CHAPTER - VI

CRITICAL POLEMICS - II: POSTMODERNISM’S INNER SUBVERSIONS: RORTY AND DERRIDA IN CROSSING

Rorty’s radical abandonment of epistemology in favour of concrete social practices and Derrida’s critique of an uncontaminated existence of a liberal community run at cross-purposes. While Rorty goes towards critical reconstruction of a liberal community, Derrida drifts towards a radicalization of already existing practices of constructing the world and the social order. Rorty’s goal is to accomplish a liberal community that includes the greatest possible plurality, specificity and sensitivity to identify with others. Derrida’s goal is to critically question all such modes of settled practices and open up an avenue to break through the existing social and political practices. From such divergent perspectives, the postmodern image of human life assumes a simultaneous persistence and dissipation of its established mores, dancing at its own funeral and re-christening its own failings to live into new melodies. Such a conflicting and destabilizing field of forces keep postmodern images breaking and re-constituting itself. Neither Rorty nor
Derrida can contribute a singular explanation that can overarch ways of the world, rather both of their contribution in terms of re-interpretations and critique set a particular tone in philosophy, whose appropriation generates a wide ranging debate on the very characteristic of the postmodern conceptualization. The purpose of this chapter is to first identify the directions in which Rorty and Derrida come in some kind of coincidence and then to elaborate upon those coincidences through Rorty’s critique of Derrida and vice-versa. The chapter draws upon such critique and counter-critique in order to identify the crossroads of postmodernism.

Coincidences between Rorty & Derrida

Coincidences between Rorty & Derrida come through in their abandonment of metaphysical circle of reason and acceptance of a discourse-centered idea of reason. But such coincidence goes in two different directions: Rorty carries out critique of metaphysics to the extent that it does not go to serve the interests of the community, while Derrida carries it out in order to bring out the ‘claim’ of any discourse. That way, Rorty turns ethnocentric,
while Derrida gives rise to a more global critical practice with his supposedly neutral method of deconstruction by way of exposing the possibilities of going beyond what a specific configuration of discourse(s) aims at. This difference between Rorty and Derrida sustains its gravity in their mutual criticism and recognition of each other's points that produce a critical distance Rorty diagnoses two mutually countervailing aspects in the practice of deconstruction: one, it wins over the tendencies to fall back on metaphysical and epistemic determinations, but, two, it turns against itself by undermining its critical spirit in its quest for reaching at those transcendental conditions that regulate a field of discourse. Derrida merely locates a streak of romantic hangover in Rorty's understanding of him. Contrarily he would prescribe 'interminability' in one's deciphering of critical meanings in whatever has acquired a stable meaning. To chart out the terrain of this critique and counter-critique between Rorty and Derrida, I shall first delineate Rorty's critique of Derrida and go into Derrida's possible responses and later to Derrida's critique of Rorty's liberal pragmatism and Rorty's possible responses. I shall derive epistemologically
significant critiques could be arrived at from this whole exercise

Rorty's Critique of Derrida

Rorty begins his critique of Derrida by charging him of a general undifferentiated 'textualism' that goes into nitty gritties of how the 'text' is produced and how the texts lean on metaphysical-conceptual opposition. Rorty maintains a 'double stance' on such idea of an undifferentiated textualism by suggesting that it should be 'promoted' to the extent that it subverts the artificial distinctions between genres of writing and open up 'literary' and 'poetic'moments in various areas of our culture. It should be discouraged to the extent that it aims at the philosophical project of overcoming ontotheological tradition. So far as 'promotion' is concerned, Rorty appropriates deconstruction in the service of 'liberalism' such a strategy shall bring deconstruction in a level-playing field with his pragmatism or 'liberalism'. Contrary to Derrida's confinement within the conceptual oppositions produced within the text, Rorty's retention of an exterior
criterion of social practice is a way of grounding such texts. Epistemically, Derrida's metaphysical quests for the some of oppositions is contrasted by Rorty's search for answers to concrete social questions and the two distinct criteria play off each other. Rorty combines such a contrast with his flare for social practices in exploring a deconstructive pragmatic possibility in the understanding of 'language'.

