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WHAT DO THERMONUCLEAR BOMBS HAVE TO DO WITH INTERCULTURAL HERMENEUTICS? (OR ON THE SUPERIORITY OF DICKENS OVER HEIDEGGER)

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss Richard Rorty's views on intercultural hermeneutics as presented in his essay "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens" and in his correspondence with the Indian philosopher Anindita Niyogi Balslev. In doing so, I focus primarily on Rorty's presumption that instead of providing an "authentic" picture of another culture, the goal of intercultural studies or hermeneutics should be to look if there is anything "of use" that a given culture offers and that is not offered by ours.
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Richard Rorty's much discussed essay "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens"[1] opens with the following invitation to the reader:

> Imagine that the nations which make up what we call "the West" vanish tomorrow wiped out by thermonuclear bombs. Only Eastern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa remain inhabitable, and in these regions the reaction to the catastrophe is a ruthless campaign of de-Westernization— a fairly successful attempt to obliterate the memory of the last three hundred years. But imagine also that, in the midst of this de-Westernizing campaign, a few people, mostly in the universities, squirrel away as many souvenirs of the West as they can—as many books, magazines, small artifacts, reproductions of works of art, movie films, videotapes, and so on, as they can conceal. …
> Now imagine that, around the year 2500, the memory of the catastrophe fades, the sealed off cellars are uncovered, and artists and scholars begin to tell stories about the West (Rorty 1991b, 66).

Before I proceed with further details of Rorty's narrative and the consequences he draws from it—the consequences which will constitute the focal point of my paper, let me mention that this particular theme of future scholars examining what remains of our civilization after

[1] Included in Rorty (1991b). The paper was initially presented, under the title "Philosophers, Novelists, and Intercultural Comparisons: Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," at the Sixth East-West Philosophers' Conference (University of Hawaii), in 1989; cf. Balslev (1999); and Wei Zhang (2006, 11-44).

its catastrophic demise can be found elsewhere too. A good example would be the satirical short story "Emperor Kennedy Legend: A New Anthropological debate" (published some three years earlier than Rorty's text was first presented) by the prominent Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski (1986, 211-217), probably most famous, internationally, for his *Main Currents of Marxism* (Kołakowski 1978). Although he refers to the latter book in his essay, Rorty does not mention the "legend of Emperor Kennedy" there and it remains an open question whether he was inspired by it or not.

Be that as it may, the lesson which each philosopher draws from his own futuristic story is different. As far as Kołakowski is concerned, he aims to deride the supposed supreme hermeneutical power of structuralism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism, by making the cultural anthropologists of a distant future interpret what they understand to be the myth of a certain "Emperor called Kennedy who is said to have ruled two large countries ["called respectively America and USA"] in the remote past B. G. C. (Before the Great Calamity)" (Kołakowski 1990, 249-250). They do so on the basis of a loose collection of books and scraps of newspapers (which remained after our civilization had disappeared from the face of the earth in a further unspecified cataclysm) and, moreover, along the lines of the aforementioned methodologies, which apparently re-emerged in that future world. The narrative spun by Kołakowski is, as it were, an exercise in *reductio ad absurdum* where structuralists, psychoanalysts, and Marxists, blissfully trustful in their methodologies, pile nonsense upon nonsense (arguing that Emperor Kennedy was thought of in our times as a "male-female figure which produces males, is defeated by males, and eventually killed, presumably by a woman or on women's order"[2]) and then deliver their results with proper academic seriousness and jargon, something which, in turn, makes Kołakowski's short story all the more comical.

The moral, as usual in such cases,[3] does not concern the imagined world, but rather our own, and can be put in the following way (which, of course, is not the only plausible one): granted that some interpretive methodologies, when applied by people who want to understand our culture but have only fragmentary knowledge thereof, can produce obvious falsities and nonsense, we must not preclude the possibility that, when we ourselves use the same tools in interpreting cultures of which we have incomplete information, this too may lead, and probably already has led, to no better results.

