

Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor. The authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

Rorty and Dialogic Discourse

To the Editor:

By needlessly dissociating dialogics from the views of Richard Rorty, Don H. Bialostosky limits the generality of his otherwise stimulating and persuasive article "Dialogics as an Art of Discourse in Literary Criticism" (101 [1986]: 788–97). The result of a (conspicuously nondialogic) move to fence Rorty out of the dialogic community is to miss many potentially fruitful connections between the agenda of dialogics and that of social constructionist (or new-pragmatist) thought currently reevaluating the nature of theory and the necessity of "foundations."

Bialostosky objects to Rorty on the grounds that he uses the term "'conversation' in advancing something like rhetoric as against the claims of dialectic" (795n2) and uses "agreement" to mean something like compliance (796n9). A more careful reading of Rorty shows that what is at issue when he talks about agreement are the conditions required to carry on "normal discourse" within a knowledge community: the "set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it." The product of "normal discourse" is "the sort of statement that can be agreed to be true by all participants whom the other participants count as 'rational'" (Rorty 320). That is, the "agreement" invoked in "normal discourse" is the acquired fluency in the distinctive vernacular language (Bialostosky's "voice") that all the members of a particular knowledge community speak (as distinguished from the vernacular languages or voices of other such communities) and with which the members constitute that community.

Dialogics and social construction are related in both assumption and intent. Both offer an alternative to dialectical and rhetorical uses of language. Dialectic and rhetoric are forms of "normal discourse." They affirm belief in the socially exclusionary, foundational, universal nature of decision and truth. Dialogics and social construction affirm belief in the socially inclusionary, constructed, local nature of decision and truth. Dialogics explores the linguistic process of mediating among the sorts of communities that social construction understands to be the matrices of knowledge—for example, schools of literary criticism.

That is, dialogics is not a form of "normal discourse." Dialogics is a form of what Rorty calls "abnormal discourse" and what Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of*

Scientific Revolutions, calls "translating" the vernacular language of one knowledge community into the vernacular language of another. It involves, as Bialostosky puts it, "responding to . . . diverse voices," the voices of the members of diverse knowledge communities, and "inventing the responses they have not made to one another" (792). Rorty regards this linguistic mediation among communities as problematic because it is self-canceling. Invented responses that communities have not yet made to each other do not constitute a lingua franca or metalanguage; they constitute the language of yet another community that itself needs translation to and from.

Bialostosky is right, therefore, that Rorty is only cautiously optimistic about the potential efficacy of mediation. His caution originates in the doubts Kuhn sometimes expresses on the issue, doubts that are worthy of more consideration than Bialostosky seems to have given them. But Rorty's response would be considerably more optimistic than Bialostosky quite gives him credit for, because Rorty is, as he claims with considerable justification, "a left-wing Kuhnian." "Left" and "right" in this context refer to a spectrum of belief among those who assume that knowledge is local, constructed, and nonfoundational. On the left of this spectrum are those who agree with the optimistic Kuhn that constructive, or dialogic, exchange among knowledge communities—that is, reacculturation and education—may be possible. On the right are those who agree with the pessimistic Kuhn that reacculturative exchange is not possible.

Since most of those interested in this subject are teachers by profession, it is perhaps not surprising that there are at the moment more identifiable Kuhnian left-wingers than right-wingers. The community of left-wing Kuhnians includes—besides Rorty and dialogists such as Bialostosky—Jerome McGann, Clifford Geertz, John Shotter, Kenneth Gergen, David Bloor, and, on relevant political issues, Michael Ignatieff and Don Herzog. The most prominent right-wing Kuhnian in our midst is Stanley Fish. Fish's assumptions are Kuhnian, but he holds that those assumptions have no practical "consequences."

The similarity between dialogic and Kuhnian or social constructionist views may be exemplified by comparing Rorty's description of a possible social constructionist literary criticism with Bialostosky's description of possible dialogic literary symposia. These, Bialostosky says, would be "narrations or inventions of interactions open to further responses and perhaps designed to provoke them" (790). Similarly, in "Criticism without Theory (MLA Version)," in his contribution to *Against Theory*, and in "Texts and Lumps" (*NLH* 17 [1985]: 2), Rorty sug-

gests that literary criticism should adopt a nondialectical, nonrhetorical, “Homeric, narrative, style” of critical discourse that sketches contexts, puts texts in those contexts, and describes the advantages that seem to accrue from doing so, thus entering into the “unrealized conversations,” as Bialostosky puts it (792), of a variety of literary and critical texts. Not incidentally, Rorty’s one explicit contribution to a discussion of liberal education as a whole (“Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching,” *Synergos: Selected Papers from the Synergos Seminars*, vol. 2, Fairfax: George Mason UP, 1982) generalizes this view in ways that dialogists are certain to find of interest.

