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Rawls, Literary Form, and How to Read Politically

Public reason—citizens' reasoning in the public forum about constitutional essentials and basic questions of justice—is now best guided by a political conception the principles and values of which all citizens can endorse. That political conception is to be, so to speak, political and not metaphysical.

— John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*¹

IN HIS CONCLUSION to *Democracy's Discontent*, Michael Sandel calls for a new public philosophy based on republican political ideals that cultivate citizenship and solidarity through the activity of ongoing civic engagement. He sees contemporary American political discourse as dominated by the language of rights and the rule of law, and he argues that in such contexts citizens are cast as mere bearers of rights, independent selves “unencumbered” by moral or civic ties to one another.² Sandel's complaint with this conception of public discourse is its failure to take into account the moral force of the many attachments and commitments by which individuals shape their lives. He concludes that the only way to alleviate “democracy's discontent” is to revive notions of citizenship and proliferate the occasions and settings—for example, churches, schools, community centres, labour unions, and so forth—in which people of different ages, incomes, and races encounter

¹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 10.

² Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1996) 28.

one another and work toward common goals. Sandel recognizes the difficulty of forging a common identity among such diverse population groups and, in a remarkable move, turns to literature to assist the democratic project:

Political community depends on the narratives by which people make sense of their condition and interpret the common life they share; at its best, political deliberation is not only about competing policies but also about competing interpretations of the character of a community, of its purposes and ends.... There is a growing danger that, individually and collectively, we find ourselves slipping into a fragmented, storyless condition. The loss of the capacity for narrative would amount to the ultimate disempowering of the human subject, for without narrative there is no continuity between past and present and therefore no responsibility, and therefore no possibility of acting together to govern ourselves. (350–51)

This is a wonderfully empowering moment for members of literature departments everywhere, because Sandel gives special place to the role of narrative in public life. Rather than be relegated to a private realm of affective communication, literature in Sandel's view intervenes in civil society by furthering the ends of self-government when other forms of discursive interaction break down. He proposes that literary interpretation, which he treats as analogous to self-interpretation, is required in order to live democratically.

Of course, Michael Sandel is not the first to argue for the political relevance of literature to democratic life, only one of the most recent. In 1795, Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* brought aesthetics and democratic relations together by claiming that the practical questions of politics, including questions about freedom and representation, can only be broached "through the problem of the Aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom."³ Schiller's claim echoed down

³ Friedrich von Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, ed. and trans. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 9.

the corridors of nineteenth-century England and registered in the works of Matthew Arnold, who shared Schiller's view that aesthetic experience facilitated the exercise of autonomous reason and thus prepared the way for free-thinking persons' future entry into democratic life. In the twentieth century, Lionel Trilling in *The Liberal Imagination* built on Arnold's appeal for disinterested thought and turned to the novel in particular as the most effective agent of a liberal democracy because it enhanced the activity of self and social scrutiny and enabled individuals to be at ease with "complexity and difficulty."⁴

More recently, the relevance of literature to public life has been energetically championed not by literary scholars but by political philosophers. In *Ordinary Vices*, Judith Shklar drew on the work of Michel de Montaigne and Baron de Montesquieu to defend what she called a "liberalism of fear."⁵ Like Montaigne and Montesquieu, she advocated a liberalism defined not by rights and legal processes but in terms of a fear of cruelty to others and a hatred of inhumanity. In Shklar's opinion, novelists and dramatists have succeeded where philosophers have failed in giving a rich and sustained treatment of human vices and the everyday harms individuals inflict upon one another. Similarly, Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum have drawn on literary works to help articulate what a society means by cruelty or injustice and to examine how literature offers up alternative conceptions of the good life.⁶ Taking a different approach, political philosophers Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel enlist narrative in the formative project of identity building.⁷ They propose that individuals in particular and societies in general grasp their lives in terms of an unfolding story, a conti-

⁴ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Viking, 1951) xv.

⁵ Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1984).

⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989); *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991); and *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991). See also Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990) and *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) and *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985). See also Sandel's *Democracy's Discontent* and *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982).

nunity of events, reactions, and moral orientations that provide the coherence necessary to make sense of who one is and where one is going.⁸

In light of this impressive body of scholarship, I wish to redraw the contours of the relationship between literature and democracy I have been sketching here. Rather than consider literature the privileged domain of affective attachments or identity formation, I wish to consider literature's contribution to democratic politics on a formal level. This emphasis on the formal properties of both literary texts and constitutional democracies means drawing on the work of probably the least literary of political theorists, John Rawls. The importance of Rawls's work to the study of literature is his proposition that "the basic structure of society" is the proper subject of political interest. Rawls defines the basic structure of society as the manner in which social, political, and economic institutions "fit together into one system, and how they assign fundamental rights and duties and shape the division of advantages that arises through social cooperation" (*Political Liberalism* 258). This "complex of institutions" (258), which may be characterized in a variety of ways as liberal, democratic, utilitarian, and so forth, provides the framework by which a community regulates itself and through which citizens grasp the nature of their interactions with one another. The basic structure, in short, provides the context within which political reflection is possible.⁹ The connec-

⁸ This is by no means an exhaustive list of political theorists who consider the connection between literature and democratic politics, only a representative one. Other works I principally have in mind are George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992); Stanley Cavell, *Discovering Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987); Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1994); Nancy Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987).

⁹ What I am highlighting in Rawls's work is the ongoing regulative function of the basic structure of society, not its initial selection. The particular character of the basic structure—that is, whether it is democratic or not, what sort of economic institutions and constitutional arrangements it will have, and so forth—is chosen by free and equal individuals from behind the veil of ignorance. Once the parties in the original position determine which particular arrangement of political, economic, and social institutions is most appropriate to them, this arrangement or basic structure serves as the context within which current and future citizens assess social co-operation and constitutional priorities in the form of public policy. The point of view of the original contractors and that of citizens who perform these assessments is distinct. See *Political Liberalism* 22-28.

tion between Rawls and literature that I wish to explore entails casting the form, or basic structure, of a literary work as political. If one adopts New Critical understandings of literature as a complex network of characters, events, emotive elements, and verbal style, then the formal arrangements of a literary work serve as powerful analogues to Rawls's claim that the basic structure of society is the proper subject of political interest. The correspondence between literary and political structures, then, reconceives the intersection between literature and politics by approaching literary texts, and novels in particular, as formal representations of relationships among individuals in a public sphere. In this view, literature serves as an important occasion for reasoning publicly about shared convictions and responsibilities, and provides rich opportunities for evaluating society's collective projects.

Before turning to Rawls's work, I will outline more fully the recent arguments put forward by political philosophers interested in the public efficacy of literary works. It is in the context of such arguments that questions about the value of formal analysis, in either literary or political contexts, arise in a particularly forceful and challenging fashion. These questions of formal arrangements place upfront what is at stake in interdisciplinary projects as such: namely, how one is to navigate critically among what are often radically different modes of representation and evaluation. At present, the available options for interdisciplinary analysis seem to run somewhere between, on the one hand, adopting a genealogical approach to textual interpretation and considering literary works as one of many interrelated domains of discursive formation or, on the other hand, towards emphasizing the non-comparability between literary representations and other descriptive accounts of socio-historical phenomena and consequently arguing in favour of what W. K. Wimsatt in *The Verbal Icon* calls "literary value."¹⁰ I propose that this second option of the incommensurability of literary with other modes of representation, together with a reconsideration of Wimsatt's notion of literary value, brings a new array of ethical-political concerns to bear on the relationship between literary works and constitutional democracies.

¹⁰ W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1967) 82.

In the interdisciplinary study of literature and democracy, Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty explore the novels of Henry James, Charles Dickens, Milan Kundera, and Vladimir Nabokov in order to theorize literature's affective role in civil society. Both Rorty and Nussbaum value novels for their unique capacity to engage readers' sympathies and elicit feelings of pleasure or pain at instances of deep love or unprovoked cruelty. In *Love's Knowledge* and *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum defends the experiential value of emotions like love, sympathy, fear, and compassion, and claims that such emotions ought to play a meaningful part in public rationality. She argues that emotions are not simply uncontrollable (and therefore unreliable) surges of feeling, but are in fact legitimate responses closely linked to individuals' deeply felt beliefs about what is important in their lives. Moreover, the language of literature—its nuanced vocabularies, the complex reaction of characters to one another, as well as its appeals to sympathy and compassion—encourages readers to notice the particular details of other people's lives. Because the reader's emotions and imagination are highly active in the process of reading, novels represent for Nussbaum a different structure of knowledge from that of rule-governed moral reasoning. Novels reveal "the worth and richness of plural qualitative thinking and engender in their readers a richly qualitative kind of seeing" (*Love's Knowledge* 36). For Nussbaum, the literary imagination is a "kind of seeing" or shared moral horizon between writer and reader. Literature's contribution to public debate is to foster dialogue between literary knowledge and the philosophical knowledge of rules and universal principles. The outcome of this dialogue Nussbaum calls "perceptive equilibrium," in response to Rawls's notion of "reflective equilibrium" in moral reasoning.¹¹ According to Rawls, reflective equilibrium refers to the ongoing process by which individuals revise their "considered judgments" and their moral principles with the goal of bringing judgments and principles in concert or in "equilibrium" with one another (*Theory* 20). Nussbaum's complaint with Rawls's process of ethical reflection is that it fails to take into account the role of emotional knowledge in individuals' particular assessments about how to act. The epistemology of feeling that novels provide furthers ethical reasoning because it enables individuals to respond

