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The Politics of Reading

Criticism's recent political turn has unfortunately driven

out discussion of the reading process. The prevailing view seems

to be either that reading-theory regards meaning-creation as a

transcendental, ahistorical phenomenon (the invariant structure

of the "implied reader"), or that analysis of reading privileges

the private sphere when there are more important issues at stake

in the larger social arena. These assumptions are questionable,

however, precisely because of the way contemporary criticism has

redefined "politics." In our post-structuralist era, most would

agree with Lyotard that "the observable social bond is composed

of language moves" (Postmodern Condition 11). Consequently (and

as the best reading theorists always knew), reading is not the

private activity of an isolated consciousness but a deployment of

conventions for understanding which help to define the reader's

social being. After Foucault, it is impossible to see a

contradiction between epistemology and politics because of the

intimate, ubiquitous relation between knowledge and power.
Reading would seem to be a crucial place for studying how, in his
words, "truth" is "produced only by virtue of multiple forms of
constraint"--how, paradoxically, the rules for truth which define
"discursive regimes" are both coercive and creative ("Truth"
131). A political theory of reading should regard the construal
of texts as a play of more than merely personal beliefs which can
reproduce or call into question the ways of seeing instituted and
enforced by a culture's rules for meaning-creation.

How conventions and beliefs acquire, sustain, or lose
authority might not seem a centrally "political" topic to the
sort of dualistic thinking which divides the world into ideal and
material realms--superstructure and base, consciousness and life,
art and society--and grants priority to the latter. A legacy of
Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, such dualism is evident in
Marcuse's claim that "art cannot change the world, but it can
contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men
and women who could change the world" (32-33). Reading is
thereby seen as at most an antechamber to the place where the
real action is. As Susan Suleiman argues, however, "one should .
. . not belittle the value of symbolic interventions in the realm
of the real": "language is part of the world (the 'real world')
and plays a non-negligible part in shaping both our perception of
it and our actions in it" (197). Foucault rightly notes that
"there are no machines of freedom" ("Space" 247). Altering how
people read will not automatically turn society upside down. But

the epistemological questions at stake in reading--what beliefs are entitled to legitimacy, for example, and what assumptions about identity should prevail--are not merely preconditions to politics but are themselves substantive issues with material consequences for social relations. For many of the most important recent political theories--those having to do with gender, race, ethnicity, gay and lesbian identity, multi-culturalism, post-colonialism, and even ecology--how epistemological categories are established and maintained is not an idealistic side-issue but a site of crucial contestation.

Rather than seeing reading as an epiphenomenon, at most a prelude to the real cultural work which occurs elsewhere, we should regard it as one political site among others, not perhaps the most decisive one but not trivial either, with its own particular advantages and drawbacks. It is not the fulcrum on which the world can be moved (there is none). But because of what Wayne Booth calls its "relatively cost-free offer of trial runs" (485), reading can be a staging ground for exposing, questioning, and experimenting with habitual ways of knowing the world and being toward others which otherwise may remain cloaked in the obscuring and therefore all the more coercive garb of normalcy.

I want to consider in detail how a particular conception of the reading process might foster "postmodern democracy." By this term I have in mind the need in our irreducibly multifarious world to create forms of community which allow us to negotiate

our differences without assuming a prior common ground or an
ultimately attainable consensus. In order to have mutually
beneficial relations between incompatible cultural conventions
and incommensurable beliefs, we need conditions and practices
conducive to what Habermas calls "communicative rationality,"
where no force operates other than "the unforced force of the
better argument" (Modernity 107)--but a genuinely heterogeneous
rationality which does not assume, as he does, that communication
will or should result in agreement.[1] "Postmodern democracy" has
at least two requirements which reading can help to stage, model,
and habitualize: 1) reciprocal, non-reified acknowledgment of
the meaning-creating capacities of others with perhaps radically
different assumptions, experiences, desires, and interests; and
2) ironic recognition of the contingency and contestability of
the conventions and beliefs on the basis of which one must
nevertheless act despite their inability to justify themselves.

I want to explore the first point by inserting an early,
pioneering political theorist of reading, Jean-Paul Sartre, into
the debate between Habermas and Lyotard over the politics of
legitimation.[2] I will then develop the second point by
analyzing the implications for a politics of reading of the
arguments of some important neo-liberal thinkers (especially
Richard Rorty but also Ronald Dworkin and Judith Shklar). What I
hope will emerge is a view of reading as a paradoxical,
democratic practice--a form of life which might make possible the
reciprocally enhancing interaction of incompatible forms of life.

1. Reading and Non-Consensual Reciprocity

In the pivotal chapter "Why Write?" of his deservedly classic text What Is Literature?, Sartre attempts to derive a political imperative from a description of the reading process through a bold if finally flawed argument which is illuminating, I think, precisely because of the difficulties which undermine it. His memorable, controversial conclusion--that it is not "possible to write a good novel in praise of anti-Semitism" (68) --is less interesting than the reasoning through which he reaches it. His crucial claim is both political and epistemological: "the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work" (54). According to Sartre, "the literary object is a peculiar top which exists only in movement" (50). More than the words on the page, the work comes into being only through the reader's active participation, which is "free" in at least two senses: it depends on choices and decisions which cannot be entirely determined in advance, and it consequently entails acts of transcendence, "a continual exceeding of the written thing" (53) by filling in gaps and making connections which are not all prescribed. Because reading requires freedom for the very production of meaning, Sartre concludes that writers subvert the epistemological conditions necessary for their works to exist if they deny freedom either in their style (by seeking to overwhelm or coerce the reader) or in their themes: "It would be inconceivable that . . . the reader could enjoy his freedom while reading a work which approves or accepts or simply abstains

from condemning the subjection of man by man" (67). Sartre concludes: "the writer, a free man addressing free men, has only one subject--freedom" (68).[3] In his view, the political essence of art follows from the essence of the reading process.

