at the very least, which problems count as *philosophical* problems.²

Rorty's point is that, with respect to any putatively autonomous discipline, there must be answers to questions about who legitimately belongs to the profession or discipline. The criteria employed in addressing these questions have to do with how one might characterize the right problems or how appropriate methods for solving those problems might be developed.

Geistesgeschichte may be compared with four other historiographical genres: doxography, rational reconstructions, historical reconstructions, and intellectual history. Rational reconstructions bring philosophers into the present as conversation partners, thus engaging the arguments of past thinkers with the issues of the present. The procedure is hypothetical, of course, and involves consideration of topics and questions of interest to the present philosopher which his ancestors might never have explicitly formulated. Nonetheless, such reconstructions permit at least the perception of an important continuity with one's intellectual ancestors.

Historical, as opposed to rational, reconstructions attempt to preserve thought within its historical context, seeking to capture the sense of conversations a past philosopher might have had with his own contemporaries. These reconstructions keep rational reconstructions honest by recalling the original sense of the philosopher's program. More importantly, they remind us that there have been ways of thinking markedly at variance with our own. Together, historical and rational reconstructions can maintain a sense of both the continuity and difference essential to any productive relationship with one's cultural past.

Both rational and historical reconstructions depend upon *geistesgeschichte*, since one really wants to be able to deal with the ideas of individuals whose work has been legitimated by consensus. In turn, *geistesgeschichte* depends upon historical and rational reconstructions to provide the data from which one culls and refurbishes those thinkers and issues which, from the perspective of the present, really *count*.

Intellectual history contextualizes *geistesgeschichte*, the self-justifying narrative which construes the past in terms of a privileged present, by appealing beyond the present canon to a variety of alternative thinkers and conditions that shaped the character of the times. In this manner, self-justifying *geistesgeschichten* may be brought to judgment before the

plethora of data of the intellectual historian, who need not employ the term "philosophy" as descriptive of a specialized discipline, but only as an honorific denoting "people who made splendid but largely unsuccessful attempts to ask the questions which we ought to be asking."³ The narratives of the intellectual historian are drawn from the broadest matrix of available evidences.

Rorty has little use for *doxography*, his final type of historiography. Philosophy cannot legitimately be doxography, since writing a *History of Philosophy* which presupposes either a final list of great philosophers or of common subject matters, problems, and themes is nothing less than the effort to literalize *geistesgeschichte*. The doxographical approach can lead to taxonomic or metaphilosophical efforts which presume a logical or semantic given from out of which one might construct the methods, principles, and subject matters of the history of philosophy. Doxography presupposes a belief that philosophy is an autonomous disciplinary matrix defined by an essentially unchanging set of questions, problems, and methods. Doxographers construe the history of philosophy after the model of a traditional science. Rorty would reject any such attempt to envision philosophy as a "natural kind."

Rorty doesn't think we ought to give up canons. We need only feel free to enlarge and revise them whenever necessary. And there is thus no need to give up the honorific sense of "philosopher," only the need to cancel any strictly disciplinary criteria for membership by appeal to a continually revised and enlarged list of canonical figures discovered through interaction with the intellectual historian.

Rorty toys with the idea that perhaps intellectual history would be sufficient for the historian of intellectual culture. His reason for finally claiming *geistesgeschichte* essential is a telling one. He believes that "we cannot get along without heroes. . . . We need to tell ourselves detailed stories of the mighty dead in order to make our hopes of surpassing them concrete."⁴ The construction of such narratives involves manipulating a cast of historical characters in such a manner as to demonstrate how we have come to ask those philosophical questions we believe to be not only profound, but inescapable.

We might note at the outset that some of Rorty's critics believe there to be a problem with regard to his continual use of the term "we." If every individual has the *right* to hold his time in thought by isolating those things of which he approves, rather than the *duty* to get the story straight by appealing to some objective norms or consensual principles, then everyone has the right to characterize precisely who "we" are. Rorty seems to be engaged in doing just that. Thus Richard

Bernstein's accusation that Rorty employs the term "we" as little more than "a label for a projected 'me'"⁵ is certainly justified. But this would be a telling criticism only if it could be shown that there is an alternative to beginning with "me" on the way to a construction of "we." One theme of Rorty's New Pragmatism will hinge on the question of the relationship between "me" and "we." Later, when we discuss this issue we will want to pay attention to whether Rorty uses "we" in such a manner as to presuppose consensus, or merely to invite it.

There are a number of important implications of Rorty's historiographical views just rehearsed. First, Rorty claims to be a nominalist and a historicist. As such, one would expect that he would be fundamentally satisfied with assembling the data of the past in the broadest and least coordinated fashion. Thus he well might take intellectual history as his historiographical model. The fact that he wavers with respect to this commitment suggests the sort of nominalism he espouses. For, though Rorty is willing to refer to himself as a "materialist," he is avowedly nonreductionist. Thus, though his nominalism might be physicalist with respect to the theories of the sciences, his historicist explanations need not follow from materialist assumptions. In fact, his is a romantic vision of history, and his historicism is decidedly *heroic*. Rorty is a *heroic* nominalist historicist.

