Uses of Metaphor: Richard Rorty’s Literary Criticism and the Poetics of World-Making

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The so-called revival of pragmatism since the 1980s gained much of its cultural momentum in literature departments that welcomed Richard Rorty’s philosophical antitradiotionalism as a refreshing contribution to contemporary theory. And yet, Rorty’s authority as a literary scholar has remained ambiguous. While literary critics tend to appreciate his turn to narrative—as an alternative to abstract theorizing—they often find it harder to accept his narrative ethics. As a result (and in contrast to the most prominent pragmatists in the literary field), Rorty has been accused of a backward-looking approach to literary artwork: a program of “literature as ethical reflection,” according to Lawrence Buell, that “looks suspiciously like old-fashioned value thematics,” a “pre-modern” approach that renders “aesthetic sensibility ultimately subservient to the goal of moral improvement.” But why would a declared postmetaphysical pragmatist revert to premodern reading practices? Critics have invoked the specter of neoconservatism, and pondered personal deficiencies in Rorty’s literary sensibility: such as a “puritan” distrust of aesthetic pleasure, inattentiveness to the intricate “sound and rhythm of poetic language,” or a habit of “philosophizing” literary texts by reducing them to propositional statements.

It seems that such implausible explanations result from translating Rorty’s pragmatist approach into literary studies without taking into account his view of literature as world-making. The concept of world-making as metaphoric redescription (in Rorty’s terms) is arguably at odds with the conceptual coordinates of Kantian aesthetics that continue to shape contemporary views of the literary. We tend to feel so much at home with these coordinates (and a critical repertoire that questions them) that it is easy to misunderstand Rorty’s revision, and to place him where he does not belong: in a quasi-formalist literary ethics that emerged in contemporary literary departments, often in response to the pioneering work of Martha Nussbaum.
I. Literary Ethics and the “Neglect of Form”

The family resemblances between Rorty and Nussbaum are well known. Trained philosophers disillusioned with their field, both have expressed an aversion to philosophical inquiry based on the idea of a moral reason independent of human emotion and circumstance. They also share the conviction that the novel’s thick description of human particularities offers richer explorations of ethical complexities than the theoretical treatise. But apart from disagreements on epistemology, they have markedly different concepts of the literary imagination.

Nussbaum views her program of literature as ethical reflection as a stand against formalist traditions. Any explanation of “how literary theory lost [its] practical dimension,” she says, should “include the influence of Kant’s aesthetics; of early twentieth-century formalism; of the New Criticism.” Nussbaum’s critique of the disinterested artwork dovetails with a broad consensus, in the 1980s, against midcentury notions of literariness (as the inner form of autonomous aesthetic objects). But in contrast to more thoroughly antiformalist theoretical trends, Nussbaum tends to choose a middle way in her revisionist readings of canonical authors. She cautions her readers that what gives “ethical writing about literature a bad name” is partly the “neglect of literary form” by some of its practitioners.8 She holds that a successful ethical turn in literary theory needs to pay attention to how “form and content shape one another.”9

This dialectical view characterizes some of Nussbaum’s best work, especially her readings of Henry James, probably her most persuasive case for a turn to ethics in literary studies. They have helped to encourage a literary ethics that considers literariness and ethico-moral insight as two sides of the same coin, implying, for instance, that somehow Henry James’s superior narrative skills contribute to the moral depth of his vision, which depth makes him all the more literary. In Nussbaum’s terms, the ethical imagination in The Golden Bowl is “finely tuned” precisely because it emerges from “a fine work of art” whose stylistic sophistication defies paraphrase into the “flat” language of moral philosophy.10 Moral intelligence is thus understood as a heightened perception of complexity, and ethical progress becomes a question of improving our aesthetic powers of discrimination. In a characteristic passage, Nussbaum argues that since artistic sensibilities like James’s possess greater “visual or auditory acuity” and “developed their faculties more finely,” they “can make discriminations of color and shape (of pitch and timbre) that are unavailable to the rest of us,” and consequently they “miss less . . . of what is to be heard or seen in a landscape, a symphony, a painting.” This makes such artists our best allies (“fellow fighter[s],” “guide[s]”) in “the war against moral obtuseness.”11
Conceiving “moral obtuseness” as lack of perceptual refinement implies a literary ethics indebted to romantic types of formalism that, far from turning away from Kant, adapts his terms to the conditions of modern professionalism. Kantians of the first generation were already anxious to disprove the suspicion that pursuing technologies of beauty (independent of theology and politics) was merely a sophisticated form of diversion. Nussbaum’s point that “literary theory” must have a “practical dimension” is reasonable enough, but it is also a major concern in Friedrich Schiller’s Letters on Aesthetic Education of 1793—a treatise that memorably begins with Schiller’s reflection on whether he “betrays a culpable indifference to the welfare of society” by philosophizing about aesthetics at a time when the “fate of humanity” plays itself out in Paris. Schiller’s well-known answer (“it is through beauty that we arrive at freedom”)12 anticipates the dialectical terms on which Nussbaum’s ethical turn is based (that “the aesthetic is ethical and political”).13

