READING OUR WAY TO DEMOCRACY?
LITERATURE AND PUBLIC ETHICS

“I believe,” wrote Franz Kafka, “that we should only read those books that bite and sting us. If a book we are reading does not rouse us with a blow to the head, then why read it?”1 Almost all of us who read books for a living and/or pleasure have undoubtedly experienced that most delightfully troubling of phenomena: a novel that forces us to think differently about the world and the way that we live. In recent years, literature’s capacity to generate in its readers “a rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by”2—what Stanley Fish calls its “dialectical” potential—has drawn the attention of a number of liberal-democratic theorists, most notably Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty. By “liberal-democratic” is meant here, of course, that system of government with popular rule, regular elections, a commitment to individual rights and the rule of law; one that draws on a tradition of political thought that includes the work of John Locke, John Stuart Mill and John Rawls. Although their exact formulations of the claim differ in important ways, Nussbaum and Rorty are united in the belief that reading can enhance the practice of liberal-democracy by expanding the moral imaginations of a citizenry. Such an expansion will, they believe, promote the values of tolerance, respect for other viewpoints, and a recognition of the contingency of one’s own perspective, in short, the values of civil society. Whilst there is undoubtedly something intuitively appealing about their claim, there is much that is philosophically and politically problematic about their respective formulations of it. Both seem to rest for example upon an implausible theory of the impact of literature upon its readers, and an illiberal tendency to treat reader-citizens as means and not as ends. Attempting to capture what is of value

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whilst jettisoning what is problematic, I will briefly set out their claims; identify the difficulties within them; and offer an account of how their project might be operationalized in a way that is both more philosophically plausible and more politically consistent with liberalism. My aim will not be to offer another detailed account of the connection between literature and democracy—not least because I believe that the current accounts are overly deterministic—but rather to suggest some ways in which we might nevertheless build upon the current work to capture the potential benefits of reading for liberal-democratic societies.

Although Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty hold quite different views about the proper role of literature in philosophy—Nussbaum believes that literature is merely a valuable addition to philosophical Reason traditionally conceived, whereas for the postfoundational Rorty, the literariness goes all the way down—both suggest that reading will promote two values that they regard as essential to liberal-democratic practice. Following Rorty we might label these values contingency and solidarity. Contingency arises from the recognition that even one’s most deeply held beliefs are always only a perspective. It is connected to civility in that it serves, Nussbaum and Rorty believe, to undermine the vehemence of individual claims. Although this claim about the partiality of individual perspectives sounds dangerously postmodern for thinker such as Nussbaum—Rorty, who calls his political philosophy “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism,” has no such qualms—there are limits to this insight in her thought. Nussbaum is simply concerned to show that an excessive and over-confident reliance on philosophical Reason is likely to generate an incomplete understanding of a given situation. For this reason, she suggests, “storytelling and literary imagining are not opposed to . . . but can provide essential ingredients in a rational argument.” She argues, for example, that Hard Times by Charles Dickens will alert its readers—in particular “the person brought up solely on economic texts” who “has not been encouraged to think of workers (or indeed anybody else) as fully human beings, with stories of their own to tell” (Pj, p. 33)—to the condition of the working classes. Similarly, she suggests, Richard Wright’s Native Son and E. M. Forster’s Maurice will alert their—presumably straight, white and middle-class—readers to the plight of African-Americans and homosexuals. In each instance, Nussbaum believes, literature will help its readers overcome the “common human tendency to think of one’s own habits and ways as best for all persons and all times” and open up their minds to the possibility of alternative perspectives. Such an approach is entirely consistent with
Classical Liberalism. Although Nussbaum labels her political philosophy “Aristotelian Social Democracy,” she nevertheless makes it quite clear that she regards it as complement to the liberal tradition of Immanuel Kant, John Rawls and Adam Smith (PJ, p. 19). Indeed, Nussbaum’s work on literature is committed to reviving Adam Smith’s long-dormant notion of “fellow feeling” as an emotional underpinning essential to the successful functioning of liberal-democratic society.