At first glance, Rorty's idea in "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," is similar to Kołakowski's as one thing he also does there is elucidate how our "professional

[2] "This last fact has been established by the confrontation of two sources: in one of a few pages preserved from a booklet 'True Facts about the Soviet Union' we read that the 'happiness of Soviet women is beyond description,' whereas another source—a page from a journal mysteriously called *The Times*—speaks of the 'utmost misery of Soviet men'; and so we see that, at least in one of the main hostile countries, women were happy and men unhappy, which suggests that this country was a kind of gynecocracy" (*ibid.,* 252).

[3] Note that both Rorty's and Kołakowski's thought experiments can be included in a certain satirical tradition which dates at least from Montaigne and consists in criticizing one's own culture through the use of an outsider—a fictional character functioning as a cultural other (such as Usbek and Rica in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*) or, in the most extreme example, a being not of this Earth (as in Voltaire's *Micromégas*); see Knight (2004, 51, 64-67, 73-80); cf. Curley (2002, 280-306).

deformations" influence the way we interpret other cultures. Yet he is not so much concerned with the epistemological aspects of such interpretations as with their sociopolitical usefulness.[4] According to Rorty, instead of providing an "authentic" picture of another culture, the goal of intercultural studies or hermeneutics should be to look if there is anything "of use" that a given culture offers and that is not offered by ours. What he means by that should become clearer in a moment, but for now let me return to Rorty's imagined post-nuclear-holocaust world of 2500, or rather to a possible aspect thereof to which Rorty attaches special importance. Namely, if "there are *philosophers* among the people who" attempt to tell a "story" about the demised West, Rorty claims, they will most probably want to know its "essence" and "the one true moral of its career" (Rorty 1991b, 66; emphasis in the original). And one could hardly think about any other person who would be better equipped to help them in realizing that task than Martin Heidegger.

Should the fantasized African and Asian philosophers consult what survived of Heidegger's works they could learn that the nuclear warfare that brought an end to the West was not an accident, but that it, as the ultimate and inevitable phase of the Western technological "frenzy," was strictly related to what that culture had been all about at least from the time of Plato; namely, "the forgetfulness of Being" (*ibid.*, 68, 72). But Rorty would rather the future Africans and Asians did not have Heidegger as a guide in their thinking about our world. Instead, he would want them to be instructed by Charles Dickens—his "anti-Heidegger" (*ibid.*, 67-68).

In fact, if the future "Asians and Africans were unable to preserve the works of both men," and had to choose those written by one of them, Rorty would want their choice to be Dickens's (*ibid.*, 68). He believes that were they to decide otherwise, their comparative study of our culture would become too "easy" (*ibid.,* 71) and in this sense less fruitful (cf. Balslev 1999, 32-33). The reason for this, according to Rorty, is that Heidegger belongs to the rather curious species which Nietzsche famously called "ascetic priests," and which can be found in any culture, including those of Eastern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. This would naturally reduce the comparative work of future Asian and African scholars to merely discerning superficial modifications of a "transcultural character" they know all too well (Rorty 1991b, 71).

The ascetic priest, or theorist (as Rorty also calls him) can be described as somebody who is wholeheartedly convinced that human beings are primarily responsible not to each other, but to something non-human that is larger [5] and stronger[6] than them, something like Reality, the Supreme Good, History, God, "'Brahma' or 'Nothingness'" (Rorty 1991b, 71); something that hovers above human affairs and is sublimely purer than they are.[7] What makes this individual a *priest* is his (note that Rorty's notion of ascetic priest "is deliberately…

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[4] For Rorty's general views on interpretation, see Rorty (1999a, 131-147); cf. Małecki (2011a, pp. 91-92).

[5] See Rorty (1991b*,* 27, 33, 48, 74); Rorty (1998a, 321); Rorty (1999, 13); Rorty (1998b*,* 116); Rorty (2005a, 126); Rorty (1991a, 117); Rorty (1989, 107); Rorty (1981, 157-158).

[6] See Rorty (1998b, 123); Rorty (1998a, 82, 182); Rorty (1991b, 3, 27); Rorty (2007, 91, 99); Rorty (1982, 158).