II. Metaphoric Worlds

Rorty’s literary ethics evades this dialectic in a way that is easily misunderstood. When critics accuse him of neglecting the intricacies of literary form—Christoph Demmerling, for instance, speaks of a tendency to “translate” complex literary artworks into “propositional” theses (reducing Proust to the thematics of self-creation, or Nabokov and Orwell to elucidations of human cruelty)—Rorty rejoins that it is unhelpful to distinguish between philosophical texts as content based and literary ones as aesthetically pleasing. “I am not sure,” he says in a reply to Demmerling, “whether the Phenomenology of Spirit is innovative because of its content or its form,” and “the same uncertainty plagues me with regard to Nabokov’s Pale Fire.”14 Contesting the form-content distinction is a staple of the post-Kantian critical repertoire, but Rorty’s argument has less familiar premises: it proceeds from a pragmatist view of art as imaginative social practice and (more specifically) a Davidsonian theory of metaphor as world-disclosure.15

Donald Davidson’s non-representational account of language destabilizes the distinction between true and false descriptions of reality. Since in this view there is no escape from metaphor, scientific revolutions are “metaphoric redescriptions” of nature rather than “insights into the intrinsic nature of nature.”16 Thus “intellectual and moral progress” should be viewed “as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are” (CIS 9). This means that philosophy and science are reconceived as literary genres and, by the same logic, the literary imagination is elevated to become the main
source of our political and ethical realities (a world-making power rather than a mere technology of beauty). The pragmatist background of this revision can be traced to John Dewey’s views on the interpenetration of aesthetic experience and social practice: In *Experience and Nature* (1925), Dewey insisted that “knowledge and propositions which are the products of thinking, are works of art, as much so as statues and symphonies,” not simply because “science is made by man for man” but because, “like any other work of art,” the production of knowledge “confers upon things traits and potentialities which did not previously belong to them.” And in *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey interprets Matthew Arnold’s dictum that “poetry is a criticism of life” to mean that art criticizes life “by disclosure, through imaginative vision addressed to imaginative experience (not to set judgment) of possibilities that contrast with actual conditions.”18 Following Dewey, Rorty replaces more narrow or formalist definitions of literariness (based on the presence of certain stylistic qualities) with a more inclusive concept of literature that covers “just about every sort of book which might conceivably have a moral relevance” in the sense that it “might conceivably alter one’s sense of what is possible and important” (*CIS* 82). Such formulations have affinities to romantic notions of the poetic visionary—as Shaftesburyian second-maker, Emersonian prophet, or Shelleyan legislator—whose inventive powers baffle us into adopting new ways of seeing the world. (Rorty occasionally uses Harold Bloom’s concept of the “strong poet,” which he broadens to include novelists, philosophers, and scientists). Yet in contrast to romantic or Bloomian views, Rorty’s literary theory is thoroughly contextualist:

We call something “fantasy” rather than “poetry” or “philosophy” when it revolves around metaphors which do not catch on with other people—that is, around ways of speaking or acting which the rest of us cannot find a use for. . . . Conversely, when some private obsession produces a metaphor which we *can* find a use for, we speak of genius rather than of eccentricity or perversity. The difference between genius and fantasy is not the difference between impresses which lock on to something universal, some antecedent reality out there in the world or deep within the self, and those which do not. Rather, it is the difference between idiosyncracies which just happen to catch on with other people—happen because of the contingencies of some historical situation, some particular need which a given community happens to have at a given time. To sum up, poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need. (*CIS* 37)19

This emphasis on contingency also brings to the fore Rorty’s difference with classic pragmatism: as many critics have noted, he follows Dewey’s conception of art as providing “imagined alternatives” to existing conditions,20 but turns away from the idea of “experience” (aesthetic or religious) as a ground of inquiry.21
III. Public and Private Worlds

Rorty’s concept of literature becomes clearer and more coherent if we consider the effects of his revisionary moves. First, his blurring of traditional distinctions between cognitive, moral, and aesthetic domains dissolves familiar genre classifications, leaving us with a broad category of “books.” In a second step, this imaginary library is then reordered with three new sets of distinctions, between (1) transformative and conventional metaphors, (2) private versus public ways of world-making, and (3) literary exploration of private versus public acts of cruelty. Rorty justifies these distinctions pragmatically and politically, without recourse to the epistemological arguments that underlie traditional moral-aesthetic-cognitive triads (or to the experiential ground of Dewey’s aesthetics).

Since *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty’s literary criticism has centered on the distinction between “private” and “public” metaphors, between “books” that contribute to the working out of individual “self-creation” and “private autonomy” (*CIS* xiii), and those that engage with human solidarity and encourage the “shared, social effort . . . to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel” (*CIS* xiv). The public-private opposition follows from Rorty’s conviction that it is impossible—not in theory, or in epistemological terms, but in lived social practice under specific historical conditions—to reconcile such values as justice, charity, and social solidarity with individual desires for self-realization, individual interests, and personal salvation. Rorty’s philosophical skepticism (about the Enlightenment claim that self-realization and commitment to justice coincide in practical reason) dovetails with his optimistic views about the practical viability of what he calls “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism,”22 the belief that modern liberal democracies can function well without common ethical values beyond a commitment to a Rawlsian procedural justice (“a just and free society” may let “its citizens be as privatistic, ‘irrationalist,’ and aestheticist as they please” as long as they cause “no harm to others” [*CIS* xiv]).

