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M. Bushmeier, E. Hammer, *Pragmatismus und Hermeneutik: Beiträge zu Richard Rortys Kulturpolitik*, Hamburg: Meiner, 2011.

Richard Rorty is rightly considered one of the most interesting authors in the field of intellectual pursuits. This vague formulation also indicates that Rorty's thinking and writing cannot simply be classified as philosophy, although by and large they seem to be part and parcel of the pragmatist tradition. For Rorty clearly confronts a number of traditional problems of philosophy, even when he suggest getting rid of the problem by redescribing the issue or changing the perspective. There is thus a strong element of a critique of philosophy in Rorty's work, for all the use he makes of philosophical concepts. Rorty's interest in subjects and writers beyond the confines of academic philosophy makes his work particularly interesting to those working in neighbouring disciplines, such as literary scholarship. And it is this theme that guides the collection under review here, a book published as a special number of the German journal für aesthetics and general science of art and including contributions both in German (seven) and English (four).

The papers included in this collection all take their starting-point in some form of pragmatist thinking, mostly that of Rorty, in order to address issues of hermeneutics and literature that are particularly relevant for scholars of literature who want to expand their theoretical focus beyond the standard fare of what often counts as 'theory' in literature departments. On the other hand, the analyses also point to gaps in Rorty's appropriation of other thinkers, highlighting Rorty's own structures of reception and providing avenues for further explorations. In this review, I will primarily focus on the contributions written in German, however not without mentioning the topics of those in English.

To pose the question of hermeneutics within the paradigm of pragmatism is not without problems, since Rorty's rejection of the usefulness of the term truth seems to circumvent any consideration of the truth of any given interpretation. In other words, under conditions of Rorty's pragmatism it does not make much sense to ask whether one has understood something correctly. Rorty's provocation consists in his rejection of epistemology, as Matthias Buschmeier explains, and Rorty regards the recognition of the impossibility of any final justification for knowledge as a hermeneutical insight (p. 34). Rorty's hermeneutics aims at some kind of understanding, trying to bring about overlapping understandings of topics or ideas in order to secure social cohesion. What remains to be seen, however, is what 'understanding' can mean if this is not tied to at least some kind of regulative idea of true understanding. Whatever one may think about this¹ –Buschmeier is consistent enough not to present an account of Rorty's intentions (p. 22), although it would surely be useful to have a plausible presentation of such an intention. Buschmeier makes two points that I want to mention in this context: 1. he draws attention to what is surely a serious deficiency in Rorty's concept of literature, namely a kind of instrumental understanding of literature as a

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¹ A mostly non-pragmatic discussion of these issues can be found in my recent article "Wahrheit ohne Methode? Hermeneutischer Relativismus als Herausforderung", *Philotheos: International Journal for Philosophy and Theology*, 12, 2012, pp. 3-16.

means to further human sympathy. This entails a corresponding lack of recognition on Rorty's part of the literary aesthetics proper, a major problem for any theory of aesthetics that wants to make sense. 2. the humanities would seem to be in a 'better' position than the sciences, because they have left epistemology, i.e. codes of true /false-distinctions, behind (pp. 39-40). One might, however, want to qualify Buschmeier's criticism by drawing attention to Ulf Schulenberg's recognition of two different kind so of books: There are not only those help us to become better human beings, but also those which enhance our projects of private self-creation (p. 178).