[7] For a discussion of Rorty's conception of ascetic priests, see Małecki (2009, 101-115).

gendered"; *ibid.,* 72) belief that thanks to all sorts of purificatory practices[8] (this is the *ascetic* component), he can elevate himself to a level approximate to that of the supreme entity and is therefore entitled to instruct his fellow humans on how to live their lives, given their inferior mental capacities leave them earth-bound. In case this portrayal does not ring any bells, Rorty names some concrete incarnations of this intellectual figure: e. g., the Plato who "created a supersensible world from which to look down on Athens," the Augustine who "imagined a City of God from which to look down on the Dark Ages," and the Heidegger who tried to see "the West and its history of power plays from afar," "from beyond metaphysics" (*ibid.,* 70, 74). Indeed, if there is anything that links all these men to the "Hindu Sage" who "sees the Wheel of Life from afar" it is the ascetic priesthood they share (*ibid.,* 75).

Now what has *that* to do with Dickens? To begin with, even though Rorty praises him for some individual talents, Dickens interests him mainly, just as does Heidegger, as exemplifying a certain intellectual type. Namely as antitheorist, or rather as a specific kind of antitheorist called the novelist. While this classification may certainly raise some eyebrows, for Rorty it is clear that novelists are antitheorists at least in the sense that, consciously or not, they expose the ascetic priest as a hopelessly comical figure (for is it not "comical to believe that one human being is more in touch with something nonhuman than another human being"?; *ibid.,* 74; cf. *ibid.,* 73), and their *differentia specifica* lies primarily in the narrative imaginative tools they deploy in doing so.

Consider, for instance, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Are the characters of Anna Karenina and Karenin not an ultimate blow to the ethical judgments and codices that ascetic priests are so fond of (*ibid.,* 78)? Just try to decide whether, as Milan Kundera puts it, "Anna Karenina is the victim of a narrow-minded tyrant, or Karenin is the victim of an immoral woman" (*ibid.,* 75-76). You can toil for ages and you will always end up with no satisfying results, your analytical tools hanging useless and your priestly posture looking more and more pathetic. Or let us take Dickens. His masterly attention to detail, praised by Rorty and Orwell alike (*ibid.,* 81) only strengthened the novel's general potential to look at anything it touches on from multiple perspectives at the same time,[9] and made his characters (see *ibid.,* 74), such as Mr. Pickwick or Florence Dombey, successfully resist being squeezed in the neat "moral typologies" favored by ascetic priests and those faithful to them. Nay, Dickens's characters, or rather their names, possess a genuine power to *supplant* such categories in the sense that they "permit us" (or at least they permit Rorty) to label other people '"a Skimpole,' 'a Mr. Pickwick'" and the like, instead of describing them, for instance, as virtuous or sinful (*ibid.,* 78). And while Rorty believes there certainly must have been *some* antitheorists in non-Western cultures and urges us "to be on the lookout … for Chinese Sternes and Indonesian

[8] Ascetic priests "are always trying to wash the language of their respective tribes off their tongues. The ascetic priest finds this language *viscous*, in Sartre's sense. His ambition is to get above, or past, or out of, what can be said in language. His goal is always the ineffable" (Rorty 1991b, 71).

[9] Although in "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens" Rorty talks about the "novel" in general, in a later text he admits that this term is perhaps overly abstract; see Rorty (2009, 292). Some of his remarks made in still other texts clearly indicate, moreover, that he is well aware that not all works traditionally classified as novels fit into the description of the genre he gives in "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens; see (Rorty 1989, 108).

Rabelaises" (*ibid.,* 73), he has no qualms about asserting that the novel is expressive of "a complex of attitudes" that was "perhaps unique for the West," and that it is also for this reason that it would more fruitful, in terms of intercultural hermeneutics, if the future Asians and Africans kept the works of Dickens rather than of Heidegger.