Rorty locates the attempt to turn ordinary linguistic practice into a domain of settling metaphysical issues like whether there is some one substance or the way the world is that must count in our ascription of truth-value to language. He relates such metaphysical criteria to the rise of certain pseudo-notions like verifiability and intelligibility that philosophical vocabulary aimed to acquire:

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\text{Not only must a philosophical vocabulary be total in the sense that anything literally or metaphorically sayable in other vocabulary can be literally said in it but it must speak of itself with the same "assumed legibility" as it does of everything else.}^1
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Precisely Rorty considers 'language' as a field of metaphorical meanings, which is more literary than 'literal' by its nature. What is meant in such characterization is that language surpasses philosophy's search for one all-inclusive vocabulary that can give rise to certain rules of meaning in relation to other vocabularies. Rorty makes a critical juxtaposition between to philosophy's dream (pace Derrida) for such a vocabulary with the ordinary linguistic practice and the possibility of uses of multiple vocabularies in various modes of writing. The juxtaposition results into a notion of irreducibility of such variety of vocabularies into one another. This brings together two consequences: one, vocabularies need not be deconstructed in order to unpack the hidden metaphysical basis of a kind of vocabulary and two, a kind of vocabulary could be replaced with another in cases when one finds them insufficient and anomalous. Rorty relates this play of vocabularies in accrediting Derrida for opening up closed vocabularies of philosophy. He accredits Derrida for opening the philosophical texts to other texts, which lie in a weave of difference of forces, in the wider field of language. Such a possibility
of wider field of differences envisages a 'total transformation of one culture marked by 'self-conscious interminability, self-conscious openness and self-conscious lack of philosophical closure. This is simultaneously an opening of the philosophical, metaphysical and epistemological text to something nonphilosophical, one can call it a self-conscious blurring of distinctions between philosophy and non-philosophy which makes one act from outside the margins of philosophy. But such an opening is fraught with the dilemma of either retaining philosophy or abandoning it totally, similar to Nietzsche and Heidegger's attempts to overcome the metaphysics of Being that forced them either in the direction of settling with eternal return or name of the Being which remain indescribable within philosophy. But such eternal return or name of the Being relates language with the metaphysics of absolute, which Derrida, intended to overcome. So Derrida takes recourse to those 'metaphors' that indicate such an overcoming and all those metaphors are built by him around writing. Such a metaphoric adaptation of a philosophical project brings into language the possibility of removing all traces or grounds for truth or a unified theory of knowledge; it
rather brings into picture a stream of 'unconnected' sentences, vocabularies and metaphors carrying no inferential relation between them. Such a of writing presents a two-horned dilemma: on the one hand, it is a writing without a fixed telos or architecture and on the other, such a writing can claim the states of a metavocabulary that can explain all other possible vocabularies.\(^5\) What Rorty posits here is the epistemic dilemma of deconstruction: going transcendental undermines the actually available texts, while remaining with text without fixed metaphysical or teleological logos means an open and non-inferential mode of representation. Rorty points out that the dilemma goes deeper in the whole terrain of Derridean deconstruction. Derridean claims like (1) production of several languages and several texts (2) moments of differance\(^6\) is the common root of all conceptual opposition that mark our language\(^7\) are reminiscent of the dilemma that (i) presents the possibility of opening up the text, while claim (ii) speaks of a philosophical process through which concepts in language acquire their functions. Both the claims taken together present two different and mutually countorposing concerns; one trying to open up texts to other texts and
the other trying to identify the common root of conceptual opposition as a depth mechanism. Rorty sees the possibility of an opening in the first that goes quite well with his project of inventing newer vocabularies, while search for ground of opposition in the second remains as the mark of denying the liberal possibility of multiplicity of genres and cultures, a kind of one vs. many that such a search goes into great. In Rorty’s words,

