METAPHYSICS IN THE DARK

A Response to Richard Rorty and Ernesto Laclau

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> A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
> An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
> Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
> Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
> Beyond which it has no will to rise.
>
> —*Wallace Stevens,* Of Modern Poetry[1]

IN A TEXT PUBLISHED in 1996, "Response to Simon Critchley," Rich-
ard Rorty took issue with my interpretation of his work and in particular with
what I said about his understanding of Derrida's work. It is clear that the
stakes of this debate are not simply philological, but touch on much larger
issues of ethics, politics, and the possibility of philosophy itself.[2] Before turn-
ing to the specifics of our disagreement, permit me to restate the basic claim I
was seeking to advance. With regard to the interpretation of Derrida's work, I
sought to show how, on the basis of Rorty's own definitional criteria, Derrida
is a public thinker whose work has serious and, I believe, profound ethical
commitments and political consequences. On my reading, the undeconstruc-
table condition of possibility for deconstruction is *justice*, which I seek to
interpret in Levinasian terms as a relation to the other, a response to suffering
or an attempt to limit cruelty and humiliation; a relation that might be
described with the adjective "ethical." On my view, then, Rorty's picture of
Derrida as a private ironist falls somewhat short of the truth.

This line of interpretation can be supported, I believe, with reference to
Derrida's remarks in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*: (i) Derrida's refusal
of the public/private distinction, where literature would cut across this dis-
tinction by being both *le droit à tout dire* and intimately bound up with the se-
cret; that is, as being both irreducibly public and that which refuses publicity,
what we might think of as the depoliticizing condition for politicization. For

Derrida, there is a historical and systematic connection between literature and democracy. Literature is the public articulation of a sphere of private and intimate experience, on the basis of which "the realm of the political can be and remain open."[3] (ii) Derrida's comments on the messianic as an a priori structure that, as he puts it, "belongs to all language," as that promisory, performative, or illocutionary dimension to our speech acts, which, as he describes it in an interview, is "the universal dimension of experience."[4] Derrida writes,

> There is no language without the performative dimension of the promise, the minute I open my mouth I am in the promise. Even if I say that 'I don't believe in truth' or whatever, the minute I open my mouth there is a 'believe me' in play. And this 'I promise you that I am speaking the truth' is a messianic apriori, a promise which, even if it is not kept, even if one knows that it cannot be kept, takes place and *qua* promise is messianic.[5]

It is difficult to see how such a claim could be contained within the limits of Rorty's neopragmatist nominalism. Indeed, Derrida's linking of the messianic a priori as a structure of experience to what he calls "the discourse of emancipation," both gets him off the hook of any claim to utopianism and suggests the possibility of an unexpected rapprochement with Habermas's understanding of the structure of communicative action. The whole Derridian discussion of the promise as that illocutionary dimension of speech acts whose denial would lead one into a performative contradiction has obvious Habermasian echoes. And despite Habermas's moral cognitivism and his insistence upon the symmetrical nature of intersubjectivity, it is clear at the very least that there is work to be done here and that possibly Habermas and Derrida share more with each other than they both share with Rorty, especially when it comes to political matters. (iii) Most important, my line of interpretation can be supported by Derrida's remarks on the need for *infinite* responsibility. I quote at length,

> I believe that we cannot give up on the concept of infinite responsibility, as Rorty seemed to do in his remarks, when he spoke of Levinas as a blind spot in my work. I would say, for Levinas and for myself, that if you give up the infinitude of responsibility, there is no responsibility. It is because we act and we live in infinitude that the responsibility with regard to the other is irreducible. If responsibility was not infinite, if every time that I have to take an ethical or political decision with regard to the other this was not infinite, then I would not be able to engage myself in an infinite debt with regard to each singularity. I owe myself infinitely to each and every singularity. If responsibility was not infinite, you could not have moral and political problems. There are only moral and political problems, and everything that follows from this, from the moment when responsibility is not limitable.[6]

