

Richard Rorty

Ironie und Solidarität



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I listed three aims in my statement at the beginning of the academic year: learning more German, writing some lectures which I had committed myself to giving in Cambridge, and writing some chapters of a planned book on Heidegger.

Between September and February I wrote four papers which I read as the "Clark Lectures" in Trinity College, Cambridge under the general title *Irony and Solidarity*. The first lecture drew a contrast between "ironists" (people who are in continual doubt about the vocabulary which they use for describing themselves, their situation, and their obligations — and who have no criteria for resolving such doubts) and "metaphysicians" (people who think that they already possess the correct vocabulary — one which merely needs explication or analysis or reflection). The ironist is the typical "modernist" intellectual—the person who thinks that everything depends upon the choice of terms used to describe a person or a situation, and doubts that there is any criterial super-vocabulary to which we can appeal when deciding between moral vocabularies. The metaphysician is the sort of "rationalist" intellectual who thinks that the vocabularies we use in the clinches are *not* just matters of time and chance, but are linked to something necessary and permanent — like Reality, or God, or Rationality, or something else which is ahistorical and unchangeable.

The second lecture discussed what I called *ironist theory*—what Habermas, in a recent book, has called "the philosophical discourse of moder-

nity" (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, etc.). I concluded that this sort of theory was an important literary genre — one which made possible a kind of private perfection otherwise unattainable — but had no public relevance. That is, it was irrelevant to politics, and to human solidarity.

The third and fourth lectures discussed the novels of Nabokov and those of Orwell. I chose these two because they were very different writers who nevertheless shared a single preoccupation: temptations to be cruel, and the humiliation suffered by victims of cruelty. I argued that such novelists, along with, e.g., journalists, sociologists and anthropologists, do the job which priests and philosophers have traditionally been expected to do — serving human solidarity. They do this by *making* such solidarity — forging links which bind particular types and groups of human beings together with other types and groups — rather than *discovering* a pre-existent "metaphysical" solidarity.

By making vivid the humiliation suffered by victims of cruelty, such writers tie human beings together by extending the range of the term "we". Unlike metaphysicians, who claim to discover a pre-existing "basis" for human solidarity, and unlike ironist theorists, ironist intellectuals who are *not* philosophers *do* serve public, political purposes. They do all that intellectuals can do, in an ironist age, to bring about human solidarity. So the upshot of the four lectures is the claim that literature and "narrative" social science, as opposed to philosophy or "analytic" social science, are the areas of high culture which can best serve human liberty.

After giving these lectures, I began rewriting them in order to combine them with some papers on "Contingency" which I had written in 1985, and with some additional material, into a book — to be called *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. This will be published next year. Writing the bulk of this book was my major achievement during my time at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Having done so makes me feel that it was a very profitable year indeed.

As to Heidegger, I wrote only one piece about him — the one included in this *Jahrbuch*. This piece sums up some lines of thought which I'd developed in earlier papers, but it is probably the last piece which I shall write about Heidegger. I concluded, in the course of writing it, that I had already written all that I had to say on the subject, and that it didn't amount to a book. So I abandoned my plans for a Heidegger book, and decided to publish what I had written so far as separate essays.

Much of what I wrote during this year I could have written back home, but I nevertheless profited greatly from the chance to talk to a lot of new people — Fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg, and philosophers from the Freie Universität Berlin and other German universities. The effect of this enlargement of my acquaintance with new books and people will, going on past experience, show up in future writing in unpredictable ways.