The extent of Rorty’s trust in the liberal harm principle can be seen in his discussion of Clifford Geertz’s Tanner lectures, on the increasing challenges of global cultural diversity. When Geertz suggests, in 1985, “that the world is coming at each of its local points to look more like a Kuwaiti bazaar than like an English gentleman’s club,”23 Rorty responds that an ideal multicultural “world order” based on the principles of liberal democracy might well include both extremes: a public “bazaar” surrounded by numerous “exclusive clubs.” The functioning of this social space does not depend on its citizens’ reciprocal recognition of their respective cultural values. Rorty pictures “many of the people in such a bazaar as preferring to die rather than share the beliefs of many
of those with whom they are haggling, yet as haggling profitably away
nevertheless,” before they “retreat,” after work hours, as it were, to their
respective clubs of “moral equals” (that is, potential “moral narcissists,”
as Rorty puts it with characteristic overstatement, “congratulating them-
selves on neither knowing nor caring what the people in the club over
on the other side of the bazaar are like”).24

It is clear that this vision of liberal democracy will provoke political
objections from communitarians as well as from ethnicity and race stud-
ies theorists.25 Rorty has taken such objections seriously, which indeed
he must as his private-public distinction rests on political rather than
philosophical justifications (like Cornel West, Richard Posner, and Stanley
Fish, and unlike Robert Westbrook, Rorty holds that pragmatism has no
theoretical affinities to liberal or indeed any kind of politics). Therefore
the most unconvincing critiques of Rorty’s literary criticism misinterpret
his references to public and private domains as a theoretically watertight
demarcation of distinct and mutually autonomous areas of social expe-
rience. Indeed it is hard to see why Rorty would have to be told (in a
critique by the pragmatist aesthetician Richard Shusterman) that firm
public-private distinctions are “untenable because the private self and
the language it builds upon in self-creation are always already socially
constituted and structured by a common field.”26 The social dimension of
private pursuits does not invalidate Rorty’s point that people’s self-culture
can, intermittently at least, fail to harmonize or clash with or have little
relevance to their moral and social responsibilities.27

How does Rorty’s liberal framework lead him to reorder his literary
library? Private world-making, in Rorty’s neoromantic terms, helps liberal
ironists to “become aware” of their “half-articulate need to become a new
person” (one whom they “as yet lack words to describe”).28 In contrast
to Paterian notions of the aesthetic as private pleasure and perceptual
intensity, Rorty considers the quest for autonomy to be a more active
endeavor, a wrestling with metaphoric worlds that may unsettle one’s
view of things in a way that has less to do with formal inventiveness than
moral and cognitive challenges.29

Rorty’s public category revolves around the narrative engagement
with human cruelty. Since human solidarity cannot be “discovered by
reflection” (lacking as it does universal foundations), it needs to be “cre-
ated” by increasing people’s “sensitivity to the particular details of the
pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people,” expanding
the category of “us” (as opposed to “them”).30 Rorty believes that this is
best achieved not by abstract theory but by narrative genres capable of
producing empathetic identification or “participate emotion,” “genres
such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docu-
drama, and, especially, the novel.”31
Rorty’s concept of public literature has been the object of much hostile critical attention, often revolving around his claims about the transformative effects of empathetic reading. The question is indeed whether descriptions of suffering necessarily produce real human solidarity, or any social engagement at all beyond the sentimental pleasures of an imagined solidarity. Furthermore, is it realistic to assume that the depiction of cruel characters transforms us by reminding us of our own faults? Would a living Casaubon indeed even recognize his fictional mirror image upon reading *Middlemarch*, let alone be able to reform himself in response to the literary lessons?\(^3\)

Yet it is easy to overestimate the importance of such objections, especially since mistaking Rorty’s contextualist approach for a global theory of capital-*L* literature means to misrepresent him as a throwback to eighteenth-century criticism. But Rorty never argues that novels *should* be educational case studies of human cruelty, or that the production of participant emotion is the most important aspect of the literary as a universal concept, or even that the production of sentimental solidarity is what literature does best. His claims are much weaker: narrative, while it has no intrinsic moral relevance (any more than an intrinsic literariness),\(^3\) has shown itself to be, in a variety of historical accidents, a potentially more effective world-making tool than traditional moral philosophy—partly because human solidarity has no reasonable basis, partly because empathetic emotion is a more powerful agent of solidarity than rational reflection. Thus when Rorty argues that “the emergence of the human rights culture owes nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories,”\(^34\) he may overstate the historical importance of, say, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but he does not “reduce” the literary to its moral effects.\(^35\)