It is in line with Buschmeier's criticism of Rorty's view of literature that Richard Eldridge provides a mostly negative answer to the question whether poets (first and foremost) have ideas. He takes issue with Rorty's claim that poets above all provide us with new vocabularies to talk about what we want to become. Although he argues, and quite rightly in the reviewer's mind, that Rorty's claim in this matter 'is mostly wrong', he nevertheless reaches this conclusion on the basis of a comprehensive agreement with Rorty's eight commitments to anti-representationalism, anti-foundationalism, opposition to metaphysics, philosophy as engaged criticism, humanism, Americanism, philosophy as an activity, generosity (p. 141-144). The devil, however, dwells in the details, which means that Rorty's employment of rigid dichotomies can be "crude and obtuse" (p. 144), with Rorty beating one term into submission and extolling the other one, e.g., in the case of the oppositions "discover vs. invent, represent vs. intervene, public vs. private, philosophy vs. literature" and so on (p. 144). What this means for literary scholarship is the following: Rorty considerably downplays the non-inventive part of literary scholarship, presenting a lopsided view influenced by French literary critics but hardly true to the actual workings of literary critics (p. 147). In a Wordsworthian vein, Eldridge suggests poetry presents rather a transfigurative than a pragmatic hermeneutics; and he exemplifies this by taking a closer look at one example, Seamus Heaney's "Digging" (p. 149-152).

The German literary scholar Friedmar Apel contrasts the rather idyllic picture of a poeticised culture in Rorty's sense (and inspired by Dewey) to the much more critical perspective of German aesthetic theory in the work of Adorno and Blumenberg. Romantic notions of human self-empowerment are much closer linked to the desire to control nature than projects of poeticizing the world realize, as Apel explains (p. 155). Apels' comparatively brief paper is supplemented by a more comprehensive discussion of the connection between pragmatism and romanticism by Ulf Schulenberg, a scholar who has thorough studied more recent forms of American pragmatist cultural politics. He looks at what he calls Rorty's anti-fundamentalist history of progress by drawing attention to romanticism as crucial influence on pragmatism. This aspect has been neglected in earlier discussions of pragmatism, according to Schulenberg, but in order to understand the so-called 'renaissance of pragmatism', one needs to clarify the precise relationship between romanticism and pragmatism (p. 174). Rorty's place in this confrontation is of great importance, as he has repeatedly dealt with romanticism in his essays. Rorty's construction of parallels extends to the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth as well as the predominance of the imagination over reason. Strangely enough, Rorty still holds on to concepts like 'progress,' e.g., when he suggests that "philosophy makes progress not by becoming more rigorous but by becoming more imaginative" (p. 179). Rorty's understanding of romanticism is usefully explained by Schulenberg in its complexity, including a critique of romanticism, and this is then linked to what Rorty considers as an important representative of a literary culture, namely the liberal ironist. For Schulenberg, the combination of romanticism and pragmatism should lead to the rejection of the abstract and unmediated confrontation of poetry and politics (p. 195).

Further contributions emphasize the value of a pragmatist poetics (Florian Klinger) and of a kind of literary epistemology (Christian Kohlroß). Although even here we find that Rorty's apostrophe of literature nowhere leads to structural analyses or hardly ever to any attention to linguistic features of literary texts (p. 197). Rorty's concept of literature and literary criticism is closely tied to his 'post-metaphysical' stance, but there seems to be a problem here, since one will always have to take recourse to some sort of metaphysical notions if one wants to discuss general concepts e.g. of 'language.' Kohlroß, who is the author of the only major German treatise on pragmatism and literature (cf. p. 17 n. 18),² introduces the issue of the epistemic status of literature, a theme that has received considerable attention in recent years, at least among scholars of literature. Literary epistemology could be considered as that which would or could have come into being if philosophy had integrated the aspect of literary presentation into its consideration instead of regarding it as a danger to its rationality; and if literary scholarship had also considered the substantial issues expressed in the texts under consideration (p. 161-162). Rorty exemplifies the possibility for this kind of rapprochement of philosophy and philology that would ultimately lead to a utopian place *beyond* philosophy and philology. But, as Kohlroß goes on to argue, there is a surprising insight. For if we ask what really distinguishes philological knowledge from philosophical knowledge, the answer is that there is no difference (p. 164). For, as Kohlroß shows, the five myths Rorty recognized as connected to the metaphor of the mirror apply in equal manner to philology and philosophy. Literary epistemology in the sense ascribed to Rorty would then be a practice that is not guided by a concern for the truth; in fact, literature can do without truth – we read *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote* as well as *The Critique of Pure Reason* or Hegel's *Science of Logic* not because they are true but because of the way they present their views of the world (p. 168). The knowledge of literature is thus a knowledge of the ways in which convictions are formed by the meanings of language, for meaning, in contrast to truth, is in fact indispensable. For Kohlroß and Rorty this furthermore leads to the recognition that the general is only accessible through the particular and not as a pre-given notional entity to which all particulars only need to be subsumed (p.172). The general, according to Rorty, cannot be reduced to a concept but is inextricably linked to experience – and this is why the experience of reading novels can offer ever new opportunities for reaching general conclusions through the medium of particular stories.

