The novel’s wisdom is different from that of philosophy. The novel is born not of the theoretical spirit but of the spirit of humor. . . . The art inspired by God’s laughter does not by nature serve ideological certitudes, it contradicts them. Like Penelope, it undoes each night the tapestry that theologians, philosophers, and learned men have woven the day before.

—Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*

We have the books that point out the bad conditions, that praise us for taking progressive attitudes. We have no books that raise questions in our minds not only about conditions but about ourselves.

—Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*

One of the more provocative claims to emerge from the recent work of Richard Rorty is the idea that the novel is “the characteristic genre of democracy.” Calling it the genre “most closely associated with the struggle for freedom and equality,” he has argued that the novel is the primary vehicle of moral reflection in a liberal democratic culture (EHO, 68). The promise of Rorty’s political thought is a way of combining a nonessentialist moral community with an ironic openness to other vocabularies—both community and diversity. Through “sentimental education,” works like Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Nabokov’s *Lolita*, his argument goes, can help forge a democratic moral community of citizens attuned to suffering and more likely to see those different from themselves as “one of us.” Because instrumental in fostering an ability to identify with the suffering of others, literature can be linked to the pursuit of justice, understood as a form of loyalty to other human beings.¹
Drawing on the thought of Czech novelist and critic Milan Kundera, Rorty evinces a conception of democracy grounded in the plurality and relativity of human perspectives that, because it derives its moral thrust from novelists and poets rather than philosophers, is able to provide the cohesion necessary for collective action while respecting diversity. Yet, in the end, the complexity and irony of great literature cannot easily be reconciled with the kinds of moral sentiments Rorty needs literature to disseminate to further the communal ends of his “liberal utopia.” Despite appearances to the contrary, Rorty’s appeal to literature looks not to irony but to sentiment for its political import. Kundera’s subversive conception of the novel’s irony undermines Rorty’s bourgeois liberalism to the point where the two can coexist only by institutionalizing a sharp division between public and private. This is the paradox of Rorty’s political thought: while he intimates a conception of democracy grounded in an ironical, nonmetaphysical culture, he resists the full force of the human ambiguity and plurality of irony in public.

Even if his solution is judged inadequate, Rorty’s account poses issues not easily brushed aside. His approach highlights a fundamental tension in the relation of irony to democratic politics between individual critical self-reflection and collective efforts of the demos, between critique and action. On Rorty’s view, collective political action which aims to remedy injustice requires a shared moral identity—something that complex and ambiguous works cannot provide. In the absence of such an identity, stagnation and democratic impotence will result. It is therefore not the nuanced, introspective, highbrow novels whose “variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty,” in Lionel Trilling’s famous phrase, prompt self-reflective questioning of ourselves and our world, but the far less complex and various lessons of didactic, middle-brow, “sentimental” novels like Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Dickens’s Bleak House that for Rorty are of the greatest value to democracy.

Devotees of literature as a source of human complexity and diversity capable of subverting ideological and moral certitudes must address the possibility Rorty raises: can complexity, irony, and ambiguity provide a sufficient basis for collective action? And, relatedly, are unquestioning, didactic stories capable of stimulating the emotions and sparking sympathetic identification in ways that more obviously subversive highbrow works cannot? Rorty is certainly not a believer in moral absolutes, and he does affirm a Nietzschean multiplicity of human perspective. Yet his view suggests that depicting the world in its many shades of gray may be of dubious political utility, at least when it comes to majoritarian democratic endeavors. If nothing else, Rorty’s account places the burden on those given to disagreement on this last point—and I consider myself in this category—to make clear the value of ambiguity, irony, and relativity of perspective to democratic politics.
I underscore these tensions by contrasting Rorty’s reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with James Baldwin’s. Baldwin’s scathing critique of Stowe’s novel, and the entire genre of the novel of moral protest that Rorty affirms, emanates from their not being complex and various enough in their presentation of African-American experience and from their failing to adequately question the dominant conception of reality upon which the system of racial oppression rested. Baldwin is surely right to identify the danger inherent in reducing the complexity and ambiguity of the human world to simplified, unitary categories. Yet his critique, however justified, must be reconciled with the beneficial practical effects that novels like Stowe’s and Dickens’s did have in the struggles against the two greatest threats the democratic experiment has encountered: the system of chattel slavery and the unfettered practices of laissez-faire capitalism.

Ultimately, two conflicting conceptions of the role of novels, or of narratives in general, can be identified in Rorty’s thought. On the one hand, narratives provide a means of collective self-criticism—the basis for “the self-criticism of cultures” and “rewaving” a community’s “fabric of belief” to make it more tolerant, more inclusionary, and more just (EHO, 15–18). On the other, they serve to solidify a common moral identity and inculcate a liberal morality. As the forging of a common identity has emerged in his recent work as the central aim of his political project, the latter role increasingly overshadows the former. Yet the project of forging an inclusive, but singular, collective moral identity leaves literature’s immense potential as a repository of human plurality and diversity untapped.

**RORTY’S POSITION: COMMUNITY VS. IRONY**

The communitarian thrust, for lack of a better word, of Rorty’s work has received scant attention. Yet it has become the cornerstone of his political theory. Forging a democratic moral community is a project which lies behind his turn to literature, and it is an essential ingredient in the quest for social justice understood as a “larger loyalty” and as the political project he has termed “achieving our country.” Solidarity, as he calls it in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, is for Rorty something which is made rather than found, a commonality achieved through struggle and collective self-fashioning rather than unearthed as a shared trait within us.

This communitarian thrust was visible a decade before the publication of *Contingency*; it is present as early as his 1979 presidential address to the American Philosophical Association, the speech that unleashed the storm on the eve of the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. For those who
search in vain for the “consequences” of Rorty’s pragmatism, which often appears to be little more than a defense of the liberal status quo, if liberated from its philosophical baggage, the best candidate is this heightened, nonessentialist sense of community. Here it is worth quoting from Rorty’s 1979 address:

Our identification with our community—our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature’s, shaped rather than found, one among many which men have made. In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right. (CP, 166)

The general contours of Rorty’s philosophical critique are by now fairly well known. The point I wish to stress is that giving up the metaphysical comfort of foundations and fully accepting the radical contingency of human life paves the way for “a renewed sense of community.” With no transcendental sources of authority to appeal to—that is, no God, Reason, History, Knowledge, or Truth—“our fellow-humans [become] our only source of guidance,” the nonfoundational foundation of postphilosophical politics. Here Rorty follows Dewey in bringing philosophy down from its transcendental heights into the uncertain realm of change and contingency. But, unlike William James, Rorty falls short of granting pragmatist philosophy a role in helping us sort out the contingent beliefs and values that constitute us as individuals.

Revisiting these early thoughts on community is useful in my view since it is precisely this project of cultivating a broader and more inclusive sense of solidarity, understood as a form of collective identity, that gives Rorty’s appeal to literature and stories its moral thrust. The means for forging this democratic moral community is “sentimental education.”

In broad terms, the idea of sentimental education rests on a displacement of reason by the imagination as the central human faculty, and it carves out a role for the sentiments in ethical judgment. Indeed, the imagination, in particular the “imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers,” is for Rorty the key to creating solidarity. Solidarity, for Rorty, is achieved through a process of coming to see other human beings as “one of us” rather than as “them” (CIS, xvi).

