

RICHARD RORTY ON LITERATURE AND MORAL PROGRESS¹

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I

“...the imaginative experiencing of a work of literature frequently calls into being the moral imagination.”

“This expansion and deepening of the student’s moral awareness constitutes the education of moral imagination.”

James, E. Miller, Jr.
“Literature and the Moral Imagination”

“Mathematics helps physics do its job; literature and the arts helps ethics do its.”

Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*

Having long been interested in the intersection of literature and morality, I have become increasingly intrigued upon hearing speakers at academic conferences make reference to Richard Rorty and his notion of moral progress through literature. Over the years I have witnessed many voices, in philosophy and elsewhere, skeptically deny that moral progress is ever, or can ever be, realized – anywhere, in any context – and certainly not through reading fiction. While one might counter by citing advances made over the last half century in areas such as human and civil rights or concern for the natural environment, what would any of this possibly have to do with literature? Consequently, I have begun to feel a need to get a clearer picture of just how Rorty conceives the relation between literature and morality, and, more specifically, what he means by moral progress plausibly achieved through reading novels in particular. Though Rorty occasionally refers to major philosophers as strong poets (a term borrowed from

¹ I would like to thank Christopher Voparil and Eduardo Mendieta for their wise counsel and helpful suggestions as this paper was taking shape.

Harold Bloom), he claims not to be a very good reader of poetry; hence, his preference for novels, that is, for longer narratives in which strong characters can be developed.²

There appears to be no single location where Rorty comprehensively lays out his broad conception of literature and morality. What we do have are snippets, morsels, developing ideas that emerge in various essays, sometimes returned to and elaborated further in other, later essays. This paper is simply an initial attempt to gather such ideas, notions, suggestions from a few limited, but essential, sources, put them together in a reasonably coherent fashion, and lay them down in hopes of painting at least an initial portrait of Rorty’s overall perspective or vision. Insofar as this is my first writing of any sort on Rorty, what follows is not intended to be a masterful, technical demonstration of philosophical or literary scholarship on Rorty. Rather it is a suggestive piece, in which there will be no rational arguments per se, or attempts to “prove” a point. In what I take to be a Rortyan spirit, this will rather be an essay that seeks to clarify and extend a philosopher’s views on an important and recurring topic in philosophy and literature. To that end, I reiterate that I am consciously adopting a limited focus. I do not deal directly with Rorty’s politics, his various challenges to the analytic tradition, his views on (T)truth and knowledge, his hopes for liberal democracy or for America, all terribly important subjects for Rorty studies generally. In addressing his ideas on morality and literature, these topics are, of course, unavoidably implicated in varying degrees, but I am content here in simply trying to answer the question of what Rorty means when he says we can achieve a measure of moral

² Cf. an interview with Rorty conducted by Edward Ragg entitled “Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies,” in: *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews With Richard Rorty*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 369-396. Also, section two (on the novel) in Rorty, “Redemption From Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises” (full citation below).

progress by reading novels. His ideas on this matter are, I believe, generally in tune with traditional strains of American pragmatism, particularly leading ideas of John Dewey and William James, but I do not wish to make the question of Rorty's understandings of pragmatism, or neo-pragmatism, a focal point of this work. Such would be another, and different, paper; indeed, the sort of project that numerous students of Rorty, both supporters and critics, have already expertly directed their attention to.

As an initial generalization, it is fair to say that Rorty offers all of us (pragmatists, neo-pragmatists, aestheticians, literature people – inclusive of writers, critics, and theoreticians) a unique and challenging perspective, or better yet, something like a varied quilt of seemingly unconventional and provocative reflections on literature, philosophy and morality. His views are singular in our contemporary context, especially when contrasted with currently reigning “theories” of literature, its nature and how it works. Rorty's views do not constitute a formal theory, nor are they overtly dogmatic. He cannot, nor does he seek to, prove the validity of his ideas. In a pragmatic vein he is more interested in whether his notions work. Are they useful rather than true, and do they allow for more expansive, generous and sympathetic reading encounters with literary works? Do they show persuasively how some literature may assist in moral progress?

His preoccupation is with narratives – not theory about narrative – with the story and story-telling, not presumed arguments or principles engrained within or growing out of the story. Rorty, I suspect, would object to my use of the following words to describe his approach: his readings of texts strike me as, in a sense, “traditional” and “intuitive” in the way literature was perhaps read and understood in a pre-theory obsessed time, a period which assumes that some ideology or other (i.e. Marxism, psychoanalysis) or some philosophical development (i.e., semiotics, deconstruction) must be the key to unlocking the

mysteries and deeper meaning of narratives. If pressed I might even say his views reflect a practical, “common sense” (another phrase he likely would resist) approach to fiction, implying simply the way in which any reader quite naturally wonders about what the experience of reading a story, feeling and thinking about the story, does to her. Does it somehow change her, and, if so, in what ways? Instead of obsessing over whether the text can be fitted into, or most fruitfully interpreted by, a philosophical, psychological or political theory, Rorty would have us ask whether our readings of say American authors like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Philip Roth or John Steinbeck afford new insight into ourselves and others, perhaps strengthening and expanding our appreciation of and empathy for those in need? Does such reading help us better comprehend our human social reality? Does it provide a moment for the reader to get inside the skin of others, namely, the strong characters in a story, and, for a moment, experience the world from their perspectives?³