**IV. Metaphoric Music**

Rorty’s third distinction, between relaxing and challenging books, has attracted less critical attention than the public-private conundrum, but it is equally important for an understanding of his ambiguous reception in literary studies. In contrast to formalist views relating literariness to stylistic unfamiliarity or difficulty, Rorty defines challenging metaphors in terms of their transformative effects, as “books that supply novel stimuli to action” (*CIS* 143). This excludes, for example, elaborately composed and canonical artworks if they fail to change their readers’ metaphorical habits (their views of “what is possible and important”).\(^36\) Rorty’s relative indifference to received notions of literariness as stylistic brilliance might have paved the way for claims about his neglect of form. This apparent
neglect is thrown into sharper relief, moreover, when Rorty is compared to pragmatist critics with greater affinities to traditional aesthetics, such as the legal scholar Richard Posner. Posner is known to share a broad theoretical common ground with Rorty—both agree, for instance, that philosophical pragmatism has no inbuilt political program, and that democratic justice is based on the contingencies of human interests rather than universal values. Posner’s contextualist views on justice (based on the socioeconomic consequences of case decisions) are at odds with more universalist legal theories. It is not surprising, therefore, that Posner objects to Nussbaum’s suggestion that specific literary genres go hand in hand with democratic politics (that the “structure” of the novel, as she puts it in *Poetic Justice*, should be “in a degree of tension” with “inegalitarianism”). Yet Posner’s most emphatic objection to Nussbaum’s literary ethics returns to familiar Kantian premises: in “Against Ethical Criticism” (1997), he accuses her of a preoccupation with “moral content” (1) that misses what he deems the defining feature of literary experience: “the presence of beauty” (21). Even in the novel, and especially in *The Golden Bowl*, according to Posner, this presence has largely to do with “formal properties,” such as “changes of pace, shifts of voice and point of view, the echoing and doubling of themes, the arousing of expectations and the deferral of their satisfaction, the creation and release of tensions, and the harmonizing of disparate elements—properties similar to those of instrumental music” (23–24).

Posner’s invocation of “instrumental music” as a test case for high literariness seems so natural because musical tropes for aesthetic value have dominated the field of aesthetics since the late eighteenth century. Aural images of the literary sharpen the content-form dualism and thus become powerful metaphors for a type of literariness that is both self-contained and deeply social; self-contained if the semantic indeterminacy of music is taken to suggest the poet’s autonomy from political or moral languages; deeply social if semantic indeterminacy is reinterpreted in mystical terms, as a “higher” expressiveness of worlds beyond discursive reason. Hence the romantic troping of poetry as a music that is “connected” to larger values (the Infinite, World Spirit, Democracy, Intensity, Unity, and so forth), but in a nondiscursive idiom that can never be “reduced” to these values. This characteristic double gesture has remained attractive beyond the waning of nineteenth-century music religions. Thus Nussbaum’s rejoinder to Posner suggests that Henry James’s musicality, though irreducible to moral concepts, is nonetheless connected to larger moral and ethical foundations: “we cannot assume,” she contends, “that even the shape and cadence of a novelist’s sentences, his choice of metaphors, his use of sound and rhythm, are altogether disjunct from his search for an understanding of the complexities of human life.”
Nussbaum’s careful formulation does not return us to romantic views of expressive form. But it does draw its powers of conviction (and the implied legitimation of ethical inquiry) from a structurally similar parallelism of stylistic beauty and ethical content. And indeed, Nussbaum’s and Posner’s musical tropes for literary experience bring their arguments closer together than their rhetorical clash over a moralism/aestheticism antagonism suggests. Posner’s view of literary musicality as a private affair that merely helps us “to live, for the moment anyway, more intensely,” implies a Paterian aestheticism decidedly opposed to the artwork’s ethical relevance. But like Pater, Posner’s concept of intensity intermittently slides towards the broader values relevant to Nussbaum’s ethical inquiry, for instance, when he attributes to literary beauty the power not only to make us “feel bigger,” “transported, exhilarated,” but also to give us a “sense of immense human possibility.”

The power to evoke “human possibility” is the main touchstone of Rorty’s concept of literary value: “great works of literature,” he says in 1998, are “inspirational” not because they are true but because they make their readership “shudder with awe” by implying that “there is more to this life than they ever imagined.” Yet Rorty defines sublimity in antiformalist terms, as a displacement not of styles but of worlds (or “final vocabularies” about worlds). Hence the “inspirational value” of, say, Henry James does not depend on (or necessarily connect with) his narrative refinement (the beauty of his “cadences”).

Rorty’s departure from the musical paradigm becomes clearer if we consider his list of unchallenging works (that is, books that most readers would experience as “relaxing” rather than transformational according to Rorty’s definition): it combines complex canonical poetry (Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*) and expository prose (Thomas Babington Macaulay’s *Essays*) with more accessible and popular genres (Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming) and even with “the works of uncomplicated pornography” (*CIS 143n3*). Rorty no doubt appreciates Tennyson’s role as a stylistic innovator whose picturesque visuality was praised by contemporaries as a refreshing improvement over what Victorians increasingly perceived, during the 1840s, as Wordsworth’s bland conceptualism. He still places the *Idylls of the King* with common pornography because (like Emerson before him) he presumably finds Tennyson’s formal innovativeness admirable but not productive of metaphors that alter his readers’ sense of “what is possible and important.” This assessment differs, of course, from the formalist identification of the pornographic with the putatively corrupt pleasures of formally easy (popular, sentimental) fiction.
V. Iridescence, Sublimity, and Metaphoric Change

The concept of literary world-making has a hermeneutic bias, but it need not deny the reality of the aesthetic intensities of nondiscursive perception Posner refers to in his description of James's musical cadences. Rorty considers non-discursive aesthetic bliss ("Housmanian tingles" between "the shoulder blades" [CIS 47]) an important dimension of literary experience that may well be more decisive for literary canonicity than reasonable argument. ("If you want your books to be read rather than respectfully shrouded in tooled leather, you should try to produce tingles rather than truth" [CIS 153].) He often suggests that the most beautiful metaphors are "iridescent" rather than conceptually useful, and that their beauty fades as they fill with hermeneutic meaning. ("After the scales are rubbed off a butterfly's wing," he says, "you have transparency, but not beauty" [CIS 153].)