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Reply:

I am pleased that Kenneth A. Bruffee has taken up my invitation for further exchange on the resemblances and differences between Richard Rorty’s project and dialogics, but I am puzzled at his reading of my brief engagement with Rorty as a nondialogic attempt to “fence Rorty out of the dialogic community.” To bring Rorty’s ideas into my discussion is hardly to fence him out of it, and to distinguish those ideas from my own is not to dissociate myself from them but to try to articulate my relations with them. Rorty’s position, as I said in note 9, resembles my position more than Gadamer’s does, but there are also differences of vocabulary and emphasis between Rorty’s position and mine that Bruffee’s neopragmatist reading of dialogics does not dispel.

Bruffee assimilates rhetoric and dialectic as “forms of ‘normal discourse’” and identifies dialogics as “abnormal discourse” in Rorty’s terms, but for my purposes something gets lost in the translation—for one thing, the difference between dialectic as a truth-seeking discourse and rhetoric as choice-determining discourse. Although Rorty argues to collapse the distinction, his argument makes sense only in an intellectual context that posits it. He argues, in effect, that philosophy and science imagine a dialectical principle of truth for themselves, but in practice they operate on a rhetorical principle of choice. They cannot account philosophically or scientifically for their choice of first principles, which they choose on rhetorical grounds no better (and no worse) than the rhetorical grounds that determine other kinds of human choices. Like Rorty, I need to maintain the distinction between these kinds of discourse in order to make the case for the discursive practice I advocate.

Also like him, I cannot rest in characterizing the kind of discourse I advocate as “abnormal.” I am interested in dialogics as an art or a disciplined practice, but for “abnormal discourse” simply as abnormal discourse “there is no discipline which describes it, any more than there is a discipline devoted to the study of the unpredictable, or of ‘creativity’” (Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of*

Nature 320). Rereading Rorty on Bruffee’s urging, I find something more like what I am after in Rorty’s description of one kind of “‘edification’ . . . the ‘poetic’ activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by . . . the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions” (360). Inventing a new discipline under the new word *dialogics* with new aims distinct from those of our more familiar arts of discourse opens up just such a reinterpretation of those practices. Bakhtin, the presiding genius of this invention, shares with Rorty’s edifying philosophers the desire “to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause—wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is *not* an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described” (Rorty 370).

If Bruffee is arguing that dialogics is just a new name for the neopragmatist position, an “accurate representation of what was already there” in Rorty and others, then I must differ with him to keep open the space of incommensurability between his position and mine. Bruffee’s Kuhnian paradigm calls “normal” a highly specialized and monologized kind of discourse that for Bakhtin is the exception rather than the rule, and it calls “abnormal” that condition of dialogized heteroglossia that Bakhtin takes as the norm. Kuhn’s paradigm posits a specialized knower perfectly acculturated to a univocal knowledge community and poses the problems of reacculturating such a knower to a different knowledge community or of mediating the relations among such knowers and communities. Bakhtin, however, posits a writer confronting “the socially heteroglot multiplicity” of “names, definitions and value judgments” associated with an object of discourse in an internally divided community, and he poses the problems of such a writer’s producing a social identity in response to that multiplicity and of making that identity answerable to the others with whom it shares the world (*Dialogic Imagination* 278).

But if Bruffee is instead arguing that dialogics and neopragmatism are distinct positions that should have more to say to each other, then I invite him not just to translate dialogics into neopragmatist terms but also to consider what difference a dialogics might make to his pragmatism. I would think that the possibility of starting from a heteroglot self and community would strengthen the position of the left-wing Kuhnians against the Fishy notion of knowledge communities that the right-wingers promote. The diverse languages in which each of us is acculturated are not as incommensurable or mutually exclusive as the right-wingers claim. Rather, the mutual bearings and the competing claims of those languages give us much of what we find to say. Members of even the most rigorously disciplined knowledge communities in literary criticism do not just confine themselves to applying their paradigms to new cases but find them-