

AT WHAT PRICE INDIVIDUALISM? THE EDUCATION OF ISABEL ARCHER

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Something terribly human yet terribly flawed about the project of Isabel Archer, the heroine of Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*, has always drawn me to this story of one individual's quest for a meaningful life. A spirited and intelligent young woman, Isabel unexpectedly inherits a fortune, freeing her particularly from the need to marry. Defying convention, as well as the aid and advice of her closest friends, Isabel pursues her dream of an "original" life with cool, confident independence. Yet after rejecting both the love of millionaire Caspar Goodwood, who embodies much of what Isabel admires, and a romantically perfect match with a handsome English lord, she chooses to marry Gilbert Osmond, an impoverished dilettante with beautiful taste. Not until too late does she discover that her wealth, rather than freeing her, has made her the victim of the fascinating but manipulative Madame Merle, mistress of Osmond and mother of his child. Madame Merle engineered the match to obtain Isabel's fortune for Osmond.

I have always admired Isabel's approach to her life while being vaguely troubled by it. Exploring the ambivalence that draws me to her story illuminated some issues of concern in American education today. One could look at *Portrait of a Lady* as a story of the fate of women, but I would argue that the story is larger than that. The struggle inherent in Isabel's quest is given form by the constraints she suffers in her feminine role -- the tension between freedom and necessity is vividly played out in the lives of women. The emphasis on individualism implicit in many of our educational goals seems to ignore the complexity of this existential tension.

Looking at the idea of the individual in the novel and in Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, I would like to explore why this idea takes the common form of an autonomous quest for self-fulfillment. What might we as individuals have to *lose* by embarking on it, and is it appropriate as an educational goal? Does self-creation necessitate detachment and isolation? What might be an alternative to this view and educational goal in terms of fulfilling and/or grappling with individual needs and dreams? In order to address these questions I will also look at a feminist critique of the individualist assumption, Naomi Scheman's "Individualism and the Objects of Psychology." Scheman questions the idea of the self on which the philosophy of mind is based.

Though the story requires a protagonist whose life options are severely limited by her sex, Isabel is, if not androgynous, sort of an amalgam of traditionally masculine and feminine conventions. But the "masculine" is in her situation, her ability to act and, most strikingly, her cool detachment from her fellow humans. This is highlighted by the "feminine" limitations of her sickly cousin Ralph Touchett, sidelined and compromised by his illness. Ralph is a spectator and Isabel is a player. This blurring of male/female roles highlights the gender issue while at the same time inviting us to see Isabel's journey as a human quest, not just an attempt to escape male domination.

Isabel coldly, grandly, confidently pursues her dream and does not let anyone hold her back. Her cool independence is not a very "feminine" ideal -- she seems to show no need but to fly. But from the start we learn that Isabel is burying something that could cost her her freedom: "deep in her soul -- it was the deepest thing there -- lay a belief that if a certain light should dawn, she could give herself completely; but this image, on the whole, was too formidable to be attractive."¹ On the most immediate level, if Isabel should meet the right man, she will let down her defenses and fall in love,

or more grimly, submit to marriage. But the vulnerability at the source of her desire for independence -- a fear of losing her self -- is not exclusively the province of the self-sacrificing woman. It is also an impetus for individualistic autonomy.

Isabel's quest for impressions of the world seems an attempt to escape from something she is afraid to confront, something Caspar Goodwood represents to her. It is not simply that she is afraid that he is the wrong man to give herself to, though she wishes to avoid the constraints of marriage. She intends to circumvent the mysterious grip he has on her by fully exercising her independence and originality. Presented by Gilbert Osmond with an opportunity that appeals to her intellect and aesthetic sense, however, she does not seem to understand all that is at stake, and is fooled into a trap of the violent conventions she was fleeing from.

Her quest makes Isabel very much an American; her faith in reason and individualism is a reflection of American Puritanism. She has much faith in her own cleverness and a theory about everything, so that Osmond scorns her "Unitarianism" (a direct though less harsh descendent of Puritanism). Her blindly naive righteousness shows the influence of both the can-do spirit and the self-importance of the Puritan worldly mission. The terror of being alone before the Puritan God is somewhat analogous to Isabel's fear of losing her self, and she confronts it as her ancestors did -- with faith in oneself and in the powers of human intellect.