To summarize rapidly, to my mind the above passage describes the ethical (or quasi- or proto-ethical, if you like) moment in deconstruction. It is an experience of infinite responsibility, which can be qualified as undeconstructable, unconditional, a priori, and universal. However, infinite responsibility only arises within the context of a singular experience, that is, within the empirical event of a concrete speech act, the performative dimension of the promise. However, and here we begin to see the limits to any rapprochement with Habermas, what takes place in the concrete linguistic event of the promise is a relation to an other, what Derrida calls a singularity, which is an experience of *infinite indebtedness*. Thus, the messianic a priori describes the structure of intersubjectivity in terms of an asymmetrical obligation that I could never meet, to which I would never be equal. It has been argued by Axel Honneth, and I am inclined to agree with him, that the symmetrical structure of intersubjectivity within Habermasian discourse ethics requires an additional moment of asymmetry, something that, for him, can be achieved through Winnicottian object-relations psychoanalysis or a naturalistic reconstruction of Levinasian ethics.[7]

For Derrida, it is on the basis of this infinite responsibility that one is propelled into moral and political problems, into the realm of the decision. It is important to point out here that this notion of the undeconstructable—justice, the messianic a priori, or whatever—does not function like the Moral Law in Kant, namely, as the basis for a decision procedure in ethics, a categorical imperative mechanism in the light of which one might propose and test specific maxims. On the contrary, it is because responsibility is infinite that the decision is always undecidable. It is because the field opened by deconstruction is limitless that no decision or choice made within this field can ever be thought of as wholly "good," "right," or "adequate." In politics, it is always a question of the least bad. Each choice I might make in favor of x might work against y and z, not to mention a, b, and c. For Derrida, it is because responsibility is infinite that the field of undecidability is not a moment to be overcome or left behind. It is because of infinite responsibility that there is what Derrida calls *politicization*; that is, an occurrence of the decision that is ungrounded, incalculable, and—to a greater or lesser extent—unjust. There could never be a wholly just decision, and this is why all decisions are political. Thus, the infinite responsibility or messianic a priori that opens in and as the singular experience of the other—whether human, animal, vegetable, or mineral—does not close down or limit the field of aporia and undecidability; it rather expands that field because the other always exceeds the context within which the encounter takes place. The ethical moment is not the dilution of aporia, but rather its exacerbation. Thus, although according to me there is a moment of formal universality in Derrida's work, which constitutes

something like an ethical criterion, what I elsewhere describe as not so much a *Faktum der Vernunft* as a *Faktum des Anderen*, political decisions must always be singular and context-sensitive acts of invention.[8]

Now, it is precisely this notion of infinite responsibility, this Levinasian moment in deconstruction, that both Richard Rorty and Ernesto Laclau have difficulties with, for quite different reasons. In Rorty's recently published *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*—a book that, despite its admirable ambition to reinvigorate a reformist, hopeful left that would be an agent within and not a mere spectator upon American society, sadly wastes much of its energy tilting irritatingly at the windmills of the so-called Foucauldian left, and where Rorty's demand for American national pride is only a cigarette paper away from a rather unpalatable chauvinism of American exceptionalism—he remarks,

> The notion of "infinite responsibility," formulated by Emmanuel Levinas and sometimes deployed by Derrida . . . may be useful to some of us in our individual quests for private perfection. When we take up our public responsibilities, however, the infinite and the unrepresentable are merely nuisances.[9]

I am happy to be a nuisance to Rorty and will continue to be so presently, but permit me a couple of words on Laclau. I attempt elsewhere to link the work of Derrida and Laclau and their respective logics of deconstruction and hegemony because I find this the most productive way of broaching the question of the relation between deconstruction and politics, that is, the relation between undecidability and the decision.[10] It is this question that is the *Brennpunkt* of Laclau's rigorous and interesting intervention in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*.[11] His argument can be summarized in the following three steps: (i) deconstruction has widened the field of structural undecidability in terms of which basic social and political categories—like toleration, power, and representation, but equally race, nation, and gender—can be understood. A deconstructive discourse analysis can show how the legitimating discourse of a particular regime—Apartheid, say—is based on a set of presuppositions whose status is ultimately undecidable. In this sense, deconstruction can be employed to show how the terrain of the social does not attain closure, the sort of closure or achievement imagined by Rorty's allusion to James Baldwin's notion of "achieving our country,"[12] but is an ever incomplete, undecidable structure. In this sense, Laclauian discourse analysis is powerfully analogous to what we might call a deconstructive genealogy, where the apparent stabilization of a society—what appears to be the natural order of things—is shown to be the consequence of the operation of hegemonic articulations, traces of power that are always political. (ii) On the basis of this