One of the first things one wants to do now, more than forty-five years after Sartre wrote, is to quietly revise his sexist word-choice. More than simply a change in what constitutes good manners, however, the question of who is left out by patriarchal language suggests that one man's appeal to freedom might be another person's (perhaps woman's) subjection. "Freedom" is not an absolute but is a socially contestable value, and not all visions of freedom are mutually compatible. Sartre assumes that every appeal to freedom will be consistent with all others, but antagonistic, incommensurable ideals of emancipation can be projected by different communities with opposing assumptions about life. The conflict of interpretations is in part a contest about what emancipation might look like (or whether it is possible at all). Sartre is blinded by what Lyotard calls the "grand narrative of emancipation" which tells the story of human history as a synthetic, teleological realization of liberty (see Postmodern Condition 31-37). A more radical conception of freedom would recognize itself in the diversity of language games and in their ongoing transformation and contestation through the invention of new moves--the heterogeneity which leads Lyotard to claim that "consensus is a horizon that is never reached" (Postmodern Condition 61). The

multiplicity of ways of reading is itself a sign of freedom, but
the consequent contingency of "freedom" as a value makes reading
and writing for freedom a contestable practice which will vary
according to one's beliefs about human being and social life.

Part of what this flaw in Sartre's argument suggests is that
one cannot derive norms from experience through an impartial
description because how experience is interpreted depends on the
norms one brings to bear on it. This circle also vitiates
Habermas's attempt to define "communicative rationality" by
appealing to "the suppositions of rationality inherent in
ordinary communicative practice," standards implicit in "the
normative content of action oriented to mutual understanding"
(Modernity 76). Language, communication, and meaning are
essentially contested categories, however, which are susceptible
to widely diverging conceptions of what constitutes good
practice. Habermas's twin assumptions, first, that "participants
. . . can act communicatively only under the presupposition of
intersubjectively identical ascriptions of meaning" and, second,
that "reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human
speech" are neither neutral nor self-evident (Modernity 198;
Communicative Action 287). From Wittgenstein to Lyotard and
Derrida, it is possible to see much more productive value in
difference and disagreement both in the means and the ends of
linguistic exchange than Habermas does. But this circle does not
prevent one from arguing for a particular conception of
communication--or of reading--and then trying to justify it as a

value worth holding for various reasons, including its
consequences for how it might shape our experience. Conceiving
of reading as a heterogeneous, variable activity can make it
desirable to argue for certain norms which the more monistic
Sartre and Habermas also advocate, even if they disguise this
advocacy behind claims that their values are not contingencies
but requirements inherent in the structure of communication.

One such norm is reciprocity. Because of the recognition a
writer must extend to the reader's capacities for meaning-
creation, Sartre calls reading "an exercise in generosity":
"each one trusts the other; each one counts on the other, demands
of the other as much as he demands of himself" (Literature 58,
61). This description of writing and reading as acts of mutual
recognition resonates with Habermas's sense of reasoned exchange
as a non-objectifying, non-coercive practice based on the
assumption of equality. These visions of reciprocity are worth
analyzing further precisely because the proper structure of
reading and communication is less self-evidently derivable from
experience than either Sartre or Habermas assumes.

Sartre's description of reading as a process of reciprocal
recognition portrays an ideally non-coercive relation, but it
also raises important questions about the role of power and
constraint in meaning-creation and communicative interaction.
Sartre describes reading as "a dialectical going-and-coming," an
open-ended to-and-fro:

when I read, I make demands; if my demands are met, what I

am then reading provokes me to demand more of the author,
which means to demand of the author that he demand more of
me. And, vice versa, the author's demand is that I carry my
demands to the highest pitch. Thus, my freedom, by
revealing itself, reveals the freedom of the other.

(Literature 62)

This mutual disclosure of one another's meaning-creating powers
suggests a sort of reciprocally enhancing meeting of
subjectivities which runs counter to Sartre's analysis of the
"look of the Other" in Being and Nothingness, where he argues
that the other's gaze threatens to objectify and take power over
me because my self-for-myself is unrecognizable beneath my self-
for-others (see 340-400). The rare gift of reading would thus
seem to be its staging of a reciprocal exchange between
subjectivities at the level of their being-for-themselves which
suspends the mutual objectification of gazes locked in a battle
for power. The question would then be whether the kind of non-
coercive, non-objectifying interaction modelled in reading could
be extended to other spheres of existence, including everyday
communicative interaction.

