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The Dialogical Self and the Centrality of Narrative: Lyotard and Rorty.

Abstract

This paper considers the “dialogical self” in the context of an exchange that took place between Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty in the mid-1980s. After Lyotard had attempted to dismantle the idea of a narrative of “universal history” largely on the basis of the resistance to this idea offered up by small, local narratives, Rorty seized upon the ever-changing interaction between “I”s (making up a “We”) and “You”s (a “They”) to support an essentially Western narrative based on “cosmopolitanism.” While Lyotard unmasked devices involved in specific kinds of narrative transmission, Rorty insisted that to use narrative is to be embroiled in ethical considerations. Here, the ethical relations described by Rorty are also conceived of as existing within the self, making the neo-pragmatist’s narrative very compatible with current models of “the dialogical self”.

The progenitor of dialogical self theory, Dutch psychologist Hubert J. M. Hermans, insists that an individual mind cannot reflect on itself without at the same time being influenced by other minds. Extending Aristotle’s characterizing of human beings as social animals and indebted to, among others, Emmanuel Levinas’s depiction of the self as always responding to the Other and to the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s emphasis on discourse as inherently multivocal, Hermans claims that a mind can never be a home for one solitary voice because it is always populated by

the voices of others. For Hermans, this inexorable interplay between voices in the mind ensures that the self is fundamentally «dialogical»¹.

Here, by commenting on an essay by the French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard and a response by the American neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty, I argue that the notion of “dialogical self”, as a self caught up in perpetual exchanges between contrasting voices, underpins these philosophers’ discussion of the notion of “universal history”. Lyotard and Rorty are both inveterate storytellers, and their shared determination to pass on a story means that they both tend to consistently demonstrate a preference for narrative rather than other modes of discourse². Unlike Lyotard, however, Rorty does not have much sympathy for a possible distinction between grand, “master” narratives and little, local narratives; and, unlike his French counterpart, Rorty is not overly concerned with the phenomenon of narrative transmission. Instead, drawing upon a strongly-held belief in the merits of enlightened Western social democracy, Rorty moves to ground the discussion in ethics-not ethics in the sense of universal norms relating to “right” or “wrong” conduct, but ethics in the more postmodern sense that encompasses notions like «worth» and «merit»³. Rorty’s implicit question “How can person B be of benefit to person A?” may be rephrased as “How can this part of myself benefit from a dialogue with that part of myself?”.

¹ See H.J.M. Hermans, *The Construction and Reconstruction of a Dialogical Self*, in “Journal of Constructivist Psychology”, 16, 2003, p. 90, p. 104. Hermans is the founder and president of the groundbreaking International Society for Dialogical Science (ISDS).

² In his most celebrated work, *The Postmodern Condition*, envisaging an opposition between narrative and science, Lyotard had already made clear his allegiance to the former which he considers somehow more fundamental. «Scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge», says Lyotard, «without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all». J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Masumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 29.

³ See S. Darwall, *Philosophical Ethics*, Westview, Boulder CO, 1998, p. 14.

Near the beginning of his essay *Universal History and Cultural Differences* Lyotard asks quizzically, «can we continue today to organize the multitude of events that come to us from the world [...] by subsuming them beneath the idea of a universal history of humanity?»⁴. This question inevitably begs other questions like: “Who makes up the ‘we’ that may once have been but may no longer be capable of giving such an account?” and “Following whose authority can this ‘we’ be given primacy?”. For Lyotard, the story of “universal history” can never be adequately recounted because it is impossible to find a “we” that is sufficiently integrated and consistent over time. Before a “you” becomes part of the “we”, the situation is one of difference and therefore potential conflict; but as soon as a “you”, in Lyotard’s terms, is «emancipated», it becomes conjoined with the “we”, and a new “we” is formed. This “we”, then, becomes a “*you and I*” open to the incorporation of further “you”s. Lyotard claims that because there will always be “you”s that, for whatever reason, will not make the leap to “we” status, «human history as a universal history of emancipation is no longer credible.».

The title of Rorty’s reply, *Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-François Lyotard*, rightly suggests that like his French counterpart, Rorty is uncomfortable with the idea of linking universal history to emancipation⁵. Rorty agrees with Lyotard that as “I”s reach out in an attempt to assimilate “you”s, some “you”s will always remain Other and thus retain their alterity. One of the consequences of the contention that there have always been and there always will be “you”s that will not

⁴ J.-F. Lyotard, *Universal History and Cultural Differences*, in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. A. Benjamin, Blackwell, Cambridge MAS 1989, p. 314, hereafter UH. This essay together with Rorty’s response was also presented at a conference at Johns Hopkins University in 1984.