understanding of the hegemonic institution of the social, Laclau argues that the field is cleared for a theory of the decision taken on an undecidable terrain. In more common parlance, one might say that once the political origin of the social has been grasped through a genealogical deconstruction, then one is in a position to reactivate a fully *political* theory without the illusory comfort of social sedimentation, a sedimentation implicit within all appeals to a concept of *Lebenswelt*, Habermasian or otherwise. (iii) However, by virtue of the fact that for Laclau all structures, including social structures, are undecidable at the level of their categorical articulation and are therefore incapable of closure, political decisions cannot ultimately be grounded on anything external to themselves. For Laclau, we cannot base political decisions on the basis of a prior program, for example, the Marxism of the Second International, or in the light of the universality of a rule or some sort of regulative idea, for example, any metaphysical or postmetaphysical reworking of the Kantian moral law. To do so, and this is where Laclau follows Carl Schmitt, would be to engage in a form of depoliticization. Therefore, the instant of the political decision is madness.

The point at issue, then, is that of the mediation between undecidability and the decision, an issue that Laclau interestingly pursues through what he calls "the absent fullness of the subject" as the space of a contingent, provisional, and ever-revisable decision.[13] Laclau then suggests that one possible line of mediation between undecidability and the decision is with reference to a "primordial ethical experience, in the Levinasian sense."[14] This is the position that Laclau ascribes to my work, a position that, for him, leaves the question of deconstruction and politics in an impasse because he cannot see in what sense an ethical injunction can work here other than as a universal rule that precedes and governs any decision. Permit me a couple of words of clarification and self-defense: (i) As indicated in my opening remarks above, the injunction that governs deconstruction, whether one qualifies it as ethical, quasi-ethical, or whatever, is an unconditional, a priori, universal dimension of experience—the messianic—which is *undeconstructable*. Thus, and this is the point I want to emphasize, the place of the ethical moment in deconstruction is not that which mediates the passage from undecidability to the decision, but rather is that which governs the whole field of undecidability opened by deconstruction. I agree that the question of the passage from undecidability to the decision is political rather than ethical—every decision is political. But, the ethical moment in deconstruction is the undeconstructability of justice that precedes the passage from the ethical to the political (it is interesting to note that Laclau does not deal with the issue of the undeconstructable, and I ask myself what place he could find for this notion). (ii) This messianic experience of justice as the undeconstructable arises, as I also indicated

above, in an experience of singularity, namely, the infinite responsibility that arises in the relation to the other, however the latter is understood. Thus, the experience of singularity as that illocutionary, promisgory dimension to our linguistic activity produces a structure that belongs to, or accompanies, all language, and is therefore universal. As such, the messianic a priori cannot be reduced to context, and it refuses the pragmatist reduction of ethicality to context, which is a point on which Laclau seems happy to follow Rorty despite his criticism of the latter's parochialism. Now, the insistence on the ultimate nondeterminability or nonsaturatability of context has been an explicit theme of Derrida's work since the 1971 paper "Signature, Event, Context." What is perhaps clearer now, and what Derrida's 1988 "Afterword to *Limited Inc*." eloquently shows, is that although there exists nothing outside context, although it is limitless, context is motivated by an unconditional appeal or affirmation—a Nietzschean "yes, yes" or, better, "a 'yes' to emancipation"[15]—that Derrida, somewhat reluctantly, describes in terms that recall Kant's categorical imperative.[16] (iii) These clarifications of the messianic a priori or infinite responsibility as the ethical moment in deconstruction, an ethical moment that is not itself a norm but that provokes the subject into the context-specific invention of political norms, allows a question of more general import to be raised. To put it crudely, what is the difference between hegemony and democratic hegemony for Laclau? At the level of genealogical deconstruction, the theory of hegemony shows the irreducibly political institution of the social: social sedimentation is simply the masking of the operations of power, contingency, and antagonism. That is to say, the fixing of the meaning of social relations is the consequence of a decision, and every decision is political. However, Laclau's and Mouffe's work famously and rightly also invokes notions of "the democratic revolution" and "radical democracy" as the consequence of the genealogical critique of Marxism. That is, the recognition of contingency, antagonism, and power does not lead to political pessimism or the collapse of the public/private distinction, but is rather, as Laclau puts it, the condition for a "new militancy and new optimism."[17] But if all decisions are political, then in virtue of what is there a difference between democratizing and nondemocratizing forms of decisions? It seems to me that there are two ways of answering this question, one normative and the other factual, but both of which leave Laclau sitting uncomfortably on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, one might say that democratic decisions are more participatory, egalitarian, pluralistic, or directed toward promoting the other's freedom. But if one grants any such version of this thesis, then one has admitted some normative claim—and hence depoliticization—into the theory of hegemony. On the other hand, if one simply says that the theory of hegemony and radical democracy is the description of a fact, that is, that