Power is also at work in reading, however, as Sartre
acknowledges in Saint Genet. There he describes how Genet fights
back against others' objectifications of him by "set[ting]
fascinating traps for other freedoms" through the rhetorical
games he plays with the reader, who in the experience of being
manipulated, teased, enticed, and frustrated by the text

"recognizes Genet's freedom and knows that he is not recognized by Genet" (555, 552). This is a particular instance of the general problem of whether what Richard Poirier calls "the performing self" of the author in the text also facilitates the reader's powers or, vampire-like, seeks ascendancy at the reader's expense. The text's quest for power can also take less self-serving but no less problematic forms. For example, as Booth argues, "all narratives are 'didactic'" because "all works do teach or at least try to"--attempting to mold the reader's character or influence his or her beliefs (151-52).[4] The pedagogical and rhetorical ambitions of a text harbor a will-to-power in their very desire to change the recipient. Whether the text's intentions are benevolent or not, the reciprocity of reading would seem to stand in necessary conflict with the deployment of rhetorical power. Sartre recognizes this dilemma by describing reading as an exchange of "demands"--with the author's will-to-power parried and countered by the reader's reciprocal assertion of the right to set the terms of the encounter. Power is thereby not suspended in reading but made mutual in an endless to-and-fro of claims on the other, a dance in which each partner takes turns leading.

The metaphor of the dance suggests a general paradox of power as it pertains to reading. As Foucault argues, power can be both repressive and productive (and is often both at once): "it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but . . . it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms

knowledge, produces discourse" ("Truth" 119). If reading entails
at least a partial submission to the rules of the games played by
the text, these restrictions and constraints are not merely
dominating and limiting but also make possible the production of
meaning. Or at least that is the reader's wager in accepting a
text's offer to play. A dilemma facing the reader, however, is
the same as that posed by any discursive regime. How can one
decide whether any particular rules for "truth" are more coercive
or enabling, more restrictive or constructive, more objectifying
or enhancing? Further, when one is in the middle of playing the
game (or being played by it), does one even have the power to
pose this question? These are issues which cannot be resolved
absolutely or in the abstract, apart from a specific examination
of concrete practices (and sometimes they cannot be raised at
all).

The problem, as Habermas puts it, is how "to discriminate
between a power that _deserves_ to be esteemed and one that
deserves to be devalued" (_Modernity_ 125; original emphasis).
This is only a problem because of the inherent duality of
discursive rules as both coercive and creative, restrictive and
productive, a threat to the subject's meaning-making capacities
but also their condition of possibility. The very difficulty of
deciding Habermas's question, however, gives value to reading as
an arena in which this paradox of power can be staged, played
with, and explored. An advantage of reading is not only that
readers can withdraw assent from textual regimes more easily than

they often can in daily life, but also that the modelling

capacities of reading might allow them to examine, test, and

criticize ratios of repression and production which they are

perhaps too caught up by to understand or question in everyday

communicative practice.

One criterion in making the discrimination Habermas calls

for might be mutual recognition. Genet would therefore deserve

the reader's suspicion and run the risk of the withdrawal of

assent, even if his own experience of refused mutuality had set

his games in motion in the first place. Reciprocity is not

outside the realm of power, however. Lyotard suggests as much

when he claims that "to speak is to fight, in the sense of

playing"--a claim he qualifies in an important way: "This does

not necessarily mean that one plays in order to win. A move can

be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention" (Postmodern

Condition 10). Wolfgang Iser distinguishes similarly between

play "as achieving victory (establishing meaning) or as

maintaining freeplay (keeping meaning open-ended)." The former

kind of play mobilizes the rhetorical power which seeks to

influence or change the reader. But power is also involved in

play as the perpetual motion of differences--what Iser calls the

"ever-decentering movement," the continual "oscillation, or to-

and-fro movement, [which] is basic to play" (Prospecting 252,

255).[5] According to Iser, this kind of play typically

establishes boundaries in order to transgress them, setting up

new oppositions which make possible new moves and which invite

new border-crossings, creating new worlds to be toppled and overturned so that yet other worlds can be constructed (see Fictive and Imaginary 69-86). The sort of decentering freeplay which seems more reciprocal and open-ended than attempts to achieve victory is itself an unsettled and unsettling process which can disrupt the relation between the players.

The creativity of transgression illustrates Nietzsche's contention that form-giving requires both negation and affirmation--or, in his striking phrase: "If a temple is to be erected, a temple must be destroyed" (95). Destruction, assault, and violence seem inherent in the crossing of boundaries and the upsetting of existing structures which make possible new combinations of difference, new modes of play. Lyotard usefully distinguishes between "two different kinds of 'progress' in knowledge: one corresponds to a new move (a new argument) within the established rules; the other, to the invention of new rules, in other words, a change to a new game." This latter kind of innovation is necessarily disruptive, he argues: "the stronger the 'move,' the more likely it is to be denied the minimum consensus, precisely because it changes the rules of the game upon which consensus had been based" (Postmodern Condition 43, 63).

Lyotard criticizes Habermas's notion of "communicative rationality" not only because "consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games" but also because "invention is always born of dissension" (Postmodern Condition xxv; also see

"Notes on Legitimation"). Lyotard's recognition of the violence
and will-to-power of innovation, however, leads him to return to .
the question of "justice" after he has rejected the value of
agreement. How, he asks, can we "arrive at an idea and practice
of justice that is not linked to that of consensus"?
Interestingly, despite his critique of communal assent as a
repressive, monistic norm, his two requirements for "justice"
both reinstate the principle of reciprocity: first, "a
renunciation of terror," defined as "eliminating, or threatening
to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with
him," and second, the stipulation that "any consensus on the
rules defining a game and the 'moves' playable within it must be
local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and
subject to eventual cancellation" (Postmodern Condition 66, 63).
Lyotard's very critique of consensus thus leads him to reaffirm
the importance of reciprocity because mutual recognition is
necessary to make possible the innovative, transgressive sorts of
play he values.