Second, Rorty's historicism, unlike idealist or materialist varieties, entails the consequence that there are no necessary, only *contingent* questions, issues, or problems facing us. We should look for no historical themes or trends or continuities other than those established by the narratives we construct.

Third, holding our particular historical and cultural present in thought will require that we wield the sword not only to dub the noblest knights of intellectual culture, Sir Philosopher, but, as well, to cut down the villains who do not yet, no longer, nor ever shall deserve that honorific. This negative task is fully as important as the positive and, given the nature of the times, it is the one in which Rorty is perhaps most actively involved.

Finally, along with the strictures against necessity, Rorty recognizes that the decentered selves of postmodern culture will have an indefinite number of interests in accordance with which to construe the historical past. There will be many "we's." The aim cannot be that of coherence or consistency guaranteed by some grand conceptual scheme. We can only seek to be persuasive. Nor are we really to expect, as was often the case in the past, any full consensus. Thus Rorty can be both daring and idiosyncratic in the construction of his vision.

Rorty has provided several versions of his *geistesgeschichte*. His various accounts are overlapping narratives which highlight elements that suit the particular rhetorical context with which he is concerned. In the following pages I will rehearse a selection of these narratives, concluding with a construction of the Grand Narrative that serves as the broadest context of Rorty's views.

In order to hold his time in thought Rorty believes that he must tell a story of the origin and destiny of the modern age.⁶ The modern age begins with the French Revolutionaries and the Romantics: The former showed that the vocabulary of social relations was contingent and open to transformation; the latter demonstrated that language, as an expression of imagination, was a self-creative tool. Romanticism helped to enforce a split between the traditional science-oriented Enlightenment thinkers and those who allied themselves with the poet and the revolutionary. The former sought reference to the real world, the latter thought of language and theories as tools whose descriptions and redescriptions change self and circumstances.

This same split gave rise to the modern sense of a philosophical discipline as distinct from the nascent scientific and humanistic disciplines. The sense of philosophy as *scientia scientiarum*—the determiner of the normative relationships of the alternative cultural interests—was cause and consequence of the Kantian organization of the value spheres into the scientific, moral, and aesthetic, and the Hegelian attempt to preserve and defend that organization. The Romantic separation of the activities of the poets and those of the scientists perpetuated the sense that scientific truth was thought to be *made*, while the spiritual truths of the poets still existed "out there."

The heirs of the Romantic movement and the French Revolution are the "strong poets"⁷ and the utopian revolutionaries. The strong poet is the creator of "de-divinized poetry." This kind of poetry is occasioned not by the inspiration of the muses, but molded from the inner resources of the individual "genius." The utopian revolutionary is the activist with a de-divinized conscience. Such revolutionaries are no longer prophets acting in obedience to the will of God, but reformers who take responsibility for their decisions and actions. The *strong* poet and the revolutionary both maintain a critical stance toward the values of the past.

Rorty's celebration of the ideals of the French Revolution and the Romantic movement takes on a peculiar cast by virtue of his agonal interpretation of history. Readers of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*,⁸ in many ways a crucial work for Rorty's entire historiographical project,

will recall that the power of the poet comes from his "strong misreading" of his predecessors. Such a reading reconstitutes the past as appropriated by the would-be genius of the present. Bloom's notion of strong misreading is rooted in the classically Oedipal dynamic in which creativity is born of patricide.

The Oedipal situation is certainly relevant to rationalistic cultures characterized by agonal interactions of programs and principles.⁹ But there is always continuity. The "strong poet" and "revolutionary," each of them in turn, takes his place in the poetic and revolutionary traditions. It is this which allows the combination of patricide and apotheosis which Freud celebrated as a primary dialectic of our culture.

The present has no viable reality except as a perspective on the past which leads either to acquiescence, or to the revolts of the strong poet and revolutionary. Each of these latter individuals holds a conjured, appropriated past in thought. Each must lay claim to both originality and superiority with respect to the past. This condescension towards one's heritage makes of one's history a "white-man's burden" each generation of liberal *Geisteshistorikers* shoulders with a deepening sigh.

The aim of an enlightened, secular society is one not only without God and the institutions of the Church, or absolute political authority, but equally without a divine self or world. Thus, it is incorrect to believe that "finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings."¹⁰

Such a society, even if it is a child of the Enlightenment in the sense that it has carried out with a ruthless consistency the desire for enlightened secularity, needs an improved self-description which avoids the old vocabulary of rational/irrational, absolute/relative, and so forth. For there is no foundation or goal shaping society. Just as language per se is contingent, the vocabularies permitting the descriptions and redescriptions of a society are contingent. There is no neutral standpoint, no ultimately *rational* perspective. In fact, the contrast rational/irrational is applicable only within a given language game and therefore cannot be used to explain movements among language games or the more radical changes in linguistic behavior associated with paradigm shifts.