In a curious and ironic way—since Rorty has always been rather dismissive of identity politics—this places a kind of identity at the center of Rorty’s meliorative political endeavor. Enlarging our sense of “we,” our ability to “imaginatively identify” with others, is valued for being the best means for fulfilling the fundamental political directive for late-capitalist liberal-democratic societies: namely, the reduction of all forms of cruelty and suffering through strengthening our moral solidarity with others. If we can be brought to see our
differences as less important than our shared ability to suffer and feel pain, a kind of moral progress toward a more humane social world can be made. “To believe that someone is ‘one of us,’ a member of our moral community,” he argues, linking moral identification to moral action, “is to exhibit readiness to come to their assistance when they are in need.”

The goal of this kind of education, then, is to get “people of different kinds sufficiently well-acquainted with one other” to cultivate the sort of sympathy required to expand the purview of who is included in the phrase “people like us.” By manipulating sentiments, as he puts it, it may be possible to train people to see differences between humans as morally insignificant, and to be able to imagine themselves in the place of the oppressed or less fortunate. For Rorty, it is literature—in particular, the novel and “sad, sentimental stories”—rather than the treatise or sermon, that is best suited to the liberal aims of increasing imaginative identification and making us more sensitive to suffering (TP, 172–79).

The kind of imaginative identification with others necessary for the creation of moral solidarity involves two crucial aspects, both of them pertinent to literature and stories or narratives. If we are to identify with the details of others’ lives, we must first know something about those lives, and indeed that they exist at all. Thus, what Rorty refers to as “detailed descriptions”—concrete accounts about who is being made to suffer—become paramount. Recognizing the importance of these kinds of accounts for Rorty signals a general turn “away from theory and toward narrative.” As he is careful to point out, it is a task “not for theory, but for genres such as the ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and especially the novel” (CIS, xvi). While discoveries about who is suffering can be made in general by “the workings of the free press, free universities, and enlightened public opinion,” Rorty cites works like “Germinal, Black Boy, The Road to Wigan Pier, and 1984” as having been responsible for such enlightening. Also paradigmatic here are the novels of Dickens and Stowe (CIS, 63–64).

The second element entailed in imaginative identification, once previously unnoticed sites of suffering have been brought to our attention, involves actually “sensitizing” us to such suffering. Cultivating sensitivity or an acute awareness toward suffering is a transformative endeavor aimed at nonsufferers—those Rorty often refers to as the rich, relatively leisured members of North Atlantic democracies. Novels can “help us attend to the springs of cruelty in ourselves” and can thus compel us to in essence become better persons (CIS, 95). In Contingency, Rorty makes the case for reading Vladimir Nabokov and George Orwell as exemplary in this regard.

Increasing our sensitivity to suffering is an integral part of the creation of fellow feeling. But it is brought about through a process of self-development,
what Rorty calls “redescribing what we ourselves are like” (CIS, xvi). The way we go about redescribing ourselves is through stories. By telling different stories about ourselves, our past, and our future, we transform ourselves, both as individuals and as a community. The detailed descriptions we encounter in literature and good narrative journalism deepen and enrich these stories, pushing us toward a more tolerant, more inclusive self-understanding that is more respectful of diversity, both individually and collectively. We “reweave our webs of belief and desire in light of whatever new people and books [we] happen to encounter.” Through the ceaseless endeavor of “continual redescription,” of recurrently returning to the self and remaking or re-fashioning it in response to an expanding circle of acquaintance, we try “to make the best selves for ourselves that we can” (CIS, 80–85).

Yet while individual edification or “self-enlargement” appears to be a part of the process by which we come to imaginatively identify with others, the sort of sympathy or fellow feeling with others that allows us to see them as “one of us” is often possible without this self-transformation. That is to say, the requirement of achieving a common moral identity that Rorty makes the sine qua non of any majoritarian political project ultimately trumps the need for individuals to redescribe themselves. Rorty’s sentimental education is more a program for getting the “rich and lucky billion” to redescribe the vocabularies they use to understand others, rather than for prompting them to redescribe themselves.

RORTY AS A MORALIST?

Despite Rorty’s pragmatist eschewal of a theory of the Good and a foundationalist morality, his aims at fostering a common moral identity are essentially those of a moralist: novels for Rorty inculcate a particular set of norms as they forge a moral community. But is it even possible to be an antifoundational moralist, a didacticist who does not believe in Truth? If Freud is a moralist without a message, the first irreligious moralist, as Philip Rieff once argued, then Rorty can be seen as a moralist without a Moralitat. As Jo Burrows observed in an insightful early essay on Rorty, the distinction between the Hegelian notions of Sittlichkeit, as values that are contingently shared, and Moralitat, as those grounded in some more fundamental, universal manner, gets blurred in Rorty’s account. “Contingently held beliefs,” she points out, “can display the same external features, and have the same practical political outcome, as ‘grounded beliefs.’” In other words, it is possible for beliefs to be contingent and nonfoundational on a philosophical level and yet still function politically as de facto “foundations.”
In calling Rorty didactic, I do not mean to suggest an affiliation with the Platonic or didactic model of literature exemplified in the campaign for an education in the moral virtues championed by people like William Bennett. Arguments for literature as a kind of moral or civic education fall into a second, less didactic category, where the aim is less an education in the timeless standards of right and wrong than a program for deepening and enriching human existence. Here ahistorical moral categories play a far subtler role. Notable representatives of this tradition are nineteenth-century Victorians like Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill. To quote Trilling, himself rooted in this same tradition, the classic defense of literary study “holds that, from the effect which the study of literature has upon the private sentiments of a student, there results, or can be made to result, an improvement in the intelligence, and especially the intelligences as it touches the moral life.”

This idea of literature as “public scenes of nondidactic instruction,” as David Bromwich has argued, is at home in a secular and democratic culture. A relatively recent invention which came into being near the end of the eighteenth century, Bromwich points out that the origins of this view of literature lie “in the separation of books from official doctrine, from an enforced consensus, from the patronage of ladies and gentlemen and the supervision of academies.” To put it another way, it coincides with the decline of nonhuman authorities—things like God, Scripture, and Truth. These are of course the very things which “stand beyond history and institutions” that Rorty no longer thinks relevant to a liberal polity where contingency and irony reign.

Surprisingly, though, Rorty passes over this conception of literature, as he does several others, in favor of Kundera’s.

At times, Rorty seems to appeal to literature for less formal reasons, like the old platitude that reading books is a good way to get to know interesting and different people one might not otherwise meet. This view calls to mind the idea, popularized by Iris Murdoch, that the best reason for reading literature is that it can teach us about the lives of others. Prose literature in general, but especially the novel, in her view, reveals an aspect of the world which no other art can reveal: namely, that “other people exist.” Rorty similarly argues that a primary value of literature for democratic life is its capacity for “enlarging our acquaintance,” the process by which individuals “rewave their webs of belief and desire in the light of whatever new people and books they happen to encounter.” But Rorty eschews this conception too; on his view, any “enlarging” that takes place happens only in private, leaving the public commitment to liberalism unchallenged (CIS, 80, 85).

With the view of literature as a means for training the ethical imagination, of which Martha Nussbaum is the best recent example, Rorty shares the notion that literature and other forms of narrative storytelling can improve our
powers of perception. The idiom he prefers is one of increased “sensitivity”—“sensitizing” us to the suffering of others. Still, Rorty’s idea of “imaginative identification” shares much with Nussbaum’s notion of “sympathetic imagining” and the “morality of perception” that she evinces based on the hyper-conscious, extraordinarily gifted perceivers that populate the novels of Henry James (CIS, xvi, 94). As she summarizes, echoing a Rortyan line,

The claim seems to be that if you really vividly experience a concrete human life, imagine what it is like to live that life, and at the same time permit yourself the full range of emotional responses to that concrete life, you will (if you have a good moral start) be unable to do certain things to that person. Vividness leads to tenderness, imagination to compassion.