democratization is simply taking place, or that freedom is a consequence of existing social dislocations, then one risks collapsing any critical difference between the theory of hegemony and that which this theory purports to describe. If the theory of hegemony is simply the description of a positively existing state of affairs, then one risks emptying the theory of any critical function, that is, of leaving open any space between things as they are and things as they might otherwise be. If the theory of hegemony is the description of a factual state of affairs, then it risks identification and complicity with the logic of contemporary capitalist societies. My view is that there is the risk of a kind of "normative deficit" in the theory of hegemony, a deficit that can be made good on the basis of another understanding of the logic of deconstruction. That is, if Laclau is justified in his claim that what deconstruction lacks in its thinking of the political is a theory of hegemony, then this needs to be balanced by the second claim that what the theory of hegemony can learn from deconstruction is the kind of messianic, ethical injunction to infinite responsibility that prevents it collapsing into a voluntaristic Schmittian decisionism. If ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind.

Let me now turn in more detail to Rorty's response to my paper. On a first listening or reading, Rorty's remarks on deconstruction and pragmatism and his responses to Laclau and myself seem to restate implacably the interpretation of Derrida's work given in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. However, on closer inspection, I think important modifications in Rorty's position can be noted, modifications that can also be tracked in Rorty's paper on Geoff Bennington's commentary on Derrida.[18]

As I stated above, my main claim was to show the inadequacy of Rorty's belief that Derrida should be understood as a private ironist, whose work had no public, ethical, or political significance. However, I argued that this claim was premised upon a certain picture of Derrida's work, what I called in my paper the "developmental thesis," where the reason for choosing Rorty's view of Derrida over that of Gasche, say, is found in the fact that, in works like *Glas* and *La carte postale*, Derrida appears to abandon the theoretical ambitions of his early work, the "quasi-professional noises" of "a young philosophy professor," in favor of private irony devoted to the business of self-creation. So, to no small extent, the hermeneutic plausibility of Rorty's interpretation of Derrida depends on the tenability of the developmental thesis. However, from the first lines of his response to me, it is clear that he is prepared to abandon this thesis: "I agree with Simon Critchley that I have, in the past, made too much of the difference between earlier and later Derrida. . . . The more one reads either Heidegger or Derrida, the more continuities between the earlier and later writings appear."[19] Now, if the developmental thesis is abandoned, then how exactly does the claim for Derrida as a private ironist still stand?

And yet, this claim would also seem to have been subtly modified in Rorty's interventions. But before looking at this question, let me take a step back.

Rorty writes, "I have trouble with the specifically Levinasian strains in his (i.e. Derrida's) thought. In particular, I am unable to connect Levinas's pathos of the infinite with ethics and politics."[20] As this response should already have shown, Derrida cannot give up on the notion of infinite responsibility because it is in virtue of this that there are, for him, moral and political problems. On a Derridian view, if you give up the infinitude of responsibility, then the moral and political realm risks contracting into an untroubled, uncritical compla- cency. I think this is what Laclau means by the danger of parochialism within pragmatism, a parochialism that becomes worryingly explicit in Rorty's belief in the need for American national pride in *Achieving Our Country*. For my part, I think this explains why Rorty feels able to express the very Ameri- can sentiment, "Neither my child nor my country is very much like a Levina- sian other."[21] Indeed, and this is precisely the problem! In Pascalian terms, when I say, "this is my country, my child, my place in the sun," the usurpation of the whole world begins. When the infinitude of ethics contracts into the finite space of an ethos—a site, a plot, a space for the sacred, "the country of Whitman's and Dewey's dreams"[22]—then the very worst becomes possible. I admit that ethics without ethos or, better, without a relation to a plurality of *ethoi*, is empty, and this is a weakness of Levinas's work, a weakness that runs like an open wound through his exaggerated polemics against Heidegger and his inability to criticize Israel as a nation state. However, Rorty's identifica- tion of ethos with the territory of the nation misses one of the crucial lessons of Derrida's work, namely, its persistent deconstruction of the concept of the frontier, the nation, and territory. If there is a deconstructive politics, then it is *de-territorialized*, which is something that Derrida tries to capture with his notion of The New International.