The real triumph of the Enlightenment is, ironically, its transmutation into a pragmatic vocabulary which best expresses a de-theologized, but also de-scientized and de-philosophized secularity. Thus, the end of enlightenment would not be a scientized but a poetized culture, one in which we "substitute the hope that chances for fulfillment of

idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized for the hope that everyone will replace 'passion' or fantasy with 'reason.'"¹¹

Talk of equal opportunity for fantasy fulfillment might be thought bizarre unless one realizes that, on Rorty's terms, there are no privileged fantasies because there is no standardized reality by which to assess them. This can only mean that progress in the cultural interests of poetry, science, philosophy, or politics results from "the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need."¹²

In this narrative, Rorty applauds the manner in which the Romantic poets and the political revolutionaries conspire to slay God the Father, and thence to weed out the vestiges of the divine in political life. The revolution is, of course, unfinished. "Reason" and "poetic genius," the standards used by the rationalists and Romantics, respectively, must themselves be de-divinized. When this is done, we shall have completed what was started at the beginning of the modern age.

We must be careful not to interpret this narrative as praise for the poet in the traditional sense. In his discussions of the strong poet Rorty is invoking the sense of *poieisthai*, "to make something into," "to hold something to be." This places, say, Francis Bacon on a par with John Milton. Bacon, as strong poet, is a significant proponent of "self-assertion."

Rorty agrees with Hans Blumenberg that "self-assertion" ought to be distinguished from "self-foundation." The former involves the creation and/or expression of one's beliefs and desires. The latter is concerned with grounding the sense of one's self upon a transcendent principle or vision such as God, the Absolute, the Transcendental Ego. Essential to Rorty's Grand Narrative is his agreement with Blumenberg's claim in his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*¹³ that historicist criticisms of Enlightenment optimism count against self-foundation but not against self-assertion.¹⁴

Rorty provides an interesting variant of this first narrative in his "From Logic to Language to Play."¹⁵ Here he moves forward in time and begins his account with the interplay of science and philosophy in the twentieth century. The character of scientific and literary cultures at the beginnings of the twentieth century was in large measure a result of the alliance of philosophy with the scientific enterprise. Russell and Husserl turned to logic and mathematics as appropriate models for philosophical emulation. But Husserl's broadening of his project into that of the phenomenology of conscious experience made the axiomatic model of the mathematical sciences less relevant and opened philosophy to critiques such as that contained in Heidegger's

Being and Time,¹⁶ which challenged its status as a science.

The move from substantialist to functional treatments of science, advertised best by Ernst Cassirer's interpretations of Einstein's relativity theories,¹⁷ along with Carnap's employment of the logic of relations in place of predicate logic, provided the context within which a new pluralistic pragmatism developed. The anti-substantialist, anti-Aristotelian, and anti-essentialist temper of such a movement led away from scientific and positivistic explanations in terms of atoms and substances and toward the increased use of the languages of processes and relationships.¹⁸

The recognition of intuitive descriptions of non-Euclidean systems, and the relativizing and historicizing of Kantian world-construction associated with C. I. Lewis and others, finally led to an instrumental, anti-realist view of physical science. The belief in the axiomatic certainty of geometry and in unchanging categories of the understanding gave way to the cultural and historical relativity of even our most substantial beliefs. Quine's attack on analytic truth (that which is true by definition) and Davidson's replacement of "the meaning of *x*" with "the place of *x* within a language game," shifted the interpretation of language from something which provides access to an objective reality into that of a mode of behavior, a tool for coping. Now, "there is no way to reach outside our language-game to an account of the relations between the language-game as scheme and 'the world' as 'content'."¹⁹

In this narrative Rorty continues the story of the first by indicating how philosophers and scientists came to call the rationality of their disciplines into question. The conclusion of the narrative is that we should reject both scientist and anti-scientist and understand philosophy as "no closer to science than to art, and no farther from either than it is from any other sphere of human self-creation."²⁰ Such an interpretation allows for an understanding of scientific, moral, or political theories in the same manner that we understand works of art—that is, as essentially metaphorical descriptions and re-descriptions.

Again we see the emergence of "self-assertion" as a major theme characterizing the modern age. Metaphorical re-descriptions result in the reconstitution of human experience. This may be accomplished idiosyncratically, as is the case with every novel act of self-description, or, perhaps globally, as is done in those rarer instances in which the creation of one's self serves as a model for other acts of self-creation.

A third variant of Rorty's history of modernity begins even more recently. Here he employs the vocabulary of isolation and professionalization. Recognizing the transition from the literary, "genteel tradi-

tion" of American philosophy to that of Dewey's social engineering that took place between the Wars, and thence to the increasing isolation of philosophy from highbrow culture criticism, Rorty notes the emergence of culture criticism as the abode of small "p" philosophical activity.²¹

Dewey was on the right track, but after the Second World War, there was a turn away from the social scientific orientation of philosophy and toward the notion that philosophy ought attain to the rigor of the natural sciences. Philosophy was as isolated now from the broader social scientific concerns as from the genteel literary tradition. The professionalization of philosophy isolated it both from the humanistic traditions within the academy and the wider concerns of the highbrow culture critic.