What pragmatists find most foreign in Derrida is his suspicion of empiricism and naturalism—his assumption that these are forms of metaphysics, rather than replacements for metaphysics. To put it another way: they can not understand why Derrida wants to sound transcendental, why he persists in taking the project of finding conditions of possibility seriously. So when pragmatists are told by 'deconstructionists' that Derrida has 'demonstrated' that Y, the condition of possibility of X, is also the condition of impossibility of X, they feel that this is an unnecessary high-flaunting way of putting a point which could be put lot more simply: viz., that you can not use the word 'A'
without being able to use the word 'B' and vice versa, even though nothing can be both an A and an B.\textsuperscript{8}

Rorty's nominalist-pragmatist ways of putting things concern itself not with 'discourse of philosophy' but with useful application of vocabularies stemming out of such discourses. Such useful application of vocabularies assume a critical dimension in Rorty's critique of 'conditions of possibility' which are non-causal conditions, yet they are misleading ways of making the point that a certain set of terms can not be used by people who are incapable of using another set. So Rorty asks the question, how could one grasp the conditions of possibility of all possible contexts? The question takes into account the claims made by some of the professed Derrideans like de Man and Christopher Norris who had read Derrida either in terms of nihilating all possible meaning by a transvaluational idiom\textsuperscript{9} or in terms of apriori critique of the power and limits of texts.\textsuperscript{10} In all such readings, Derrida's deconstruction is identified as a transcendental project, as a project of reaching at the grounds of any discourse or concept, but Rorty adds a further dimension to the problematic nature of this project by asking the question,
Within what language are we to lay out arguments demonstrating (or even just making plausible) that we have correctly identified these conditions?¹¹

Rorty considers this question as one of the major Achilles' hill for transcendental project because it restricts the context of use of language and once it is restricted in this way it turns regressive in borrowing expressions from what it conditions as 'context'. But transcendental project elevates that borrowed language to a stage of metalanguage that gives rise to language for various contexts. This means a counterproductive situation in which contexts are already determined by the metalanguage, which makes no sense in talking about various linguistic usages in various contexts. Rorty aptly cites how Gasche read in Derrida the Hegelian 'philosophy of reflection' because he found out the 'conditions of possibility' that determined the conceptual relationship. Concepts in such a reading of Derrida, are always 'cracked and fissured' by the trace of its opposite. So, Rorty conclude that,

The best we nominalist can do with such claims is to construe them by
saying that one can always make old language look bad by thinking up a better one - replace an old tool with a new one by using an old word in a new way (e.g., as "privileged" rather than the "derivative" term of a contrast), or by replacing it with a new word. But this need for replacement is ours, not the concepts. It does not go to pieces, rather, we set it aside and replace it with something else.12

Rorty effectively follows this kind of renewal, replacement and re-creation by citing two major reading of Derrida by some of his great disciples like Paul de Man. and Hillis Miller. Rorty cites how de Man, following Derridean deconstruction considered 'poetic language' as naming 'the presence of a nothingness',13 a language that represents an 'abyss' created from deconstruction of the 'subject' and the 'knowledge' such a de Manian interpretation of language hinges upon a contrast with the 'phenomenal world' and the way it acts upon human subjectivity. Such a contrast makes language, the voice of a Dark God, who speaks in a literary language14 and de Man considered a writing like 'literature' as giving a sense of 'no exit' from the 'condition that is felt to be
unbearable', an experience of the void and the abyss that can not be known but only be 'named with ever-renewed understanding'. This is what jibes well with ready made understanding of Derridean claims like the following:

The sign represents the present in absence. The sign in this use is deferred presence

This is what Rorty identifies with 'hypostatization of language' in ways such as Hillis Miller characterizes language,

Language promises, but what it promises is itself. The promise it can never keep. It is this fact of language, a necessity beyond the control of any user of language, which makes thing happen as they do happen in the material world of history.

Rorty calls such an understanding of language as hypostatization as it images languages as a field of permanent absence as well as it preserves de Manian contrast with phenomenal world in the form of drawing an equivalence between literature and phenomenal world. But the equivalence is so abstract that it gives language the role of 'showing up' certain fictional or poetic events
which are 'imaginary' and yet retains a law-like worldly correspondence between such 'imaginary' and 'fictional' events. Such a deliberate tie-up between 'phenomenal world' and language as Rorty conceives, is a result of 'trying to bring everything together one's most private emotional needs and one's public responsibilities'.

