

Rohrer and Rorty: The Contingency of Desire

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As I was thinking about Patricia Rohrer's rich essay, I kept being reminded of a poem that Brenda Hillman read at Notre Dame last Fall, a poem entitled "Holding On." Perhaps this is because both Rohrer and Hillman write passionately and well about passion. While the former is mostly concerned with its role in moral education, the latter starts at a more basic, affective level: That is, the poem seems not to theorize about passion but, instead, presents us with a striking example, the care of a particular mother for her child. To reflect on passion at this level may be a good way to center a discussion of its place in democratic life. For perhaps a poem such as this one will prod us toward wonder rather than explanation, help us *stay with* passion as something mysterious and miraculous, with the wondrous yet terrifying thing that passionate desire is. Hillman writes:

So, one by one, I pull the lice from your red hair.
 One by One I try to splice them with my fingernails;

No use, they hold on
 As they were taught to. Still they glisten
 like heavenly sparks in the morning light
 of the bathroom.

I have to pull extra hard on many of them,
 Use the turquoise, fine-toothed comb
 Provided by the pharmacy.
 They hold on with all their strength:
 Each has its individual hair to love,
 Each pus-colored creature
 Has a genius plan for not leaving you.

I fling the lice out in the air then
 Thinking how the world despises them
 The other mothers of Berkeley,
 and the teachers who have not appreciated their beauty.

And though I have had to poison them again,
 I have always understood them,
 I also wanted to get that close,
 Wanted to cling to you in just that manner,
 Even go to heaven with you so we will not
 Have to address this problem of the separate you-and-me,
 Of outer and inner.

I hope we will have our same bodies there
 And the lice will have their same bodies,
 That each hopeful tear-shaped egg
 Will be allowed to cling forever, not be pulled
 Between loves' desires
 and a lesser freedom.¹

At times nothing seems to me to be more fundamental, more basic, than the sort of passion exhibited here. As Wittgenstein so famously put it: "In the beginning is the deed." Without such primitive reactions as found in Hillman's mother figure,

reactions embedded in a form of life (which for Wittgenstein and Richard Rorty take the place of “metaphysical contexts”) argument would itself be impossible. According to William James, it is only because human beings exhibit such passionate, “natural,” reactions in the first place that ethical systems are possible. In a world without valuing agents, no ethical justification of any sort would make sense.

Of course, some parents do not feel passionately about their children, one way or another. In fact, in some notorious and ever increasing cases, children are for their fathers and mothers just one nuisance among others, prime candidates for whatever trash barrel comes along. Surely we wonder about such tragic cases, cases where the expected passion is missing. But from at least one philosophical perspective, even the expected case is mysterious. Why should the barking dog ultimately be less mysterious than the dog that meows or moos? For those who have been severely depressed, any sort of passionate connection to “the Other” (or, less melodramatically, others) often appears as the ultimate, unattainable grace. Perhaps Hillman’s poem is meant, in part, to help us appreciate this grace. It is meant to help us better understand what we take on when we are allowed such love.

For example, we can learn from this poem how frightening love can be. To do this we must, however, take Hillman quite literally. In doing so we come to recognize the text, correctly or not, as a full-blooded gnostic fantasy in which a mother’s love, once granted, would sacrifice the entire world of the “separate you and me,” of “outer and inner,” in its favor. In a material world free of Charles Taylor’s overarching metaphysical and ethical contexts, any number of things may contingently come to matter. But only within a gnostic world, a world in which the material must be transcended, where contingency and individuality are abolished, can what really matters be truly enjoyed. Here a mother comes, not without suffering, to understand that the fulfillment of love requires the death of the self *as well as* of the beloved. In fact, here such an act of evisceration would be a noble thing! So there is something very disturbing here: In this mother’s world of love, one may find that one’s closest friends become head lice!

But might it not be the case that a less “literal” reading, ironic yet stable, conveys more clearly what Hillman has in mind? Might “Holding On” be better read as a Rortyan rather than as a metaphysical, a gnostic fantasy? Then its intent would be, first of all, to make the reader understand what a truly monstrous, truly unacceptable and immoral thing a gnostic mother’s love would be. Thus, it might, through indirect communication, help us to celebrate the only kind of love a Rortyan can really know, contingent love, love without metaphysical consolation, the love of one irreducible individual for another. On this reading of her poem the final contrast tells us that whatever desires we have, we will in fact have to make do with the lesser freedom and insecurity that human beings can provide for each other.

