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live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art?” (p. 173). Such a monumental interrogation of one’s art strikes me as similar to Adorno’s statement, which we should rephrased as a question. How do we write poetry (or make art) after Auschwitz?

Newman spent the rest of his life, until he died in 1970, attempting an “authentic answer” (as Adorno would phrase it) via his painting—an encounter with the canvas that became an almost Sisyphus-like experience for the artist. And if Newman’s paintings seem pedantically similar, we should remember his often-repeated assertion that he approached each canvas as if the history of painting did not exist.

To what extend he was successful is arguable. I see in these stubborn paintings the futile heroic I also find in a Giacometti sculpture or a sentence by Beckett. Perhaps Newman was discovering at the same time as Beckett that the role of the artist after the Second World War is no longer to create a successful work of art, whatever that might be, but rather “to fail as no other dare fail.”

Newman was fond of saying that he was painting the true “subject matter,” rather than the “object matter” of decorative art, reviving art “from the making of pictures to the making of paintings” (p. 253). This was Newman’s most subversive act—offering up paintings that resisted almost any language of interpretation. To understand them was indeed to dispel power structures because it mean also rejecting the grammar of new mythologies.

Editor John P. O’Neill divides Selected Writings and Interviews into sometimes arbitrary categorical epithets: “The Artist-Citizen” (what Newman called himself), “The Artist-Critic,” “The Artist-Thinker,” and then “Statements,” “Correspondence” and “Colloquia.” The disadvantage of this division is that the writing does not proceed chronologically, or rather it proceeds through five chronologies. The distinctions of critic, thinker, citizen (painter?), however, hold up for the most part and show us an artist whose “job” did not end when he left his studio.

The book is if anything too long. Newman’s vision, like his painting, was so focused, that readers will find themselves crossing familiar terrain simply because the artist was addressing different audiences. Much better, I think, would have been to preen some of the prose for a color plate or two of some paintings—a badly needed example of what Newman spend his life defending in prose. It was, finally, the vast oceans of monochrome color in his larger canvases that Newman believed most closely approached the sublime.

And of course the book comes much to late. Had the essays been collected 30 years ago, as would have been chronologically appropriate for the history of art, Newman’s prose might have appeared as an important precursor to much of the aesthetic theory that has appeared over the last three skeptical view of personal or populist mythologies, anticipates much of the best contemporary criticism—from Terry Eagleton to the OCTOBER critics (feminists pass by). Belatedly, we can only situate Newman in an historical perspective. Both his philosophical prose and his painting project an outsider of High Modernism at the advent of the postmodern era, which would usher in the likes of Pop Art, Op Art, Screen Printing-pastiche, et al. He insightfully articulated the end of an aesthetic driven by mythos, but was not ready to reject the possibility of an expressive sublime in exchange for the consumer-driven art of mass culture.

His prose reveals a restless and relentless mind at work. Yet for all his adroit ripostes, manifestos, and critiques, the nature of the sublime is that it is inarticulatable. Newman was never at a loss for words when defending his art, but the final “understanding” of it relied on the viewer’s sensitivity. Finally, Newman’s prose simply points to the paintings, and offers the caveat that to understand them is to understand an autonomy independent of capitalism. One could argue that capital has since commodified Newman’s canvases, yes, but the paintings still, stubbornly as ever, resist the fetishizing gaze bestowed on the “beautiful” in the contested realm of contemporary arts.

Erik Reece, Lexington


This volume contains lectures by Richard Rorty, in which he explores a variety of topics, from natural science to political theory to textual criticism and philosophy. Rorty confronts the myth that science and philosophy are capable of discovering truths about the world or reality that are based on objective criteria. He defends an anti-representationalist view against the correspondence theory of truth which has dominated philosophical and scientific thought. Knowledge is not a matter of rightly understanding reality, rather it is a matter of coping with reality by acquiring the right habits of action.

This book is written for the academic community and it presupposes the reader’s familiarity with certain issues and thinkers such as John Dewey, Donald Davidson, and Thomas Kuhn. However, if the reader is not
acquainted with such thinkers, there is no cause for alarm. Rorty writes in a very conscientious manner, so that his position is made clear to the reader.

The order of the lectures is also one of the strengths of the book. The beginning lectures acquaint the reader with the general problem at hand and the theoretical basis from which Rorty works. The later lectures are an application of Rorty’s theories to various areas of knowledge. The very last section of the book draws out the implications of Rorty’s argument for political theory. A brief exposition of the first two lectures may be helpful in assisting the reader in reading the book.