The suggestion that liberalism requires some recognition of its own social context is, somewhat surprisingly perhaps for a political philosophy that places so much stress upon the individual, a perennial theme of liberal discourse. We see it, for example, in the work of John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, and Adam Smith.9 Indeed, Smith’s notion of “fellow feeling” is an account of the concern for one’s fellow citizens that must underpin liberal-democratic society. It is not enough on this account simply to see the “other” as a rights-holder, one must also care about that status in order for it to have any meaning for, or impact on, one’s actions. Rorty’s notion of solidarity is in many ways a more recent formulation of the same idea. Both Rorty and Nussbaum believe that literature is a way to generate such fellow feeling, and that it will, furthermore, lead to more effective liberal-democratic institutions. Citizens will, they believe, be empowered to make better decisions through the empathetic insight that comes from the act of reading. Empathy emerges from reading in a similar way for both theorists.

According to Nussbaum, reading puts us in the position of Adam Smith’s “judicious spectator” (PJ, pp. 72–77): one who feels the emotions and predicament of another, but whom, nevertheless, manages to retain her own detached perspective. In reading about characters from whom we differ in significant ways, suggests Nussbaum, we come to share their predicament whilst simultaneously maintaining our own detachment. “The compassion of the spectator” writes Smith, “must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation and, what is perhaps impossible, was at the same time able to regard it with his present reason and judgment” (cited in PJ, pp. 73–74). It is this position, says Nussbaum, which cultivates in us the capacity of “fancy” (PJ, p. 36), an expansion of our moral imaginations which enables us to empathize with all sorts of different people whilst rationally evaluating their position. Similarly, Richard Rorty holds that reading novels by writers such as Dickens, Orwell, Schreiner and Wright permits us acquaintance with lots of different ways of living and “gives us details about the kinds of suffering being endured
by people to whom we had previously not attended” (GIS, p. xvi). It is this which, he says, enables us to see people from whom we differ in a multitude of ways as nevertheless connected to us by similar hopes, desires and commitments. Reading generates solidarity, Rorty believes, by showing us what we have in common with those we have previously considered as “other.”

In addition to generating solidarity, however, Rorty also believes that literature can transform us as people: making us more sensitive to the needs of others. In reading a novel such as Lolita, he says, we become so caught up in the charmingly vicious Humbert Humbert that we momentarily forget about the eponymous heroine of the text: the abused little girl who has lost her father, her mother and her brother. We forget, writes Rorty, “because Nabokov arranged for us to forget temporarily. He programmed us to forget first and then remember later on—remember in confusion and guilt.”10 The impact of this text and indeed Nabokov’s other masterpiece, Pale Fire, is he asserts, dialectical. We “emerge from the final pages of each novel rubbing our heads, worrying about whether we are all alright, wondering whether we like ourselves” (PF, p. xiii). Such an experience, Rorty suggests, allows us to see a particular type of cruelty—the cruelty of incuriosity—of which we ourselves are capable. It is this experience, he argues, that enhances the practice of liberal-democracy by generating an awareness of the contingency of our position, and by reminding us always to consider the situation of our fellow citizens.

Given the broad similarities in Nussbaum’s and Rorty’s work, it is unsurprising that their textual readings follow similar patterns: both read the novels that they identify as useful to liberal-democratic society and tell us what lessons the readers will or should derive from them. Thus, Mr. Gradgrind, we learn from Nussbaum, will teach us about the dangers of excessive abstraction and a reliance on formal modeling (PJ, p. 42); while Charles Kinbote, according to Rorty, will teach us about the need to be more sensitive to the suffering of others (GIS, pp. 164–65). In this both Nussbaum and Rorty seem to be advocates of what we might call a “supply-side” theory of the novel: neither seems terribly concerned about the role of the reader in the process of deriving the relevant lessons from literature. This is especially true of Nussbaum who declares that the very form of the novel “constructs compassion in readers, positioning them as people who care intensely about the suffering and bad luck of others, and who identify with them in ways that show possibilities for themselves” (PJ, p. 66). Nevertheless, in their
supply-side approach to the novel both thinkers seem to be guilty of what Jonathan Rose has called the “receptive fallacy”: the attempt to discern the message that the text transmits to its audience by examining the text rather than the audience.\textsuperscript{11}