Americans have a peculiar blindness to the shadows in their own culture and in their individual psyches. Nathaniel Hawthorne was among those to point this out when he described America as "a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight..."² James also makes this theme of blindness a central feature of Isabel's outlook. Discussing Madame Merle with Ralph, Isabel detects an ambivalence about her new friend's character she chooses not to pursue. "With all her love of knowledge she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners. The love of knowledge coexisted in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance."³

Isabel believes in a certain sort of transparency in her dealings, as if whatever she turns the light of her intellect upon will be purely revealed to her. She is quite sure she knows herself in this light: "she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was."⁴ She does not want to "touch the cup of experience," the "poisoned drink,"⁵ she simply wants to *see* life for herself.

This cool detachment and belief in her ability to see rational choices -- perhaps at the expense of other ways of relating to her world -- fail her more than once, and tragically in the cases of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond. Determined "to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action,"⁶ she pays no attention to indications that she may be walking into a trap set especially for her. Unfortunately her incandescent vision of herself blinds Isabel to much of what goes on around her, good and bad. Isabel's plight suggests that an education based on this perhaps misguided American faith in individualism and reason does not offer meaningful ways to confront existence.

For all its blindness Isabel's quest to make the most of her life, not really knowing what she seeks, is not an unfamiliar one. She is attempting to describe herself, to avoid being objectified by being described by someone else. In *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* Richard Rorty calls this project self-creation; it is the private pursuit of autonomy, split off from the public realm and ideas of human solidarity. He sets out to show that we have no need for a theory uniting public and private and should simply "treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable."⁷ Hinging upon this distinction between public and private, is a figure Rorty calls the "liberal ironist" -- liberal in the desire not to be cruel, ironic to the extent of knowing one's most central beliefs are contingent.

This split seems artificial to me; it illuminates an important aspect of what doomed Isabel Archer. Autonomy, according to Rorty, though not intrinsic to humans, is something certain humans aspire to attain through self-creation. Addressing the desire to embody one's private yearning for autonomy in public life and institutions, Rorty proposes a compromise: to "*privatize* the Nietzschean-Sartrean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity, in order to prevent yourself from slipping into a political attitude which will lead you to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty."⁸ Must an "attempt at authenticity and purity" be reduced to a desire for autonomy -- to be self-governing? But what is most striking about this passage to me is its clarification of what Rorty hopes to isolate in the private realm. (It also manifests the conservatism inherent in his split between public and private.) Deciding that western liberal societies are generally headed in the direction of less cruelty, he turns his will to the creation of an autonomous self in a private domain. Rather than engage with the world, he chooses to bounce off of it in self creation. But just what are the boundaries between private self and public world?

Isabel dismisses her public concerns even more easily than Rorty because of her "theory" that someone as clever as everyone thought her should "begin by getting a general impression of life," an impression "necessary to prevent mistakes, and after it should be secured she might make the unfortunate condition of others a subject of special attention."⁹ But it is not simply that she puts aside her concern for the suffering of mankind in order to "find herself." Her public/private split is manifested in her determined aloofness from everyone, even those who care the most about her.

Isabel's determined detachment is, for my purposes, analogous to Rorty's split. She lives in the world of her dreams, out of touch with society at large. More relevant (historically) for a woman, Isabel is unusually out of touch with the people she cares about. All she feels she needs is the freedom to act out her will; everything else will take care of itself.

Rorty sets out to do what Isabel did unwittingly. Delineating his intentions quite clearly, he sets aside the public sphere to go on about its liberal democratic business while reserving the private sphere for an autonomous quest to redescribe the self. Much more sharply defined than Isabel's, Rorty's private sphere does not seem to include personal/social relationships, implying that they have nothing to do with the choices one makes about how to describe oneself or how to live one's life. The project of self-creation for Rorty's liberal ironist, in fact, is an attempt to articulate alienation. "Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated" and "the ironist is the typical modern intellectual, and the only societies which give her the freedom to articulate her alienation are liberal ones."¹⁰ But what is it she is alienated from?