Reciprocal acknowledgment and ever-renewed negotiation
between the players are required to keep the play-space intact
and to preserve the possibility of productive interaction between
heterogeneous ways of playing. But the to-and-fro of reciprocity
is not the same as agreement. As Foucault argues, "one must not
be for consensuality, but one must be against nonconsensuality"
("Politics" 379). Where "consensuality" implies a restrictive
insistence on identity and homogeneity, refusing

"nonconsensuality" insists on mutual recognition so that
differences may play. As a norm for heterogeneous, socially
useful meaning-creation, non-consensual reciprocity--a non-
reified mutuality without the assumption of prior or ultimate
agreement--makes possible the ongoing generation and
communication of differences, whether by obeying or transgressing
the rules.

One value of reading is that it can be practiced in such a
way as to stage this kind of non-consensual reciprocity. This is
a political value, I would argue, because the social bond staged
in non-consensual, non-objectifying, mutually transformative
interactions with texts could model behaviors which would be
useful in other social interactions. The sort of reading I have
in mind would differ from either a conservative reverence of
canonical authority or a radical unmasking of textual false
consciousness. Reading guided by the norm of non-consensual
reciprocity would not assume that the outcome should be agreement
with the values of the canonical text (nor would it assume that
the values of worthwhile texts were mutually compatible).
Rather, an assumption of parity between the worlds of text and
reader would mean that the authority of the conventions governing
both were at play and at risk. Reading would thereby entail the
ongoing staging of Habermas's question about which rules for
meaning-creation deserve credence without deciding it in advance
in favor of either text or reader--or without ever deciding it
once and for all inasmuch as non-consensual reciprocity grants

all parties the ongoing authority to propose new rules and
challenge existing ones. This kind of reading would thus enact
Sartre's call for a "constant renewal of frameworks, and the
continuous overthrowing of order once it tends to congeal"
(Literature 139).

The perpetual questioning of authority implied by reading as
a practice of non-consensual reciprocity is not the same,
however, as the hermeneutics of suspicion. Unmasking a text's
deceptions can be an assertion of power which denies mutuality by
refusing to hear the claim it would make on us. Locating a
work's primary worldly entanglements in its originating context
can be a way of refusing to recognize its attempt to speak across
historical or cultural distance, thereby preventing our different
worlds from engaging one another. The need to grant the work a
hearing does not mean, however, that one must assent to its
claims or even, finally, take them at face value. As the example
of Genet once again suggests, unmasking a text's strategies for
asserting power over the reader can be a means of maintaining
reciprocity, especially (but not only) when it refuses us the
recognition it demands. As in other social relations, so in
reading, it is not always clear when to believe or suspect one's
interlocutor, if only because believing and doubting provide
their own proofs. It is sometimes possible, however, to
recognize what Gadamer calls a "Spielverderber" (or spoil-sport),
whose actions thwart rather than facilitate the playing of the
game (92). Unmasking strategies that disadvantage or marginalize

other players, exploiting their good faith or restricting their
capacities, would be a move not only authorized but even required
by non-consensual reciprocity. It can therefore provide a
standard of justice against which to measure a text's--or any
interlocutor's or fellow citizen's--claims, even if it cannot
always tell us how to evaluate them.

2.   Reading and the Negotiation of Differences

     As a democratic value, non-consensual reciprocity is not an
end in itself but a means to facilitating the mutually beneficial
interaction of differences. Once again reading can stage certain
behaviors which might model and encourage such exchange.
Creating and maintaining spaces in which different forms of life
with incompatible values and beliefs can productively interact is
a non-trivial challenge across a variety of social settings--from
the classroom and academic department where the "culture wars"
are sometimes fought with alarming ferocity, to the national
arena (not only in the U.S. but also in many other places) where
ethnic and other kinds of diversity all too often lead to
reciprocal demonization instead of multicultural pastiche, or to
the international scene where, in our fluid post-Cold-War, post-
colonial situation, the collapse of previously stabilizing
oppositions has resulted in a proliferation of conflicts.
Reading cannot of course solve all of these problems. But a
particular practice of reading could be socially useful in the
current climate by promoting the paradoxical and therefore

precarious behaviors required for the ongoing negotiation of
differences--a negotiation which is not only civil and non-
violent but mutually worthwhile and potentially transformative.

A threat to the productive exchange of differences is the
tendency of any epistemological community to demonize and
scapegoat the Other in defensive rejection of the recognition of
the contingency of its own values and beliefs (see Girard). This
tendency is exacerbated by the mutually reinforcing dangers of
habitualization and homogeneity--how assumptions acted on again
and again become naturalized and how beliefs shared
unquestionably take on the status of absolutes. A practice of
reading as a non-consensual engagement with differences can
counteract this normalization. The practice I have in mind would
stress three dimensions of the reading process: 1) how reading
can stage the paradox, constitutive of democracy, that there can
be many forms of life with equal dignity and worth; 2) how
reading can facilitate the imagination of change by suggesting
that the world could be otherwise; 3) how reading can thereby
encourage the recognition of the contingency of the very beliefs
one sets in motion to make the text cohere.

What I am suggesting about reading does not have to happen.
Reading does not automatically make better citizens through its
essential epistemological processes (if it did, English
departments would be less politically self-destructive places
than they often are). Some interpretive methods facilitate more
than others do the playful openness to multiplicity and

cultivation of contingency I have in mind. But these attitudes are themselves compatible with a variety of hermeneutic strategies, not just one particular set of presuppositions and procedures. They are democratically open to heterogeneity because they can be enacted in varying ways by readers with different assumptions, values, and conventions.