It is with regard to the professionalization of philosophy that Rorty associates Kant's most pernicious influence in America. Though he well appreciates that such a phenomenon has its roots as much in Britain as the Continent, it is the Kantian turn that Rorty finds most reprehensible.

[T]he wrong turn was taken when Kant's split between science, morals and art was accepted as a *donnée*, as *die massgebliche Selbstausslegung der Moderne*. Once that split is taken seriously, then the *Selbstvergewisserung der Moderne*, which Hegel and Habermas both take to be the "fundamental philosophical problem," will indeed seem urgent. For once the philosophers swallow Kant's "stubborn differentiation," then they are condemned to an endless series of reductionist and antireductionist moves. . . . To be a philosopher of the "modern" sort is precisely to be unwilling either to let these spheres simply co-exist uncompetitively, or reduce the other two to the remaining one. Modern philosophy has consisted in forever realigning them, squeezing them together, and forcing them apart again. But it is not clear that these efforts have done the modern age much good (or, for that matter, harm).²²

Professionalized philosophy insures both the perpetuation of its own disciplinary concerns, in large measure through its claim to be the adjudicator of value conflicts among the various cultural interests and the professionalized status of the areas of cultural interest which it purports to classify and organize.

In "Nineteenth Century Idealism and Twentieth Century Textualism,"²³ Rorty reverts to the Enlightenment beginnings and takes yet another run at the question of how we arrived at the present. The

Enlightenment contrast between science and superstition based upon the claim that Newtonian science provided the ground of knowledge was effectively a shift from religion to science as the guiding and grounding discipline of culture. The effect of this claim was to exclude questions of God, freedom, and immortality from the realm of responsible discussion.

This shift toward scientific rationality presented a problem which Kant finally resolved by offering philosophy in the place of science as the presiding cultural discipline. Philosophy now is employed to establish the legitimacy of scientific knowledge and to provide a place for moral, aesthetic, and (in a somewhat Pickwickian sense) religious interests within intellectual culture. This occurred in three stages: First, Kant claimed that the validity of scientific knowledge presumed that the subject matter of science was a world transcendentally construed. Second, this belief presupposed a distinction between the world as "made" and as "found." This distinction parallels the one between "science" and "morality." Our knowledge is of a world that is antecedently construed; we act in a world directly encountered. Third, Kant forwarded philosophy as that discipline which transcends both science and morality, and as the only discipline capable of telling us of the nature of things. This move leads us in the direction of contemporary foundationalist philosophy.

"The Kantian system . . . began by borrowing the prestige of science . . . then proceeded to demote science to the second rank of cultural activities."²⁴ Moreover, the Kantian system was a *system* in which the disciplines of science, morality, and art were institutionalized and organized in a manner that played one against the other in such a way as to set up "the contest of the faculties" which has since plagued modern culture.

For Rorty, the upshot of Hegel's characterization of how thought works is the celebration of the discovery or invention of new vocabularies, the presumption of their finality, and the recognition of their transitoriness, which leads each in turn to succumb to yet another contender. Hegel ushered in literary culture shaped by a Romanticism which replaces the pursuit of truth with the search for the appropriate vocabulary. According to Rorty, this emergent culture promised something like the substitution of literature for philosophy as the guiding cultural discipline. In this sort of culture science is placed in an ancillary role with respect to the most vital of human interests.

The final step away from the Enlightenment ideal of scientific rationality is taken by pragmatism. It was the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche

and William James that finally led to the replacement of Romanticism with pragmatism. "Instead of saying that the discovery of vocabularies could bring hidden secrets to light, [the pragmatists] said that new ways of speaking could help us get what we want."²⁵ They gave up the notion of truth as correspondence to reality, thus rendering philosophy on a par with science as a discipline capable of creating useful interpretations or construals of the world.

A literary culture does not need a presiding discipline in the sense of a ground or foundation. All it requires is a recognition of the contingency of the vocabularies which constitute our beliefs and desires along with a sense that the purpose of these vocabularies is the practical one of effecting our desires rather than the theoretical one of discovering something final or absolute about the way things are.

The refrain of each of these *geistesgeschichten* is: *In the Kantian Fall we sinned all*. The net effect of construing the modern age in terms of Kant's construction of the presumably autonomous value spheres and Hegel's defense of what he thought to be their threatened autonomy is to see modernity primarily through German eyes. But whether we take the German interpretation or broaden our perspective to include consideration of the British, French, and American contexts, there is one constant: The destiny of philosophy in the modern period has involved an erratic vacillation between the literary and the scientific enterprises as models of philosophic discourse. Rorty's preference is clearly for the literary, poetic model.