⁵ R. Rorty, *Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-François Lyotard*, in R. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1991, vol. I, pp. 211-222, hereafter CWE.

be part of the “we” is that a division between “I” and “you” will always remain as a feature of the self that is indefatigably dialogical⁶.

Rorty concretizes Lyotard’s “we” as Western believers in democracy and Lyotard’s “you” as inhabitants of other cultures which fall outside Western hegemony. Movement back and forth between the two sides, that of the “we” and that of the “you”, then becomes easier to imagine the former moving toward the latter (as when, for example, an anthropologist learns the local native language) and the latter moving toward the former (as when Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* achieves competence in the language of the colonizer). Thus, Rorty implies that every individual self is preeminently at any given point in time either part of the “I” or part of the “you”. Anyone may rightly consider him, or herself, to be embracing the point of view of one culture over the other; but recourse to neutrality is not an option, at least according to Rorty, who insists that «there is no supercultural observation platform to which we may repair»⁷.

Determined to preserve the autonomy of local traditions against the hegemony of a possible universal history, Lyotard turns to what he calls «les petites histoires», little stories. Singling out the story-telling tradition exemplified by the Cashinahuas of Eastern Peru, he explains that among these primitive Latin American tribes, stories are transmitted from one storyteller to another, and speakers conclude their narratives by saying, «Here ends the story of . . . He who told you it was . . . (Cashinahua name), who is known to the whites as (Spanish or Portugese name)»⁸.

⁶ On this absolute division between “we” and “you” see also the work of the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero who argues that in the context of narrative, «without the ‘you’ my own story becomes impossible», Cavarero also insists that although there may be similarities between “you” and “I”, the “you” and “I” can never be the same; “your story” can never be “my story”. See A. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. P. A. Kottman, Routledge, London, 2000. Cavarero’s claims are neatly summarized by Judith Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2005, pp. 32-38.

⁷ CWE, p. 213.

⁸ UH, p. 320.

According to Lyotard, it is especially through this act of celebrating Cashinahua names, in particular the names of Cashinahua heroes that members of this particular South American tribe are able to carve out a self-contained cultural space endowed with «local legitimacy»⁹.

Of course, it is possible to see Lyotard's highlighting of the narrative practices of the Cashinahua people as pointing not so much to the idiosyncrasies of proper names within a local culture and more to the universal desire to tell, listen to, and transmit stories. When Lyotard explains how in Cashinahua culture «A story is told for the sake of telling a story, and the listener then retells the story because of “The obligation to retell”»¹⁰ this «for the sake of telling a story» is vague enough to suggest that whatever it is about the story that compels its infinite retelling across the generations has to be more than an alleged delight in local patronyms.

The power of Cashinahua narratives themselves can, therefore, more plausibly be conceived to be a function of the characteristics of “universal” narratives as represented, for example, by the nobility, stoicism, and courage of characters or the rendition of a striking sequence of events possibly hinting at a message of worldwide significance. These elements of narrative in the tradition stemming from Aristotle, and continuing closer to our own time in very different forms in the work of thinkers like Vladimir Propp, Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes are surely trenchant enough to outmuscle any local peculiarities¹¹. Thus, the reason for the relentless transmission of stories within Cashinahua culture,

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 322. See also *The Postmodern Condition* where, using the same example, Lyotard had suggested that behind these naming practices within Cashinahua culture lies a «pragmatic rule» which «cannot, of course, be universalized». Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 21.

¹⁰ J.-F. Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 35.

¹¹ Pertinent works here include V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. L. Scott, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1968; T. Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre*, trans. R. Howard, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1975; and R. Barthes, *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, in R. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. S. Heath, Fontana, London, 1977, pp. 79-124.

the «for the sake of which» Cashinahua stories are told and retold over and over, may have more to do with the elements that comprise narrative as a phenomenon in general than with the contention that such stories can encapsulate uniquely Cashinahuan experience.

The idea of a transfer of roles from speaker to listener, enabling the latter to become another speaker, is of course universal. It happens, for example, at various stages during the process of transmission of authorized interpretation of sacred texts from generation to generation within Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other religious traditions. The extra stress on the passing on of a narrative from one speaker to the next, the transferring of the baton from narrator to narratee, a narratee who then becomes another narrator in a never-ending relay may be more important in Cashinahua culture than in most cultures, but this practice is hardly unique to Cashinahua culture. Although what Lyotard refers to as the Cahinahuan's «narrative knowledge» may, in his terms, have «no pretension to universality»¹², it cannot be immune to universality and neither can the narrative knowledge of any community, no matter how isolated¹³.

Lyotard's recourse to the storytelling tradition within Cashinahua culture may be most memorable for allowing the relationship between narrator and narratee to take center stage and for implying that it is not just local narratives, like those disseminated by the Cashinahua, but all narratives that are fundamentally dialogical. The most important insight to be gleaned from Lyotard's essay on *Universal History*, then, may have less to do with doubts about the feasibility of a comprehensive history of our

¹² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 30.