The reading practice I am proposing would stage the posture which Richard Rorty calls "liberal irony" but would confront more fully and directly some crucial difficulties which he tries to minimize or evade. According to Rorty, a liberal ironist "faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires." Liberal irony recognizes that "the idea that the world decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense", that as a result a variety of not necessarily mutually compatible vocabularies or interpretive frameworks can perform effectively, and that the most we can ever have is "a circular justification of our practices, a justification which makes one feature of our culture look good by citing still another." Liberal ironists therefore combine "commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment"--recognizing the lack of necessity of "their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community" but nevertheless "remain[ing] faithful to those consciences" (Contingency xv, 5, 57, 61, 46). The liberal ironist's combination of contingency and commitment is a contradictory practice which is easier to describe than to follow. Acting on

one's beliefs tends to undercut professions of their contingency by habitualizing and naturalizing them, but keeping their lack of justification continually in view may inhibit action and engagement. The defining contradiction of liberal irony makes it precarious, susceptible to falling into either paralyzed skepticism or smug complacency if the tension lapses between doubting one's beliefs and nevertheless believing them.[6]

Reading can help to stage and model the paradoxical task of combining contingency and commitment because of the contradictory status of our beliefs when we read. In order to make the parts of a text cohere, we need to project hypotheses about the configurations they form, guesses about textual patterns which we generate from our more enduring, deeply held presuppositions about literature, language, and life (see my Conflicting Readings 1-19). The paradox of reading is that, by invoking our own beliefs in this way, we make another world take shape which may be based on assumptions and interests very different from and perhaps even antagonistic to the ones we hold. By the very deployment of our own beliefs and values, we may create a world which demonstrates their relativity and challenges their ascendancy. Again, this does not have to happen; it is very easy for the hermeneutic circle to remain closed, with our presuppositions confirming themselves by finding only what they seek. But if we read for non-consensual reciprocity, directed by an ideal of dialogue as mutual recognition without the necessity of agreement, then the hypotheses about a work's configurations

which we project can allow otherness to speak through beliefs it may question, at the very least by demonstrating their contingency. Reading would then entail precisely the paradox characteristic of "liberal irony" in that we concretize the different assumptions, values, and interests which make up the text's world by acting on conventions and commitments whose relativity the process of reading at the same time reveals. This contradiction of reading can make it an unsettling practice that can lead to the overturning of our beliefs or to their transformation as the possibility of new combinations of attitudes are disclosed.

This doubling of worlds in reading differs from epistemological models based on identification. For example, Martha Nussbaum argues that "the novel makes us acknowledge the equal humanity of members of social classes other than our own, makes us acknowledge workers as deliberating subjects with complex loves and aspirations and a rich inner world. . . . It thus inspires compassion, wonder, and the passion for justice" (893). This claim is both too narrow and too broad. Texts other than the novel can confront the reader with different forms of life, but the result of this doubling is not as automatic or as immediately uplifting as Nussbaum suggests. The juxtaposition of worlds in reading is much more unpredictable but also potentially more socially productive than the imaginative identification with otherness which Nussbaum calls for. The relation of my world and the text's world which doubling brings about is not empathic

identification which unifies different ways of being but a
dynamic oscillation between the "me" and the "not-me" which may
resist synthesis or resolution. Because of the principle of
difference which doubling entails, it can transform the
participants. By overcoming differences, identification reduces
the challenge of the negative and therefore may diminish the
impetus for change. Empathic assimilation of otherness gives too
little play to the transformative power of opposition and
negation.

Although Rorty values the invention of new modes of self-
creation (he calls the poet--"the maker of new words, the shaper
of new languages"--"the vanguard of the species"), he tries to
contain the disruption caused when beliefs or vocabularies clash
by "making a firm distinction between the private and the public"
(Contingency 20, 83). I want to examine this controversial
proposal in some detail because exposing the fallacies of the
"public-private" split as it pertains to reading and writing will
allow me to explain how my model of reading offers a better
solution to the problem of rival conceptions of existence.[7]
Practicing reading as an exercise in "liberal irony" attempts to
address the opposition of rival worlds by transforming it into a
socially useful reciprocity rather than trying to neutralize it
through a strategy of containment which in any case will not
work.

Rorty is worried, and justifiably so, about the will-to-
power of competing vocabularies or visions of self-creation--

about their desire to drive out rivals, establish their
ascendancy, and thus deny their contingency. "We should stop
trying to combine self-creation and politics," he advises; we
should "equalize opportunities for self-creation and then leave
people alone to use, or neglect, their opportunities," "to work
out their private salvations, create their private self-images,
reweave their webs of belief and desire in the light of whatever
new people and books they happen to encounter" (Contingency 120,
85). But precisely because of what the reading process suggests
about the necessary entanglement of the "private" and the
"public," it is not clear that they can be kept separate, and the
contradictions in Rorty's own account of reading and self-
creation suggest as much. For one thing, to "encounter new
people and books" is obviously a social rather than purely
private experience, even if it takes place in the mind of an
individual reader. The play of opposing beliefs which reading
can set in motion is potentially transformative because it is an
intersubjective meeting of different presuppositions and values
rather than a purely personal communion with oneself.