While appreciating the contingency of desire, Rorty would deny (as Hillman does, on this reading) that the consolation of metaphysics is necessary for a satisfying life. Like James, Rorty celebrates as a democratic virtue the willingness to honor our contingent passions, and thus the freedom of each individual to build a self out of whatever desires, associated beliefs and abilities are available to her.

Note that this self-creation is not “*ex nihilo*.” Instead, it involves the building of a sustainable tapestry out of the materials which contingency grants us. This idea leads some to say that for Rorty, all the self can be, minus the underlying metaphysical nature which he denies, is some such web.

But how, then, can we be sure that such selves will care for anything but themselves? I think Rohrer is right that something important is missing from Rorty’s educational scheme.² This missing thing could not, given her Rortyan sympathies, be metaphysics, at least as we tend to understand it, for example, *as system*. Rather, in evoking Soren Kierkegaard, I think she is referring to what Pierre Hadot has referred to as philosophy, metaphysics, *as a way of life*.³ In this context, pragmatism, in order to be a viable philosophy of education, must find room for the ancient imperative that self-examination, the passionate search for self-understanding, is a crucial element of democratic as well as classical education. In other words, John Dewey’s concern *with* the public, more socially involved self, and *for* democratic solidarity, must allow room for the more private, supposedly subjective, concern with “the meaning of life” as espoused by writers such as Kierkegaard and James.

How, then, would philosophy as a way of life aid our quest for a moral education in authentic passion? In a world increasingly inhabited by frozen, self-centered consumers caught within the matrix of an all-encompassing corporate machine, how might it even begin to liberate authentic love and meaning? Perhaps it could achieve a very small, but real, beginning by encouraging in adolescents an awareness of the miracle and mystery of passion itself.

Here, I believe, is where Rohrer’s concern with Rortyan irony can be useful. On my second, supposedly Rortyan reading of her poem, Hillman rejects not metaphysics (per se!) but (simply) anti-naturalistic metaphysics, just as Rorty is presumed by many to reject Plato *for* Darwin. But imagine for a moment a reading of Hillman’s (and Rorty’s) irony where the truth the ironist points towards is not simply the opposite of what one says. Instead, in a situation of unstable irony, what the writer or speaker points towards is “concealed, undeclared, undeclarable.” According to Milan Kundera, this kind of irony “[irritates.] Not because it mocks or attacks but because it denies our uncertainties by unmasking the world as an ambiguity,” as a mystery!⁴ Perhaps Hillman espouses this sort of counter-irony, an irony that countenances *neither* the metaphysics of presence *nor* mere naturalism.

If so, an education in philosophy as a way of life might help us understand, just a little, what kind of spiritual questing can be found where passion of the sort described in “Holding On” finds the edge of ethics. Is it not possible that an education where this Socratic irony, unspoiled by system, has a role might, in fact, make a contribution to the philosophical life of passion, of Kierkegaardian subjectivity? There is no question of imitating Prometheus here, of aiming at the mastery over, the control of, desire. Yet even if the gift, the grace, of true, philosophical passion cannot be earned, might we not better learn how to await the moment of its coming?

1. The poem is in Hillman’s *Bright Existence* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 25.

2. Given the necessary space, I would put in context Rohrer’s reading of Rorty’s “Education Without

Dogma.” What Rohrer puts forward as Rorty’s constructive view is, in fact, his concession to “the sad state of things” where the political right controls pre college learning. In his ideal scenario, initiation or socialization into the a democratic way of life involves fashioning persons whose very idea of citizenship (solidarity) is intimately tied to respect for and encouragement of self-creation.

3. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as A Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises From Socrates to Foucault* (New York: Blackwell, 1995). For a further discussion of the themes in Hadot that I have in mind, see Al Neiman, “Logic and Sin: Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Education at the Limits of Language,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 18 (1999): 339-49.

4. Milan Kundera, *The Art Of The Novel* (New York: Grove, 1988).