For Rorty, ethics is what we need when "we face a choice between two irreconcilable actions." Of course, this is not what Levinas means by ethics, where, as I have claimed, he provides a material phenomenology of intersub- jective experience whose ultimate structures can be (but they *need* not be) described with the adjective "ethical."[23] For Levinas, as for Derrida and Laclau, the sphere of choice and decision is political rather than ethical, it is the realm of political justice. If, however, for the sake of argument, we accept Rorty's account of ethics, then it would appear, interestingly, that he no longer believes that Derrida's work has no ethical, political, or public signifi- cance. Rorty writes that reading Derrida, like reading Proust or Dewey, can make a significant difference to our descriptions of ourselves and our proj- ects, but he qualifies this by adding that one should not assign too much political significance to Derrida's work.[24] These remarks can be extended

with reference to Rorty's comments on humanism, in which he interprets Derrida's remarks about *la démocratie a venir* as sharing Dewey's and Mill's "utopian social hope." For Rorty, then, Derrida is a thinker who belongs to what he would probably call the sentimental side of Western democracy. Although, for reasons I hope to have shown, I find this an inadequate understanding of Derrida, my immediate point here is to show that Rorty's response to me represents a subtle but important shift in his assessment of Derrida insofar as he is willing to see his work as having valid ethical significance, although its political utility is limited. As a separate argument, I would want to question the utility of Rorty's notion of utility, which risks reducing politics to the business of state administration and social engineering. In the conclusion to his response, I think that Rorty is right to suggest that the big difference between him and me is "straightforwardly political rather than philosophical."[25] At its crudest, Rorty thinks that we do not require a critique of liberal society and I think that we do.

Furthermore, I would argue that the measure of any society that calls itself liberal is its capacity for critique, for encouraging citizens, through the education process and the to and fro of cultural and public life, to take up the standpoint of reflective critique toward their social and political practices, a reflective critique indexed to emancipation. On my view, deconstruction offers an exemplary version of such a reflective, emancipatory critique. Without this capacity for critique, neopragmatism risks collapsing into what I called in my paper "a (re)descriptive apologetics for the inequality, intolerance, exploitation and disenfranchisement within actually existing liberal society."[26] We do not, as Rorty suggests we do, simply require "more liberal societies," pleasant as that might be for some of us, for the simple reason that such a view would exempt liberal societies from critique, as if liberalism were indeed the end of history. Rather, what is required is that democracy be driven by a concern for justice, an infinite responsibility, a formal universality, that arises in a singular experience or in the experience of indebtedness toward a specific singularity, and which is the condition (but not a recipe) for politicization. On my view, political decisions have to be invented in relation to a conception of justice that is never integrable or presentable within the institutions and practices of a given society.[27] There is no just society, no just decision, and justice can never be done, which does not mean that the demand for justice should be given up, but precisely the reverse. This is what I meant in my paper by the disembodiment of justice, where no state, nation, or territory could be said to embody justice, and where all claims to "achieving our country" have to be abandoned in the name of justice. As I see it, the difference between Rorty and me is essentially the difference between a pragmatized and parochial liberalism and a critical and emancipatory politics driven

by a nonterritorial conception of justice, what I elsewhere call "deterritorial-ized democratization."[28] Such a view still requires, contra Rorty, both *"Ide-ologiekritik* and . . . the romantic notion of the philosopher."[29]