Rorty is famous for appropriating a rather large number of different thinkers and writers for his own ends. But what is the precise structure of this appropriation? Oliver Jahraus, a specialist in the sociological systems theory of Niklas Luhmann,³ addresses this question in his contribution. He tries to find points of convergence between the theories of Rorty and Luhmann, based on the observation that Luhmann is not covered by Rorty anywhere. Starting from observations of similarities and difference between Rorty and Derrida, Jahraus points to the possibilities of art to show that which philosophy cannot express. He reads a famous painting by Magritte, *Reproduction interdite*, with Rorty to consider the issues of reflection. Rorty considers reflection as the point of attack in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and, according to Jahraus, suggests abandoning a form of thinking in terms of media. Literature as well as literary scholarship are considered by Rorty as forms of reflection overcome as well as of deconstruction overcome (p. 94). In Magritte's painting, reflection only works with the book represented (Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*) but not with the subject

² Christian Kohlroß, *Literaturtheorie und Pragmatismus oder Die Frage nach den Gründen des philologischen Wissens*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2007.

³ He is the co-editor of a recent standard reference work *Luhmann-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2012.

looking in the mirror. Reflection, here, works precisely where it is not necessary: we would have to see the mirror image of the subject in order to recognize it, whereas the book only remains readable if it is not mirrored (although Jahraus here underestimates the possibility, which is of course a mere matter of training, to read mirrored script) (p. 95). Rorty and Luhmann can be regarded as an interesting constellation, because it adds a third option to the two positions on the aporias of reflection put forth by Rorty and Derrida: Luhmann's systems theory transforms the aporias of reflection into paradoxes that become constituents of its own theory design. Contingency becomes the key concept which Rorty and Luhmann address in different ways: Luhmann describes social systems as huge engines of the elimination of contingency; Rorty regards social systems as fields of contingency in which this phenomenon can be made (p. 98). Both Luhmann and Rorty, according to Jahraus, attempt to leave behind any foundational justification based on the subject and they try to do this by means of hermeneutics.

The issues of subjectivity are also raised by a number of other papers, most notably Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg, who focusses on the struggle of pragmatism with subjectivity and reaches the conclusion that final vocabularies, "as structures of commitment and orientation, are [...] something we as thinking agents operate in and through" (p. 58). For Torberg, his reflections lead to a "significant reinterpretation of Rorty's notion of a final vocabulary. Final vocabularies turn out to be not final but rather present "the momentary shape of our rational responsiveness to the world and our dynamic ability to engage the world, and to be engaged by it, as thinking and thus ever changing agents" (p. 59).

This collection, as my summaries have demonstrated, offers rich food for thought and is to be recommended for anyone who wants to consider the relationship of pragmatism to hermeneutics and to literature. Not the least of the benefits of this collection is the fact that diverging viewpoints have not been ignored or harmonized, e.g., with regard to the role of the future in Rorty's pragmatism (p. 26). This also means that some points of Rorty's pragmatism and cultural politics which are affirmed in one part of the book are called into question in another. But that, of course, is as it should be, if we do not want to accept Rorty's own vocabularies *as final*.