Rorty further interprets this abyssal effect of deconstruction in pragmatic terms and sees a mechanism of self-eschewment and guilt-consciousness in such attenuation of language into an 'uncontrolled' espousing of life through a fission of signs. In Rorty's lens, such a worshipping of a hypostatized form of language is simultaneously a mark of ironizing the world, a perennial quality of intellectuals who also want to redeem their 'selves' from such voids and re-construct it in newer vocabularies. Further hypostatization bears a sense of 'guilt' in so far as the intellectuals can not create their own projection of self-invention to the needs of those less capable of re-description and re-invention.

Question arises here whether Rorty's nominalist, liberal interpretation of deconstruction gets and of the dilemma between 'transcendence' and 'opening', or it merely re-plate it in a different way? At least Rorty's
pragmatic truck with deconstructive notion of 'openness' in terms of an ability 'to substitute sensible signs with other signs'\textsuperscript{21} re-instates the deconstructive dilemma in terms of private perfection and 'public responsibility'. His nominalist notion of redesignation remains meaningful in the realm of the 'private', Rorty's dismissal of Derrida's 'transcendental project' as a 'circumvention' of the play of language and hence restrictive of the possibility of re-description revives Derrida's own dilemma between 'inside' and 'outside', 'impossible' and 'possible'. Still, Derrida's exegetics retains a deconstructive leeway to the dilemma as Simon Critchley's counterbalancing question reflects,

Whether Rorty's pragmatism is in fact pragmatist all the way down, or whether its commitment to liberation, in terms of a non relativizable claim about the susceptibility of human beings to suffering and the need to minimize cruelty-transgresses the limits of Rorty's pragmatism?\textsuperscript{22}
Derrida's Defense of Transcendental Project and Consequent Critique of Rorty

From a Derridean point of view, the question that arises is whether Derrida would agree to Rorty's understanding of his search for 'conditions of possibility' of context, meaning and writing. Especially Rorty's debunking of such 'conditions of possibility' as something contrary to the possibility of openness or newness necessitates an answer to the question formulated above. In responding to the question, we have to locate the response in Derridean notion of general economy of difference, which is a structural principle that governs the structure of writing in general. For Derrida, writing is a process of chaining up signs that follow a rule of differing and deferring, differing from itself as well as other signs and deferring its presence altogether. Such a structure of differance never gives the full presence of signs to itself, rather it is a process in which signs appear only to erase themselves in traces and such traces produce the always moving structure of writing, which is without a fixed loci, but stretched along a field, heterogeneous in character. Derrida's question of transcendental condition of possibility needs to be
contextualized in this structure of writing, called differance. This is Derrida’s way of posing the question in its relation to writing and in its possibility of breaking through, that is, in a simultaneous relation of ‘belonging’ and ‘not-belonging’. This take us to the Derridean interpretation of transcendence, which is a real structure like economic, historical etc. all of which becomes real in an ‘interpretive’ move. The interpretive move is an attempt to arrive at certain stable meaning of certain kinds of activities, but what lurks through such a move is the Derridean question, what are the conditions of possibility of such structures? . And also other question crops up though an act of interpretation, that is, is the conditions or limits of a context determinable? These two questions are interlinked between contexts present in a structure of writing; it is present only by closing its limits, an enclosure that opens up at the limits. So, ‘its presence’, lies at the ‘limit’ while it is open and wide at it limit. Derrida’s search about conditions of possibility is a question that emanates from the limits of the context, namely, can such limits ever determine itself totally or it is just an extraction from the world or just a way of grounding in the world? Derrida’s answer that
conditions of possibility include those items which are excluded by the context and hence context produces an inside containing what is conceived from within it and produces an outside that includes all that are excluded. Conditions of possibility dissolve this 'line' between inside, and outside and it simultaneously gives rise to a possibility of having a context while at the same time it remains impossible to delimit a context. Therefore, a Derridean answer to Rorty's paraphrasing of conditions of possibility could be reformulated in this way: it is not only that you can not use the word 'A' without being able to use the word 'B' is no guarantee to be able to use the word 'A', what it means that 'condition of possibility' is a derivation to know what other possibilities remain when one thing is made possible. Translated in pragmatic terms, it is not merely to use signs, but it is also the capacity to relate signs with contexts of real life that deconstruction purports to in its paradigm statement, 'nothing outside the text'. Rorty approves of such an approach in his notion of recontextualization that advocates relation between various texts.