Metaphoric iridescence calls to mind Nietzsche's view that aesthetic bliss requires uncertainty. In Alexander Nehamas's paraphrase: "We find things beautiful—in nature, in people, in art—when we sense we have not exhausted them, and our eyes... 'remain fixed on what remains veiled, even after the unveiling.'" But how do iridescent metaphors relate to literary world-making? According to Rorty, sensual pleasure may be a value in itself; yet since it lacks statable meanings, it can neither be theorized nor affect our moral-cognitive worlds. Even if aesthetic bliss is defined more actively, following Nehamas's suggestion that "beautiful things are those we still desire... to possess and know better," the meaning of iridescent metaphors remains elusive ("we never know in advance," Nehamas says, whether "what remains veiled is beautiful or ugly" or "will bring us benefit or harm"). This makes metaphoric iridescence part of an "erotics of art" outside discursive knowledge. For if the purely somatic does acquire meaning—as liberating force (Sontag), democratic wholeness (Whitman), or Dionysian destructiveness (Nietzsche)—it ceases to be pure.

Literary world-making indeed begins with the impure sensual bliss that emerges when perception has been contaminated by hermeneutic (that is, propositional) meaning. It pertains, presumably, to the sublime "shudders of awe" Rorty ascribes to "inspirational" literature. The experience of the sublime occurs at the moment when iridescent uncertainty opens into a metaphoric world whose moral and cognitive dimensions become statable values, though not (or not yet) rationally justifiable beliefs. Defining inspirational metaphors as both persuasive and "unjustifiable" has religious undertones that have recently been considered evidence of a religious turn in Rorty (who admitted to "back-pedaling" on his more aggressively secular statements). But the pragmatist sublime does
not require the transcendental claims common to both established religions and most varieties of the romantic sublime. Rorty associates inspirational sublimity with a fairly narrow definition of “the religious impulse,” as simply “the impulse to stand in awe of something greater than oneself.”

Rorty has shown little interest in sharpening the lines between iridescent beauty and quasi-religious sublimity, presumably because he focuses primarily on their pragmatic effects. Beauty causes somatic thrills that fail to affect our metaphoric frames in a lasting way, while the more concrete visions of inspirational texts take their readers to formerly unimaginable worlds. We can exemplify this difference if we compare the varieties of beauty/sublimity portrayed in Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Hans Castorp’s blizzard dream in the Davos mountains produces similar shudders of awe as Marlow’s descent into the primeval—both cases invoke the combination of pleasure, anxiety, and unjustifiable knowledge generic to literary portrayals of Wordsworthian moments. But Castorp’s vision fails to have any lasting effects. After his return to the “highly civilized” Berghof, he “eats enormously at dinner” while his dream is “fading” along with his grasp of the inspirational “reflections” it had prompted. Conrad’s Marlow, by contrast, returns to European civilization a changed man: the “shuddering wonder” of his nightmare vision has completely altered his outlook on life, to the point that his older self now seems as absurd as his contemporaries’ “insignificant and silly dreams.” Their “knowledge of life” appears an “irritating pretense” because Marlow feels sure that “they could not possibly know” what has been revealed to him. Nor could he explain or justify to them this knowledge, since his vision does not translate into the contemporary notions of rational discourse he has left behind. In contrast to Castorp’s sensuous thrills (which merely stimulate his appetite), Marlow’s nightmare vision has a world-shattering effect that leads him to the sort of self-revision Rorty attributes to the private desire for autonomy. Conrad leaves open, to be sure, what he thinks about Marlow’s reliability—whether we should read his vision of Kurtzian “horror” as a Schopenhauerian recognition of deep reality or merely the fantastic projection of an unstable mind. In Rorty’s view, the truth-value of Marlow’s world-vision is irrelevant (because ultimately undecidable), but we can discuss its sociopolitical effects and conclude that Marlow’s visionary experience produces a private rather than a public metaphoric world. This is not because his Jungian and exoticist insights may strike us as irrational but because it is hard to see, for reasons unfolded in the wake of Chinua Achebe’s seminal critique, how his portrayal of primal humanity and African darkness should further human solidarity. Public sublimity, according to Rorty, lies in transformative
visions of social possibility that invoke “a faith in the future possibilities of moral humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community.”

VI. Literary Tools, Metaphoric “Experiments in Living”

The inspirational sublime is a central attribute of literary world-making; another is the power to create the sort of empathetic identification that encourages human solidarity. But these are noncompetitive goods that should not be ranked within a single hierarchy of literary or narrative functions: some texts produce nondiscursive joy, others change their readers’ views of what is possible, yet others extend people’s circles of loyalty. If literary world-making merely provides “experiments in living” (rather than revelations of Nature), its metaphoric tools are “as little in need of synthesis as paintbrushes and crowbars” (CIS xiv), nor are they likely to harmonize into a single vision. In contrast to musical tropes, the toolbox analogy jars with the view of the literary as a privileged space where private aspects of aesthetic negativity (the “music” of form) dovetail with positive ethico-political meanings. Thus Rorty’s expansion of literary criticism to a criticism of world-making activities destabilizes familiar disciplinary borders only to replace them with more tangible political distinctions. This shift from epistemology to cultural politics is well exemplified by Rorty’s reluctance to identify pragmatist philosophy with democratic politics, or to justify his sociopolitical views with his credentials as a critic of Heidegger or Proust.