As stipulated, I will here make use of a limited number of Rorty essays I have found particularly helpful. Principle sources include “Ethics Without Principles,” “Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens,” “Justice As a Larger Loyalty,” and the lesser known “Redemption From Egotism: James and Proust As Spiritual Exercises.” Other helpful references are *Consequences of Pragmatism*, especially the “Introduction” and chapter “Is There a Problem With Fictional Discourse?,” and “The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature,” an appendix to *Achieving Our Country*. As for literary illustrations, Rorty's essays on Nabokov and Orwell in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* are perhaps the most pointed and well developed. The secondary, scholarly work of Christopher Voparil and Eduardo Mendieta will, also, be of considerable assistance in this endeavor.

³ I have pursued this “inside the skin of” line of interpretation in previous writings, perhaps most notably in “Moral Experience in *Of Mice and Men*: Challenges and Reflection,” included in *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck*, ed. Stephen K. George (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), pp. 61-71.

II

In attempting to articulate Rorty's views on the relation between literature and morality, it will be at first helpful to briefly draw a contrast with what he is definitely not saying. Theorists, ideologists of differing stripes, literary critics, advocates of religion and ethicists have all, over the ages, offered their own at times self-serving theories of literature, virtually all of them criticized or even rejected by Rorty.

In the essay, "Redemption From Egotism,"⁴ Rorty clearly identifies several things that his sort of imaginative approach to literature is not about when it comes to morality. Fiction, for Rorty, ought not promote a religious conception of ethics or morality. It is not about advancing, for example, Christian or Jewish values or seeking, through reading, converts to such religious faiths. Literature does not peddle dogma any more than it lays out a system of religiously inspired moral do's and don'ts for its readers. In fact, Rorty believes that religion (as well as philosophy) must be overcome in narratives. Contrarily, he suggests that in order to attain what Harold Bloom refers to as greater reader autonomy – readers who are more sensitive, knowledgeable, perhaps wiser – "the replacement of religion and philosophy by literature is a change for the better."⁵ And further, when speaking of the differences between religious and literary cultures, Rorty claims that "devotional reading emphasizes purification, rather than enlargement, getting rid of distractions rather than incorporating them in a larger unity. Novel reading ... aims at encompassing multitudes rather than eliminating superfluities."⁶ As will be seen, for Rorty such notions as "enlargement," "distractions," "larger unity," and "multitudes" are all essential to literature's achievement of moral progress.

⁴ Richard Rorty, "Redemption From Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises," in: *The Rorty Reader*, eds. Christopher J. Volparil and Richard J. Bernstein (West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 389-406.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

Imaginative narratives are, also, not about promoting a philosophy, ideology or particular ethical theory formulated by philosophers, social scientists or theologians. Rorty continually admonishes us to avoid ideology or theory in our reading of stories, and this includes expecting to find arguments in literary works. A novel simply does not, and cannot, put forth a litany of logical or quasi-logical arguments, just as it does not confirm or illustrate a particular theory or ideology. When Bloom advises on how to read, he points out how literature specialists of our time often use, for example, Heidegger-Derrida critiques of metaphysics or Marx-Foucault critiques of capitalism as ideological guides that tell readers "what to look for when reading imaginative literature." Rorty shares with Bloom the view that "the dominance in U.S. departments of literature first of 'theory' and then of 'cultural studies' has made it more difficult for students to read well ... such attempts to give politics or philosophy hegemony over literature diminish the redemptive power of works of the imagination."⁷

Likewise, Rorty's preferred narratives steer clear of advocacy for particular philosophical theories of ethics. Literature that embraces "imaginative novelty, rather than argumentation ... does most for the autonomy of the entranced reader." While argumentative works of philosophy may offer novelty, and may transform a reader's life in some respect, Rorty again sides with Bloom when he writes: "the kind of autonomy he [Bloom] is thinking of is primarily the sort that liberates one from one's previous ways of thinking about the lives and fortunes of individual human beings,"⁸ thereby allowing for expansion of imagination and sympathy. For Rorty works of literature "hint rather than proclaim, suggest rather than argue, and offer implicit rather than explicit advice."⁹

Ideology, "in the sense of a set of general ideas which provide a context in which the reader places every book

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 389-390.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

she reads,” turns out to be an enemy of reader sensibility and autonomy. Indeed, it may well promote bad reading habits. An ideal reader actually hopes that “the next book she reads will re-contextualize all the books she has previously read – that she will encounter an authorial imagination so strong as to sweep her off her feet, transporting her into a world she has never known existed.”¹⁰ Just as with all the authors and characters she has before known, so with her real life family and acquaintances, all may start to look different, regarding their thinking, motives and actions.