Here, however, one stipulation is in order. Rorty does not want to say here that the novel is an emanation of some inner transhistorical essence of the West in a way that Heidegger's oeuvre is apparently not, and that therefore by focusing on the novel one arrives at a *truer*, if not *the* true, image of what the Western world is about. For he thinks there is no such essence (the emergence of the novel is a product of contingent factors—not some inherent inevitable teleology of the West, and one might as well imagine that the Westerners might have never invented it), and that, moreover, it is precisely the novel, with its emphasis on the historicity of human affairs, that is best equipped to teach us just that. This in turn helps us understand that when Rorty says it would be better if the future Asians and Africans preserved Dickens's rather than Heidegger's works, he does not mean it merely in the trivial sense that were they to keep the latter's, they would not learn much, apart from the fact that ascetic priests existed in the West too. What he has on his mind has more to do with his conviction that novelists such as Dickens are a better source of sociopolitical inspiration than theorists, including *social* theorists:

> …when you weigh the good and the bad the social novelists have done against the good and the bad social theorists have done, you find yourself wishing that there had been more novels and fewer theories. You wish that the leaders of successful revolutions had read fewer books which gave them general ideas and more books which gave them an ability to identify imaginatively with those whom they were to rule. When you read books like Kołakowski's history of Marxism, you understand why the Party theoretician, the man responsible for the "correct ideological line," has always been, apart from the maximum leader himself, the most feared and hated member of the Central Committee. This may also remind you that Guzmán, the leader of the quasi-Maoist Sendero Luminoso movement in Peru, wrote his dissertation on Kant (Rorty 1991b, 80).

Exaggerated though it may seem, Rorty tries to support this view with several arguments, which work, however, only on the proviso that one accepts his basic political outlook: liberalism defined as a call "for alleviation of suffering" and for securing "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (*ibid.,* 21, 74; cf. Rorty 1989, xv, 74).[10]

The first of these arguments is that paying attention to fellow humans' suffering and happiness is something that ascetic priests are not particularly well predisposed to do, because their gaze is directed primarily to the sunlit uplands above us (or in some more curious cases to the darkest, deepest chasms below; see Rorty 1991b, 74). To Rorty's mind, a glaring example of this is the fact that "under the leveling gaze of the Philosopher of Being [i.e. Heidegger] even the extermination of the Jews seem[ed] merely an event "equivalent to many others" (Habermas 1989, 453; cited in Rorty 1991b, 69) and that "Heidegger's response to the imprisonment of his Social Democratic colleagues in 1933 came down to 'Don't bother me with petty details'" (*ibid.,* 80). Novelists, on the contrary, instead of looking upward or

[10] For an account of Rorty's conception of politics, see Voparil (2006).

downward, look around them and do so in such a way as to knock us out of our usual state of "queasy agnosticism" (see Rorty 2005b, 91-94). with regard to other people's plights.

Of course, there have been *some* ascetic priests who have wanted (indeed, have been desperate) to do the same thing, yet their worship of the non-human other and their resulting preference for expressing themselves in the most dehumanized, abstract language possible, one that would be properly detached from the messiness of everyday life, has made all their efforts in this regard far less impressive than those of the novelist (see Rorty 1991b, 71; cf. 73). Still another thing is that with its emphasis on "the essential relativity of human affairs" (*ibid.,* 76),[11] its "adher[ing] to Protagoras' motto 'Two *logoi* opposing one another'" (Rorty 1998b, 118),[12] the novel envisages "a paradise of individuals in which everybody has the right to be understood but nobody has the right to rule," and that paradise, on Rorty's account, is about as good a vision of liberal utopia as it can ever get.[13]

Ascetic priests, or theorists, on the contrary, despite the utopian yearnings they often espouse, cannot produce any clear utopian vision because the world they would like us to inhabit is a non-human one, and the human language (which is the only one they have, however much they try to dehumanize it) does not allow for its satisfying depiction (see Małecki 2011b, 119-120). Related to that, a self-respecting ascetic priest simply has to conceive of the world in which we live as necessarily condemned to failure, because insufficiently compatible with the edicts of the great non-human something that rests on his altar, and the only advice he can offer to other featherless bipeds on what to do with that world is to wait until it collapses.