Somewhat implausibly, both Nussbaum and Rorty seem to suggest that there is but one valid interpretation of the text, and one lesson or set of lessons to derived from each novel. It is an approach that flies in the face of the history and practice of literary criticism and the experience of reading. Very few, if indeed any, literary critics now regard their job as being to discern a text’s intrinsic meaning, and even lay-readers seem to content to permit the coexistence of competing interpretations. Equally problematically, both Rorty and Nussbaum place a good deal of emphasis on the dialectical power of literature to transfigure its readers, but dialectic is, as Rorty himself notes, a somewhat fragile matter, “the sort of thing which only writers with very special talents writing at just the right moment in just the right way, are able to bring off” (\textit{CIS}, p. 160). As he points out in his introduction to the Everyman edition of \textit{Pale Fire}, such dialectical effects can be easily nullified, and depend, in part at least on the way in which the reader reads the text (p. v). Almost all of us have probably had the experience of a friend who has urged us to read a book that changed his or her life, only to find ourselves distinctly underwhelmed by the text in question. Indeed, Rorty himself acknowledges that different readers can have decidedly different responses to the same text: “it is no surprise,” he writes, “that some putatively great works leave some readers cold.”\textsuperscript{12} As such, both Rorty’s and Nussbaum’s account of the dialectical power of literature seems to be overly robust and implausibly deterministic. In Rorty’s case it also appears contrary to his previously stated philosophical position, that which seems to commit him to some sort of reader-response theory.\textsuperscript{13}

The “supply-side” theory of the text is, however, not only methodologically problematic, in the context of liberal-democracy it also seems to be politically problematic. For, implicit in the claim that texts have clear meanings that they transmit to their readers is the assumption that a failure to see the text in the prescribed way arises from a deficiency on the part of the reader. This is, perhaps, no way to conduct our business in a liberal-democracy.

Liberalism, no matter how one conceives of it—as the product of metaphysically derived principles in the manner of the early Rawls, or simply as the most pragmatic way to reduce cruelty in the approach of Richard Rorty—demands certain basic commitments. Foremost among
these perhaps is that we treat people as *ends* and not *means*. This has generally taken the form of respecting individual rights. Literary liberals have, however, been anxious to expand upon this conception of respect: to see the person not just as a rights-holder, but as someone with hopes, dreams and desires situated in a particular context. Paradoxically, however, in seeking to build this fuller notion of respect by theorizing about the impact of a well-read citizenry on the practice of liberal-democracy, such theorists seem to have forgotten that respect—treating people as ends in themselves—might also require *listening* to the voices of these individuals.\(^4\) Indeed, reading, which is presented as a source of contingency and empathy by Rorty and Nussbaum, seems to generate neither in the theorists themselves. Each seems compelled to champion a particular interpretation of a given text at the expense of all others. Whilst Nussbaum is prepared to accept that different readers *might* draw different experiences from the text, she is, nevertheless, determined that through the process of *coduction*—a sort of conversational reflective equilibrium—such readers will come to agree on the proper interpretation of the novel, that is, the one identified by Martha Nussbaum (*PJ*, p. 76). For Rorty too, there is a definite sense that his political project requires agreement on a particular interpretation of a given novel. In his introduction to Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, for example, he seems—as a latter day Kinbote—to be an advocate of a “boo-hooray” theory of literary criticism: awarding bouquets to those whose interpretation of the novel agrees with his, and brickbats to those whose does not. This tendency towards imposing a textual interpretation on the citizenry also suggests a certain lack of faith in the theorists’ own approach. For, if reading novels is indeed supposed to be useful for expanding the moral imagination of a citizenry, it is not clear why Nussbaum and Rorty spend so long setting out their own readings of texts. Reading about reading is not the best way to enlarge our moral capacities: it is rather like expecting to benefit from watching somebody else exercise. The dialectical impact of literature is not, that is to say, something that can be experienced second-hand. As such, the work of Nussbaum and Rorty seems to be rather more of an attempt to use literature to convince others of their pre-existing commitment to liberal-democracy than any genuine attempt to harness literature’s dialectical power.