From the foregoing it should be evident that Rorty eschews any suggestion that a work of literary art seeks to advance a particular theory of ethics, philosophically or theologically conceived. Earlier we noted Rorty’s rejection of religion in literature. Similarly, for Rorty, readers or critics debase, and unduly restrict, a novel by assuming, for instance, that it reflects or advances Kantian deontology, Mill’s utilitarianism, Aristotle’s conception of virtue ethics, etc. Though such readings have often been attempted,¹¹ the unfortunate outcome is that, in their zeal to attach every clue and nuance in the story to something that could be construed as like Kant or Mill, they overlook the obvious expansive, exploratory, imaginative prospects of the text. Instead of letting the work speak for itself and establish its own relations and projections, they funnel it through an apriori theoretical prism. They essentially beg the question insofar as they simply assume what they expect is *in* the work, and to no surprise, end up *finding it* in their interpretive reading. Rorty’s approach to literature is wholly contrary.

Ethical theories are not in the narrative, and, therefore, narratives do not deliberately employ ethical theories to resolve dilemmas that arise in the course of the story.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

¹¹ Some clear examples include readings of the fiction of John Steinbeck, such as John Timmerman’s deontological interpretation in his “John Steinbeck: An Ethics of Fiction” or John J. Han’s “I Want to Make ‘Em Happy’: Utilitarian Philosophy in Steinbeck’s Fiction,” both included in *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck*.

Neither authors nor their characters are under any burden to come up with the right or best answers to moral dilemmas or controversies conjured by their stories. Fiction may shed important light on such matters – for instance, the agonizing difficulties of choice and action – but the larger purpose of the story is not to tell readers how to live or what their obligations are. No rule, principle or presumed universal ethical value guides the action or meaning of the story. In effect, a Rortyan approach to narrative is essentially anti-religious, anti-ideological, anti-philosophical in any normative or prescriptive sense.¹²

III

humanistic intellectuals are “people trying to expand their own moral imaginations. These ... people read books in order to enlarge their sense of what is possible and important – either for themselves or for their society.”

Rorty, “The Humanistic Intellectual: Eleven Theses”

“...we see both intellectual and moral progress not as a matter of getting closer to the True or the Good or the Right, but as an increase in imaginative power ... Imagination ... constantly operates so as to make the human future richer than the human past.”

“Pragmatists think of moral progress as ... like sewing together a very large, elaborate, polychrome quilt.”

Rorty, “Ethics Without Principles”

A number of Rorty’s leading ideas about literature and morality were initially introduced in Section II, in summarizing what he is *not* saying about the matter. Therefore, in this section I simply attempt to draw together, somewhat more coherently, the notions integral to his overall view and without which we could

¹² Further evidence and confirmation of what Rorty rejects about the relation between literature and morality – and how “theory” or “ideology” or “philosophy” do not provide a method of reading or an ethic of reading – is found in “The Pragmatist’s Progress: Umberto Eco on Interpretation,” in: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) pp. 131-147.

not make much sense of how literature can, in fact, work toward moral progress.

Christopher Voparil, in his chapter, “The Politics of the Novel,” confirms that for Rorty “the novel is the primary vehicle of moral reflection in a liberal democratic culture.” Further, through what Rorty terms, “sentimental education” [enlarging the sentiments],

works like Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Nabokov’s *Lolita* ... can forge a democratic moral community of citizens attuned to suffering and more likely to see those different from themselves as ‘one of us.’ Because it is 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.¹³

Eduardo Mendieta, in discussing Rorty’s understanding of the nature of philosophy and its role, points out that “A society with politics ... would have philosophy as a dialogue partner in the great conversation about what society should become.” However,

Philosophy has only poetry to offer, a type of inspirational jostling that foments a type of utopia that is generally expressed in literary terms ... When it [philosophy and literature] is not instigating our moral and social imaginaries, trying to expand our loyalties, it is performing the humble job of clearing the pathways to a better society.¹⁴

Both Rorty scholars point to five central themes that frame and express Rorty’s understanding of how narratives embrace morality and, in some instances, contribute to moral progress: moral imagination, sympathy and empathy, sentimental literature, expanded loyalty, and achieving a greater justice. In what follows I elaborate briefly on each, using Rorty’s seminal essay, “Ethics Without Principles,”¹⁵ as a primary

touchstone for a summary, in my own words, of his key points. Throughout, we will do well to bear in mind Rorty’s account of his overriding objective in another leading essay, “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” for his words provide foundation for the five principal themes. Writes Rorty, “My purpose ... is to develop an antithesis between the ascetic taste [of ascetic priests] for theory, simplicity, structure, abstraction, and essence and the novelist’s taste for narrative, detail, diversity and accident.”¹⁶