Until that happens, one particularly noble occupation we can engage in, or at least this is what ascetic priests recommend, is producing jeremiads and wallowing in self-hatred, constantly reminding ourselves that, for instance, our world is characterized by a "forgetfulness of Being" whose culmination is the current "age of the world picture" (see Rorty 1991b, 69; cf. Rorty 1998b, 6-7). An "age of giantism, of aesthetico-technological frenzy… in which people build 100-megaton bombs, slash down rainforests" and "try to create art more thoroughly postmodern than last year's" (Rorty 1991b, 69). That Heidegger, according to Rorty, thought this to be a perfect diagnosis of the West[14] points to the fact that sometimes the self-hatred of ascetic priests becomes localized, and that those in particular who direct it at Western civilization to which they belong tend to look to the *non*-Western world[15]

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[11] Rorty attributes this phrase to Kundera. To be exact, the latter talks about "the essential relativity of all things human" (Kundera 1986, 7).

[12] In saying that literature "adheres" to the said motto, Rorty follows Harold Bloom.

[13] "In such an utopia nobody would dream of thinking that there is something realer than pleasure or pain, or that there is a duty laid upon us which transcends the search for happiness. A democratic utopia would be a community in which tolerance and curiosity, rather than truth-seeking, are the chief intellectual virtues. … In such a community, all that is left of philosophy is the maxim of Mill's *On Liberty*, or of a Rabelaisian carnival: everybody can do what they want if they don't hurt anybody else while doing it" (Rorty 1991b, 75; cf. Rorty 2009, 291; and Rorty in Balslev (1999, 101).

[14] Rorty refers here to Heidegger (1968, 29); and Heidegger (1977, 115).

[15] Rorty complains also about "loose talk, fairly common in the West these days, about 'non-Western' ideas, as if there were one great big source of ideas called the non-West" (Rorty in Balslev 1999, 91).

for inspiration, and often idealize it as being allegedly less anthropocentric, closer to Nature, Being, Cosmos, etc., than the Westerners are (see Rorty 1991b, 67).[16]

Now, if we remember that for Rorty the aim of politics is human happiness in this, sublunar world, then I hope the above arguments make it clearer why, to his mind, novelists are a better source of sociopolitical inspiration than ascetic priests. After all, assuming that our primary concern should be other people's suffering, it would be better for us to follow those who bring us closer to fellow humans than those who draw us away from them, even if they simultaneously offer a promise of a harmonious unity with "Being" or a God. It would be better for us to listen to those who have an inspiring utopian vision of a happy coexistence between people than to those who offer disheartening jeremiads and scorn happiness as the petty ideal of the "last men" or bourgeoisie (see *ibid.,* 72, 78). This also allows us to fully understand why Rorty thinks it would better if in their intercultural studies the future Asians and Africans focused on Dickens rather than Heidegger, which eventually brings us to Rorty's general presumption that instead of capturing the essence of another culture, the goal of intercultural studies or hermeneutics should be to look if there is anything "of use" that a given culture offers and that is not offered by ours (see Rorty in Balslev 1999, 41).