That Martha Nussbaum’s and Richard Rorty’s attempts to theorize a relationship between literature, reading and a public ethics for liberal-democracies seem to flounder on a problematic account of the way in which texts impact upon their readers, and a rather top-down model of
literary interpretation that runs contrary to the central tenets of liberalism does not, of course, mean that there is nothing to the posited relationship between literature and liberal-democracy. Reversing Immanuel Kant’s well known observation on the common saying that what might be true in theory is not necessarily true in practice, it might be argued that the connection between literature, public ethics and democracy is true in practice, but not true in theory, for there does seem to be something intuitively and phenomenologically appealing about the claim that literature can expand our moral imaginations in ways that might indeed be useful to liberal-democratic societies. Novels can and do lead us to think differently about our lives and relationships. Indeed, in her recent work Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books, Azar Nafisi suggests that it is not only liberal-democratic societies that might benefit from the values generated by reading certain works of literature, but that such improvements are possible whatever the prevailing political regime. The problem is then one of reverse engineering: how to capture what is of value for public ethics in liberal-democracies in the act of reading in a way that is both philosophically plausible, and politically consistent with liberalism. The questions at hand become then how should we read literature politically in order to capture its transformative potential for liberal-democracy? How should we conduct literary-political debate so as best to enhance democratic practice? How best to capture the solidarity and contingency Nussbaum and Rorty, and indeed, moral intuition, seem to suggest that literature can offer?

The most obvious solution to some of the problems posed by Nussbaum’s and Rorty’s approaches would, perhaps, be to promote a literary criticism that recognized its own contingency; thereby removing the politically problematic tendency towards imposing an interpretation on a citizenry for their own good. The problem here is, of course, that such an acknowledgement—“this is only an interpretation”—would soon become a trope, and an empty one at that. Alexander Nehamas argues that Nietzsche was concerned with just such a problem, and that he chose to solve it by adopting a multiplicity of styles that constantly drew attention to himself as the author of the views expressed in his work. Nevertheless, even Nietzsche was to find himself misinterpreted with his ironic, provocative, cajoling and deeply subjective assertions coming to be seen by many as claims to fact, or worse still, the outlining of a program. In the history of literary criticism we see a similar process at work. In the case of New Historicism, for example, claims to being above issues of “authorial intent” or “textual meaning,” soon became bogged down in just such questions.
approaches is that the textual critics seem to be searching for some sort of methodology which they believe will lift them out of their subjective readings into a realm of inter-subjective or even objective reality. The solution to this problem is, perhaps, to recognize that when we talk about literature we are talking about our own responses to it, and that as such, we are, in a way, talking about ourselves; and, rather than trying to find some methodology which will emancipate us from this perspective, simply to embrace it.

Literature, on this theory, might generate a potentially useful public ethics for liberal-democracy by providing an opportunity for citizens to talk about their fears, concerns and desires. They would do so, however, at a level of abstraction that arises from being seen to talk about literary events and literary characters rather than directly about themselves, thereby facilitating rather than truncating conversation about politically sensitive topics. Anybody with any experience of a reading group can confirm that the topics raised are seldom if ever confined to the literary. Azar Nafisi, for example, notes that in her own reading group of ethnically, religiously and politically diverse women in Tehran: “the novels we escaped into led us finally to question and prod our own realities, about which we felt so hopelessly speechless” (pp. 38–39).

There is, furthermore, an historical pedigree for this approach. In his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas argues that a similar discussion of literary works was a crucial factor in the development of Western civil society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This practice, he argues, “provided a training ground for critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself—a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness.”

Jettisoning Habermas’s *agreement*-model of conversation—that which suggests that the outcome of public discussion is or ought to be agreement—and replacing it with a weaker *recognition*-model—one that suggests that there is something beneficial about the process of discussion that negates the need for absolute agreement—might provide the basis for plausible theory of literature and public ethics in liberal-democratic societies. Such an approach draws on the dual notions that public discussion of literature provides a way for a citizenry to discuss politics in a manner that facilitates dialogue, and that such discussion is—as recent literature suggests—indeed beneficial to liberal-democracy. The potential benefits here are twofold.

In the first instance, by talking about literary characters and events, citizens will be able to reap the benefits of *abstraction*. Although their concerns may be personal, participants in the discussion will, perhaps,
be able to talk about them in a way that detaches the topics from the citizens' innermost selves. The double-mechanism here might be to allow citizens to talk about issues that they would not normally bring to a public forum; and secondly, to talk about them in a way that allows for a more considered approach to such matters than might emerge if they were seen to be talking about their own concerns. The second potential benefit, paradoxically perhaps given that the first is abstraction, is context. Traditional liberal theories of politics and society have relied upon thought experiments such as the “State of Nature” or the “Original Position” to generate critical discussion of matters political. The problem with such Lockean or Rawlsian models is that—in addition to generating unhelpful and misleading debates about the ontological status of such devices—they also promote a “how would you feel about this issue if you were somebody else” approach to political thought. It is precisely this that draws the ire of communitarian and feminist critics of liberalism. Such models, they argue, do not fully capture the complexities of a situated agent’s existence. The new model of literature and public ethics being sketched here—what we might call “Contextualized Abstraction”—might go some way towards addressing these concerns by opening up the possibility of a dialogue which is both removed from the participants, but informed by their interpretations of the literary context.