But, as we shall see, Rorty does not believe the particular “vividness” offered in Jamesian novels is of use in public instruction, arguing that the ambiguity of James’s novels makes them ill suited for moral inculcation.

Most surprising, however, is Rorty’s neglect of Dewey’s arguments on this topic. In a discussion of Matthew Arnold’s notion that “poetry is criticism of life” in *Art as Experience*, Dewey criticizes all such theories that attribute a “direct moral effect and intent to art.” Characteristically, Dewey’s main criticism is that these views pry particular works from the social milieu in which they exist. As a result, they conceive their moral impact in terms of “a strictly personal relation between the selected works and a particular individual.” Rather than imputing a moral intent to the writer and postulating a moral judgment on the part of the reader, Dewey believes art functions as a criticism of life, not directly, but by “disclosure”—that is,

through imaginative vision addressed to imaginative experience (not set to judgment) of possibilities that contrast with actual conditions. A sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized are, when they are put in contrast with actual conditions, the most penetrating “criticism” of the latter that can be made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress.

The view of literature as a form of social criticism expressed in this last passage is the one that meshes most seamlessly with Rorty’s own presuppositions, in particular with his understanding of America in terms of a forward-looking, as yet unrealized but ongoing project, in *Achieving Our Country*. However, to the extent that forging a moral community displaces the portrayal of future possibilities as literature’s primary purpose, on Rorty’s rendering, the critical import of this conception is lost.
RORTY’S USE OF KUNDERA: WROUGHT IRONY

Despite all these common resonances, however, the conception of literature with which Rorty most explicitly aligns himself is not any of the ones just discussed, but that of Kundera. Kundera’s literary criticism, in particular his reflections on the novel, appear to have deeply affected Rorty’s thinking during the mid-1980s. The epigraph to Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is a long quote from Kundera’s eloquent and insightful *The Art of the Novel*, and Rorty credits Kundera with suggesting the view of the novel as the characteristic genre of democracy that he defends in his recent work (EHO, 68). A novelist of ideas whose erudition is wide ranging enough to rival Rorty’s own and well-versed enough in philosophy to characterize the tradition of the novel in terms of a recovery of Heidegger’s notion of “forgotten Being,” Rorty’s interest in Kundera is quite understandable. It is significant, however, that this coincides with Rorty’s most ambitious attempts to think through the implications of his philosophical critique and develop a more positive vision.

Initially, no doubt, Rorty was drawn to Kundera’s work for its anti-Philosophical, with a capital *p*, bent. In stirring passages, Kundera rather explicitly opposes the spirit of the novel to the spirit of philosophy, the vibrant world of unmitigated relativity and multiple, conflicting perspectives to the world of one single Truth and a dictated, unquestionable Reality. Pitting Cervantes against Descartes, Sterne against Leibniz, Kundera’s take on the “wisdom” of the novel is that it contradicts and subverts rather than serves ideological certitudes, “undo[ing] each night the tapestry that the theologians, philosophers, and learned men have woven the day before.”

This of course meshes well with Rorty’s antifoundationalism and critique of the Cartesian-Kantian tradition. Yet Rorty mines Kundera’s thought for more than its negative, critical thrust. He seizes upon Kundera’s notion of the “imaginative world of the novel” and assimilates it to his own ideal of a democratic, liberal utopia. For Kundera, the imaginative realm of human plurality and ambiguity, where “no one owns the truth and everyone has a right to be understood,” is one where tolerance and a loose fraternity reign. The highest value is “respect for the individual, for his original thought, and for his right to an inviolable private life.” In this picture, one perceives the broad outlines of Rorty’s liberal utopia: ambiguity (“contingency” in Rorty’s parlance), tolerance, diversity, fraternity (“solidarity”), and the importance of a firmly delineated and protected private realm.

The curious thing is that Kundera depicts the novel as a subversive force that “contradicts” rather than “serves” “ideological certitudes.” Given, in his own words, Rorty’s “plain ordinary Old Leftism” and the banal politics of
labor unions and signature collection in his liberal utopia, this strikes one as an unlikely perspective for Rorty to embrace. In my view, Rorty gets into trouble because he is attracted to the way Kundera sets the novel in opposition to philosophical certitudes. The part about undermining ideological certitudes is simply overlooked. As is the case with almost all his positive claims, Rorty’s affirmations are best understood against the backdrop of the “Philosophical,” conceptions he is polemizing against.

Kundera’s imaginary paradise is under constant assault from the “agélastes,” those convinced “that the truth is obvious, that all men necessarily think the same thing, and that they themselves are exactly what they think they are.” For Rorty, the villains are the metaphysicians. Kundera’s conflict between the novelist and the agélaste is mirrored by the opposition between the ironist and the metaphysician that Rorty develops in *Contingency*. The essay “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” which dates to the same period, contains Rorty’s strongest defense of the novel over the philosophical treatise as the characteristic genre of democracy. It is also the place where he makes most explicit his reliance on Kundera.

Yet isn’t it strange, and even contradictory, for the pragmatist Rorty to appeal in his discussion of democracy and the novel to a perspective that identifies the political import of the novel as “protecting us from the forgetting of being,” especially given Rorty’s indictments of postmodern thinkers for theoretical oversophistication and needless abstraction and their mistaken belief that such philosophical notions are relevant to the “real” politics of ending people’s suffering, not to mention his own critique of Heidegger’s self-delusions about the relevance of his philosophy for politics?

The lack of fit between Kundera’s ethereal ideas and Rorty’s prosaic liberalism, and the lengths to which Rorty has to go to make them hang together, emerge in his discussion of irony. For Kundera, the ultimate wisdom of the novel and the supreme value in his imaginary realm is “the relativity and ambiguity of things human.” This is what renders the novel incompatible with totalitarianism and imbues it with subversive force in the face of all attempts to constrain and clear away this fundamental relativity and ambiguity, including those of Philosophy. It is also what Rorty seems to find most salutary in Kundera’s vision.

This “relativity” is not unlike what Rorty calls the “radical contingency” of human life. It seems to evoke the values represented by his notion of irony: the figure of the ironist is defined by an awareness of the relativity and ambiguity of her beliefs. If we recall Rorty’s portrait, the ironist has “radical and continuing doubts” about her most fundamental beliefs or “final vocabulary.” She realizes her beliefs are only one set among many others, she does not think they are closer to reality than anyone else’s, and she knows they are
always potentially subject to change. In a word, ironists are aware of their “rootlessness.” Or, one might say, they have a sense of the relativity and ambiguity of things human (CIS, 73–75).

Kundera too makes irony central; the novel, he states, is by definition “the ironic art.” Irony irritates, he says, “not because it mocks or attacks but because it denies us our certainties by unmasking the world as an ambiguity.”

This is why Rorty’s metaphysicians, still clinging to things certain and unambiguous, fear the ironists, and why they brand them “relativists.” Having repudiated the appearance-reality distinction, Rorty might object to Kundera’s use of the word “unmasking” (although it does not appear to bear this strong connotation for Kundera). Yet this effect of irony is precisely why he values it in his anti-Philosophical campaign and why it must be central to his post-Philosophical liberal culture.