¹³ Elsewhere Lyotard admitted that «even these tales [concerning the Cashinahua's naming practices] might have a “cosmopolitical import”». «[T]he problem,» he went on, «was ‘linkage’—what will join Cashinahua stories with a ‘universal history’?» Cited in K. Lee Klein, *In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History*, in “History and Theory”, 34, 4, Dec. 1995, p 284.

world/universe and more to do with highlighting the act of passing on a story, especially when the relationship between narrator and narratee is thought of in terms of what the former attempts to do to the latter. This conception of the uneven balance of power in the relationship between narrator and narratee may also be one of the factors that led Rorty, in his response, to turn to ethical considerations¹⁴.

The much Dewey-influenced American thinker's bringing of ethics into the fray is perhaps most apparent when he not only links the "we" invoked by Lyotard to adherents of Western ideas but goes beyond that to acknowledge that believers in Western democracy are indubitably selfish:

We cannot leap outside our Western social democratic skins when we encounter another culture and we should not try. All we should try to do is get inside the inhabitants of that culture long enough to get some idea of how we look to them, and whether they have any ideas we can use¹⁵.

If Rorty is proposing that in situations where there is «intercourse»¹⁶ between Westerners and other cultures, that Westerners resort, at least momentarily, to empathy, the neo-pragmatist may be ignoring the

¹⁴ First Lyotard and then Rorty may be regarded as transferring some of the French structuralist Émile Benveniste's insights in the linguistic domain into the domain of narrative because not only had Benveniste, in *Problems in General Linguistics*, regarded the "I-you" relationship as primary and as the basis for all verbal communication; but he had also insisted that the relationship between "I" and "you" means inequality, especially because the former is always in a position to define the latter. For an engaging summary of Benveniste's claims see K. Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984, pp. 43-53.

¹⁵ CWE, pp. 212-13. Notice that Rorty also puts an ethical gloss on the relation between "them" and "us" in his earlier essay *Solidarity*. «I claim that the force of 'us' is, typically, contrastive», he says, «in the sense that it contrasts with a 'they' which is also made up of human beings—the wrong sort of human beings». R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 190.

¹⁶ CWE, p. 212.

traditional idea that empathy is not supposed to be self-serving¹⁷. When he suggest that “we” Westerners enter the heads of non-Westerners in order to try to ascertain «how we look to them»¹⁸ this may sound like empathy, but how genuine can such empathy be when the Westerner’s crystalline intention is to grab and make use of any of the non-Westerner’s ideas that may be deemed useful?¹⁹

If Rorty’s call for «narratives of increasing cosmopolitanism, though not narratives of emancipation»²⁰ is considered from the side of the non-Westerner, any non-Westerner could claim that it may not be in the interest of all members of their cultures to be appropriated by the West in order for them to become more “cosmopolitan”. There is no clear reason to assume that everyone in a non-Western culture needs to be freed from restraint or could be persuaded to believe that they would be better served by embracing what Rorty calls «the vocabulary of Western social democrats»²¹.

Of course, the “cosmopolitanism” in «narratives of increasing cosmopolitanism» that Rorty has in mind is especially earmarked for Westerners. Thus, the narrative that he espouses involves adding to the

¹⁷ Social neuroscientist Tania Singer claims that «empathy is [...] likely to render people less selfish because it enables them to share others’ emotions and feelings, which can help to motivate other-regarding behavior—in other words, behavior beneficial to another person and not only to oneself (e.g., helping someone)». T. Singer, *Understanding Others: Brain Mechanisms of Theory of Mind and Empathy*, in P.W. Glimcher et al. (eds.), *Neuroeconomics: Decision Making and the Brain*, Elsevier, Amsterdam, 2008, p. 251.

¹⁸ Intent on emphasizing what the “I” can get from the “you,” Rorty may be accused of downplaying the idea that the “I” and the “you” are to some extent reversible and that non-Western culture is not just a “you” but also an “I.” As “I”s, both Western and non-Western cultures recognize and define the Other as “not I”. I am a “you” for you. You are an “I” for yourself. Today many thinkers maintain that genuine empathy involves «The interpretation or understanding of myself as an Other for you». E. Thompson, *Empathy and Consciousness*, in “Journal of Consciousness Studies”, 8, 5-7, 2001, p. 17.

¹⁹ Rorty will reiterate this “what we can get from them” idea later in the essay when he says that «anthropologists have [...] shown us that the preliterate natives have some ideas and practices that we can usefully weave together with our own» (CWE, p. 218).