Rorty’s criticism sets out from broader ethical or sociopolitical questions (such as “how shall I live?” or “how can society be improved?”) that seem secondary to classic theories of literature. His self-conception as a literary critic has mainly to do with his conviction that pertinent answers to all inquiries are created rather than found (hence, poetic rather than philosophical). This emphasis on the critical exploration of the imaginative dimensions of practical living may well explain why Rorty’s pragmatist readings have raised eyebrows in literature departments that associate good critical practice with the detailed and exhaustive description of particular literary works. Literary scholars may not want to redefine their canons (let alone departmental affiliations) in terms of Rorty’s imaginary library of “books.” But they have a great deal to learn from his expansion of literary studies towards a practical poetics of world-making.

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1 For example, Richard Poirier, Stanley Fish, Walter Benn Michaels, or Barbara Herrnstein Smith.
3 Rorty’s critique of leftist theorizing is often misconstrued as a rejection of leftist politics (see, for instance, Terry Eagleton’s recent *The Idea of Culture* [London: Blackwell, 2000], 47, for a characteristic misrepresentation of Rorty as an apologist of Western imperialism). His endorsement of “liberal irony” has also been said merely to adapt cold-war liberalism or a Reaganite ethos to a postmodern epistemology and encourage a cynical and complacent attitude towards social ills (see, for instance, James T. Kloppenberg, “Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking,” *Journal of American History* 83, no. 1 [1996]: 125). For a perceptive defense of Rorty (with reference to his recent political interventions and commitments), see Casey Nelson Blake, “Pragmatist Hope,” *Dissent Magazine* 54, no. 2 (2007): 95–101.
5 Josef Früchtl, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und moralisches Urteil* (Frankfurt, Ger.: Suhrkamp, 1999), 239.
7 Rorty shares Nelson Goodman’s constructivist outlook, but hardly ever engages the philosophical intricacies of his *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing Co., 1978). I will use the term “world-making” in a more abstract sense to describe Rorty’s distance from formalism in favor of Donald Davidson’s theory of metaphor.
10 Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 152. As Nussbaum puts it in 1998: “the aesthetic is ethical and political. It is precisely in virtue of the mastery of craft that enables the novelist to deploy ‘perceptual and expressional’ terms with skill that he can make a contribution to a public victory over obtuseness and emotional deadness.” Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22, no. 2 (1998): 344.
12 “Ich hoffe, Sie zu überzeugen, . . . daß man, um jenes politische Problem zu lösen, durch das ästhetische den Weg nehmen muß, weil es die Schönheit ist, durch welche man zur Freiheit wandert.” Friedrich Schiller, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Otto Dann et al. (Frankfurt, Ger.: DTV, 1992), 8:558–60. Schiller’s answer is characteristic of a powerful rhetoric of legitimation that begins to dominate the emerging literary field around 1800, when it...
enables “men of letters” in increasingly professionalizing situations to counter their anxieties of marginality with claims for social distinction and cultural authority. These claims follow from a double move: on the one hand, romantic criticism inclines towards formalist concepts of the aesthetic, epitomized by Kant’s description of beauty as autonomous form. This makes artistic creation a question of technical skills (such as the mastery of poetic difficulty) by which romantic intellectuals contrast themselves from lay readers deemed imperceptive to form. At the same time, romantic critics shore up the cultural authority of formalist aesthetics by reinterpreting disinterested beauty as an instrument of social melioration (when aesthetic play is associated with freedom) or ontological vision (when beauty is considered a symbol of the Infinite). See my discussion of “post-Kantian” rhetoric in “Democracy’s ‘Lawless Music’: The Whitmanian Moment in the U.S. Construction of Representative Literariness,” New Literary History 38, no. 2 (2007): 333–52.

17 John Dewey, Experience and Nature (1925; repr., New York: Dover, 1958), 378, 381–82 (hereafter cited in text). As Dewey expands (anticipating Rorty’s nonfoundationalism), the realist objection to the view of knowledge as art “springs from a confusion of tenses. Knowledge is not a distortion or perversion which confers upon its subject-matter traits which do not belong to it, but is an act which confers upon non-cognitive material traits which did not belong to it. It marks a change by which physical events exhibiting properties of mechanical energy . . . realize characters, meanings, and relations of meanings hitherto not possessed by them” (381).
19 The Kuhnian terms with which Rorty discusses how metaphors “catch on” amount to a radically contextualist reader-response theory. For instance, when Rorty explains the public relevance of George Orwell’s Animal Farm, he does not attribute to Orwell the discovery of political truths (that is, the realities behind communism and fascism). Instead he sees the significance of Animal Farm in its transformation of the existing discourse. Orwell’s choice of a children’s story as a narrative frame interfered with a political rhetoric that had tied common concepts (“socialism,” ‘capitalism’ and ‘fascism’) into an “unwieldy” framework of debate: “In Kuhnian terms, so many anomalies had been piling up, requiring the addition of so many epicycles, that the overextended structure just needed a sharp kick at the right spot, the right kind of ridicule at the right moment. That is why Animal Farm was able to turn liberal opinion around. It was not its relationship to reality, but its relation to the most popular alternative description of recent events, that gave it its power. It was a strategically placed lever, not a mirror” (CIS 174).
20 Kloppenberg, “Pragmatism,” 117.
21 In Experience and Nature, Dewey suggests that the dualisms of traditional philosophy (such as subject/object, body/matter, and so forth) originate from a neglect of “the primacy and ultimacy of gross experience” (15), implying that true consideration of experiential facts may anchor philosophical inquiry in a quasi-transcendental way. In the opening chapter, on philosophical method, he speaks of the need to “discover some of the general features of experienced things and to interpret their significance for a philosophic theory of the universe” (he refers to “traits possessed by the subject-matters of experience” that, like the “characteristics of sun and electron” are “found in experience”) (2). Rorty considers the concept of “experience” a Bergsonian element in classic pragmatism that is best discarded. See Rorty, “Dewey’s Metaphysics,” in Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980 (Min-