But it is also why Rorty insists irony must be circumscribed and carefully confined to the private sphere. Rorty gives several relatively innocuous reasons for this: For one, the idea of a public culture which is ironist would be a culture whose youth were socialized to be “continually dubious about their own process of socialization,” a condition Rorty implies is unhealthy. Moreover, ironists need to have something to have doubts about—his second reason for keeping irony private. But perhaps the greatest cause for concern is that, if allowed to reign in public, irony has the potential to humiliate, for it threatens the cohesiveness of others’—presumably nonironists’—self-understandings, making them feel “futile, obsolete, powerless.” However, Rorty goes to some lengths to show that there is no reason to think ironists are inherently illiberal. As long as individuals are willing to split themselves into public and private parts, there is no reason there cannot be liberal ironists (CIS, 87–91).

On the face of it, there is nothing about this that seems highly objectionable. Yet one cannot help but wonder, if we are to believe that Rorty indeed values human relativity and ambiguity as Kundera does, and if the highest value of the novel for democracy is its incompatibility with the totalitarian universe—its ability to unravel and subvert any attempt to impose singular truths or perspectives on this diversity—why circumscribe irony in this way? Won’t this have the effect of neutralizing irony’s most important qualities?

By Rorty’s own lights, irony represents the recognition that one’s “final vocabulary” is only one of many out there and the abandonment of the idea that the collective search for such vocabularies is convergent, that one true or universal final vocabulary will ever be found. Building on Kundera’s powerful views about the novel, Rorty seems to make the argument that this irony or ambiguity or contingency—the lack of metaphysical certainty and universal validity—is not only central but more conducive to democratic life. But he
then effectively shackles irony to the point where it becomes little more than window dressing (CIS, 73–77).

If indeed Rorty is committed to the human multiplicity that Kundera’s writing on the novel so eloquently portrays, and if the novel is indeed the characteristic genre of democracy and the struggle for freedom, there is no need to limit irony, the novel’s most basic characteristic. Rorty’s concern for not humiliating the metaphysicians, though admirable, seems to me misplaced. If he is interested in arriving at the condition of full democracy where there is nothing which can trump the consensus of its citizens, where “nobody dreams that God, or the Truth, or the Nature of things, is on their side,” as he often asserts, it would appear that undermining the certainty and transcendental appeals of the metaphysicians is a necessary aim, even at the risk of mildly offending them in the process.

It may be that irony cannot be reconciled with a demand for a singular, unified moral community in a way that promotes rather than stifles democratic pluralism. When contrasted with the truly ironic and contingent world of Kundera’s, it strikes one that Rorty fails to show that there is a difference that matters between the rationalist, universally grounded politics of the Enlightenment and his own “post-Philosophical” version.26

THE ETHICS OF THE SENTIMENTAL NOVEL: MORAL INculCATION VS. ETHICAL REFLECTION

As we have seen, at the heart of Rorty’s political project is what he calls “sentimental education.” This notion evokes images of Schiller and Flaubert and an ideal of human fullness attainable through aesthetic education. By “manipulating sentiments” in such a way that individuals “imagine themselves in the shoes of the despised and oppressed,” Rorty thinks the kind of shared moral identity necessary for progress toward greater justice can be created. Of crucial importance here are what Rorty calls “sad, sentimental stories,” but also the novel of moral protest, understood on the model of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (TP, 176–81).27 Although Rorty refers to Stowe’s work with the radical-sounding rhetorical flourish, “novel of moral protest,” Jane Tompkins characterizes it as a “sentimental novel,” rooting it in a small but highly influential—at least in terms of sales figures—cadre of works that dominated the American landscape during the latter part of the nineteenth century.28

This is significant because Rorty briefly discusses Tompkins’s original work on the sentimental novel in his account of sentimental education. What Rorty finds particularly attractive is Tompkins’s characterization of the sentimental novel as “a political enterprise halfway between sermon and social
theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time” (TP, 183n). However, Tompkins goes on to point out that the sentimental novels, like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide World*, were understood by their authors and antebellum critics and readers as “stories,” as opposed to “novels.” Stories function more like biblical parables: they are “written for edification’s sake rather than for the sake of art.” In their attempts to mold public opinion, Tompkins argues, certain works are closer to propaganda than to art. It is this moral or propagandistic function elucidated by Tompkins which Rorty seems to have in mind in his assertions about the public value of middlebrow novels and when he calls for an Arnoldian “religion of literature” in *Achieving Our Country* (AOC, 136).29

It is important to distinguish between narratives that seek to validate a pre-existing set of abstract truths or values and those that aim at the more diffuse and subjective notion of meaning—more specifically, between those that attempt to redeem the sins of the past and those that endeavor to create a space in which those sins can be confronted.30 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* falls into the former set of categories. Yet the rub on the power of fictions is that it is not absolute; it cannot ensure the acceptance of its perspective exactly as intended. Moreover, fictions seldom fail to generate multiple interpretations and to provoke argument. Even if *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did help convince a nation to go to war and free its slaves, as Abraham Lincoln believed, in terms of its own set of aims, it was a complete failure.31 As Tompkins compellingly argues,

Stowe conceived her book as an instrument for bringing about the day when the world would be ruled not by force, but by Christian love. The novel’s deepest aspirations are expressed only secondarily in its devastating attack on the slave system; the true goal of Stowe’s rhetorical undertaking is nothing less than the institutions of the kingdom of heaven on earth.32

To provide a useful vocabulary for this discussion, I suggest we draw a distinction between moral inculcation and ethical reflection to better grasp the political effects of novels. The “ethical,” as literary critic Wayne Booth has argued, suggests a much broader project of “the entire range of effects on the ‘character’ or ‘person’ or ‘self’” of which moral judgments are only a small part.33 It involves individual conceptions of the good life, of how to live well, which may or may not correspond to any given set of moral norms about “right” conduct. Distinguishing between “that which is considered to be good” and “that which imposes itself as obligatory,” as Paul Ricoeur puts it, allows us to clarify the difference between viewing books as capable of sparking the kind of reflection that may lead us to deepen and enrich our lives and looking to books to instruct us on how to live morally.34
It is on this basis that we may distinguish the good life from the moral life. While the moral life entails a set of minimum conditions, a constellation of constraints or codes of behavior, the good life comprises much more—the fulfilled life. This is something which may or may not, or may only to a certain degree, involve living in accordance with accepted conventions and with moral absolutes. Alexander Nehamas has argued that it is the “lesser,” or popular, middlebrow works—including the dominant medium of storytelling in contemporary life, television—that function as tools of moral instruction, not the “great” works: “In acquiring the status of works of high literature, fictional writings tend to lose their role as tools of moral education.” In a comment directed explicitly at the literary-political projects of Rorty and Nussbaum, Nehamas perorates, “I agree that literature has much to teach us about life. But this is how to live, and that in turn is not the same as how to live morally.”

Rorty seems to recognize this kind of distinction when he distinguishes between two different types of books: books relevant to our duties to others and books pertaining to our duties to ourselves. This distinction runs alongside the divide between public and private, which fundamentally structures his ideal liberal polity. Rorty’s case for sentimental education—that is, for the public, moral role of literature like Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Bleak House—rests on the need to promote the values associated with our duties to others. Novels like James’s The Princess Casamassima, the novel of ethical reflection par excellence for Nussbaum, on the other hand, end up in the “private” category, relevant only to our duties to ourselves. These latter duties need not be actively fostered in a liberal democratic polity, but merely permitted to exist, as long as they remain private and do not impinge upon the public work of building a moral community. Such highbrow works for Rorty do edify, but in a way only of interest to those attempting to live in an original and imaginative fashion who are not concerned with their responsibilities to others.