The first, entitled ‘Solidarity or Objectivity?’ sets the tone for the following lectures by defining the project that Rorty attempts to carry out. Rorty begins by making a distinction between objectivity and solidarity, and then argues that the goal of science and philosophy should be solidarity not objectivity. Objectivity, according to Rorty is the attempt to discover a relationship between human beings and a non-human reality. Implicit in the notion of objectivity is the belief that there is some ahistorical, non-human reality to which things must correspond. Solidarity, on the other hand, is the point of reference within an historical community. Hence, the relation between practices in a community is sought within that community and not outside of it. The rejection of objectivity in favor of solidarity is Rorty’s version of pragmatism. For Rorty, pragmatism is preferable to a God’s-eye point of view which western philosophy and science have tried to obtain. Rorty argues that objectivity is unachievable and that we can only discover what is best for a particular place and time. Emphasis is placed on what is best for the moment. No position is final, and any position must be replaced if a better one comes along. Hence, Rorty argues for the type of openness in science and philosophy that will allow free dialogic cooperation. He believes that science is a model for society insofar as it already exhibits much of this type of openness.

Insofar as Rorty argues that there is no objective truth, and that no one has rightly grasped reality, he has been charged by some of his critics as being an advocate of relativism. Rorty counters this attack (and rightly so) by demonstrating that pragmatism is not relativism. Pragmatists do not believe that anything goes. They believe that some views are better than others yet they are not absolute.

However, Rorty may not entirely escape the accusation of relativism. For example, the breadth of Rorty’s notion of solidarity is unclear. On one hand it seems to be limited to a community or society. On the other hand solidarity may have a more universal role. If solidarity is found only within a society or a community, the result would be cultural relativism. Each society would have its own notion of the good for that society. This means that members of the culture in question would be in agreement concerning the good. However, the members of a neighboring society may agree on a different notion of good. Hence the two societies may come into conflict. The only way to avoid conflict in this case is for each society to isolate itself from the other and to avoid any interaction. Our world, however, is not structured that way. Rather, the current trend toward globalization in many areas shows the world’s societies are becoming increasingly interconnected.

In a broader sense, the notion of solidarity may be applied not to a particular society among many, but to the entire human species. This implies that there can be a point of agreement between all people, regardless of various ethnic backgrounds. This view sees the world as one large society. Particular societies (countries) depend on other societies outside of their own for the trade of certain goods etc. Interaction between particular societies has created a larger single society. Hence it may be appropriate to seek solidarity on a very broad level. The task then becomes finding worldwide agreement on certain issues, even between countries with rival ideologies. Rorty’s theory may still apply at this level; however, such an achievement may be elusive. Nevertheless, this question of scale is not explored. Rorty does not make it clear whether or not his theory applies to the many small particular societies or to the one large society. This distinction is very important because the level at which this theory is applied determines its plausibility)

In Rorty’s critique of rationality, discussed in the second lecture ‘Science as Solidarity,’ he disagrees with what he finds in our culture to be a synonymous use of science, rationality, objectivity and truth. He argues that in our culture we have made the scientist a type of high priest. “The scientist is seen as someone who keeps humanity in touch with something beyond itself” (p. 35). Rorty argues that the scientist should be seen as a role model not because he or she is capable of imparting knowledge of some ahistorical or extra-human reality. Instead, the scientist should be seen as a role model by virtue of his or her openness.

Insofar as science is bound up with rationality, objectivity and truth, the rationality of the humanities is brought into question. Rorty attempts to solve this problem by distinguishing between two forms of rationality. The type of rationality that has traditionally belonged to science is methodological rationality. This means that “the criteria for success is laid down in advance” (p.36). Further, we seem to have a clear criterion for the success of a scientific theory — namely, its ability to predict, and thereby to enable us to control some portion of the world” (p.36). Rorty argues that if this is the only possible definition for rationality, then the humanities may be excluded as rational activities; however, he says that another meaning for rationality is available. Rationality may mean reasonable rather than methodical. It means that one has a willingness to listen and rely on persuasion rather than force. The word rational in this sense means something like civilized.
Rorty's remaining lectures explore this second meaning of rationality. The eleventh lecture "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" offers an interesting discussion of philosophy and democracy. Referring to thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, John Rawls and John Dewey, this lecture demonstrates the political implications of Rorty's notion of solidarity. In his defense of Rawls against Sandel, Rorty's political use of his notion of solidarity becomes clear. In reference to Rawls he argues that a search for an "Archimedian point" is not the search for a point outside of history, "but simply the kind of social habits that allow much latitude for further choices" (p.187). For Rorty, this is the goal and function of democracy. Therefore, democracy is desired over philosophy.

This book is stimulating and challenging. The topics covered are diverse enough to capture the attention of almost any academic audience. Rorty introduces a variety of fresh and exciting ideas. However, I think that there is need for a little more systematization and clarity on certain issues. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the status of objectivity and truth in science, philosophy, political theory and literature. The themes set forth in this book are consistent with the themes that have been a part of Rorty's overall project. As far as subjectivity/objectivity goes, this book makes an important contribution and presents a strong challenge to the traditional notion of objectivity.

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