Imagination is the starting point for Rorty’s conception. In “Ethics Without Principles” he repeatedly speaks of the need for an increase in imaginative power. To this end, the reader’s encounter with a story may stimulate the imagination and open up a wider horizon of possibilities for how she understands herself and others, as well as her society and the world at large. Thus, Rorty’s initial focus is on individual persons – the creator of the narrative, the lives and experiences of the individual characters in the story, the reader as a unique person with a perspective, and, of course, the reader’s involvement with the characters and with others in her world. As noted earlier, the proliferation of imagination spawned by reading goes well beyond the boundaries of any theory, argument, principle or even basic emotions and feelings. At critical times narratives open up and vigorously challenge the moral imagination, causing the reader to both feel and reflect on motives, behaviors and their consequences, and how people can and do help or hurt others. In my own writing on John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* I demonstrate how the novella expands the range and complexity of fellow-feeling and, thereby, the moral experience of the reader, doing so through an imaginative leap inside the lives and experiences – personal, economic, political – of the main characters.

When the moral imagination is thus opened, a path is cleared for heightened awareness and sensitivity to the plights of others. The reader no longer simply

¹³ Voparil is here distilling key ideas from Rorty’s essay, “Justice as a Larger Loyalty” in Christopher J. Voparil, *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), p. 61.

¹⁴ Eduardo Mendieta, “Introduction” to *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews With Richard Rorty*, pp. xxvi-xxvii.

¹⁵ Rorty, “Ethics Without Principles,” in: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp. 72-90.

¹⁶ Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens,” in: *The Rorty Reader*, p. 313.

intellectualizes or critiques a text, but rather takes the reading experience into her heart as well as mind. Rorty states, “it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing *sensitivity* to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things.”¹⁷ Through sensitive reading the reader becomes more alert to the fullest dimensions of the story, particularly on an affective and social level. A character no longer stands simplistically for an idea or principle, for good or bad, but rather reflects a myriad complex of feelings, dreams and aspirations, regrets, and uncertainties about how to act and about what is good.

Enhanced sensitivity is the first move toward what Rorty calls sympathy for the characters and their lives. In his usage it is important to note that sympathy is not restricted to “feeling sorry for” or pitying another. In its deeper and more original sense, it denotes the prospects for sameness of feeling or affinity of one person for another, and elicits actions or responses that follow naturally from such affinity. It rests on a kind of mutual liking or understanding that further rests on the ability to enter into another person’s mental state – their feelings and desires. Rorty puts the matter very directly: “Moral progress is a matter of wider and wider sympathy.”¹⁸

Sympathy, in this enlarged sense, opens to closely related empathy, a sort of personal identification (another favorite Rorty term) with another in order to better understand the person and hopefully feel something like what she feels. Rorty frequently alludes to how stories function in unique ways to cultivate greater empathy, in the concrete sense of causing the reader to experience some approximation of the pain and suffering of others. As we sense another’s pain, we naturally wonder about its causes. This provokes deeper, wider reflection on the problems and shortcomings of individuals and groups, their relations to one another, and of society more broadly. This essential Rortyan point

is echoed by other recent authors, whose new books on the troubled humanities, ruminate on the role of the humanities in creating a heightened alertness to the possibilities of being human, and how greater self-awareness leads to greater sympathy-empathy and appreciation for the predicaments of numerous, varied others.¹⁹

Literature that opens the moral imagination, thus providing a possibility of greater sensitivity and sympathy for the suffering of others, constitutes what Rorty at times refers to as a sentimental literature that facilitates sentimental education. Sentiment for Rorty appears to be a subtle combination of feelings and impressions that provide a basis for judgment and action. It reflects sensibility, delicacy and depth of emotion, and is similar to Hume’s notion of sentiment (rather than reason) as the basis of morality. Importantly, sentiment, or sentimental, are not disparaging terms for Rorty when applied to literature and the arts generally. In literary criticism there is a well established tradition in which the label “sentimental” marks a death blow for any work of fiction. A work deemed sentimental is thereby accused of being superficially emotional and maudlin, not guided by thoughtfulness, by reason. We can hear in this echoes of Aristotle’s explanation of how tragic poetry functions emotively or Plato’s denunciation of the poets as too emotional and distracting to reason. But, for Rorty, insofar as a sentimental story reflects tenderness, subtlety and depth of feeling – reaching widely into the reader’s experience and sensibility – it is a positive attribute. Such stories make possible the cultivating of sentiment – directed primarily toward the feelings and sufferings of others – and a kind of redemptive, sentimental education for readers and the communities they inhabit.