In this way, Rorty constructs an accepted public reading list for liberal democracies and severs this public sensibility from (private) self-transformation. Yet while I agree with Rorty on the point that we should not be compelled by some conception of moral duty to subordinate our private loves with our public responsibilities, distinguishing between moral rules and a larger notion of ethics along the lines I have suggested provides a better route than his rigid divide between public and private.

Ultimately, Rorty’s commitment to what we have called ethical reflection does not hold up. Despite a certain amount of lip service to ethical phronesis, Rorty appeals to literature and stories for the inculcation of moral norms. These are of course not transcendental moral norms. But his historicized conception of morality as a matter of “we-intentions” still implies a kind of universality inasmuch as it rests on collectively agreed upon and shared terms.
To preserve this commonality, Rorty must insulate it from the idiosyncratic attempt to define one’s character. In this way, he reproduces the traditional moral-aesthetic divide he has supposedly jettisoned along with the rest of the Kantian baggage.

On the one hand, Rorty seems to think, like Nussbaum, that reading non-didactic literature, on account of its concreteness and attention to the details of the lives of others, will help make people into better perceivers, and hence transform them such that they act in more just and more tolerant ways. Yet at the same time, Rorty concurs when Nehamas questions the idea that general moral lessons can be extracted from the concrete situations portrayed in such literature, in particular, from the rich, finely woven, detailed situations that characterize the novels of Henry James. Here Rorty seems to undermine his own argument for literature making us more sensitive, conceding, in a response to Nehamas’s criticisms, that

Nehamas is surely right that it is just the specifically highbrow character of [James’s] account, its extraordinary delicacy, and its consequent “incalculable specificity” that makes it relatively useless for purposes of moral instruction. Yet one can surmise from this that it is not the “incalculable specificity” that Rorty objects to, having already touted the importance of detailed descriptions, but rather the lack of clear moral norms in the Jamesian novel. In my view, Rorty attempts to have it both ways. Let me explain.

As far as I can tell, Rorty is genuinely committed to the idea that reading novels can foster the kinds of sensibilities that will not only make us better people but better citizens through individual edification, and, further, that they will promote the moral community that he sees as integral to the pursuit of social justice. But these purposes collide, given Rorty’s conception of one in terms of irony, and the other, a singular moral identity. Rorty’s task, then, given the logic of his commitments, is to make the normative force of literature safe for his liberal, Enlightenment politics.

What this amounts to is that Rorty must subordinate the ethical aim to the moral norm, rather than the other way around. He enlists the ethical force that literature works upon individuals in principle, but in practice its transformative power can only be allowed to function in the direction of producing better liberal citizens. Hence he must distinguish between works which meet this criterion and those which do not—namely, between books for public and for private purposes.

On one level, one may want to respond that Rorty may be justified in this differentiation: different novels surely do different things. But it seems to me that his stance undermines the possibility that literature will produce the
enlarged, more sensitive individuals his politics require. Rorty’s scheme seems to supplant one kind of narrowness with another: it is as if Rorty wants people to be free to pursue their own conceptions of the good life in private and yet still be likely to be compelled by moral compunctions to reduce the unnecessary suffering of others in their public lives, while at the same time leaving their fundamental ethical orientation unchanged. Stated another way, he splits ethics off from politics, whereby the latter becomes the province of a collective moral identity and widely accepted conventions from which individual conceptions of the good life are either excluded altogether or, if admitted, required to coincide with what “we” believe.

THE NOVEL OF MORAL PROTEST: STOWE, DICKENS, AND BALDWIN

Rorty’s appeal to the novel rests on a crucial linkage of stories, or narrative more generally, to the forging of an identity, specifically, to a moral identity. This is true whether we are speaking of personal identity or the collective identity of a community or nation. Rorty believes that it is through stories that human beings give sense to their lives. Through the larger narratives we invoke in response to the question “who are we?” we understand ourselves and our relations to others. He agrees with Alasdair MacIntyre, who says the story of one’s life is always embedded in the stories of the community in which one’s identity is rooted.

From this premise, Rorty arrives at the fundamental insight underlying his political project: if we can alter the larger communal stories upon which we draw to craft our own narratives of self-understanding by replacing parochial and group-based stories with grand, optimistic and inclusive tales of open vistas and possibilities unrealized, then a kind of moral progress can be made toward a more tolerant and more just world. If people revise their moral identities—what he calls their “final vocabularies”—in light of whatever new people and books they encounter, this becomes a way of achieving moral progress (CIS, 80–85).

In short, stories are for Rorty political interventions. Their political value resides in the fact that the telling of stories both about episodes in a nation’s past and about the kind of future for which it can hope is for Rorty the essential prerequisite of collective self-transformation. The key premise here is that “hope is the condition of growth” (PSH, 120). In Achieving Our Country, Rorty likewise casts hope as the precondition of engaged action and argues that national pride is a necessary condition for collective self-improvement. His assessment of the somewhat debased and demoralized state of the con-
temporary left provides a case in point of the importance of stories for politics. He holds that it is the lack of “inspiring stories” which is at the root cause of the predicament. Such stories are precisely what is required to “persuade the nation to exert itself” (AOC, 3–15).

Distinct from his view of novels as vehicles of moral inculcation, this reading of Rorty’s intentions suggests a conception closer to the broader notion of ethical reflection discussed above: the idea that we tell stories in order to change—to refashion our identities and remake ourselves by deepening or enriching our existence. Securing a place for this broader transformative role is in my view essential for an adequate account of the politics of stories. However, it is not clear that such a place really exists in Rorty’s picture: his view of sentimental education as accommodating individuals to a fixed and monolithic moral identity elides this transformative potential. That is, the adoption of a common moral identity does not seem to necessarily entail self-transformation. This is the fundamental claim or assumption I want to examine. If we accept that stories or literature can foster political renewal or collective transformation, can the kind of middlebrow, “sentimental” novels, or novels of moral protest, Rorty espouses have a transformative effect if divorced from what Booth referred to as “the entire range of effects on the ‘character’ or ‘person’ or ‘self’”?

Making the case that Rorty does in fact leave room for the idea that we tell stories in order to change requires something of a sympathetic reading. That the transformative role of stories is indeed part of his design rests on the idea that the moral relevance of books resides in their ability to “alter one’s sense of what is possible and important” (CIS, 82). Literature fosters reflection on the possible, on what we can hope. This forward-looking orientation is a crucial ingredient of collective self-transformation. Of this, Rorty is convinced: “You cannot urge political renewal on the basis of fact. You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become” (AOC, 101).

Yet the exclusive focus on hope and future possibilities distances his perspective from the facts of political reality. We can illustrate this point by returning to the case of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Although he has not devoted much space to substantive discussion of the work, Rorty repeatedly cites Stowe’s novel as representative of his program of sentimental education (EHO, 80, passim; TP, 181–84). He identifies *Uncle* as exemplifying “the novel of moral protest,” the genre “most closely associated with the struggle for freedom and equality,” which he sees as the most enduring legacy of the West (EHO, 68). To be sure, the novel contains the major qualities prized by his ideal of sentimental education: detailed descriptions of distant others’ lives, a capacity to foster identificatory states of sympathy and compassion constitutive of a
democratic moral community, and the moral force necessary to compel bringing about an end to the injustice.48 Yet this valorization of *Uncle* as the democratic literary intervention par excellence must be reconciled with James Baldwin’s scathing critique of both *Uncle* itself and the overall genre of the novel of moral protest.49 Insofar as Rorty positions himself as something of a spiritual heir to Baldwin’s political project of “achieving our country,” the latter’s take is of particular relevance.