24 Rorty, Philosophical Papers, vol. 1, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, 209–10. As Rorty expands: “Such a bazaar is, obviously, not a ‘community’ used by critics of liberalism like Alasdair MacIntyre or Robert Bellah. You cannot have an old-timey Gemeinschaft unless everybody pretty well agrees on who counts as a decent human being and who does not. But you can have a civil society of the bourgeois democratic sort. All you need is the ability to control your feelings when people who strike you as irredeemably different show up at City Hall, or the greengrocers, or the bazaar. When this happens, you smile a lot, make the best deals you can, and, after a hard day’s haggling, retreat to your club. There you will be comforted by the companionship of your moral equals” (209).


26 Shusterman, Practicing Philosophy, 122. Similarly, Ernesto Laclau has said that “[o]nly in a tidy rationalistic world can the demands of self-realization and those of human solidarity be so neatly differentiated as Rorty wants them to be.” Ernesto Laclau, “Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony,” in Deconstruction and Pragmatism, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1994), 65. See Rorty’s reply, “Response to Ernesto Laclau,” in Deconstruction and Pragmatism, 74–75.

27 Rorty’s reluctance about stable borders comes more clearly into focus in his essay on “Justice as a Larger Loyalty” (1997), on the dilemma we face when we seek to combine our loyalty to family members with our concepts of justice. Rorty refigures the sharp distinction between people’s commitment to private loyalties and their public responsibilities in terms of widening concentric circles, as a difference between loyalty to smaller groups and loyalty to larger groups. Rorty, “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” in Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues, ed. Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 223–37.

28 Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, xiv. For the romantic basis of this concept of self-creation, see Charles Taylor’s Sources of the Self (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989).

29 Of the sort that Rorty attributes, for instance, to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past, and Derrida’s “Envois.” These works challenge their readers by the evasion of “any conceptual scheme previously used to evaluate novels or philosophical treatises” (CIS 136–37).

30 Exemplars would include such narrative treatments of “slavery, poverty, or prejudice” as “The Condition of the Working Class in England and the reports of muckraking journalists and government commissions, but also novels like Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Les Misérables, Sister Carrie, The Well of Loneliness and Black Boy” (CIS 141).
Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 147, xvi. Rorty divides public literature into two subcategories, one referring to books that create empathetic identification or “participate emotion” and thus widen people’s circles of loyalty and solidarity (presumably to include more of the people living at the clubs “over at the other side of the bazaar”); the other subcategory reinforces the liberal harm principle by sensitizing readers to how their private idiosyncracies become forms of cruelty against others.

Rorty offers an intriguing interpretation of Nabokov’s work as a dramatization of the cruelty of “incuriosity” (CIS 161), arguing that this dramatization culminates in Nabokov’s “Afterword” to *Lolita*, which reveals to the reader what he or she is likely to have missed during the reading of the novel. In Rorty’s words: “The reader, suddenly revealed to himself as, if not hypocritical, at least cruelly incurious, recognizes his semblable, his brother, in Humbert and Kinbote. Suddenly *Lolita* does have ‘a moral in tow’ [despite Nabokov’s protestation to the contrary]. But the moral is not to keep one’s hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying” (CIS 163–64). While this seems a convincing description of Nabokov’s affective strategy, one wonders to what extent the reader’s recognition of his or her own concentration has tangible practical effects other than the sort of embarrassment felt in literature classes by those who are caught not having done the assigned reading.

See Rorty’s rejection of broadly theoretical debates about the “real” aim of the writer or the “nature” of literature (CIS 145).


For Rorty’s use of the toolbox analogy as a central metaphor of literary effect, see CIS xiv.

Even if, according to Rorty’s contextualist view of literary value, the “line between the stimulating and the relaxing, obviously, separates different books for different people” (CIS 143n3).


This is indeed a probable explanation for the romantic shift from painterly to aural definitions of poetic essence. The sharpening of the form-content duality contributes to the romantic need for intellectual legitimation. If the poetic is a sort of “music” that defies conceptual paraphrase, it needs cultural workers with refined formal perceptions. In eighteenth-century art discourse, such refinement had little cultural authority because music was considered a hedonistic medium, subordinate to the verbal art it was supposed to accompany (in worship or opera). Musical metaphors of literariness became useful only after 1800, when the semantic indeterminacy that had been seen as the medium’s weakness was reinterpreted as a mark of its expressive powers, as a “language above language” that carried a numinous presence, but in a subconceptual idiom we can only intuit and feel. See Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989).