In my paper, I raised a critical worry about the cogency of an antifounda-tionalist liberalism. I suggested that Rorty's pragmatism might not be prag-matic all the way down and that its commitment to liberalism transgresses the limits that he sets for his pragmatism. My critical question here is simple: if Rorty defines liberalism in terms of a claim about the need to minimize cru-elty, reduce humiliation, or be responsive to suffering, then what is the status of this claim? More particularly, can this claim be relativized? And more sharply, is cruelty something about which liberals can be ironic? I think not. But the consequence of such questions is that the recognition of cruelty or suffering as the ethical basis for Rorty's liberalism seems to involve an appeal to an essential, foundational fact about human beings, namely, that we are the sort of beings who respond to the other's suffering in a way that recalls Rous-seau's notion of compassion as a presocial, prerational, sentient disposition that is common to all human beings. But if this claim is plausible, then doesn't it sit rather uneasily with the general drift of Rorty's intentions? Despite Rorty's claims to irony and the ubiquity of contingency, is he not in fact attempting to base moral obligation and political practice upon a founda-tional claim about human susceptibility to humiliation, upon a recognition of the other's suffering? And even if one were to relativize this claim and argue that only "we liberals" recognize the avoidance of cruelty as the basis for morals and politics and that such recognition is a product of particular—and therefore contingent—social and political histories, does it not nevertheless remain true that the claim has the status of a nonrelativizable universal for "we liberals," with our set of "we intentions"?

Unsurprisingly, Rorty quickly rebuts this argument claiming,

> I do not see the point of delving down to the roots of the difference between people who care about others' suffering and those who don't. . . . Maybe it's acculturation in some people and genes in others. I don't see why this should matter.[30]

However, this misses my point. Of course it is clear that Rorty is not *trying* to locate a source for moral obligation in an abhorrence to cruelty, understood as a universal feature of human behavior. My worry is rather about the coher-ence of his position, namely, that if cruelty is something about which liberals cannot be ironic, then the attempt to diminish suffering must have the status of a nonrelativizable universal, if only for "we liberals." This is why a prag-matist liberalism cannot be pragmatic all the way down. However, a wider point can be made here, for surely research into the sources of our moral

intuitions does matter and Rorty's remark is simply flippant. If one thinks of the work of moral psychologists such as Nietzsche, Freud, or Adorno, or, for example, of the Oliners' study into the nature of altruism with specific refer- ence to the behavior of rescuers of Jews in the Second World War, then to my mind it does matter what sort of account we can give of our moral intuitions, especially when those intuitions lead to hatred, cruelty, suffering, and mur- der. In short, what Rorty is disregarding is the whole field of social patholo- gies and the possibility of empirical research into certain deformations of subjectivity that have occurred in history, and which continue to reoccur with depressing regularity. It is not clear to me that the implementation of liberal political structures, combined with what Rorty blithely calls "affluence and security"[31] will be sufficient—they were hardly sufficient in the case of the Oklahoma bombings.[32]

However, I cannot finish this response without discussing Rorty's "ulti- mate weapon" against me, namely, that my philosophical attitudes strike him as metaphysical. For Rorty, the metaphysician is the person who believes that there is a "Right Context"(Rorty's capitalization) and that consequently the search for "ultimate sources of this, and indefeasible presuppositions of that" is valid.[33] Rorty goes on to suggest that I believe that moral seriousness requires us to conduct such a metaphysical search. Well, am I a metaphysi- cian? In a word, as Laurence Sterne would say, "Yes and No." I take it that one of the most important lessons of Derrida's early thinking—and here he fol- lows Heidegger—is that our relationship to the metaphysical tradition is caught in a double bind. That is, any attempt either to enclose oneself within the metaphysical tradition by postulating some new thesis on Being or to leave metaphysics behind in some move to postmetaphysical thinking is equally doomed to failure and is a candidate for deconstruction. I take it that this is the situation that Derrida describes as "the closure of metaphysics," a crucial notion because it permits one to undermine any formalist understand- ing of deconstruction by situating it in relation to a specific historical or epochal conjuncture, namely, the post-Heideggerian understanding of the philosophical tradition.[34]

I see the closure of metaphysics as the double recognition that the meta- physical tradition is theoretically exhausted with Heidegger's reflections on the history of philosophy as the oblivion of Being, but that any belief that we can step across into an overcoming of metaphysics or any notion of the post- metaphysical always risks collapsing back into a pre-Heideggerean naïveté or nondialectical positivity. Deconstruction takes place at the limit between metaphysics and its other(s), as the rigorous disruption of that limit. From a deconstructive perspective, the relation to metaphysics should be governed by the figure of aporia, which denies both the security of an inside or an

outside to metaphysics. I take it that is why Derrida can consistently decon-struct *both* Plato, Rousseau, or Husserl for attempting to buttress a metaphys-ics of presence *and* Bataille, Foucault, or Artaud for attempting to step out-side of metaphysics.