Needless to say, Rorty's stance provokes a plethora of questions. For one, even if we agree that the fantasized Asians and Africans can understand Dickens the way Rorty wants them to, and that this will turn them into Rorty's fellow liberals, is there not something suspicious in calling that outcome useful? For whom would it be so? For those Asians and Africans or maybe simply for Rorty? Or maybe for the Liberals? Or maybe for the West? And is this whole message of learning from something that is "unique" (even if contingently so) to the West not a form of patronizing Eurocentrism? Would it not be "useful" (at least for the purpose of enriching the intercultural dialogue between the West and the rest of the world) to ask what non-Westerners think about it—not some future, hypothetical non-Westerns, but the real ones, our contemporaries? The answer to the latter question can hardly be other than yes, and fortunately the available literature in English allows us to learn what at least some non-Westerners think about "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens." I would like to close this paper with a discussion of the respective views of one of them, namely, Anindita Niyogi Balslev's. I chose Balslvev because not only does he formulate some doubts concerning Rorty's stance, but also turns them into questions he asks Rorty in a series of letters; questions, moreover, to which he receives answers. Taken together these questions and answers constitute a chronicle of a peculiar intercultural dialogue, and it is peculiar because concerned mainly with the possibility of such dialogues in general. Of the doubts that Balslvev expresses some are strictly related to the problems I alluded to above. He wants to know, for instance, what makes Rorty think that his brand of liberalism and its concomitant utopian vision is something non-Westerners should adopt (Balslev 1999, 63). Is Rorty's position not just an apology for a ruthless "Europeanization of the Earth" which Heidegger lamented along with some of his Indian sympathizers? (Mehta 1970, 312; cf. Rorty in Balslev 1999, 44). Can Rorty present any decisive philosophical argument in support of his views that would transcend his Western perspective?

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[16] In this context consider the so-called "notion of the Ecological Indian" (see Garrard 2004, 120-127).

In all frankness, Rorty responds that not only he does not have such an argument, but feels no need to have one (assuming that it were possible to have it, which he thinks it is not; Rorty in Balslev 1999, 69, 72). This is because Rorty believes that the liberalism he harbors, which in the future will hopefully, but not necessarily, lead to his cherished utopia, is simply the best thing any culture "has come up with so far" (Rorty 1991a, 219; Rorty in Balslev 1999, 70).[17] And if the spreading of this particular ideology turns out to be Westernization, then we need more, and not less, of it; or at least this is how Rorty sees it by his "unavoidably parochial lights" (cf. *ibid*., 283, 70).[18] This, of course, is simply a restatement of Rorty's notorious ethnocentrism, and admittedly it would seem disappointing if his conversation with Balslev led only to such an outcome. But fortunately it does not.

When prompted by Balslev to ponder on the possibility of escaping ethnocentrism Rorty actually conjures up a solution, and given that, to my knowledge, it had not appeared in any of Rorty's previous texts and that it takes up some threads from Balslev's letters, one may safely hypothesize that it was inspired by this particular intercultural exchange. Despite being its author, Rorty admits that he himself is "in no position" to put the solution to work, and when trying to clarify who could indeed do so, he points—which should come as no real surprise—to a novelist. This time, however, it is not Dickens, but Salman Rushdie, since Rorty's recipe for "avoid[ing] ethnocentrism" consists in "the blurring of the ethnic presented by works of bricolage" such as *The Satanic Verses.* As he explains:

> There is no good answer to the question of whether he [i.e. Rushdie] is an English or a Pakistani novelist, nor to whether *Shame* is a contribution to political journalism or to mythology, or *The Satanic Verses* a contribution to Islamic thought or to the novel of manners. Rushdie seems to me the sort of figure who has read a lot of books coming from the two sides of the world, and is likely to help create a culture within which intellectuals from both sides may meet and communicate (Rorty in Balslev 1999, 69).

Now, paradoxical though it may sound, the conclusion one should draw from Rorty's take on ascetic priests and novelists (assuming that one accepts it, of course) is the following: If one wants to change the world for the better, and not merely to interpret it, one should read less philosophers (be they Heidegger, Marx, or Rorty for that matter), less scholarly articles (such as this one, for instance), and more novelists, such as Rushdie or Dickens. Indeed, Rorty's lesson goes, if there is something that may prevent us from blowing ourselves up with thermonuclear bombs one day in some insane clash of civilizations it is rather novels than philosophy.[19]

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[17] In this sense, he considers "the hope of freedom and equality" that underlies this liberalism as "the West's most important legacy" (Rorty 1991b, 68); cf. Rorty 2009, 292).

[18] Note that while Rorty admits that Westernization has "caused" many "ills" (such as "the famines caused by the colonialists' elimination of earlier agricultural methods" or "the exploitation of the peasants by the landowners"), he believes that "Western ideals… may themselves be the best medicine for [those] ills" (Rorty in Balslev 1999, 93).

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