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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, multiculturalism, 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.<sup>1</sup> "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.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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).<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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).<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup>On the notion of "communicative rationality," also see Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1, especially 10-42.

<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>On "play" as a model for the reciprocal understanding of otherness, also see my "Play and Cultural Differences."

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

<sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>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."

<sup>9</sup>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."

<sup>10</sup>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).

<sup>11</sup>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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