Rorty's liberal heroes, the "strong poet," who fears his creations and his life may not be unique, and the "utopian revolutionary," are alienated in-so-far as they are "protesting in the name of society itself against those aspects of society which are unfaithful to its own self-image."¹¹ If those aspects were reformed, would alienation end? More important perhaps, is what seems an inconsistency in Rorty's argument: if the "strong poet" is responding to societal concerns, where is the public/private split? And if not a response to social concerns, is alienation the "natural" response to an indifferent world? If the latter is the case, Rorty would seem to be suggesting that the we confront our existential alienation with social alienation. As Americans, Rorty and Isabel Archer could not but have been influenced by belonging to a society whose self-image is that of rugged individualism and whose main goal at times seems to be ensuring the freedom to be alienated.

This alienation seems to lead to resignation in the face of "public" obstacles or uncertainties, an impression supported by the liberal ironist's minimal idea of human solidarity: that the only thing that "unites her with the rest of the species is...susceptibility to pain..."¹² Liberal ironism sounds at times to be a justification of resignation to the problem of cruelty in the world, to situations that one cannot control. In the face of contingency, investing self-fulfillment in "public" ideals of human solidarity might threaten complete mastery over the process of defining one's self. By linking self-creation to "private perfection," however, Rorty seems to hope that it may be realizable apart from

the realities of everyday life, including, it seems, how one actually *lives*. Detached from the concrete experience of the surrounding world, one's final idea of one's self remains untouchable -- in a private world. Instead of negotiating between despair and hubris, Rorty proposes what sounds to me like an escape into autonomous flight.

The model for Rorty's flight is the life of the strong poet, who urgently needs to demonstrate that he is not a copy of what has existed before. The strong poet's aim is "a special form of an unconscious need everyone has" -- the need to come to terms with what chance has left us -- by describing the self in one's own terms.

Isabel's quest for transcendence, like Rorty's attempt to describe himself, becomes more like flight away from something she is afraid to confront -- an attempt to confront contingency by creating a unique self separate and safe from the vagaries of human existence. Coming to terms with chance and the fact of one's uniqueness as a person are significant concerns. However, the strong poet's need to *demonstrate* his uniqueness, a need manifested vividly in Isabel's concern with originality, does not necessarily follow. And we should not assume that the underlying aggressive competitiveness in this idea is in any sense "natural." Isabel's plight suggests that we are ignoring some crucial aspects of human fulfillment and potential by institutionalizing competitive individualism in our educational system. For those of us not interested in Rorty's model of self-creation based on the hero-genius-poet, is there an alternative?

Feminist scholars have begun to suggest another perspective. Naomi Scheman argues that the assumption that "the objects of psychology -- emotions, beliefs, intentions, virtues and vices -- attach to us singly (no matter how socially we may acquire them) is...a piece of ideology."¹³ Individualism in this sense is not "natural" or inevitable, but it has become central to our idea of freedom. Not surprisingly, this is an ideology that contributes to the efficient functioning of a patriarchal, capitalist society. Her aim is to explain why this individualist assumption underlies contemporary philosophical accounts.

Scheman's provides two explanations as to why the individualist assumption in the philosophy of mind has taken hold of us to such a great extent. The first explores the link between the individualist assumption and the idea of the self in the ideology of liberal individualism. Scheman argues that by definition an ideology is based on the assumed naturalness of its components. In this case, it seems natural to believe that humans exist fundamentally as separate entities. We have needs, preferences, abilities, pleasures that attach to us as individuals and these must be respected as belonging to us by any social order. Classic liberal societies aim to maximize the right of each member to self-definition, while not discriminating among these various ideas of the good life. But Scheman points out that claiming neutrality among views of how to live, is in fact taking a stance against other views, for instance, communitarian ideals. Further, since the social theory of liberalism is based on an "asocial" foundation -- that of separate, self-defining individuals -- it is incompatible with the view of an indeterminate, socially constituted self.