The liberal-democratic model of literature in politics that is being outlined here, though considerably different from either that championed by Rorty or Nussbaum, is not, however, entirely unconnected to their approaches. Both rely, to some extent, upon a dialogic model of politics, and upon a discussion of literature as a source of critical leverage. Rorty conceives of society as an ungroundable conversation into which he seeks to draw various different groups through story telling; whilst Nussbaum, borrowing from Wayne Booth’s *The Company We Keep. An Ethics of Fiction*, offers a theory of critical literary discussion called “coduction.” In Nussbaum’s account, however, the aim of this process is to come to an agreement on the proper understanding of the text, so that we might use it to inform our understanding of the situated agents often obscured by liberal reasoning. Such a theory seems to work against the element of contingency that Nussbaum and Rorty both wish to transplant from literature to politics: it simply seems to replace one category with another. Equally, there appears to be something illiberal about the process—at least as far as it is presented by Nussbaum, Booth’s account is rather more circumspect—for it simply seems to be a matter
of bringing other readers around to the critic’s interpretation of the text. Abandoning the need for agreement, however, might enable us to capture the contingency that Rorty and Nussbaum see in literature for the public ethics of liberal-democratic society. Literature might then function as the ostensible subject matter in an ongoing, potentially transfiguring dialogue about politics in which the contingency arises from the recognition that differently situated people may interpret the same text in different ways. Recognizing that another’s reading may emerge from a different life experience might well be a step towards reaching some kind of recognition of another’s status as “fellow citizen” or “fellow human being,” something that might serve to temper potentially hostile of incommensurable debates by breaking down some of the moral distance between otherwise disconnected citizens.

In such circumstances, in addition to contingency, we might also derive the other important value Rorty and Nussbaum seem to desire: solidarity. For, if we do indeed see any moral improvement arising from the act of reading in politics, the most likely source of that improvement is the discussion about the texts rather than the texts themselves. Coming to see another as a fellow citizen may well emerge from the process of coming to see her as a fellow reader, even perhaps a fellow reader of a favorite author. Such a process does not, of course, require that individuals come to an agreement on the meaning of a text. Such solidarity can emerge simply from finding a fellow enthusiast. Discussing the now defunct Stanford University Great Books course of the late 1980s—a program that was derailed by public protests over “dead white male” hegemony—the political theorist John E. Seery declared that the project there was “simply to read and try to make sense of” the books. “That minimalist project” he writes, “somehow created a community of readers, of questioners, of Socratic seekers. Students drew together in this common project and discovered that it was enjoyable to think together. These texts . . . fostered reading communities.” Indeed, Seery, a teacher in the program, declares “these little classes were the closet thing I have seen to successful liberal communities in practice—little educational utopias.”

The most obvious objection to the theory of literature and public ethics outlined here is, of course, K. K. Ruthven’s famous observation that: “Despite their familiarity with the classics, professors of literature do not appear to lead better lives than other people, and frequently display unbecoming virulence on the subject of one another’s shortcomings.” Literature in these circumstances does not appear to promote civilized
discussion, contingency, nor even solidarity. Nevertheless, such debates may serve to obscure the perfectly civil interactions that make up the corpus of critical literary discussion but which do not draw as much public attention as a good literary feud. Furthermore, there is clearly a difference between the way professional literary critics and lay readers approach and talk about texts. In his novel *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Julian Barnes’s fictional Geoffrey Braithwaite offered a potential explanation for this difference: “I can’t prove that lay readers enjoy books more than professional critics, but I can tell you one advantage we have over them. We can forget.” Professional critics “are cursed with memory: the books they write about can never fade from their brains. They become family. Perhaps this is why some critics develop a faintly patronizing tone towards their subjects.” Having less invested in the texts, lay readers would perhaps be more able to use them constructively in political discussion. They are, perhaps, less likely to be practitioners of methodological reading—any approach which simply lays an analytical grid over texts in order to categorize them as examples of another phenomenon, be it class, gender, ethnicity or some other political value—something which must be avoided if a transformative conversation about politics through literature is to occur. As Richard Rorty notes, “you cannot . . . find inspirational value in a text at the same time you are viewing it as a product of a mechanism of cultural production” (*IV*, p. 13). In this we are reminded of the role of the reader and indeed, the way in which she reads as an important element in determining the likely success of the role of literature in enhancing the public ethics of liberal-democracies. In this, literary critics have an essential role to play, particularly in the context of our educational institutions.