We may now isolate some of the themes constituting Rorty's Grand Narrative: First, modernity is characterized by a movement from religion to science to philosophy to literature. Second, that movement involved the development of idealist philosophy as an attempt to ground culture. Third, the effect of idealism has been to initiate a competition between science and philosophy, science and literature, and, finally, literature and philosophy, as cultural dominants. This conflict of the value spheres is a result of the two-sidedness of the idealist model of philosophy. In the late modern period, philosophers continue to vacillate between the literary and the scientific models as they attempt to resolve the question of their true function.

Fourth, the true heritage of idealism is its Romanticist impulse, deriving from the early Hegel. This Romanticism has constituted the primary dynamic in the transition from philosophy and science to literature as the constituting element of culture. Fifth, this literary culture is best articulated in terms of the pragmatist's concern for the utility of vocabularies. Pragmatism has reflected the ambivalence of

philosophy per se. But even on its naturalistic, scientific side it has concerned itself with functionalist, anti-essentialist, interpretations which led it away from rationalism and objectivism toward an operationalist, practice-oriented understanding. Meanwhile, its distinctively literary, Jamesian, side has stressed the issue of the utility of languages in achieving human desires. Importantly, it is pragmatism that combines the legitimate aims of both consensual and idiosyncratic vocabularies. Pragmatists promote the use of both vocabularies of private self-creation and vocabularies of public praxis. The latter vocabularies are concerned with the alleviation of cruelty. Sixth, a pragmatic culture, the heroes of which are the strong poet and the utopian revolutionary, needs no grounding since the aim of literary culture is the production of a variety of novel vocabularies of self-enrichment and the enrichment of public life.

Finally, the conflict of the value spheres is best resolved not through reduction or the introduction of a supererogatory adjudicating discipline, but through the recognition of the autonomy of languages. Every discipline can have something important to say without any having the last word. Thus, the languages of science, and of literature, and the discourse of common sense as well, can grow together without fear of reduction or sublation.

Rorty's Grand Narrative provides an explanation of why many presume that modernity is defined in accordance with the divided self, the soul at war. In his Grand Narrative he provides some suggestions as to how modernity could be conceived as requiring an account of the conflicts and mutual reinforcements of art and morality, science and art, morality and science, etc. The depression of art through technique, the reduction of science to technologies of purposive rationality (Weber's *zweckrationalität*), the insipidity of moralized or politicized art, the horror and distastefulness of art won free from the constraints of the moral sense, are all expressions of the value conflicts that define one aspect of modernity.

A more positive implication of Rorty's narrative is that science and technology may enlarge, enrich, and secure life. Ethical and political institutions secure and protect rights and freedoms of individuals; art sensitizes and ennobles the human being and underwrites quality leisure pursuits. This is possible if we arrange social and individual life around the aims of justice in the public sphere and the freedom of self-creation in private.

There are at least three important issues raised by Rorty's Grand Narrative. First, we should note that he begins with the so-called mod-

ern period. Why should he believe that the modern epoch, as opposed to the entire sweep of intellectual culture from the Greeks to the present, constitutes the epoch he needs to hold in thought? Rorty is taking his stand with those who hold that the modern age begins a distinctive epoch in human history. This raises the question of "the legitimacy of the modern age." In contemporary discussions, this question is normally divided into two parts: (a) Is the modern period the appropriate beginning point for historicist explanations of the origin and development of contemporary culture?, and (b) Is modernity still viable, or ought we be accounting for a transition to "postmodernity"?

Second, we recognize that in telling a story of the sort that Rorty tells, it is as important to distinguish what has been left out from what has been included. Thus, in order to contextualize Rorty's narrative we need to assess other plausible narratives of the origin and fate of the modern period, and then to ask whether narrative can legitimately take the place of theory.

Finally, Rorty's Grand Narrative is just that—a narrative. Does it count as "history" in any viable sense? More specifically, is Rorty's manner of thinking "historicist" in any of the more familiar senses of that word? At the very least, if we are going to accede to Rorty's claim that he is a historicist, we ought to understand the sense in which he is using that term.

THE LEGITIMACY QUESTION

By beginning with the Enlightenment and telling the story of the movement from the Age of Reason, in which science was the guiding discipline, to the present "literary culture," Rorty effectively claims legitimacy for the modern period as that in which the story relevant to himself and his times might be told. I want to briefly examine Rorty's reasons for this claim.

The traditional division of the Western cultural tradition into ancient, medieval, and modern may appear rather facile. After all, the mere act of giving a name is a form of legitimation. "The rhetorical function of names . . . is to lay claim to the legitimating weight of genealogy."²⁶ Reinforcing the weak legitimating effect of naming, there is the fact that mere persistence tends to legitimate. If we continue telling the same old story we will presume the importance of the tale even if we ourselves are not engaged in it. Inertia is a law of life. What hangs about has authority.

