

Humanities Center Newsletter

December 2001 vol 1 no 2

Trinity 126, 100, and hallway www.csuchico.edu/hfa/hc

Director's Corner

I promise to make this column shorter than my last. We continue to look for feedback, constructive criticism, and suggestions as we tinker with this publication. Just get in touch with me.

Rorty Visit

If one of the main purposes of the Humanities Center is to bring prominent, world-class scholars to campus and to stimulate intellectual excitement and controversy, then the November 5-7 visit of Richard Rorty was a success. His public talks were packed—about sixty people had to be turned away from Monday's talk, and PAC 144 was full for Tuesday's lecture. Both of his symposia were well attended and lively affairs. In the words of one expert, "This is certainly one of the most successful of the Presidential Scholars in terms of faculty support and interest and student attendance." Rorty, too, enjoyed his visit writing me to say, "I had a great time in Chico. There is nothing like appreciative audiences to bolster one's sense of well-being." None

of this should imply that everyone agreed with what Rorty had to say—that would indeed have been a disaster. You may read in this newsletter a range of reactions from some of your colleagues (and I thank them all for their comments).

Spring Speakers

A number of you have expressed your interest in the visit of philosopher **Susan Haack** to campus on March 11. She has suggested that she will speak on one of two chapters from her forthcoming book (her sixth!) entitled provisionally *Science Defended—Within Reason*. Many thanks to the Committee on Arts and Lectures for help financing her visit. Meanwhile historian **Russell Jacoby** will be arriving on campus on May 1; the title of his talk is still to be decided.

Thursday Afternoon Tertulias

In the Spanish-language cultural sphere, "tertulias" are circles of friends who gather regularly to discuss ideas. We plan to inaugurate such a tradition within the HFA by having a regular

Thursday afternoon get-together in the Humanities Center beginning at 4 p.m. and lasting until about 5:30. Naturally, refreshments, both solid and liquid, will be available in order that the part of us Virginia Woolf calls "the seat of the soul, not that hard little electric light which we call brilliance, as it pops in and out upon our lips, but the more profound, subtle and subterranean glow, which is the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse" may be nourished. There was such a positive response to the series of socials we had earlier in the year, we hope that these tertulias will carry that spirit forward. So please stop by after your busy day on Thursday or perhaps before your evening class, have a bite to eat and something to drink, and enjoy the company of your colleagues.

Donations to the Humanities Center Library

On behalf of the Humanities Center, I would like to thank the following individuals for their generous donations to our library:

Those Who Have Contributed Books

Marcel Daguerre, Philosophy
The Oxford Companion to Philosophy and

The Dictionary of the History of Ideas (four volumes)

Anthony Graybosch, Philosophy
Joseph Margolis, *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?*

Troy Jollimore, Philosophy
Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*

Authors Who Have Donated Their Own Books

Lois E. Bueler, English
Clarissa's Plots and
The Tested Woman Plot: Women's Choices, Men's Judgments, and the Shaping of Stories

Jeanne E. Clark, Creative Writing
ohio blue tips

Donald Heinz, Religious Studies
The Last Passage: Recovering a Death of Our Own

Brooke Moore and Ken Bruder, Philosophy
Philosophy: The Power of Ideas, 5th edition

Becky Cox White, Philosophy
Competence to Consent
We continue to encourage HFA authors to submit copies of their books to the Humanities Center library as well as to encourage people to donate other books. Anyone interested may obtain from

me a wish-list of titles
our library committee has
drafted.

Puzzle Contest

*Play cannot be denied.
You can deny, if you like,
nearly all abstractions:
justice, beauty, truth,
goodness, mind, God. You
can deny seriousness, but
not play.*

—Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

You are a clever, verbal
bunch and from what I can
see, competitive as well.
So clever in fact that I
hesitate to pose to you a
double acrostic I composed
a number of years ago (see
the final page of the
newsletter), the first of a
series of double acrostics
I hope to include in future
editions of the newsletter

(for those who don't know
what a double acrostic is,
the first letters of the
clues will spell both the
author's name and the title
of the work from which the
quotation is taken). I fear
this is not a worthy
challenge for you (but
perhaps that's because I
already know the answers).
At any rate, to make it
worth your while, the
Humanities Center will
offer a \$10 gift
certificate to the A.S.
Bookstore as a prize. All
you need to do is to submit
your solution to me by the
last day of finals
(December 21) and we will
draw the winner at random
from the correct solutions
submitted. Good luck!

Laird Easton, director
Humanities Center

Responses to Rorty

Olav Bryant Smith, Philosophy

Richard Rorty's visit was a tremendously uplifting experience for
me and, I believe, most of my colleagues and students in the
Philosophy Department. He provided us with a window of
opportunity to participate in philosophical discussion at a level
which our ordinary activities in an undergraduate program do not
regularly allow for. His visit also provided an opportunity for
me to meet colleagues in the humanities whom I would not
otherwise have an opportunity to meet and interact with. That is
a great gift that he brought us.