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 213.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 219.

contention that Westerners only want to understand the viewpoint of the Other in order to exploit it and find fresh ideas (which they can use for their own advantage), the claim that by adopting the ideas of the Other, Westerners themselves may become more “cosmopolitan”. Rorty realizes that such «narratives of increasing cosmopolitanism» will doubtless be written by those in the West, and he seems less interested in these narratives’ potential value for non-Westerners than he is in people in the West’s possible self-improvement through their enhanced cosmopolitanism.

Rorty’s call for the replacement of one kind of narrative with another is also an indication of a reluctance to share Lyotard’s postmodern attempt to distance himself from all grand narratives. Speaking for pragmatists, who he considers roughly synonymous with «us twentieth-century Western democrat socialists», Rorty dreams of «tolerant reciprocity» gaining the upper hand at the expense of any form of «imperialist force»²². With keen irony, he acknowledges that «typically we *have* used force rather than persuasion to convince natives of our own goodness»²³, but he also envisages a time when Westerners recognize that whether they themselves are “good” or “bad” is less important than their being aware that it is in their interest to be regarded by the Other as “good” and that this goal is of course more likely to be achieved if they refrain from violent confrontation.

Although Rorty’s promoting a rhetoric (he could just as appropriately say a “narrative”) of «increased tolerance and decreased suffering» may be read from the perspective of both Westerner and non-Western Other, generally the American philosopher’s own overarching narrative has a brazenly Western bias; and it is hardly surprising that Rorty has been

²²*Ivi*, p. 214, p. 213.

²³*Ivi*, p. 218, p. 219.

accused of «hermeneutic ethnocentrism»²⁴. Implying that Western democracies are developed to the extent that improvements are possible on the basis of the potential knowledge that may be gained from Western exposure and interaction with non-Western cultures, Rorty seems very willing to recognize that a “you” may be transformed enough to sit at the table restricted to those who believe in Western democracy; but he shows little confidence in the Westerner’s ability to sit comfortably at the table of the Other. He implies that even if a democratically-minded American, for instance, were to feverishly embrace the narratives, music, cuisine, language, dialect, dress and hair style and even patronyms of a non-Western culture, he or she could never go completely “native” and is condemned to remain ineluctably part of the Western “we”.

At one point in *Universal History and Cultural Differences* Lyotard had marveled at the power of “narrative” which «authorizes an unbreakable *we*, outside of which there can only be *they*»²⁵. The key word throughout the exchange between Lyotard and Rorty is “narrative”, whether it is as in the attempt to debunk the narrative of universal history by pointing to the distinctiveness of small, local narratives (Lyotard) or the call for the replacement of one kind of narrative (“emancipation”) with another (“cosmopolitanism”) (Rorty). Unlike Lyotard, Rorty consistently grounds the relationship between the “we” and “you” in the realm of ethics, and the neo-pragmatist couples his prioritizing of the preeminently Western “we” with a profoundly idealistic belief in “moral progress.”

Furthermore, when he, not Lyotard, follows thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas in urging that ethical relations be

²⁴ This claim is made by Steven Mailloux who interprets Rorty to be saying that «we are all comparativists from within our particular ethnos—a geographically and historically situated network of beliefs and desires». S. Mailloux, *Making Comparisons: First Contact, Ethnocentrism, and Cross-Cultural Communication*, in J. C. Rowe (ed.), *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, p. 118.

²⁵ UH, p. 321.

characterized by nonviolence and deep respect for the Other²⁶, Rorty tacitly allays Lyotard's fear that there can be «no cosmopolitanism without mastery»²⁷. Keenly aware that the division between "I"s and "you"s is fundamental and that all the "you"s that make up the "they" cannot be miraculously converted into the "I"s that make up the "we", Rorty, nevertheless, insists that this realization should not trigger despair. On the contrary, there may even be a chance for members of both sides of the divide to move beyond "tolerant reciprocity" toward "solidarity".

By highlighting the emphasis that Rorty places on the ethical import of the "I-you" relationship and by assimilating Levinas's insistence that «The Other is inside me and in the midst of my very identification»²⁸, it becomes possible to appreciate that in order to experience an ethical relation, not only does one person require the existence of another, but also that the ethical relation already exists as an internal dynamic within the self. This ensures that the self is and always remains "dialogical" and is part of the narrative that building on the Frenchman's insistence on an adamant division between "I" and "you", and unflaggingly willing to be part of a serious conversation, Rorty was beginning to construct.

²⁶ See Derrida's reading of Levinas. J. Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas*, in J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980, p. 90.

²⁷ This fear is attributed to Lyotard by Klein in *In Search of Narrative Mastery* cit., p. 286.

²⁸ E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis, Kluwer, Boston, 1978, p. 125.

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