    Rorty's observations about reading and writing repeatedly
call into question his separation of "public" and "private." For
example, Rorty claims that Proust "had no public ambitions"--"he
managed to debunk authority without setting himself up as
authority, to debunk the ambitions of the powerful without
sharing them" (Contingency 118, 103). But he can only succeed by
inculcating new ways of seeing in the reader, new attitudes

toward "authority" which require changes in our beliefs which
will themselves become authoritative if they win acceptance and
become conventional, the kind of attitude we recognize as
"Proustian." Rorty acknowledges Proust's authority when he notes
that, because of the adoption of Remembrance of Things Past into
the canon, "anyone who wants to write a bildungsroman has to come
to terms with Proust." Rorty also recognizes that "you cannot
create a memorable character without thereby making a suggestion
about how your reader should act" (Contingency 136-37, 167).
This is true, however, because the "private" experience of
reading makes more of a "public" claim to mold our beliefs and
values than he admits when he asserts that "novels are a safer
medium than theory for expressing one's recognition of the
relativity and contingency of authority figures" (Contingency
107). Only a theorist could think this (ask Salman Rushdie).

Reading can have political consequences because self-
creation is a social process. Borrowing from Harold Bloom's
model of poetic influence and self-fashioning, Rorty recognizes
that "even the strongest poet is parasitic on her precursors"
because new metaphors can only be created from previously
existing, linguistically shared materials; even more, "she is
dependent on the kindness of all those strangers out there in the
future" to distinguish her "genius" from "eccentricity or
perversity" by demonstrating that "we can find a use for" her
creation (Contingency 41, 37). According to Bloom, however, it
is precisely this dependency of poets on others for their

materials and validation that they attempt to deny by refusing to accept their indebtedness or their historical contingency (see Anxiety 5-16). The poetic drive for divination is fueled by the insufficiency of the private sphere, its entanglement with public processes which deprive poets of the sense of autonomy Bloom claims they seek. Rorty may be right, citing Bloom and Nietzsche, that "the strong maker, the person who uses words as they have never before been used, is best able to appreciate her own contingency" (Contingency 28). But that is why, according to Bloom, strong poets seek a sort of recognition from the reader which grants them ascendancy and denies their contingency by taking over the reader's world.

These dilemmas arise only because the beliefs about language, literature, and life which we encounter in texts seek to win assent and to displace the presuppositions and values of the reader which are paradoxically responsible for their concretization. They are not satisfied with remaining contingent themselves even if they point out the contingency of the reader's own beliefs. Reading may be a private act in some senses, but it is also a meeting of beliefs and values in the social space where conventions and attitudes compete for allegiance. Reading thus refutes the effort to contain the will-to-power of rival vocabularies by distinguishing between private and public but instead enacts their conflict in a way that stages the problem of negotiating differences and makes it a task for the reader.

A more satisfactory response to this conflict is Rorty's

argument that we should "call 'true' (or 'right' or 'just')
whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be,
whatever view wins in a free and open encounter" (Contingency
67). But again the reading process suggests some necessary
revisions in this formulation, first of all (as Rorty would I
think agree) that perhaps no single view will prevail. In order
to make sure that "persuasion" rather than "force" decides such
encounters, Rorty places a premium on freedom: "If we take care
of political freedom, truth and goodness will take care of
themselves" (Contingency 84).[8] As Lyotard's worries about
"terror" suggest, however, freedom must be supplemented by mutual
recognition to make such encounters "just." We cannot assume
that rhetoric alone will create justice because persuasion
entails a will-to-power which is sometimes indistinguishable from
force, whether motivated by a Bloomian drive for ascendancy, the
resentment of a Genet, or less complicated desires for dominance.
"Undistorted communication" demands that we interrogate
persuasion to assure it does not violate reciprocity. This
dilemma is especially evident in the reading process, where the
efforts of rhetorical power to move or shape the reader always
threaten to disrupt the parity required for the to-and-fro
exchange of mutual demands. The doubling of worlds which reading
as an exercise in liberal irony seeks to establish and maintain
is a precarious achievement which requires vigilance as well as
vulnerability from the reader.

If, however, non-consensual reciprocity makes reading a

playful exchange between the reader's beliefs and the text's, then this doubling can facilitate the "free and open encounter" Rorty calls for--perhaps, indeed, in a manner not so likely to occur in other areas of society where the power of shared, habitual frameworks may be less visible and thus more intractable. One political value of reading is that its ability to reveal the contingency of the reader's customary commitments and conventions may open up possibilities of criticism and choice not available in everyday life under the normalizing pressure of prevailing epistemological regimes. Precisely because no standpoint outside of rival vocabularies is available for judging them, the conflict of beliefs which reading may set in motion can allow differences and distinctions to become apparent which would not be evident within a single framework. The doubling of perhaps incompatible worlds in reading can disclose their comparative advantages and disadvantages not in relation to some neutral ground but diacritically, by delineating what they are not.