Scheman's second explanation connects the individualist self to male psychosexual development. Considering child-rearing practices as analyzed by Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow, she argues that the liberal idea of the autonomous individual is the defensive response of males who have been raised by women. An infant has a primary identification with his or her mother, and the formation of identity develops out of that relationship. Since society draws such sharp gender distinctions, a boy's relationship with his mother is marked by his sense of difference from her. To achieve selfhood, then, a boy must define himself in terms of separation and difference, defensively protecting his sense of self by emphasizing what is distinct about him.¹⁴ I find this a strikingly similar description of the process of self-creation through one-upmanship that Rorty describes so unironically in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*.

Scheman also points out how moral development is influenced by child-rearing patterns. Because fathers are for the most part absent, boys are urged to identify with a distant and relatively abstract

figure who metes out punishment or approval. The boy's superego is the internalization of his absent father's authority. Scheman argues that it is the impersonality of this superego that predisposes males to accept the dominance of abstract notions of objective and universalizable morality. Rorty's anti-foundationalism vindicates him from this charge, at least as far as his philosophizing goes. However, Scheman also claims that "masculine" morality is more concerned with abstract characterizations of interpersonal relationships, than with concrete relations between particular people. Is it possible that Rorty's failure to consider interpersonal relationships -- or to lump them implicitly into the "public" side of the split -- is due to such a tendency toward abstraction?

Scheman's view of child development emphasizes socially and historically contingent factors in the formation of personhood, as did Freud's theory, one of the necessary precursors to Rorty's notion of the "ironist." Rorty would conceivably find it compatible with his own views of the self, but it would seem nearly impossible to take such a view in stride and continue to believe in the figure of the liberal ironist. Men brought up in patriarchal societies quite naturally tend to adopt the individualist stance upon which the dominant political and economic ideology is based. Moreover, we tend to accept the model for male psychic and moral development as if it were that of all persons, leading us to see the development of women as truncated and not normal. The emphasis on individualism, separation and difference then becomes natural. Promoting this ideological perspective in our schools and curriculum hurts not only females forced into this model, but males who are limited to it.

There are several episodes that illustrate Isabel's "masculine" tendency to abstract interpersonal relationships, but one of the most notable is her professed reason for returning to Pansy -- and Osmond -- at the end of the novel. What seems to take her back is simply that she promised Pansy she would return (a promise she cannot even remember why she made), and not that she felt her stepdaughter's obviously desperate need. Against the abstraction of Isabel's promise, her friend Henrietta advises Isabel not to return, knowing her happiness is at stake. Isabel is also curiously "principled," to my mind, about obeying her husband's wishes. First, she refuses to allow her stepdaughter Pansy to meet with her anxious beau. But Isabel even further denies her self and those she cares about when, at Osmond's request, she encourages the union of her own former suitor Lord Warburton and the unfortunate Pansy. When her husband's demands conflict with what she knows is right, Isabel chooses -- painfully -- abstract duty, thus proving herself morally unassailable as a good wife.

The tendency toward abstraction in the male model of individualism helps to explain Isabel's negative and very revealing reaction to the news that her friend is going to marry:

Henrietta, after all, had confessed herself human and feminine, Henrietta whom she had hitherto regarded as a light keen flame, a disembodied voice. It was a disappointment to find she had personal susceptibilities, that she was subject to common passions, and that her intimacy with Mr. Bantling had not been completely original.¹⁵

Particularly interesting is the notion that Henrietta has not just given in to feminine emotions; rather, this is a "human and feminine" choice she has made. This suggests that to be truly human (whatever that means) may include being more feminine, or incorporating "feminine" concerns. Isabel has a vision of Henrietta as a disembodied flame -- the light of reason without a body, the masculine half of the classic dualism that separates mind/male/reason from body/female/emotion. She seems to see her own wished for ideal self in the abstract, detached, rational being she envisions her friend to be. Henrietta shows she is much more complicated than that, much more human.

When Isabel is tired of "observing" life in all her travels, she chooses to surrender her own life willingly to Osmond in marriage, even "with a kind of humility." She was responding to "a need the answer to which brushed away numberless questions, yet gratified infinite desires."¹⁶ Was her need for self-definition answered by choosing to define herself as Osmond's tasteful wife? Or was she

responding to a desire to connect with another human life? To give herself? Perhaps these issues are not so easily separated, and the "numberless questions" not so easily brushed away.