Derrida himself defines his transcendental enterprise, because asking for transcendental condition of
posibility is not just confronting empiricism, positivism and psychologism but reaching into an area that makes an event both possible and impossible. This is an area that Derrida articulates as a function which defines possibility as a function of impossibility, that is defining possibility as its impossibility, which further signifies the deconstructive move to go beyond the possible. Derrida terms this position on transcendentalism as 'quasi transcendental' as it is neither a bland approval of possibility nor a flat talk about 'impossibility', rather it is contrapuntal in the sense that possibility breaks through the impossibility and vice-versa. This is transcendental only in a reflective sense while in actual terms; it is the possibility of the condition of possibility. Derrida calls this position as highly unorthodox and distinguishes it from a traditional Kantian-Husserlian notion of transcendental that takes only a grasp upon the realm of possible and claims that the grasp is total.

A subtler critique of Rorty is generated in Derrida's defense of the transcendental project. He also asks a counter-question to Rorty's objections to conditions of possibility by pointing out that,
How is that something 'X' which does not have a stable meaning or reference becomes indispensable in a certain finite, but open, context, during a certain period of time, for a certain number of actors? 

Derrida answers this question in the context of a supposed relationship between deconstruction and pragmatism, as Rorty supposes so. The relationship between the two is of such a kind that they are disentangled in such a way that there can be an articulation of similar purpose without a common shared basis. Rorty's pragmatism, assuming its nominalist face tries to handle the resources of deconstruction, but finds it circumventing the beliefs of liberal democracy. Deconstruction on the other hand takes a pragmatic cue in the form of dispelling closure in a culture such that it can absorb newer trends in it. With this lack of fit between deconstruction's commitment to contain condition of possibility and pragmatism's non-committal webs of beliefs, manifest in understanding how decisions are taken, in what ways. Rorty's immediate answer is, 'the way things are' or 'the way it is good in the belief of the community' reduces the scope of decidability into choosing from a set of givens. But
this way of determination of 'the way things are' or 'the way it is good in the belief of the community' leaves open the relationship between the human subject, choices and decisions. It does not become a determinate relationship expressed in the coinage 'the way'. Decisions in such a mode suspend a one to one relationship between acts and choices. Derrida explains the situation in the following way,

Even when I believe myself to have opted for a decision, I don't know if I have in fact taken a decision, but it is necessary that I refer myself to the possibility of this decision and think it s'il y a (the way the things are).²⁸

To sum up, the crucial difference between Rortyean Pragmatism and Derridean deconstruction lies in their perspective upon the nature of reality. For deconstructionists, the possibility of taking decisions stem out of a radical stage of undecidability showing that an already taken decision is supervenient upon the conditions of its possibility, which in themselves are never totally determinable. While Pragmatism takes nature
of reality as something arising out of shared needs and produces more of a constructivist account of the human situation and hence conceives any decision as coherent, with set of beliefs and standards within a particular society. ²⁹
NOTES


3] EHO. p 87.
5] EHO. p. 94.


9] Richard Rorty,EHO, p. 117.

10] EHO. p. 120.
14] EHO. p. 115.
16] EHO. p. 131.
17] EHO. p. 115.
21] EHO. p. 115.
22] EHO. p. 37.

24] DP, p. 82.

25] DP., p. 82.

26] DP. p. 85.

27] DP. p. 87.

28] DP. p. 87.