As I see it, our relation to metaphysical questioning is analogous to that of transcendental questioning, where Derrida notes in his "Remarks on Decon-struction and Pragmatism" that, "this new form of transcendental question-ing only mimics the phantom of classical transcendental seriousness without renouncing that which, within this phantom, constitutes an essential heri-tage."[35] Although it has received too little attention from his readers, and although it is a word that has to be wrested from too close an identification with Heidegger's notion of *Erbe* as the authentic historicity of *Dasein*,[36] *heri-tage* is a key item in Derrida's vocabulary for it describes a historically self-conscious or reflexively reactivated relation to any sedimented notion of tra-dition. In this sense, metaphysics, like transcendental philosophy, constitutes part of an essential heritage.

Now, this heritage might well be exhausted and incapable of innovation—we cannot expect any new theses in the realm of *prima philosophia*—but such a recognition does not automatically entail that one can simply abandon metaphysical questioning, or cogently speak from outside of metaphysics. I think this is what Derrida means when he speaks of *mimicry* in relation to a tradition that has become *spectral* or when he uses terms such as the "quasi-transcendental," a word incidentally also employed by Habermas. But the point here is that although metaphysics has become spectral, it is a phantom that continues to haunt our philosophical present.

As a consequence, the neopragmatist attempt to step outside metaphysics, by leaving it to itself, forgetting about it, or subjecting its claims to banaliza-tion, simply understates how shot through our language and history are with metaphysical categories and the ghosts of the metaphysical tradition. A simi-lar point could be made with reference to Habermas, when one thinks of how brusquely he dismisses metaphysics and makes a move to the postmetaphysi-cal in the opening three paragraphs of the Introduction to *The Theory of Com-municative Action*.[37] Returning to Rorty's main point, however, I think that moral seriousness, for reasons of historical, social, and linguistic embedded-ness, might in some cases (but not all) entail the use of metaphysical catego-ries and the resources of the metaphysical tradition. The attempt to exclude certain forms of inquiry as being "too metaphysical" might be said, strangely perhaps, to be *too philosophical*, that is, as requiring too much in the way of a priori assurance. That is, everything must be either empirical or normative, which is simply a new version of Occam's razor. It is in terms of such claims to heritage and mimicry that I make sense of someone like Levinas's

palaeonymic talk of "ethics as first philosophy," although I always read him through a deconstructive looking glass, that is to say, through Derrida's decisive dismantling of his pretention to ethical metaphysics. Part of the problem with neopragmatism is that it refuses to recognize our linguistic, social, historical, and philosophical entanglement with the metaphysical tradition as an element in its program of the banalization of philosophical vocabularies. As a consequence, this banalization risks a double alienation: both from a philosophical audience infuriated by its deflationary redescriptions and from the nonphilosophical audience of the "folks at home" who, in its rather patronizing way, neopragmatism imagines as its touchstone of authenticity.

Happily enough, Rorty finally seems to have got this point about the closure of metaphysics in his 1995 paper, "Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition." Under the pressure of Geoff Bennington's powerful presentation of Derrida's work, Rorty is finally forced to admit defeat or at least a strategic retreat. He begrudgingly concedes,

> Maybe what Bennington calls "the impossibility in principle of cutting oneself cleanly from the metaphysical logos" is, as we nominalists like to think, at most a local, transitory and empirical impossibility—one that prevails only over half the planet's surface and will last, even there, only another few centuries. But those words—Plato's and Kant's words—certainly helped make some of us . . . what we are.[38]

So what are we then? To return to my epigraph from Wallace Stevens, *some* of us are "metaphysicians in the dark," and if that is the case "only for another few centuries," then this is some comfort. Of course, such metaphysics in the dark can no longer claim insight into some ultimate reality or The Right Context. For us, this is, as Stevens points out earlier in the poem, "a souvenir," the reminder of a heritage. But such realization does not entail a wholesale abandonment of the metaphysical tradition. Rather, the metaphysical task is one of "twanging a wiry instrument that gives/Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses." The metaphysician in the dark, like Stevens's man with the blue guitar, plays "a tune beyond us, yet ourselves,"[39] who achieves through these sudden rightnesses what Stevens calls "the finding of a satisfaction." Stevens describes the condition to which such a thinking should be equal in the following terms, which seem to me to be a rightness that I cannot improve upon:

> It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
> It has to face the men of the time and to meet
> The women of the time. It has to think about war
> And it has to find what will suffice. It has
> To construct a new stage.