Presumably, however, there is more than just the name "moder-

nity” and the persistence of accountings of it to argue for the significance of the epoch. The core of the legitimation of Modernity lies in the justification of the Enlightenment on its own terms, divorced from past epochs. Rorty’s Grand Narrative provides a description of the distinctiveness of the modern period in terms of the themes summarized above.

It is important to realize, however, that the rhetorical function of narratives can be most insidious. All narratives, particularly a meta-narrative of the type that Rorty provides, avoid explicit argumentation. And in the absence of analytical and dialectical arguments we tend to suspend our critical sense. Dramatic narratives which assure us of the importance of the struggle being recounted and provide some hope of victory over the darker forces celebrated in the tale, tempt us to yield our skepticism and disbelief in much the same way as we do when listening to bedtime stories which begin, “Once upon a time . . .”.

There is another concern when considering critical accounts of modernity. Some accounts seek to undermine the notion of modernity by challenging its distinctiveness or the viability of the turning that took place with the Enlightenment sensibility.²⁷ But we mustn’t forget that an epoch may be challenged at both ends. That is, we may ask, however legitimate a period has been considered to be, whether it is any longer viable. Proponents of “postmodernism” may claim that modernity was a legitimate epoch, but that it no longer has any real integrity as a historical context. Rorty, having recently backed away from his former association with what he termed “postmodern bourgeois liberalism,” means to stay within the boundaries of the modern world.

Jean-François Lyotard has made a helpful distinction between forms of legitimation. Metanarratives may be of two sorts—projective and originary. Projective legitimation may attempt to argue for the authority of an epoch on the grounds that certain trends that characterize the processes of the epoch ought to continue. Originary narratives account for the meaning and significance of an epoch by appeal to its origins. Originary narratives are concerned with the legitimation of the present in terms of the past. Projective narratives are concerned with accounts of presumed trends leading to an idealized future.

Arguments that promote the belief in the positive value of the progress of knowledge or the growth of human freedom are examples of projective narratives legitimating the modern age. Originary narratives often involve resort to mythical accounts. The grand myth that founded our culture is one of the transition from chaos to cosmos. Versions of this myth, whether in the form we find in *Genesis*, or in

Hesiodic and Orphic cosmogonies, may be used to legitimate Western culture in its entirety. Variants of this originary narrative have been employed, for example, by members of the Frankfurt school to demonstrate the origins of reason as an ordering, construing agency aimed at the shaping of an antecedent chaos.

Rorty begins with the origins of the modern period, thus advertising the relevance of the movement from the Enlightenment to the present as a means of indicating how we got to be the way we are. He doesn't find it necessary to go back to Plato and beyond as Heidegger does in recounting the History of Being, nor does he follow Alasdair MacIntyre, who returns to Aristotle for the sense of tradition that he feels has been lost in the modern age. These antimodern thinkers have no wish to legitimate the modern age. They hope to show that if we are to get back on the right track we must return to the origins and uncover the appropriate resources for a revitalization of our individual and social lives.

There are two criticisms which will help us contextualize Rorty's narrative. The first is that in offering a projective narrative which would legitimate trends in the modern period leading to increased autonomy and the value of "self-assertion," Rorty has depended upon the determinative significance of the Kantian turning. In fact, one may argue that the Kantian turn was less significant than Rorty suggests and that the "value spheres" and the contest of the faculties they entail, have their origins at the beginnings of Western culture.

A second, for our purposes more interesting, criticism is that Rorty's narrative of modernity leaves out altogether too much of what we mean by the modern age, and that his failure to engage significant alternative views amounts to an unproductively dismissive attitude toward some contemporary self-understandings. We shall be able to dispense with the first criticism in rather short order. The second, far more serious, objection will be dealt with in the following section.

The problem of legitimation can be restated in this fashion: Is the origin of what is modern about us the origin of what is most distinctive about us? One manner of answering this question negatively is by providing a plausible account of the history of our culture which finds the origin of the conflict associated with the value spheres in ancient times in the construction of Plato's tripartite structure of the psyche.²⁸

One might argue that you could get more mileage out of an originary legitimation that finds the origins of the value spheres of science, morality, and art at the very beginnings of the articulation of the concepts of the person. In Homer, *psyche*, *noos*, and *thymos* adumbrate the

elements of the Platonic version of the soul articulated in terms of *noesis* (reason), *thymos* (spirit), and *epithymia* (appetite). The same functions surface as value spheres in Aristotle's organization of the disciplines grounded in thought, action, passion. These activities ground the theoretical, practical, and productive disciplines. There is some basis for arguing that associating the origin of the conflict of the value spheres with the modern period is wrong-headed.