44 That a lack of formal difficulty implies a sensuous retreat from beauty in favor of mel-
low content (that “raw taste,” as Schiller puts it, mistakes “beauty” for the “excitement” of “theme” [Werke und Briefe 8:671]) is a major implication of Posner’s argument. He is appalled by Nussbaum’s patience with what he deems mediocre novels parading as philo-
sophical or educational tracts (he finds Dickens’s Hard Times and Richard Wright’s Native Son both moralistic and badly written). Nussbaum contests Posner’s sharp moral-aesthetic opposition, of course, and (like Rorty) she appreciates sentimental fiction for its power to induce empathetic identification. Still, in contrast to Rorty, her concept of literariness often ties the literary to aesthetic complexity (or difficulty) and opposes it to the sensuous consumption of the popular.

45 Rorty defined Nabokov’s capacity to produce aesthetic bliss in terms of a talent for “arranging words into iridescent patterns” (CIS 155).


47 Nehamas, “The Return of the Beautiful,” 402. As Nehamas expands: “a beautiful thing only invites us further into itself.” “Beauty is a call to adventure, a symbol of risk. It is the enemy of certainty. If Beauty, as Stendhal said, is a promise of happiness, it is a very dangerous one. We may fail to find what beauty promises and end up bitter and disappointed” (402). In Achieving our Country, Rorty criticizes Foucault’s “inability to think of beauty as a promise of happiness” (139).


50 Following Manfred Frank’s history of the linguistic turn, Rorty argues that intentional consciousness requires propositional understanding rather than (as Ernst Tugendhat characterizes Husserlian phenomenology, and as Rorty views Dewey’s concept of experience) merely a prepropositional state of beholding one’s own flow of perception. See Rorty, “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin,” in Philosophical Papers, vol. 3, Truth and Progress, 293; and Manfred Frank, Was ist Neostrukturalismus (Frankfuht, Ger.: Suhrkamp, 1983), 284.

51 Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism, 208.


53 Rorty, Achieving Our Country, 18. Rorty takes the religious appeal to “something greater than oneself” from Williams James’s Varieties of Religious Experience. He has criticized James for dithering between transcendental and pragmatic justifications of religious experience. Rorty, “Some Inconsistencies in James’s Varieties,” in William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing the Varieties of Religious Experience, ed. Wayne Proudfoot (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004), 86–97. Rorty’s view that the religious impulse must be disconnected from transcendental foundations—“the infantile need for security, the childish hope of

54 In a misleading passage in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, Rorty discusses these terms in passing, when he associates beauty with Proust’s acceptance of contingency and contrasts it to the “historical sublime” he attributes to foundationalist philosophers (105–6). Most of the time, however, Rorty eschews such contrasts, and almost always defines sublimity in nonfoundational terms, as “unjustifiable hope” (Consequences of Pragmatism, 208).


57 See Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa,” Massachusetts Review 18 (1977): 782–94. At the same time, however, one might wonder to what extent the strong sense of racial “othering” that stikes us in Marlow’s description of the natives is contingent to the post-1960s ideological shifts of perspective that led to the foregrounding of the exoticist or primitivist aspects of modernism. This perceptual change might have rearranged the gestalt of Heart of Darkness so as to constitute its racism, rather than revealing ideological faults that generations of readers missed until Achebe’s 1975 “discovery.” If indeed the wide currency of primitivism and Jungian metaphysics among Conrad’s contemporaries prevented the foregrounding of racial otherness, Marlow’s “recognition” of the common roots of Africans and Europeans might well have widened rather than diminished European circles of loyalties, encouraging contemporary audiences to empathize with the African victims of colonial cruelties. If this is true, Marlow’s visionary experience (and by implication, Conrad’s novella) can be said to have undergone a transformation from a public call to participate emotion to a merely private tool for individual self-revision. Similar claims could be made about the post-1960s “emergence” of racism in Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Huckleberry Finn.

58 Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” in Philosophy and Social Hope, 160–61. As Rorty expands: “I shall call this fuzzy overlap of faith, hope, and love ‘romance.’ Romance, in this sense, may crystallize around a trade union as easily as around a congregation, around a novel as easily as around a sacrament, around a God as easily as around a child.” What makes this utopian hope a faith rather than a traditional political belief is that it “carries us beyond argument, because beyond presently used language” (161). This is why Rorty stresses what he considers a similarity between religious faith and “being in love with another human being.” Love resembles faith in that it can provide an important redemptive force in our lives although it “is often not capable of being spelled out into beliefs about the character or the actions [of beloved people]” (158).

59 See Rorty’s description of Housmanian tingles and participate emotion as “two distinct, noncompetitive goods” (CIS 147).

60 Rorty draws this phrase from Isaiah Berlin’s appropriation of John Stuart Mill (CIS 45). See Isaiah Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty (1967), and the third chapter of Mill’s On Liberty (1859).

61 On the expansion of literary criticism, see CIS 81–82.

public intellectuals who try to ground their beliefs in vernacular versions of their scholarly work, Rorty leaves his philosophical clout behind when he moves to political debate (as in his essays on government policy for *Dissent Magazine*). On the relevance of the vernacular to contemporary public intellectuals, see Russell Jacoby’s *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 235.