¹⁷ Rorty, “Ethics Without Principles,” p. 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁹ Cf., for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010) and Geoffrey G. Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

The reader's growing connectedness with others, evolving from heightened awareness and identification through feeling with strong fictional characters, may gradually bring about what Rorty describes as a "greater we" and an "expanded loyalty." Recognizing that *they* are one of *us* begins with accepting characters in stories as being like us in fundamental ways, in our mutual capacities for change, suffering, growth, and dreams for a better future. This broadened appreciation for the plights of fictional characters then enables us to better comprehend our own predicaments. And as we gain broader and deeper self-awareness we begin to identify all the more with the problems of others. In a Deweyan pragmatist sense, Rorty's aspiration for a "greater we" reflects an expanded community of people who share common interests, experience, struggles, and goals. As Rorty says, "Moral development in the individual, and moral progress in the human species as a whole, is a matter of re-marking human selves so as to enlarge the variety of the relationships which constitute those selves."²⁰

Narratives help us, as readers, to understand the struggles people, and societies, undergo in search of freedom, equality, and fairness. This path of discovery may well begin with our own such struggles, but the narratives we embrace, and take into ourselves, make all the clearer the sense and extent to which all such difficult efforts, and the hardship and pain that accompany them, are common to peoples throughout the world, regardless of culture, religion or ethnicity. On Rorty's account this is all implicated in the struggle to achieve a "greater justice," put simply, to realize increased freedom, equality, and fairness in our own society and others around the world. He identifies such struggles in novels of moral protest by writers like Charles Dickens, James Baldwin, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, to name but a few. Their various fictions emphasize, for example, the detailed, negative impacts of economic class, racism and slavery on the lives of individuals, and how societal structures and institutions

thwart realization of freedom and equality. But they may, also, suggest ways in which people, drawn together as [reader] communities with common interests and purpose, can constructively work toward a brighter future characterized by expansions in freedom, equality, and fairness, to wit, a greater manifestation of justice. As Rorty writes, the basic moral dilemmas we confront are not conflicts between loyalty (i.e. to our family) and justice (i.e. for the whole of society), but rather conflicts "between loyalties to smaller groups and loyalties to larger groups."²¹ When as readers, we think not just with our feelings but with accompanying critical reason, and when we deliberately seek a larger loyalty (greater justice), we are engaged in two sides of the same activity. Indeed,

any unforced agreement between individuals and groups about what to do creates a form of community, and will, with luck, be the initial stage in expanding the circles of those whom each party to the agreement had previously taken to be 'people like ourselves.' The opposition between rational argument and fellow-feeling thus begins to dissolve.²²

Skillfully drawn narratives about people and their situations have far greater efficacy in launching this process than does any theory or ideology.

In sum for Rorty there exists a line of evolution from opening the moral imagination, to enhanced sympathy-empathy, to cultivating proper moral sentiments, to expanded loyalty and the pursuit of a greater justice. What he calls "inspirational literature" and "inspired reading" can uniquely and powerfully merge in this development. When Rorty attributes inspirational value to works of literature, he means that such works "make people think there is more to this life than they ever imagined."²³ Such works have "nothing to do with eternity, knowledge, or stability, and everything to do with futurity and hope – with taking the world by the

²⁰ Rorty, "Ethics Without Principles," p. 79.

²¹ Rorty, "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," p. 434.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 441.

²³ Rorty, "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature," in: *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 133.

throat and insisting that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined.”²⁴ And, perhaps somewhat ironically, on Rorty’s terms, it may even be possible to hope for a new found religion of literature “in which works of the secular imagination replace Scripture as the principal source of inspiration and hope for each new generation.”²⁵ Even though he here refers to the possibility of a new found “religion of literature” it would be, in my view, mistaken to conclude the Rorty is re-introducing religion or a religious world view in any customary sense. Key words in the above quotation are “secular” and “replace Scripture.”

While some may speculate that Rorty’s thinking about the role of literature in the reader’s private development or private reflection (as found, for example, in some aspects of his analyses of Nabokov and Proust) retains some elements from religion, I think this is clearly secondary to his main point. Literature for Rorty is essentially a secular endeavor. It constitutes a living assembly of texts (stories) that may well (and happily) supplant profound religious texts as principal sources of hope and inspiration. Rorty’s “religion of literature,” and his continual use of the word “redemption,” does not connote any sort of redemption or deliverance from evil, any spiritual cleansing that may lead to salvation or another, better life, or even moral purification. For Rorty redemption need have little or nothing to do with religion or religious experience as traditionally understood. Contrarily, his approach to the novel suggests a possible redemption (recovery from) the insularity of individual persons, from exclusive fixation on self-interest, the impotency of imagination, the sadness of callous hearts, and from the tyranny of theory. This is all of a piece with literature, as conceived by Rorty, stimulating the sort of inspired and enraptured readings of texts that he considers the mark of a pragmatist method of approach, one that focuses chiefly

on making the text, the story, useful, as opposed to getting it right.²⁶

IV

“...when you weigh the good and the bad that the social novelists have done against the good and the bad that the social theorists have done, you find yourself wishing that there had been more novels and fewer theories.”

Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens”

“There is more significant philosophy in the American novel than there is in the output of our philosophy departments.”

Gustav Emil Mueller, “Philosophy in The Twentieth Century Novel”

In the spirit of pragmatism, the veracity and fruitfulness of Rorty’s ideas on literature and moral progress will, in large part, be a function of their application and usefulness. To what extent then are his notions helpful in reading certain writers and their novels? In what respects do such novels reflect the process of reader-story interaction Rorty describes? Earlier I cited the writers Dickens, Baldwin, and Stowe, all of whom Rorty shows appreciation for as vivid examples of the struggle for an “expanded we” and a “greater justice.” He would be inclined I think to call certain of their works “sentimental novels” that induce enhanced moral feelings and reflection. His comments on them are brief and sporadic, spread through various of the essays cited earlier, but he would count these authors as among those who may well contribute to moral progress, so long as their works are not read, as is typical, through a restrictive funnel of theory, ideology or pre-defined set of values. Accordingly, I propose that a close, openly imaginative reading or re-reading of *Bleak House* or *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* begins to add fleshy detail to Rorty’s grandest hopes and aspirations for stories.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 138.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 136.

²⁶ A brilliant and concise account of the difference between methodical and inspired readings can be found in Rorty’s “The Pragmatist’s Progress,” pp. 145-146.

Probably the most sustained and elaborated application of Rorty's manner of reading and interpretation involves Milan Kundera, Vladimir Nabokov, and George Orwell. Kundera is something of a literary hero for Rorty. His views on the imaginative world of the novel (as expressed, for example, in *The Art of the Novel*), and the extent to which they countervail philosophy and ideological certitudes, coincide with Rorty's own ideal of a democratic, liberal utopia in large part facilitated by narratives. But his most extensive treatment of writers would be Nabokov and Orwell. Rorty lauds both for getting inside of (and sensitizing audiences to) the cruelty and humiliation suffered by many, whether stemming from individuals, groups or institutions. The two chapters on these authors in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* are well known to students of Rorty's work, and will not be analyzed here. Suffice it to say that both are of considerable importance in getting a fuller grasp on Rorty's views, and a thoughtful re-reading of either becomes a prime moment for concretizing Rorty's generalities.²⁷

To extend the range of speculative application a bit further, I will suggest the work of fellow American and I believe kindred spirit, John Steinbeck. Rorty writes favorably, albeit very briefly, of Steinbeck on several occasions. For instance, he points to a scene in *The Grapes of Wrath* as being "Perhaps the most vivid description of the American concept of fraternity." The scene involves the sharing of limited food with a starving migrant family and Rorty writes, "As long as people in trouble can sacrifice to help people who are in still worse trouble, Steinbeck insisted, there is fraternity, and therefore social hope."²⁸ Elsewhere, he categorizes *Grapes* as a socialist novel of the 1930's era written "in the belief that the tone of the Gettysburg Address was

absolutely right, but that our country would have to transform itself in order to fulfill Lincoln's hopes."²⁹

Steinbeck, like Rorty, was largely a man of America, made in part from the cloth, the very texture of this land – its history, culture and ideals. He was a man of deep-seated hope who firmly believed in the prospects of progressive, evolutionary development of man and society over long swaths of time. Steinbeck embraced a profound sense of meliorism that I believe Rorty shares. Steinbeck believed in what he termed the infinite perfectibility of man though it could, of course, never be fully realized. Rorty is of similar mind when he writes, "you cannot aim at moral perfection, but you can aim at taking more people's needs into account."³⁰ For Steinbeck there was the ever-present possibility of achieving a greater and more efficacious community, growing out of sensitivity to others, trust, loyalty, and basic friendship. Witness, for instance, his masterful treatments of human community in works like *Of Mice and Men*, *Cannery Row* as well as *Grapes of Wrath*. Moreover, Steinbeck had an inherent environmental and global sensibility and understanding well before we had wide spread recognition of or even a vocabulary for such things, while many of his leading characters are culturally diverse (Mexicans, Asians, native Americans) and sympathetically related to one another in ways Rorty would very likely approve. Importantly, these characters often struggle together, in relative solidarity, in seeking greater fairness, equitable treatment, and improved living conditions. To use Rorty's term, they display enthusiasm for a "greater justice."