Rorty would likely reply that he is not so much concerned with this issue as he is with what is effectively a reinterpretation of one of the elements or functions which underlie the value spheres. The medieval period is distinguishable from the ancient by virtue of the introduction of Hebraic-Christian traditions into the Hellenic, Hellenistic, and Roman cultural streams. What is distinctive turns out to be the notion of *volition* which, if not "invented" by Augustine, was certainly spelled out most profoundly in his *De Trinitate*, *De Civitate Dei*, and *Confessiones*. This is the point that Hans Blumenberg ultimately makes by singling out the notion of self-assertion as the primary characteristic of the modern period. And there is certainly some reason to believe that volition, *arbitrium*, the power of the will, is the defining characteristic of modernity, since once self-consciousness demonstrates the arbitrariness of the foundations, there is no reason not to employ the will in the exercise of redefining or restructuring cultural significances. But the discovery of the human will awaited the recognition of an extramundane source of volition. In this sense, Nietzsche's cultural diagnosis was quite correct: Consciousness of will finally leads to consciousness of the unacceptability of competing wills—particularly that associated with the Will of God.²⁹

With regard to the "legitimacy question," Rorty effectively sides with Blumenberg who finds the resort to "self-assertion" to be the distinctive quality of modern individuals. After encountering Blumenberg Rorty added Francis Bacon to his list of heroes. Rorty's Grand Narrative is, of course, not inconsistent with this recognition of the importance of Bacon. Rorty agrees with Blumenberg that "self-assertion" rather than the "realization of subjective freedom" is the driving force of modernity.³⁰

Blumenberg finds the modern age legitimate in the following ways: First, the *querelle* is decisive for the sense of a transition from tradition to the belief in *de modo*. The break between tradition and modernity is achieved at the psychological level by the *sense of being modern*. Second, the modern age is characterized by a novel response to changes that led to the experience of radical contingency. This response depended on

the dialectic of Christianity and Gnosticism and its role in shaping the Augustinian synthesis. The Gnostic Marcion expressed a vision of a world patterned by evil, having been created by a lesser god, which could be destroyed by the pure god as a means of redeeming the world. Augustine responded to this vision by making the fallenness of the world a consequence of the prideful self-assertion of man, the cause of which lay in the will itself and not in God.³¹ When the nominalism of the later medieval period established the arbitrariness of God, however, the synthesis of Augustinian and Aristotelian theology of the High Middle Ages was dissolved into contingency and irrationality. Self-assertion replaced submission as the most legitimate human response to one's environs.

Augustinian Platonism and Thomistic Aristotelianism kept voluntarism from entering the mainstream from Christianity, but Nietzsche's introduction of radical contingency into secular culture had more immediate consequences. Nietzsche's recognition of the arbitrariness of the world creates the same two possibilities—either submission to the nihilism of Plato and Christianity, or self-assertion. Without traditional constraints, the self-assertive mode is raised to the level of consciousness and modern individuals begin to recognize the volitional foundation of rationality.

Individual self-assertion, then, is a legitimate response to this situation, and modern science is a primary agent of the need to face the contingency of reality and the arbitrariness of the divine agency. "Deprived by God's hiddenness of the metaphysical guaranties for the world, man constructs for himself a counterworld of elementary rationality and manipulability. . . . The exigency of self-assertion became the sovereignty of self-foundation."³²

There is little for Rorty to disagree with in this analysis since it underwrites his nominalism and volitionalism and his sense of the arbitrariness of cultural artifacts. He gladly accepts the importance of Francis Bacon as a legitimate corrective to many accounts of the rise of modernity. Science is Baconian science, the science of manipulation and control. This opens Blumenberg, and *pari passu* Rorty himself, to criticism from those such as Heideggerians and the Frankfurt school who would claim that seeking to legitimate modernity in terms of self-assertion, the primary expression of which is that ubiquitous technology which threatens the earth, is highly questionable.

The concept of legitimation implicit in Rorty's Grand Narrative differs somewhat from that of Blumenberg. Rorty requires that "self-assertion" be able to function in such a manner as to avoid the problems of

"demarcation" and "the contest of the faculties" characteristic of the post-Kantian age. But it is most difficult to believe that Rorty has altogether avoided these difficulties himself. When he says that philosophy has been construed as science, metaphor, or politics,³³ he is recapitulating the science, art, morality dispute begun with Kant. Rorty would, of course, reply that he is not endorsing this conflict only reporting it. But his resolution of the contest, awarding victory to the poetic and political models, may certainly be read as a resolution *on Kant's terms*.

Rorty wishes "self-assertion" to be characterized in such a way that we are able to view the construction of theories in the same way as we see the creation of works of art. But his claim that what modern thought does is to play the historical forms of modernity off against one another in the same way, for example, that "Blumenberg plays 'self-assertion' off against 'self-grounding'"³⁴ suggests that he too is stuck in this impasse. For Rorty's introduction of "self-assertion" can plausibly be read as little more than a referencing of culture in terms of one of the possible value modalities. He may claim that he has bypassed Kant, and that "self-assertion" is a reasonably neutral, historically grounded category, but, as I have indicated, one could easily argue that he has only appealed to the same intransigent value spheres in their quasi-Platonic or Augustinian forms.³⁵

Rorty's appeal to "self-assertion" involves one of the reductions played out in our culture since Kant, or since Bacon, or since, for that matter, the ruminations of Protagoras and Callicles, Antiphon and Critias. Self-assertion may have a longer and more effective history than Rorty acknowledges. Nevertheless, I would say that even if one were to make a case for the existence of the conflict of the value spheres at the very beginnings of our culture, Rorty's focus upon self-assertion provides a distinctive enough legitimating criterion for his Grand Narrative. For we moderns are perhaps the first to name our own age through a self-conscious attempt to ask what sort of beings we are. And it is in large measure our consciousness of the degree to which our individual and cultural lives are defined by the relations of the principal value modalities that defines our sense of the modern period.