I was genuinely pleased to discover that Rorty was a
sincere and modest man, willing as much to listen and openly
consider ideas as he was willing and able to present his own. The
highlight for me was a lunch that several of us in the humanities
had with him. Relating with him about his experience teaching in
Virginia, which I'm very familiar with myself, I saw the
earthiness of the man unfold before me: talk of the Blue Ridge
Mountains, its bears, deer, and frogs. I was very glad to see
that.

As a scholar of Whitehead, it was nice to hear him respond
directly that he was a Whiteheadian early in his career. I had

known that he had written his dissertation on Whitehead, but the extent of Rorty's involvement in his philosophy had been unknown to me before. As someone with an interest in bridging the gap between Continental and Analytic thought, it is very interesting for me to see that Rorty, too, comes to this project with a background in Whitehead's provocative thinking. This is another thing that I would not have learned without having gone to lunch with him.

I ultimately do not agree with Rorty's deep skepticism about our ability to express the Truth in language. As a result of his visit, however, I believe that I better understand his point of view.

With regard to his work on *Achieving Our Country*, I am simply delighted to have been able to participate in his call to progressives to maintain high ideals, and to work hard to achieve them. There is nothing more that I'd like to see than that our dissatisfaction with social injustice be converted from a poisonous and arrogant disdain to a positive vision that we strive to make manifest around us.

Cliff Minor, History

Rorty's Monday evening lecture was a treat, intellectual candy—so witty and full of subtle humor—it was a joy to listen to and comparable to reading Gibbon's footnotes for the same reasons (wit and much subtle humor).

Maryanne Bertram, Philosophy

Rorty asks present-day intellectuals to read literature as if they are in relation to something that is not their own creation, i.e., something both individual and diverse. They are to get in touch with "the present dimensions of imagination" (I'm not clear what that means except he adds that it is an imagination that consumes its own artifacts and so leaves the reader interested in novelty). I am bothered by such a view because it fails to address the importance of the past (what has become familiar, a sense of home and regularity) in a person's point of view, and therefore in a person's thought. In Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra proposes that authors write with their own blood. Such writing requires courage on the part of the author to kill the words thus written with laughter so she can write something unique and new next time. It is my understanding that Nietzsche's view of writing that is supported by his "perspectivism" comes from a view of perception as the struggle in the gestalt between foreground (diversity) and background (familiarity). Every perceiver has the sense of being at home in the "here" while wondering imaginatively into the many diverse "theres" of their "gestalt" perceptions. Furthermore, Nietzsche claims that the relation between foreground/background for the artist-reader as well as the artist-writer is that of war because, like Rorty, Nietzsche values the future over the past, the different over the familiar.

I think Rorty is wise in his choice of Plato and Nietzsche as authors he most values. Plato in his theory of remembrance describes a student of philosophy who is asked questions until she has a moment of insight where she "sees" what it is she has been looking at. I understand that "seeing" as fitting the diverse "theres" or foregrounds of perception against a more familiar "here" or background of perception—a process that involves memory. Plato describes Socrates' philosophy—love of wisdom—as the desire (eros) for the familiar, for what is past, and therefore what is safe. But Nietzsche (as described above) presents Zarathustra's philosophy—a love of wild wisdom—as the desire (eros) for dangerous novelty, for what is future. I like Rorty's choice of authors because I think a present-day intellectual has these two drives—the eros of Plato and the eros of Nietzsche. At times when I read, my desire for the familiar is stronger than my desire for the novel and vice versa. The critical issue for the present-day intellectual when she reads a book becomes when one drive is better, more appropriate, in her thoughts than the other drive. The issue is how to balance these two desires such that it is not a matter of war where one hopes one side will win over the other every time. I want an Aristotelian "mean" so to speak—but not a mean controlled solely by reason because such a mean is rigged in favor of Socratic eros nor a mean controlled solely by a warrior spirit of emotions since that is rigged in favor of Zarathustrian eros. The issue seems to me to be how to develop the skill of balancing these two drives.

Carl Peterson, History

Macaulay famously observed that Puritans were opposed to bearbaiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators. Why ever else? Surely this is precisely what was wrong with it, if anything. As an historian I will wager that bearbaiting disappeared not in some fit of ursophilia, but because the upper hand was got by those who despised the boobies enjoying it, probably for some reason having nothing to do with bears. This is the paradigm of moral progress. Richard Rorty cites *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an example of the power of imaginative literature to persuade where philosophical argument fails. Mrs. Stowe, having no first-hand acquaintance with the South, only imagined that she was imagining what it was like to be a slave. She was actually emplotting a northern moral movement, 'feeling thought,' in the phrase of Irving Howe which Rorty quotes. This movement too drew more from a dislike of their oppressors than it did from any imaginative sympathy with actual American blacks. I can say only that my reading of historic moral reform in liberal society is much messier and less attractive than the ideal proposed by Professor Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is a very beautiful and memorable book.