As a professor of literature at Cornell in the 1950s, Vladimir Nabokov was known for setting examination questions such as “List the contents of Anna’s handbag” or “Describe the wallpaper in the Karenin’s bedroom.” Although few students were ever able to identify such details—Nabokov is said to have awarded bonus marks to the student who suggested that the wallpaper pattern might be “little trains”—they were, nevertheless, forced to pay close attention to the details of the text and to enter the world of the novel. Whilst there are many who would dismiss Nabokov’s attention to detail as fetishistic fastidiousness, this approach to literary criticism may provide a model for an approach to literature that will enhance the practice of liberal democracy whilst remaining consistent with its principles. In asking his students to pick out such details, Nabokov was in effect asking them to break out of whatever “methodological
reading” habits they had developed and see the world of the novel as an alternate reality:

Nothing is more boring or more unfair to the author than starting to read, say *Madame Bovary*, with the preconceived notion that it is a denunciation of the bourgeoisie. We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge.26

Such an apparently aesthetic approach to reading is, of course, likely to draw the ire of many a school of literary criticism, especially those such as Marxists, feminists, post-colonialists and even ethical critics who are concerned with connecting the world of the text to the world in which it is written. Such an approach would seem to obscure what is crucial to these schools of criticism, be it the identification of hierarchy and exploitation, or the political and ethical content of a given text. There is a twofold response to such an objection. First, that the argument being made here is a specific one about reading literature in a specific context for a specific purpose: seeking to use literature as a means of generating a public ethics for liberal-democracy. It is not an assertion that all other politically and ethically motivated critics should desist from practicing their own approaches to the text; merely a suggestion that if we are to operationalize the sort of project outlined by Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, this is a way in which we might do it. Second, that this Nabokovian approach to texts is not inconsistent with the self-consciously ethical or political approaches identified above. Indeed, the sort of two-stage process advocated by Nabokov might actually serve to enhance such ethico-political work. Coming to the text with a preconceived notion of its content, a critic is likely to find little else in it; coming to it as another world to be explored then contrasted with our own is, perhaps, likely to be a more fecund source of genuine insight than the “knowing” readings of much political literary criticism.

“Schools and universities,” wrote Italo Calvino, “ought to help us understand that no book that talks *about* a book says more than the book in question.”27 If we are indeed to capture the transformative power of literature for the purposes of generating a public ethics for liberal-democratic societies, then we would do well to remember Calvino’s
advice. Theories of literature in politics that rely on the theorist’s reading of the text to tell us how to react are literally preposterous: the end comes before the beginning. If we are to use literature to generate a public ethics that will enhance democratic practice then we need to find an approach which generates contingency and solidarity out of the multiplicity of possible textual readings, and one in which the reader-citizen is ultimately treated as an end and not a means. To achieve this we might need, it has been suggested here, a pedagogy of indirection, one that teaches us to read first, and to think and talk about politics second.

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3. Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); hereafter abbreviated as CIS.


6. This is, of course, probably something of a null set. I am grateful to Eric Naiman for this point.


13. This certainly seems to be the implication of Rorty’s claim that the reader’s relationship to the authors of such texts as In Search of Lost Time, Finnegans Wake, or Postcards, “depends largely upon her being left alone to dream up her own footnotes” (CIS, p. 127). See also Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), p. 151. For a discussion of this tension see Simon Stow, “The Return of Charles Kinbote: Nabokov on Rorty,” Philosophy and Literature 23 (1999): 65–77.


17. See, for example, I. Dollimore and A. Sinfield, eds., New Essays in Cultural Materialism (Manchester: University of Manchester University Press, 1994), especially the essay by Margaret Heinemann.

18. I am grateful to Kip Kantelo for his insight into reading groups.