By staging the interaction of incommensurable conceptions of existence, the reading practice I am advocating implies something like what Ronald Dworkin calls "the right to equal concern and respect" necessary for democratic governance: "Government must treat those whom it governs with concern, that is, as human beings who are capable of suffering and frustration, and with respect, that is, as human beings who are capable of forming and acting on intelligent conceptions of how their lives should be

lived" (272-73). The doubling of belief in reading requires a similar granting of "concern and respect" to different forms of life. Some inequalities in reading are productive, as when, for example, a text exceeds a reader's understanding and calls for the development of new capacities to meet its demands. Analogously, a player may have to learn new rules to play an unfamiliar game, but such growth and discovery imply respect for the dignity of the reader-player as someone capable of assimilating new conventions and responding to the text's gambits with moves of his or her own. Other inequities are more insidious and disruptive because they entail violations of a player's dignity--whether through the forceful refusal or restriction of the possibility of participating, or through an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities which also results in exclusion or diminished ability to join the exchange. One of the reasons why debates about who has the right to read in what ways have political significance is that they raise questions of this kind about access to the democratic arena where the granting of equal respect and concern entitles participants to negotiate differences. Analogous dilemmas occur in reading and democracy because both stage the problem of how alternative conceptions of existence--different visions of self-creation, rival vocabularies for constructing the world, opposing if equally contingent commitments--can beneficially interact.[9]

A call for equal concern and respect similarly informs Rorty's stipulation that liberal ironists "include among [their]

ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings will cease." Rorty's liberal thinks "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (Contingency xv), and the cruelty of humiliation is particularly repugnant because it denies others their power of self-creation. "Humiliation" is not a stable value, however, because what counts as a worthwhile conception of existence is subject to dispute. The meaning of a worthy life--and thus of what might be considered shameful or wounding--is not a given but a variable susceptible to cultural contestation.

Judith Shklar consequently distinguishes between "injustice," a socially remediable wrong, and "misfortune," an accident or debility for which no one is responsible: "the line of separation between injustice and misfortune is a political choice" which can be questioned and revised, and "yesterday's rock solid rule is today's folly and bigotry." A society may wish to alleviate the suffering of misfortune, but it has a stronger obligation to redress the grievances of injustice. As Shklar points out, however, "it will always be easier to see misfortune rather than injustice in the afflictions of other people. Only the victims occasionally do not share the inclination to do so." But in a democracy "their sense of their rights . . . deserves a hearing," she argues, because to do otherwise would be to deny them the "minimum of human dignity" (Injustice 5, 8, 15, 35, 86).[10] In a democratic society the shape of justice is therefore constantly open to change because

it is a differential product ever subject to contestation and
redescription. The line between "misfortune" and "injustice"
gets drawn and redrawn through protests in which aggrieved
citizens present and dispute their opposing senses of what they
are due. This process is necessarily conflictual and
differential because, as Lyotard points out, "it is in the nature
of a wrong not to be established by consensus" (Differend 56).

Rorty hopes that "cruelty" and "humiliation" can be defined
less problematically. He calls on us "to separate the question
'Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire?' from the
question 'Are you suffering?'" (Contingency 198). Conflicts
about self-creation cannot always be so cleanly separated,
however, from issues of what constitutes cruelty and suffering.
Some kinds of suffering seem easier to recognize than others do
regardless of the vocabulary employed (the anguish of a dying
cancer victim, for example, as opposed to the suffering caused by
sexual harassment, racial discrimination, homophobia, or
religious bigotry). This greater visibility may simply reflect
the greater agreement of the society about the applicable
epistemological and moral categories. More is at stake here,
however, than the notorious and perhaps undecidable question of
whether another's pain can be recognized outside of a vocabulary.
Shklar's distinction between "misfortune" and "injustice" shows
that significant areas of dispute with practical consequences may
still remain even if, following Rorty, each party recognizes the
other's suffering. A victim of homophobia, after all, has

weighty, non-trivial reasons for preferring to be recognized as a victim of social injustice instead of having his or her sexual orientation stigmatized as a misfortune. The status of some kinds of suffering can be controversial because it has yet to be settled through political negotiation between parties who hold different views about the wrongs that can humiliate or injure, views which go back to their different conceptions of what constitutes a worthy life. In such disputes, what the different parties "believe and desire" is integral to their sense of what is cruel and humiliating, and such conflicts are consequential rather than merely metaphysical because decisions about how to define injustice set norms for individual and social behavior.

Conceiving of reading as a non-consensual interaction between different worlds can make it an arena for playing out the question of injustice. For this to occur, construing texts needs to be seen as a double, non-consensual to-and-fro in which the values and beliefs of both players are at stake. By juxtaposing conventional norms with views that contest their inevitability, this doubling of worlds can challenge the naturalization of the prevailing notions of "injustice" and "humiliation." By bringing opposing conceptions of existence into a dialogue which reveals and questions the defining limits of each, reading can enact the renegotiation of what counts as a correctable social wrong. By demonstrating the contingency of the beliefs the reader sets in motion and suggesting alternative assumptions, desires, and interests, the process of reading can stage the sort of exchange

of differences which has the power to reconfigure social values--
the sort of conversation about "the sense of injustice" which can·
change a community's understanding of the kinds of cruelty and
humiliation entitled to recognition and remedy.

This dialogue does not have to happen, however, either in
reading or in other areas of social life, because the voice
protesting injustice is very easy to squelch or ignore. The
reading practice I am advocating would try to keep alive the
potentially transformative, often unsettling conversation through
which the meaning of injustice can change by having readers put
their assumptions at risk. Reading in this way would try to keep
in mind the lack of necessity of the conventions and commitments
it puts in play for the very reason that the conversation about
injustice is precarious, ever in danger of being shut down by the
self-protective force of prevailing norms or by the will-to-power
of rival voices.