Marcel Daguerre, Philosophy

The concept of a liberal ironist still appears to me to be self-contradictory. To be a liberal in Rorty's sense is to hold the

conviction that cruelty is the worst thing we do. To be an ironist is to have no convictions at all. As he points out to the Athenians, Socrates cannot be both a believer in false gods and an atheist, as Meletus has charged. Obviously, Meletus does not know what he is talking about. Likewise, Rorty on liberal ironists. In addition, Rorty states that no arguments or reasons can be given for accepting the claim that cruelty is the worst thing we do. So why believe it? There certainly are other candidates for the title, Worst Thing We Do. So why cruelty and not something else? He assumes that there are only two political choices—seek social change (liberals) or promote the status quo (conservatives). But one can seek social change without being a Rortian liberal (i.e., without thinking that cruelty is the worst thing we do). He thinks we should be Rortian liberals. So he is obligated to say why.

Troy Jollimore, Philosophy

I have remarked elsewhere on the deep gulf I find in Rorty's work between a very reasonable, moderately skeptical, coherentist philosophical position, and a very radical, truth-denying, relativistic stance. Reasonable Rorty gives us reasonable advice: be suspicious of Platonic forms and eternal truths, be skeptical of epistemological foundationalism in its strongest forms; above all, expand the notion of what you count as 'philosophy.' Radical Rorty, meanwhile, utters such perfectly wild claims as that nothing is really either true or false, no representation of the world is more or less accurate than any other, no human project or activity is really better or worse than any other, and so forth. (Moreover, he seems to think that these things somehow follow from what Reasonable Rorty says.) Also, unlike Reasonable Rorty, who tells us to start doing things we may not have done before (like reading novels, poetry, or Heidegger), Radical Rorty is fond of telling us to stop doing things. Stop wondering about the nature and meaning of human existence, he says. Stop asking the deep metaphysical questions. Stop asking, is this picture of the way things are more accurate than that one? And so on.

I very much enjoyed Reasonable Rorty's visit. I agreed with a great deal of what he had to say, and while most of the ideas were already familiar from his essays, it was useful, or at least interesting, to hear them from the source. I kept waiting, though, for Radical Rorty to make an appearance. Indeed once or twice I tried to bring him out. Each time I tried to get him to defend one of his radical positions, though, Rorty would sort of shrug and raise his eyebrows just a bit, and say, "Oh, I don't think I ever said *that*." Well, what can you do? Perhaps the directors of the Humanities Center could look into the possibility of obtaining additional funding to bring *Radical Rorty* to campus, as a follow-up. One wonders, though, whether Rorty's more controversial twin is available for public appearances.

Ron Hirschbein, Philosophy

IS PHILOSOPHY IN CHAPTER 11?

Is philosophy—at least academic philosophy—intellectually (if not morally) bankrupt as Rorty intimates? A philosophic answer is in order: yes and no. Rorty offers a synoptic vision of intellectual history—a grand sweep of remarkable clarity, precision, and insight. The take-home message: no one cares about philosophers' problems (save for careerist philosophers); even if they did, philosophers will never "get it right" by articulating a final, final vocabulary of "redemptive truth." We have no sturdy foundation for our cherished values; no authoritative tribunal exists to draw bright lines to rescue us from moral ambiguity.

So where's it at? Much like Comte, Rorty periodicizes history into three stages. Western intellectuals abandoned religion in favor of philosophy, and the "Queen of the Sciences" is dethroned by the ever-fertile literary imagination. Ironically, whether this is completely true is irrelevant: I suspect Rorty's history of the world is more prescriptive than descriptive—we *ought* to use our imagination, *read* about exotics, and *abandon* misguided philosophic projects.

Sure, to some extent continental philosophy (to say nothing of incontinental philosophy) ignored Dewey's exhortation to deal with problems of humanity, not problems of philosophers. And, in the unlikely event, that a philosopher revealed a redemptive truth, no doubt it would be contested and interpreted—that's our job! So here's a coda: philosophy is not yet obscene; it can have redeeming social value. A philosopher takes less for granted by scrutinizing unthought, unquestioned assumptions. Asking the right questions about the right questions, along with rigorous scrutiny of cherished assumptions can temper the overactive literary imagination.

Calendar

December 2001

- thru 21** *Reward Structure*, sculpture by Klutch Stanaway, Trinity 100
- 13** Tertulia, 4-5:30pm, Trinity 126
- 20** Tertulia, 4-5:30pm, Trinity 126

January 2002

- 9-31** *Elizabeth Newman Kuiper*, mixed media, Trinity 100
- 24** *Elizabeth Newman Kuiper* reception, 5-7pm, Trinity 100

February 2002

- 5-28** *Plant Whispers*; oils, water media, silk screens by Paula Busch; Trinity 100
- 5-28** *What Makes It Good*, photography by Beth Macias, Trinity hallway
- 7** Tertulia, 4-5:30pm, Trinity 126
- 8** *Plant Whispers* reception, 7-9pm, Trinity 100
- 14♥** •Tertulia, 4-5:30pm, Trinity 126
•*What Makes It Good* reception, 5-7pm, Trinity hallway
- 21** Tertulia, 4-5:30pm, Trinity 126
- 28** Tertulia, 4-5:30pm, Trinity 126

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