

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

Mary 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 boxes of domestic and professional chaos into 24.3 linear feet of organized file folders, labeled, categorized, and accessible to scholars. Neil Gross, who worked with those chaotic papers before they had been reduced to order, for this book on the sociology of influence, would have been envious.

And a real vicarious pleasure as well. How pleased Richard would be to be involved in this, the first wave of *born-digital* archives, the cutting edge archival technology that we are celebrating here today.

In the '90s when I got involved in the philosophy of medicine, I remember going home and telling Richard that he had entries 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 this born-digital archive at UC Irvine had made WIRED magazine, he'd laugh out loud with surprised pleasure. 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 thought 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 our 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 acknowledgment that what we do, what we make, has then an existence independent of ourselves. It is no more our possession than our children are; we worry about its fate out in the cold cruel world, but once made, once done, it exists independent of its maker, whether it be an artifact, a tool, a work of art – or an expressed idea.

III. Ideas (like information) wants to be free

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 that you have established at this university, he expressed his belief that Ideas (like information) wants 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 by ingesting food. If farming is a public good, contributing to our individual growth, so do ideas contribute to our cultural growth.

IV: Whence intellectual property?

As by default Rorty's literary executor, I have puzzled in the last few months 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. And as an adjunct academic, I've noticed from personal experience in the classroom that it's increasingly difficult both to encourage research – and 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. If any of you in the audience are still deliberating about what career to choose, I can safely recommend intellectual property law as one of the most interesting sources of case law precedents for the next few decades.

V. Rules for the Human Zoo

Peter Sloterdijk, a German philosopher, aesthete, and pessimist, once hypothesized (in his "Elmauer Rede") that thanks to the influence of television and video games, succeeding generations would transcend (or degenerate away from) print, from literacy – would lose the sense of themselves as participants in what Richard Rorty once described as the continuing 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. Rorty himself, in his lifetime, moved from lined notebooks to corrugated bond and typewriters, thence to computers. I doubt that he would have imagined, thought, that he, antiquarian, historian 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 am I, unprepared inheritor of his legacy, am grateful – to the collators, custodians, and creators of this digital archive, 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, folks.