Readers who themselves have a sense of injustice may reply
that they cannot afford to bracket their convictions because that
may disadvantage them in their arguments against oppression.
The necessary contradiction of such a position is that these
readers require injustice to be a variable, so that its meaning
can be changed, even as they need to act as if their own values
are absolutes--self-evident entitlements whose violation is an
intolerable outrage. If they win their argument (perhaps by
invoking the values of mutual recognition and equal concern which
also inform my conception of reading), they must then relinquish

their absolutism or else they will lapse into the same exclusionary essentialism against which they protested. My politics of reading should be their ultimate goal and their implicit norm, I would argue, even if they must temporarily, for strategic reasons, act as if their beliefs and values were not contingent--paradoxically bracketing their bracketing of their commitments so that they can later take the first brackets off. This is different from a terroristic attempt to stop the play of reading by securing the permanent dominance of one particular conception of existence, although the necessary strategic refusal to compromise of those with a sense of injustice is sometimes hard to distinguish, and unavoidably so, from that kind of absolutism.

Every kind of reading differs according to its practical aims, and my goal of creating a play-space where differences can freely and reciprocally interact will be more or less compatible with aims other politically engaged readers may have. What this problem suggests is that my politics of reading, although an attempt to facilitate the negotiation of differences between incommensurable forms of life, is itself based on beliefs and values which other ways of reading may contest. Although the doubling I advocate sets ideologies against each other to disclose their contingency, it is not without its own ideology and is itself nothing more than a contingent, contestable practice. This paradox is also a constitutive contradiction of democracy, however. Democracy is one form of life among others,

even as it offers itself as a mode of structuring the relations between different forms of life which would (or so it argues) allow them to thrive. This offer is a contestable claim based on values, assumptions, and aims which other conceptions of existence may not accept. This contradiction is not, as is sometimes thought, disabling proof of the false promise of pluralism (it isn't "neutral" after all). It is instead evidence of the contingencies and conflicts which make democracy possible and, in the view of its advocates (like myself), preferable to other modes of life which would stifle heterogeneity. Democracy is a contestable value, but that makes it worth advocating, indeed makes it necessary for those who believe in it to plead its case--to argue for the worthwhile consequences of the equitable exchange of differences which mutual recognition can facilitate.[11] There is no place outside of the contingencies of ideology, value, and belief. The practice of reading as a non-consensual, reciprocal, potentially transformative play of differences is an attempt not to transcend those contingencies but to discover ways of living with them which are mutually beneficial and just.

Notes

[1]On the notion of "communicative rationality," also see
Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1,
especially 10-42.

[2]On the debate between Habermas and Lyotard, see Wellmer,
Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne, especially 105-109;
Jay, "Habermas and Modernism"; Jameson, "Forward" to Lyotard,
Postmodern Condition; Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on
Postmodernity"; McGowan, Postmodernism and Its Critics 180-210;
and Poster, "Postmodernity and the Politics of Multiculturalism:
The Lyotard-Habermas Debate over Social Theory." My concern is
less with the details of their debate, however, than with the
issues it raises for the theory of reading.

[3]On Sartre's literary theory, see Goldthorpe, Sartre:
Literature and Theory 159-84; Hollier, The Politics of Prose 83-
103, and Howells, Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom 116-44.

[4]On the paradox of how a text might exert a kind of power
over the reader which is emancipatory rather than coercive, also
see Chambers, Room for Maneuver, especially 14-18.

[5]On "play" as a model for the reciprocal understanding of otherness, also see my "Play and Cultural Differences."

[6]I examine this dilemma in greater detail in "The Politics of Irony in Reading Conrad." Also see West, "The Politics of American Neo-Pragmatism."

[7]Among the many critiques which Rorty's "public-private" split has received, see particularly Fraser, "Singularity and Solidarity: Richard Rorty Between Romanticism and Technocracy," and Bhaskar, Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom, especially 81-96.

[8]On this issue, see McCarthy, "Private Irony and Public Decency"; Rorty's response, "Truth and Freedom," and McCarthy's answer, "Ironist Theory as Vocation." Also see Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy."

[9]Dworkin is unfortunately self-contradictory on the issue of whether this negotiation will or should end in agreement. He says "there are hard cases, both in politics and at law, in which reasonable lawyers will disagree about rights, and neither will

have available any argument that must necessarily convince the
other" (xiv). But at the end of Taking Rights Seriously he
contradicts his earlier pluralism about "hard cases" and claims
they have one right solution (see 290). It may be, as he argues,
a pragmatic necessity of the justice system that such cases must
be resolved: "It remains the judge's duty, even in hard cases,
to discover what the rights of the parties are, not to invent new
rights retrospectively" (81). But Dworkin then adds:
"reasonable lawyers and judges will often disagree about legal
rights, just as citizens and statesmen disagree about political
rights" (81). Leaving space for those differences to be
negotiated without presupposing a unitary outcome would seem an
obligation entailed by his insistence on the ultimate "right to
equal respect and concern."

[10]Rorty borrows his injunction against cruelty from Shklar's
earlier book, Ordinary Vices 7-44. He misrepresents her
position, however, inasmuch she argues that "for liberal and
humane people" to "choose cruelty as the worst thing we do" is
not to resolve or bypass the dilemmas of moral relativism but to
encounter all sorts of "paradoxes and puzzles" about what to
count as cruel and how to rank different evils (Vices 44). He
also ignores her clear declaration that "It is not possible to
think of vices as simply either public or private" (Vices 243).

[11]A further implication of the contingency of "democracy" is, of course, that it is not a unitary, self-evident state of affairs but is subject to conflicting interpretations even among its advocates (as, for example, among Habermas, Lyotard, Rorty, and myself). For a particularly illuminating recent example of such controversy, see Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," and the "Comments" by Wolf, Rockefeller, and Walzer in Taylor, Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition".

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