NOTES

1. *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1955), 240. I owe this allusion to Tracy Strong.

2. Rorty's response and my original paper ("Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?") can be found in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996), 41-6, 19-40. In the time since my original paper was written in 1993, Derrida's work has, characteristically, evolved. In particular, it seems to me that a consideration of *Spectres of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994) and *Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997) would lead me to modify significantly elements of my interpretation of Derrida. I attempt to do this in chaps. 7 and 12 of my forthcoming *Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1998).

3. Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 80.

4. See Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality," *Radical Philosophy* 68 (Autumn 1994): 36.

5. Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," 82.

6. Ibid., 86.

7. I take up these questions in greater detail in a debate with Axel Honneth, "Habermas und Derrida werden verheiratet: Antwort auf Axel Honneth," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 42, no. 6 (1994): 981-92.

8. On the relation of ethics to politics, see "The Other's Decision in Me—What Are the Politics of Friendship?" *European Journal of Social Theory*, October 1998.

9. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

10. "On Specters de Marx," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21, no. 3 (May 1995): 1-30.

11. "Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 47-67.

12. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 13.

13. See "Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony," 54-60. Incidentally, as I argue elsewhere (see S. Critchley and P. Dews, eds., *Deconstructive Subjectivities* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996], 1-12 and 13-45), I completely agree with Laclau that one cannot do away with the category of the subject, understood as the subject of a lack, a failed structural identity, because it is, as Laclau admits, "part of the structure of experience" ("Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony," 56). But if one accepts this, might one not also ask: if, for Laclau, the subject is a freedom that is condemned because it is defined in terms of failure and lack, then who is the subject condemned to be in relation toward? More simply, if the subject is part of the structure of experience, then is not the other also part of that structure? One thinks here of Sartre's celebrated remark "Hell is other people," but also of the transformation of the Hegelian dialectic of intersubjectivity in Lacan's thinking of the subject in relationship to the big Other. What is the relation between Laclau's theorization of the subject and the problematic of intersubjectivity, and is not the latter ultimately constitutive of the former?

14. "Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony," 53.

15. "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," 82.

16. I am compressing a much longer argument that can be found in "From Text to Context: Deconstruction and the Thought of an Unconditional Ethical Imperative," in my *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 31-42.

17. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 82.

18. See G. Bennington and J. Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Rorty's essay, "Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition" appears in his *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 327-50. In his conclusion, Rorty writes, "Bennington has convinced me that I cannot get away

with my stance of tough-minded, hypostatization-bashing empiricism without falling a bit too much under the sway of the metaphysical logos. . . . I still cannot help becoming impatient with the bloodless ballet that Bennington very skillfully choreographs, but I think I now understand better why he thinks it has to be done—why he thinks we can't just let deconstruction go hang if we still want to hang on to Derrida" (p. 349).

19. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 41.

20. Ibid., 17.

21. Ibid., 41.

22. *Achieving Our Country*, 107.

23. See *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 33.

24. Ibid., 44.

25. Ibid., 45.

26. Ibid., 24.

27. Chantal Mouffe makes the same argument using Cavell's critique of Rawls in "Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 9-11.

28. See "The Other's Decision in Me."

29. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 45.

30. Ibid., 42.

31. Ibid.

32. For the sake of completeness, I would like to point out two further infelicities in Rorty's response: (i) I did not write "justice is an experience of the unexperiencable" (*Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 41), which is a perhaps fructive contradiction in terms, but "an 'experience' of the undecidable," which is something quite different. I take it that Rorty's subsequent remarks about my "pointless hype" would have to be moderated by the fact that they do not refer to my paper. (ii) As far as I am aware, I do not speak of a "supreme ethical principle"(ibid., 42).

33. Ibid., 43.

34. I discuss this in detail in "The Problem of Closure in Derrida," in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 59-106.

35. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 82.

36. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 383-6.

37. *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1984), 1-3.

38. "Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition," 350.

39. "The Man with the Blue Guitar," in *Collected Poems*, 165.

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