On Baldwin’s view, the sentimental novel of moral protest fails for two reasons. First, it fails to challenge the conception of reality buttressing the status quo: in this case, the “reality” of black inferiority and the identities of privileged whiteness it makes possible. The existence of this whiteness-privileging reality is precisely what Baldwin thinks keeps white Americans from facing the compromised parts of their selves and from being forced either to change or to abandon their hollow rhetoric and stated American ideals of freedom and equality. In short, it is a recipe for lip service and the hollow invocation of ideals that keeps us from enacting real change.

The second reason it fails is due to what Baldwin calls the sentimental novel’s “rejection of life.” Taking a view which calls to mind the ugly and frightening scenarios depicted in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, Baldwin argues that the mask of self-righteous sentimentality often conceals a deeper, underlying “aversion to experience” and a “fear of life” not unlike “that spirit of medieval times which sought to exorcise evil by burning witches” and “that terror which activates a lynch mob.”50 Turning to *Uncle*, Baldwin contends that by suppressing human complexity in its reduction of existence into thin, stereotypical caricatures, its effect is to deny the resources—the ambiguity, paradox, and complexity of existence—necessary for changing both ourselves, black and white, and our situation. For Baldwin, the business of the novelist is to portray a vaster reality—namely, the “beauty, dread, and power” of the human being—which gives the lie to fictive realities upon which such resentment depends. In the process, it cannot avoid doing what Dewey most highly valued in art, what makes it “more moral than moralities”—that is, breaking the crust of convention. These complexities and ambiguities, then, are central to Baldwin’s political project of achieving our country.

I recount Baldwin’s perspective here to point out that Rorty’s conception of the political relevance of literature is vulnerable to the same criticisms Baldwin directs at *Uncle*. In the first place, Rorty makes “the fictive reality for which we hope” ultimately more central than actual reality. Because the notion of reality has at best an ambiguous and uncertain status for Rorty, inasmuch as his antirepresentationalism undermines traditional categories of truth and fact, he renders the ability to contest or criticize that reality virtually impossible. And, second, because of the way Rorty circumscribes
CONCLUSION

Stories are a double-edged sword. Unabashed advocates of a heavy-handed education in the timeless virtues, like the neo-Platonist Bennett, appeal to stories as bearers of eternal and unassailable values, while postmodern purveyors of irony and ambiguity turn to them for the critical, subversive power to undermine and expose the dictates of universalist and essentialist values as particular and subjective. If there can be no ultimate resolution of the contradictory force of stories in either direction, and if no camp can claim stories finally and inexorably as their own, the task becomes identifying in any given account in which direction the ethical force of a story cuts. The crucial issue I have tried to underscore is whether stories are employed in the name of value systems that have a monolithic or homogeneous goal at their core, or as a way of preserving and living with the fundamental ambiguity and diversity of human life.

Rorty’s account of the role of novels in a democratic culture contrasts sharply with Dewey’s argument about art and social criticism. If we recall from our earlier discussion, Dewey’s main insight was to underscore the way imaginative projections of future possibilities perform the critical function of exposing the limitations of present conditions. In a famous passage, Dewey made the startling claim that “art is more moral than moralities.” The latter, on his view, “are, or tend to become, consecrations of the status quo, reflections of custom, reinforcements of the established order.”

This seems to me a good description of the prime function of art and imaginative thought in a democratic culture. If we were to put it in the terms of our earlier discussion, we would characterize it as the “ethical” function of art—sparking critical reflection on the world and the place of our conception of the good life in it, but also on the kinds of selves we hope to be. On Rorty’s rendering, however, this function is transmogrified into the moral task of bringing us in line with a common identity and shared public values in a way that leaves our selves ultimately unchanged. The kinds of novels capable of breaking the crust of convention are privatized, effectively safeguarding liberal conventions from criticism. Baldwin’s pointed criticisms of the novel of moral protest also remind us that novels, or art in general, can have, apart
from the moral and ideological function of “lesser” or middlebrow or sentimental art, a critical function—nay, that they must have such a function if they are to be of any positive social value at all toward effecting collective self-transformation and be anything more than a way of entrenching static, monolithic identities.

Yet this does not address the fundamental questions raised at the outset of this chapter. Can the types of novels that exercise a critical function promote political action? Are its readers likely to be inspired to remedy injustice? Such novels may lead to self-reflection and a thoughtful appreciation of the ambiguity and complexity of human life, but will all this self-enlarging but ponderous rumination so preoccupy us that action fails to take place? Is Rorty right when he argues that such ironic questioning must be restricted to private life because it will generate the pernicious political attitude that “there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty,” like aesthetic purity or authenticity?

One may be tempted to respond that perhaps different novels do do different things and indeed serve different political purposes, both of which are beneficial to democratic life. This view suggests that there are two modes of democratic transformation, and it underscores a fundamental tension between the individual and collective levels that is as old as democracy itself: on the one hand, change brought about through collective action by a loosely organized demos united by a commitment to greater social justice and propelled by shared moral sentiments and emotions, and on the other, change on an individual level, where through critical reflection on ourselves and our world we transform ourselves into enlarged, more tolerant, and more virtuous citizens than we were originally socialized to be. Framed in this way, Rorty’s distinction between duties to ourselves and duties to others appears quite useful. Didactic, sentimental, middlebrow novels that inspire action rather than self-reflection serve the goal of collective demotic change quite well, for what is required here is action-generating emotions not critical questioning and potentially paralyzing ambiguity. By contrast, the more complex, highbrow repositories of ironical ambiguity we read in our spare time are very well suited to individual change through critical self-reflection.

As attractive as this bifurcated picture may appear, I want to argue that we resist it. Citizens of democracy surely do read different kinds of novels, and these different novels serve different purposes for different people, some critical and questioning, others didactic and moral. Novels, like art in general, can be put to many uses, both radical and reactionary. As long as both types exist, one is tempted to argue, democracies will be capable of generating change from within. However, to the extent that the actions we take in the public realm to collectively alter our world are severed from our efforts to
transform ourselves, the power of the *demos* may end up yielding little more than a defense of the status quo.

As Dewey and others, like Sheldon Wolin, have argued, democracy is more than a form of government: it is a way of life, a “mode of being.” The kind of renewal from within that democratic polities are capable of, if only sporadically and ephemerally, is only possible when it entails the transformation of individuals’ self-understandings as well as change on a formal or institutional level. Although he did not do enough to link his notion of art disrupting unreflectively accepted conventions with democratic ways of living, Dewey’s conception comes closest to doing justice to democracy’s potential for internal criticism. It can be improved further by combining his idea of “imaginative vision” of unrealized possibilities with a conception of what Stanley Cavell has called in an Emersonian spirit, “perfectionist” change; demotic transformation can be fused with individual transformation. In the end, as Melissa Orlie has nicely put it, “the conditions of political action cannot be supplied by the individual alone. But neither can the conditions of politics be created without individual action.”