There seem to be plausible grounds for Rorty beginning his narrative with the modern period as defined by the notion of self-assertion. Moreover, he has at least as plausible grounds for holding that the modern period so defined is a continuing project. That is to say: self-assertion, expressing itself in terms of a transition from objectivist to historicist, from scientific to literary, modes of discourse still has work to do in bringing about a poetized culture.

Thus, on his terms, the most important competing narratives must be neither originary criticisms of modernity of the sort provided by Heidegger, the early Frankfurt school, or even Alasdair MacIntyre—all of which problematize the notion of modernity by promoting a return to the origins of our culture—nor projective narratives such as are illustrated by postmodern critics, who see us as having moved beyond the modern age. There is sufficient contrast between Rorty's view and these antimodern understandings as to render them effectively unengageable from Rorty's perspective.

Having established Rorty's reasons for claiming the modern age to be the distinctive epoch in terms of which our self-understanding might be contextualized, I will now begin to consider the implications of Rorty's Grand Narrative against the background of alternative narratives of the origins of the modern age.

STRANDS OF MODERNITY

The chief rivals of Rorty's *geistesgeschichte* are the family of accounts which seek to legitimate modernity. I intend in the following pages to outline some alternative plot-lines which constitute different accounts of how we got to where we are. I should reiterate here what I said at the very beginning of this work: A responsible evaluation of Rorty's thinking best proceeds, not by recourse to analytical or dialectical argumentation, but by the method of recontextualization. The point of the following rather lengthy detour from the direct exposition of Rorty's thinking will not be to undermine his Grand Narrative, but merely to highlight the consequences of following the route of narrative explanation Rorty has constructed.

In one sense of the term my account may be deemed more historicist than Rorty's. A narrative is different from history in that the former tends to have the unity of characters and plot while the latter may be, as Henry Ford noted, "just one damned thing after another." Narratives are the manner we shape those damned things into meaningful patterns. But if we don't hold these things as separately as we can, we will be left with theory-laden narratives instead of meaningfully historicist explanations.

The vast number and variety of published responses to the question of the meaning of the modern age attest to the difficulty of giving a coherent response to that concern. Matei Calinescu describes "five faces" of modernity classified under two general headings: the "bourgeois" and the "aesthetic,"³⁶ while David Frisby is content to assay

"fragments" of its interpretation.³⁷ Each of these authors recognizes that the search for a univocal definition of "modernity" would be vain. Others who address this issue are often less modest—though their treatments have in general shown they have more reason to be.³⁸

Modernity has been associated with secularization of the sort celebrated and scorned by Max Weber, which led to the development of formal rationality. Such rationality allows the modern self to exist in society as an empty, merely formal, decision-maker without the presence of any normative content by which to guide its decisions.³⁹ Renato Poggioli distinguishes a "humanistic" and a "romantic" version of modernity, the former dedicated to a restoration of the classical and the ancient, the latter to "a construction of the present and future not on the foundations of the past but on the ruins of time."⁴⁰

Even granting the maximum amount of overlap among these visions, it is clear that we are in a desperate situation with respect to the idea of "the modern age," if it is a definition or coherent characterization that we seek. The fitful incoherence of our conceptions of modernity resists synthesis. Attempts at comprehensiveness will yield little more than the blurred eccentricity of a gnat's eye view. On the other hand, it is quite clear that any one of these characterizations of modernity could appeal to a particular audience whose members will resonate with the interpretation espoused. "The modern age" is, on this account, no more or less problematic than the meaning of "freedom" or "love."

Still, we sense that there is a difference here that needs accommodation. Some of those who discuss the term "modernity" are operating with a crisis mentality resulting from pitting modernity against the notion of "postmodernity," which serves to call into question at least its legitimacy, if not its very existence. A number of others take the defensive stance, attempting to vindicate the Enlightenment project. The controversial character of these discussions determines that we must attempt to look at the phenomenon in as inclusive a manner possible if we are to serve the interests of broad cultural self-understanding.

Until the arguments were refined over the last several years, many philosophers were at least certain when the modern age *began*. It was with Descartes, he who made the significant double move that defines the modern epoch: the internal move toward the grounding of the self in consciousness of itself, in the securing repose of self-reflection, and the outward move from the self to the material world armed with the coordinates of analytic geometry.

What is modern about the Cartesian stratagem is not merely the provision of an unsullied vantage point from which reason could inven-