Therefore, I offer a modest suggestion – that Rorty would have found fertile narrative ground for instantiating his ideas about literature and morality in Steinbeck novels beyond *The Grapes of Wrath* – the Pulitzer prize winning, quintessential story of Depression-era America and its moral response to

²⁷ Richard Rorty, "The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty" (pp. 141-168) and "The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty" (pp. 169-188), in: *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²⁸ Richard Rorty, "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096," in: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 248.

²⁹ Richard Rorty, "American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey," in: *Achieving Our Country*, p. 8.

³⁰ Rorty, "Ethics Without Principles," p. 83.

economic as well as political and individual desperation. He would no doubt have found what is arguably the most powerful and dramatically moving illustration of loyalty and friendship anywhere in American literature in *Of Mice and Men*. He would have, also, witnessed there a lived sense of fraternity amongst members of the economic underclass, in this case, migrant laborers, and their collective need to articulate the suffering and injustice of a class system structured around heartless owners and contingent laborers. He would have “felt” the living, day-to-day experience of debilitating racism and sexism in the characters of Crooks and Curly’s wife. There is good reason why *Of Mice and Men* – as novella, multiple movies, and various stage plays – remains so popular today, with respect to sales and audience reception. A Rortyan explanation seems to me part of it. *Of Mice and Men* grabs readers and viewers at a deep affective level, evoking their sympathies for the plight of powerless, everyday people whom Steinbeck masterfully develops into heroic-like fictional characters capable of moving people to action. His characters, through the power of narrative, make us suffer with them. They make us entertain the very real possibility of an “expanded we.”

In *Cannery Row* Rorty would have seen, in the context of a raucous and satirically hilarious story about a collection of social misfits, a passionate and expansive exploration of human community – its meaning for simple people, how it gets formed, and what its prospective ramifications are. *Cannery Row* tweaks our collective funny bones, challenges our finer moral sensibilities, as it gladdens our hearts with the redemptive power of human fellowship and its liberating potentialities. Once again, loyalty and friendship merge to elevate the human spirit out of the vagaries of subsistence living, to achieve levels of mutual understanding, satisfaction, even joy, that the material conditions would seemingly never make possible.

In the lesser known but hugely popular (particularly in Europe) WW II-era novel, *The Moon Is Down*, Rorty

would revel in the emerging resistance movement among residents of a small Norwegian (so it is assumed) town that comes to be invaded and occupied by fictionalized German Nazis. How the citizens and their local leaders gradually, surreptitiously, invisibly band together, in an uprising of sticks and stones and spirit over guns and bombs, is eloquent testimony to the power of human dignity and freedom. Quite simply, the townspeople cannot, will not, live under oppression. They are persons and they must be free. They must reverse the injustice of occupation and, miraculously, they pull it off. The story is hopeful and inspiring, and naturally reverberated with thousands of underground readers throughout Europe during the war years. While an admitted work of propaganda, it, nonetheless, has lasting effect on the human pursuit of freedom and justice. It advances Rorty’s aspirations for narratives that make a difference.

Lastly, I hope eventually to develop a separate paper that will attempt a Rortyan interpretation of the moral dimensions of Steinbeck’s final and frequently overlooked novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, the one work in his corpus that Steinbeck identified as being simply about morals and morality. But for now, in closing this section, I simply allude to a bold statement Steinbeck makes in the frontispiece to the book. He warns that instead of trying to identify specific fictional people or places in the story, readers would do better, “to inspect their own communities and search their own hearts, for this book is about a large part of America today.”³¹ Rorty would surely have resonated to this admonition. In considering Steinbeck’s all too briefly referenced works here, and in imaginatively speculating on the guiding spirits of both John Steinbeck and Richard Rorty, we can best grasp hold of both by bearing in mind Rorty’s generic instruction to readers of stories: “people merely need to turn their eyes toward those who are getting hurt and notice the *details* of the pain being

³¹ John Steinbeck, *The Winter of Our Discontent* (New York: Viking Press, 1961).

suffered...”³² When once asked by a graduate student what his philosophy was, Steinbeck responded, somewhat tongue in cheek, by saying he had no idea really. What he did know is that innocent people get hurt and suffer, and he did not like it. He thought we all needed to work, in our various ways, to put a stop to it.

V

A tentative appraisal of Rorty on literature and moral progress might evolve from a few observations and questions. I conclude the paper by raising at least some of them. Some critics might note that Rorty’s radical ideas landed him on the fringes of academe, summarily dismissed (or worse, condemned) by both philosophers and literature specialists. How could he ever be taken seriously without a firm disciplinary home and accepted philosophical methodology? In the end, this mattered little to Rorty, and it should matter little to us, students of Rorty. Among his lasting achievements was to show us all the full and genuine possibilities of interdisciplinary inquiry. He demonstrates convincingly the superiority of pragmatic pluralism and diversity, outgrowths of interdisciplinarity, to the more fashionable multiculturalism that has gripped the academy for at least the last three decades. Rorty breaks down walls, and no better example could be offered than his outlook on morality and ethics. For him ethics is not just the province of philosophy or religion. It is found with equal force and vigor in the arts and literature. While some critics may condemn him for mixing politics and ethics with literature, alleging a consequent diminution in aesthetic integrity or purity, Rorty believes that narratives, messy and realistic as they may be, are for the purpose of opening up imagination and linking people together. For him, traditional aesthetic values are to be supplanted by sensibility, community building, and the pursuit of justice. Put simply, his overriding objectives for literature are radically different, and must, in fairness, be understood and assessed on their own terms.