Rorty may be right that certain novels do less than others to further our sense of injustice and the felt need to end it. Yet this is not remedied by restricting the reading list in a democratic society but by cultivating particular ethical practices, or “habits,” in pragmatist parlance. Any defense of the novel as a vehicle of democratic progress must therefore begin at the level of individual selves. Although Rorty occasionally notes the importance of the development of individual habits of action, his account of the novel’s relation to democracy, skewed as it is toward forging a public moral community, divorces the transformative possibilities of books from the selves who read them and thereby runs the risk of cultivating participation in emotional states of fellow feeling—even if fueled by a sense of injustice—that result in no concrete changes at the level of individual selves.

**NOTES**


2. Many are familiar with James’s statement that “the pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable.” However, for James it is not a method intended solely for philosophers for settling their disputes, but for everyday individuals to cut through endless philosophical debates so they could determine which view better fit their own personal vision. Rorty’s understanding of philosophy shares more with Peirce, who understood pragmatism as

3. See “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” in *TP*, 167–85. Here Rorty explicitly connects his antifoundationalist project and the project of strengthening community: “The best, and probably the only argument for putting foundationalism behind us is the one I have already suggested: it would be more efficient to do so, because it would let us concentrate our energies on manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education,” (176).


6. In general, these views are given their fullest expression in *CIS*, but see also “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens” in *EHO*. On the political importance of making our sense of *we* more expansive, see “Justice as a Larger Loyalty.”

7. Rorty’s mention of the “comic book” in this context might strike some as odd, but an excellent example of the kind of thing Rorty may have in mind is the pioneering work of Joe Sacco, a writer whose comic-strip journalism, for lack of a better description, contains the qualities exalted by Rorty: detailed descriptions and narratives that sensitize us to the suffering of others. See for example his excellent *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992–95* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2000).

8. For Rorty’s discussions of Nabokov and Orwell, see chapters 7 and 8.


10. Jo Burrows, “Conversational Politics: Rorty’s Pragmatist Apology for Liberalism,” in *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)*, ed. Alan R. Malachowski (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 328. Burrows concludes that “despite his protests to the contrary, Rorty is peddling liberal ideology.” However, noting that Rorty could simply admit to this “banal” charge and point out, a la Churchill, that liberalism, given the alternatives, is not such a bad system to be peddling, she takes a different tack and interprets Rorty’s views from the perspective of a “political contender”—someone who “has good reason to contend for (say) a new political set-up”—in order to illustrate how Rorty is “surreptitiously narrowing down the options” (331–34, passim).

11. Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965), 183–86. It is hard to find a better summary statement of this view of literature and its relevance to political life than Trilling’s: “To the carrying out of the job of criticizing the liberal imagination, literature has a unique relevance, not merely because so much of modern literature has explicitly directed itself upon politics, but more importantly because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.” See his *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1950), xii–xiii. For the didactic argument, see William Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*


13. Rorty suggests that “we try to get to the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat everything—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance” (CIS, 22).


15. See Martha Nussbaum, “Finely Aware and Richly Responsible,” in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). At the time, Nussbaum seemed to claim that the imagination itself is intrinsically ethical. However, when pressed about this issue and the question of whether good reading necessarily leads to good living, she responded in the negative and introduced a helpful distinction: she now says that she is concerned with “the morality of the act of reading, not the morality that is caused by reading.” Her claims about the ethical content of the literary imagination involve what happens during the time when one is reading. There are many things, she points out, that may prevent one from acting ethically in one’s life. See the interview in Richard Kearney, ed., *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 127–28. Nevertheless, her conjunction of “finely aware” and “richly responsible” seems to require such a connection if it is to have any force. By contrast, Rorty is more concerned with the latter—the common morality or solidarity of “we-ness” that may result through an indirect route from reading.


18. It is not clear that Kundera has ever described the novel in these terms. Kundera undoubtedly paints the spirit of the novel as hostile to the single-Truth, absolutist views of the world that often butts totalitarian regimes. Rorty associates this spirit with the kind of “democratic utopia” he advocates in his own work, but there is little evidence that Kundera sees it in this same light. Although obviously committed in a deep and fundamental way to individual freedom of thought, Kundera’s positive claims on behalf on the novel tend to be sweeping, abstract, and ethereal, rather than a defense of the novel as supportive of democracy in practical terms. Unlike Rorty, he has no particular political program to promote. This is not to say Kundera’s work is not “political”; on the contrary, as someone who lived much of his adult life in the shadow of a totalitarian regime or in exile from it and had his own works banned, the cast of his character has been forged in the fire of politics. But this is not politics in the narrow, partisan, or ideological sense. Kundera’s is a politics that transcends borders, parties, and platforms, a politics that traffics in the highest human values and obtains at the most fundamental level of human existence. If there is a politics inherent in Kundera’s writing—a “politics of the novel,” if you will—it is first and foremost a
politics of the self, concerned with deepening and enriching human existence by over-
coming and dismantling the forces that seek to limit and truncate it from the outside.

19. Ian Shapiro discerns in Rorty’s work since PMN a “journey from philosophical
diagnosis to political prescription” characterized by the effort to “describe a polit-
ics he thinks we should embrace once we wholeheartedly reject foundationalist
presuppositions,” in Political Criticism (Berkeley: University of California Press,
1990), 20.


22. Richard Rorty, Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies: A Conversation with
Richard Rorty, ed. Derek Nystrom and Kent Puckett (Charlottesville, VA: Prickly

23. Kundera, The Art of the Novel, 159. Kundera borrows the term agélastes from
Rabelais for those who do not laugh. The reference is to a Jewish proverb that states,
“Man thinks, God laughs,” which Kundera believes inspired Rabelais’ Gargantua and
Pantagruel—on his view, the first great European novel. God laughs because man
thinks and the truth eludes him. From this, Kundera erects his opposition between the
novel’s spirit of humor and the “theoretical spirit” of philosophy.

24. The raison d’etre of the novel is to keep man’s concrete being, his “world of
life” or Lebenswelt, “under permanent light and to protect us from the forgetting of
being,” in Kundera, The Art of the Novel, 17, 3–6. For Rorty’s critique of Heidegger,
see AOC, 73–107, and CIS, 122–40.


26. As Jo Burrows put it, Rorty “is concerned to drive home the difference between
subscribing to liberalism simply because it is the ‘best pragmatic option,’ given the
historical circumstances, and subscribing to it because it can somehow be shown to be
‘absolutely correct’ on philosophical grounds,” in “Conversational Politics,” 325.

27. The idea of sentimental education, of course, emerged as a reaction to the nar-
rowness of neo-Kantian, rationalist conceptions of moral education in the early nine-
teenth century. This is significant, since Rorty’s view of social justice rests on appeals
to sentiment rather than rationality, the key component of the Kantian view. However,
the more direct forebear of Rorty’s politics of sentiment is David Hume.

1790–1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). In this refreshing work,
Tompkins attempts to recover the “sentimental novels” of Stowe, Susan Warner,
Charles Brockden Brown, and James Fenimore Cooper from the subordinate status
they occupy as a result of the dominant “American renaissance” perspective which
cast them as overly effeminate, sensationalistic, and propagandizing. Tompkins
adeptly portrays the deep moral and political force inherent in these works, charac-
terizing the sentimental novel in general as “an act of persuasion aimed at defining
social reality.” In particular, she highlights the critique of American society she iden-
tifies in these novels, particularly Stowe’s, as “a monumental effort to reorganize
[American] culture from the woman’s point a view” (124).

29. Tompkins, Sentimental Designs, 126, 149, 186.

31. Upon meeting Stowe in 1863, Lincoln greeted her as “the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war,” quoted in Alfred Kazin in his introduction to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), ix.