To be the best wife possible, Isabel knew she would have to submit to her husband in virtually all ways, to lose herself. Certainly Osmond expected that she would have no self and would serve merely to reflect him. She seems, in part, to have chosen him as a husband because she could do something for him -- provide him with a fortune to gratify his excellent taste. Caspar Goodwood, however, is the only person to whom Isabel consistently responds on an emotional level and perhaps she realized that he would demand more than her money -- would demand some of her self -- to satisfy him, "but this image on the whole, was too formidable to be attractive." Caspar is the factor that most threatens her freedom, and the threat is vulnerability and loss of control. It is a turning point, a truly human moment, when she allows Caspar to feel sorry for her, and in so doing admits a vulnerability that connects her to his pain. But outside of the limitations of 19th-century life and patriarchal structures in general, is it possible to respond to human needs without losing one's self?

I admire both Isabel's and Rorty's attempts to describe themselves, and tend to agree with Rorty that making these sorts of choices is part of the substance of being human. I have tried to show, however, how much these two trajectories -- linked, it seems to me, by an attempt at a sort of transcendent flight of individualism or originality -- spring in part from factors that are taken for granted but are not essential. The need for autonomy is shaped by a variety of cultural factors; it is not a natural point of departure. Arguing that attempts to link public and private concerns are artificial and unnecessary, Rorty claims that autonomy, and thus self-creation, are "at odds with feelings of solidarity." The opposition he sets up between self-creation and solidarity, however, seems no more essential than does a grand theory uniting the two.

Considering the limits of the individualistic view, should we foster self-creation as an educational goal? Is there a way to encourage definition of the self without assuming the desirability (or possibility) of autonomy, or the necessity of competition?

There are at least two ways in which Rorty's project might become less "individualistic," thus providing a creative alternative to the model of the strong poet. The first thing is that though the self-creation of geniuses may involve opposition to society, the significance of this relationship might be recast as a question of orientation, rather than of opposition or escape. The idea of *autonomous* self-creation (acknowledging, as Rorty does, all the social, psychological, cultural, physical contingencies that have a part in shaping our personhood) is perhaps an illusion. Self-creation might more realistically (and, I would argue, more fruitfully) be seen as an ongoing process of individuation rather than a definitive cutting of ties.

The second is that the importance of self-creation should not be limited to intellectuals attempting poetic autonomy. Not only are there many ways to respond creatively to the world, there are many types of genius. Perhaps there is genius in connecting and individualism without autonomy. There is a sort of connecting that is not just emotional or maternal, though it could include those, but also intellectual and imaginative.

This story of a woman -- whose situation exemplifies the conflict between the desire to soar and the bonds of human connection and social convention -- offers a glimpse of the existential forces that seem to conspire to prevent freedom or autonomous self-creation for all men and women. Operating on an assumption of "human nature" that is not natural, American education promotes the desirability of the individualistic quest -- the need to prove oneself different (and "better than" through competition) -- and the power of autonomy. These culturally produced traits of (mainly masculine) personhood should not be allowed to define a multitude of diverse and complex selves -- male or female. Alternative ideas of self-creation -- perhaps redirecting some energy from the "self" in the direction of "creation" -- should have an important place in the educational process.

Finally, we should consider whether individualism as a philosophy of education not only inhibits the understanding of our own dreams and desires but works against our efforts to fulfill them. We should not be trying to free ourselves from what is holding us back if part of what holds us back is what we love. Perhaps one approach is an education that does not encourage escape from the tensions of existence -- the unanswerable questions -- but allows exploration of how these questions can enrich our lives with intriguing complications.

¹ Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 56.

² Carl Degler, *Out of the Past* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 168, citing Nathaniel Hawthorne's, Introduction to *The Marble Faun*.

³ James, 173.

⁴ James, 54.

⁵ James, 134.

⁶ James, 54.

⁷ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xv.

⁸ Rorty, 65.

⁹ James, 56.

¹⁰ Rorty, 88-9.

¹¹ Rorty, 66.

¹² Rorty, 92.

¹³ Naomi Scheman, "Individualism and the Objects of Psychology," in *Discovering Reality*, eds. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Holland: Reidel, 1983), 226.

¹⁴ Scheman, 235.

¹⁵ James, 470.

¹⁶ James, 297.