Some may claim that Rorty’s notion of moral progress applies only to particular, limited authors and selected texts. Obviously, his own literary illustrations are pointed and reflect his favorites. But I would respond in two ways. First, I think it entirely plausible that more works could well be included within the Rorty inventory. If we exercise, with Rorty, narrative and moral imagination and look carefully, we may well come up with a variety of narratives from different periods, styles and locations. My earlier speculations about Steinbeck were meant to tentatively illustrate this point. Secondly, it would not be entirely wrong to charge a certain limitation involved in Rorty’s thinking about the novel, but such charge misses a fundamental point about literary theory. Any and all theories of literature are, by their very nature, selective as to the particular works of literature that serve to best illustrate what the theory is saying. To be more precise, Rorty’s preferred works are what he variously calls the “literature of moral protest,” “sentimental literature,” or “inspirational literature,” and we have identified several examples earlier. Surely, within America alone, following modernism, writers like Barth, Pynchon, De Lillo, and Auster have experimented with the disappearance of strong characters and plot. Indeed, they may be seen as having given up altogether on typical notions of plot development or characters capable of inducing moral progress. They display serious reservations about the power of language or any literary form to grasp reality, including social reality, let alone advance it along. This, for sure, is not Rorty’s “literature of social hope.” He is aware of such writers and their works, referring to them in *Achieving Our Country* as a literature of “acquiescence in the end of American hope.” While I do not think he could truly engage such works, or have much to say about them, Rorty’s dismissive posture toward such novels does not negate such an alternative way of conceiving and executing the novel. It is simply not the sort of literature that confirms, illustrates or advances his notion of what literature is and what it is capable of accomplishing within the human community. This is hardly different in any meaningful way from, for example, Sartre’s rejection (in *What is Literature?*) of the

³² Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens,” p. 319.

so-called “pure poetry” of Valéry and Mallarmé because it was too formalistic, ethereal, and abstracted from living social realities. It is no coincidence that Sartre’s own socio-political theory of literature is best understood and illustrated by reference to his literary works – *Nausea*, *No Exit*, *The Flies* – or to texts like Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*. Likewise, we should not forget that Aristotle (in his *Poetics*) clearly had *Oedipus* in view as both inspiration and illustration for his theory of literature as organic unity that imitates nature and causes a purgation of the emotions. Obviously, there exists a great and wonderful variety of literary works and literary theories. Equally as obvious, no one theory could ever engage or explain such wide variation in forms, styles and thematic emphases. But this need not diminish the significance or applicability of any theory of literature. It simply confirms that the nature and function of literary art is too vast and diverse a subject matter to be adequately handled by a single conception. In short, I do not believe Rorty would have much interest in the experimental literature mentioned above, but this in no way defuses the significance of his own ideas about literature and morality.

Some would no doubt want to ask Rorty whether moral progress can be measured? Is there a scale of justice or fairness within literature, within the real world outside the narrative? How would we ever know when justice is achieved, and how could it ever be confirmed, one way or the other, that the reading of stories had anything to do with human actions? While these seem reasonable questions, they tend to miss Rorty’s point. Of course, there is no scale or measure of moral progress, other than generally improving social conditions, no mechanism that could definitively prove that progress has been realized and that novels have somehow contributed to it. Rorty’s ideas are projective, enveloped by hope and human ideals. He is not interested in proof or precise calculation. If a narrative cannot, does not, give us a precise position on anything, why would anyone even want a specific measure of its effects and

outcomes? Such questioning reflects the sort of analytic or logical temper in which Rorty does not traffic. Lack of precise measurement or proof, however does not belie the efficacy of narratives or Rorty’s ideas about just how they work.

I suspect that Rorty’s lasting legacy on the question of literature, and its relation to morality and moral progress, will be the extent to which he worked assiduously and creatively to liberate both literature and morality from the tyranny of theory and ideology. In his pushing of boundaries, he has opened up the space for a fresh start. He has given legitimacy to the moral imagination, and vitality to the role of moral experience in our reflection and action, both individually and collectively. As an antidote to the sterile, purely academic analyses of much of literary and ethical theory, he has infused literature and philosophy with hope and very real human purpose. For this we should be forever in his debt.