32. Tompkins, Sentimental Designs, 141.

33. Wayne C. Booth, The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 8. Though sometimes used interchangeably, the idea that ethics can be distinguished from morality has gained considerable currency in the past two decades. A number of pioneering works have dissented from prevailing Kantian assumptions long dominant in moral philosophy: see, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). One would also have to include in this category Rorty’s Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, which argued that the entire edifice on which Kant’s universalized morality rested was “optional.” In different ways, these variegated works affirm the point that morality is a subset of ethics, one that depicts a particular constellation of values endemic to Western Christian societies. Ethics—as opposed to morality—as most of these works at some point come around to asserting, is best understood in terms of Socrates’ question, “How should one live?” Similar claims have been made by literary critics interested in reviving ethical criticism, like Booth.


35. Alexander Nehamas, “What Should We Expect from Reading? (There Are Only Aesthetic Values),” Salmagundi 111 (Summer 1996): 31–32. To illustrate this argument, Nehamas recalls the lengths to which Plato went to exclude Homer and the tragic poets from the Republic. On one level, Homer and Aeschylus have survived, so perhaps Plato’s efforts failed. However, the reason Plato’s concerns strike us today as unnecessary and unfounded is that Homer and Aeschylus have survived as “paradigms of high culture and great art,” that is, as “mere literature”; they no longer serve the direct moral and ideological roles they occupied in the fourth century BC, to which Plato reacted.


37. In the essay where he refers to Tompkins’s work, Rorty frames this distinction even more explicitly as one of “public utility” vs. “private perfection” (TP, 183–84). He sees this distinction as paralleling one drawn by Tompkins between the sentimental novelists like Stowe and Warner, on the one hand, and Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville, on the other. However, while Rorty cites this distinction approvingly, for Tompkins it is actually the pejorative differentiation her entire work is designed
to undermine. Tompkins argues that the social criticism inherent in the sentimental novelists—heretofore overlooked, largely because they are rooted in a woman’s perspective debased by twentieth-century critics as overeffeminate and trivial—is far more devastating than that of the celebrated trio of Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville. Rorty, it appears, fails to see this point.

38. In his essay on Nabokov in CIS, Rorty cites Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert as a representative case of this kind of aesthetic self-preoccupation. However, by taking Humbert’s case of the “cruel aesthete” as exhaustive of the possibilities of aesthetic self-creation, Rorty is led to grossly overgeneralize the dangers inherent in such projects. In his zeal to protect the moral community he wants to foster in public from disruptive incursions by self-absorbed aesthetes or strong poets who refuse to remain private, Rorty elides the possibility of self-actualization in public life by democratic citizens, a possibility crucial for to the effective functioning of a vibrant democracy for thinkers like Emerson and Dewey, Rorty’s putative intellectual and pragmatist forebears.

39. Rorty says that it is only for those “lucky Christians from whom the love of God and of other human beings are inseparable, or revolutionaries who are moved by nothing save the thought of social justice” that duties to self and duties to others coincide—these are the two types of (potentially nonliberal) character Rorty seeks to preempt via his public private split (PSH, 13).

40. Rorty borrows this term, and his understanding of morality and moral obligation more generally, from Wilfrid Sellars (CIS, 59, 190). In Sellars’s view, the core meaning of immoral behavior is “the sort of thing we don’t do.” Rorty initially claimed that our sense of solidarity with others is strongest when we identify with them as part of some particular—that is, less than universal—community, as “one of us,” whether it be as Americans, as liberals, or the like. More recently, however, he seems to have abandoned this view, suggesting that we replace the ideas of justice and universal moral obligation with the idea of—he now calls it “loyalty” rather than “solidarity” (he may be following the sometimes pragmatist Josiah Royce here)—“loyalty to a very large group—the human species.” See “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” 48.

41. Nehamas lumps Nussbaum and Rorty together in his criticism of accounts that impute to literary works the capacity to teach us to live morally. However, I think this criticism applies more to Rorty than to Nussbaum—that is, more to the kind of moral instruction Rorty looks to literature for than to the agent-centered capacity for ethical deliberation that is the object of Nussbaum’s thought. Nehamas raises a second concern with regard to Rorty and Nussbaum about whether the kind of sensitivity and acute powers of perception both Nussbaum and Rorty praise are in themselves sufficient to be considered moral virtues. Sensitivity and its opposite, a kind of moral obtuseness, he argues, are in themselves neither good nor evil. “Whether they are to be pursued or avoided depends on the particular use one is to make of them, the conditions under which they will function in specific circumstances, what they will produce in conjunction with other features,” in Nehamas, “What Should We Expect from Reading?” 55–56.

43. Although it may not appear so on my rendering, Rorty’s position—developed at length in CIS—is actually a very thoughtful and ingenious compromise that is not without a certain appeal. I for one have never been convinced by his claim that people can (and do) divide themselves in such a way that they can be “in alternate moments, Nietzsche and J. S. Mill” (CIS, 85). More recently he has curtailed his example somewhat to read, “There is no reason why one cannot be a revolutionary activist on weekdays and a reader of John Ashbery on weekends,” in “Duties to the Self,” 65. Still, it seems to me that people simply do not work this way, at least to the extent that they have any coherence to their existence. Who, after having read Nietzsche, is able to embrace liberal democratic politics as usual without, at the very least, looking askance at it?

44. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221; Rorty, “Ethics without Principles,” in PSH, esp. 76–79; and “Justice as a Larger Loyalty.” Rorty discusses MacIntyre’s views in “Freud and Moral Reflection,” in EHO, 157–62; and briefly in “Justice as a Larger Loyalty.” The moral thrust and edifying force of stories arises from the fact that in our, in MacIntyre’s phrase, “narrative quest” to forge a character and an identity, we draw on the narratives we know, whether encountered in literature, in stories, or in religious parables. “I can only answer the [ethical] question ‘What am I to do?’,” he argues, “if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” in *After Virtue*, 208–16. Rorty takes a similar view in the above passages.

45. Rorty has been talking about stories and narratives, largely as part of a more general shift from theory to narrative, since CIS. AOC is a good source for understanding Rorty’s political use of stories. Other places he discusses the relevance of stories include “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality” in TP and “Justice as a Larger Loyalty.”

46. The relation of the vocabularies of political theory to the “facts” of political reality is complex. In my view, Sheldon Wolin’s notion of presenting facts in a “corrected fullness” is a better conception than Rorty’s notion of redescriptions in terms of future possibilities because the former retains its connection to the reality of the present. Cf.: “The ideas and categories we use in political analysis are not of the same order as institutional ‘facts,’ nor are they ‘contained,’ so to speak, in the facts. They represent, instead, an added element, something created by the political theorist. Concepts like ‘power,’ ‘authority,’ ‘consent,’ and so forth are not real ‘things,’ although they are intended to point to some significant aspect about political things. Their function is to render political facts significant,” in Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960), 5.

47. “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens” is a key essay for understanding Rorty’s view of literature, written in the late 1980s around the time he was working on CIS. It is also noteworthy for Rorty’s mind-boggling effort to read Dickens as “a sort of anti-Heidegger”—an essayistic tour de force only someone like Rorty could even attempt. See also “Human Rights” in TP.

48. Here Rorty’s thinking is supported by Tompkins’s claim that the novel “helped convince a nation to go to war and to free its slaves,” in Sensational Designs, 141.