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Rorty's Legacy

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MEMORY, ETHICS AND LITERARY CUSTODIANSHIP IN THE ERA OF COMPUTATIONAL MEDIA

Mary V. Rorty
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I am so delighted to be here for this occasion--an honor to be invited, an incredible pleasure to see the work the archivists have done, turning 60 boxes of domestic and professional chaos into 25 linear feet of organized file folders, labeled, categorized, and accessible to future scholars. Neil Gross, who worked with those chaotic papers before they had been reduced to order (for his book on Rorty and the sociology of influence¹) would be envious to see them now.

And a real vicarious pleasure as well. How pleased Richard would be to be involved in this, the first wave of born-digital archives, that cutting-edge archival innovation that we are celebrating here today. In the '90s when I got involved in the philosophy of medicine and clinical ethics at the University of Virginia, I remember going home and telling Richard how many entries he had in Medline. "Really?" he said. Of course he instantly fell into his poker-faced, 'aw, shucks' persona. But I think if I were able now to tell him that his born-digital archive at UC Irvine had made *Wired* he'd laugh out loud. Quite a modern treat for a man whose academic career (as I learned from the archives) began with a paper on Matthew of Aquasparta.

I: Publish, publish, publish

I have often said about Rorty that he never had a thought that he didn't write down and publish--a habit that I'd like to recommend to the young scholars and future scholars in the audience here. Academics are sometimes socialized to believe that it has to be perfect, just right, deathless and eternal, before we can commit it to print. But if you haven't expressed those first thoughts, that you can build upon or retreat from, your intellectual trajectory remains a private amusement rather than a public good.

II: Intellectual parenting

Reading the often critical (and sometimes even rude) responses to his many published provocations, Rorty might sigh, gulp and mutter "Well, at least they spelled my name right." His decision a couple of years ago to donate his papers to the Irvine archive was in some respects of a piece with this attitude. I see it as a respect for the work--an acknowledgement that what we do, what we make, has then an existence independent of ourselves. Our idea, if we make it public, is no more our possession than are our children. We worry about its fate out in the cold cruel world, but once made, once done, it exists independently of its maker -- whether it be a tool, a work of art--or an expressed idea.

III: Ideas (like information) wanna be free

¹ Richard Rorty: *The Making of an American Philosopher* (University of Chicago, 2008).

He took authorial responsibility for his ideas--some of which he then took authorial responsibility for changing his mind about. And by his decision to donate his papers to an archive of the sort you have established at this university, he expressed his belief that ideas (like information) want to be free. The kind of animal we humans are, individually and culturally, progress, advance, by ingesting and processing the ideas abroad in our environment, as surely as we grow by ingesting food. If farming is a public good, contributing to our individual growth, so do available ideas contribute to our cultural growth.

IV: Whence intellectual property?

As by default Rorty's literary executor, I have puzzled in the last few years over what rights and responsibilities that entails. So I've been paying attention to the implications for print publications of the internet, Google scholar and Google books. Things seem to be up in the air. As an adjunct academic, I've noticed from personal experience in the classroom that it is increasingly difficult to both encourage research, and at the same time to impress upon the young the continuing importance of canons of responsible research--footnoting, attribution of sources--the difference, in short, between borrowing and stealing. And this is a corporate, as well as individual, question. If any of you in the audience are still deliberating about what career to choose, I can safely recommend intellectual property law as a growth industry. There are going to be some crucially important precedents set by cases settled in this area in the next few decades.

V: Rules for the Human Zoo

Peter Sloterdijk, German philosopher, aesthetician and pessimist, once hypothesized² that thanks to the influence of television and (his favorite bugbear) violent video games, succeeding generations would transcend (or more properly described, degenerate away from) print, from literacy--would lose the sense of themselves as participants in what Rorty has described as the continuing, transgenerational, conversation of mankind.

We, a transitional generation, tied to and created by the written cultural history of our past, cannot know, cannot imagine, what use, if any, those who follow us will make of the records that are now being moved from one medium to another. That is in their hands, not ours. Indeed, Rorty himself, in his 60 productive years, moved from lined notebooks to corrugated cardboard and typewriters, and finally (hallelujah!) to computers. I doubt, though that he would have imagined that he, antiquarian and historian, observer of his present, imaginer of a social-democratic future, would some day be memorialized in an archive titled "born digital."

He would have been pleased, I think, and grateful--as I, unprepared inheritor of his legacy, am grateful--to the collators, custodians, and creators of the digital and also the paper archives, for their skill, assiduous attention to detail, and respect for the products of the human imagination. that is a gift from the present to the future.

Thanks, Michelle and Dawn, Brian, Ali and Tae.

² In his *Elmayer Rede*, "Rules for the Human Zoo" (2000)