¹¹ See *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971) 20 ff.

more fully, to be wholly “perceptive” to the complex particularities of people and situations (*Love’s Knowledge* 182). “Perceptive equilibrium,” Nussbaum argues, “is an equilibrium in which concrete perceptions ‘hang beautifully together,’ both with one another and with the agent’s general principles; an equilibrium that is always ready to reconstitute itself in response to the new” (*Love’s Knowledge* 182–83).

Nussbaum’s appeal to literary emotions resembles in many respects Richard Rorty’s work on literature and democracy. While questions about the good life frame Nussbaum’s treatment of literature, Rorty immediately sheds whatever metaphysical freight these questions carry and instead focuses on literature’s role in sustaining a liberal conception of freedom. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty argues in favour of a “liberal utopia” characterized by a movement away from theory and toward narrative (xvi). This movement entails individuals’ recognition that questions about truth, knowledge, rationality, or human nature are political questions, rather than epistemological or metaphysical ones. The significance of this shift in questioning for Rorty’s liberal utopia is the conviction among citizens that “a society’s definition of ‘truth’ or ‘goodness’ will be the outcome of open discussion under enduring democratic institutions” (*Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* 28). Because there is no agreed upon metalanguage that subsumes alternative conceptions of truth or justice, for Rorty the function of narrative is to bring other ways of judging or feeling or describing such conceptions into public discussion in an effort to generate solidarity among fellow citizens. Like Shklar, Rorty considers cruelty to be the worst of human vices and, because its diminishment is the moral imperative of a liberal society, human solidarity becomes a matter of forging public agreement on how to avoid cruelty.

Like Nussbaum, Rorty argues that detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation found in the novels of Dickens and Nabokov must factor into society’s ethical deliberations. He also shares Nussbaum’s view of the literary imagination as instrumental to acquiring new attitudes and furthering liberalism’s investment in self-revision. Rorty’s liberal utopia is populated not by metaphysicians but by “strong poets” capable of “telling the story of their own production in words never used before,” in a language that is private, “unfamiliar and idiosyncratic” (*Essays on Heidegger and Others* 71). In this society of poets, literature helps reconcile private freedom with the public concern to become less

cruel: "Books help us avoid cruelty, not by warning us against social injustice, but by warning us against the tendencies to cruelty inherent in searches for autonomy" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 144).

Encouraged as I am by the arguments put forward by Nussbaum and Rorty, my interest in literature's contribution to political life entails a departure from them. To my mind it is too limiting to speak of literature in strictly emotive terms, as merely a mode of expression aligned with the imagination and with affective responses to pleasure and pain, although it is certainly that. Undoubtedly, Nussbaum and Rorty would take exception to this characterization because both wish to avoid simply aestheticizing what are, in fact, moral responses to literature.¹² But when Nussbaum encourages individuals to be "surprised" by literature, where "surprise" is equated with "an attitude of mind that storytelling fosters and develops," so that readers may "become more responsive" to their "own life's adventure, more willing to see and be touched by life" (*Love's Knowledge* 162), she risks equating literary value with the degree of feeling experienced by the reader, which is the very kind of literary impressionism masquerading as criticism that Wimsatt and Beardsley sought to curtail in "The Affective Fallacy." One need not subscribe to a conception of literature as emotionally vacuous to counter Nussbaum's claims, and certainly even the New Critics didn't support such a position. But to approach literature in the manner I am suggesting, that is, as a deliberative framework for assessing collective activities, means that one has to leave off thinking that eliciting emotive responses is the only thing literature does.

The chief difficulty with Nussbaum's unduly restricted defence of literature as affect, however, is that it's a thin argument, politically speaking. For to say that literature is the repository of

¹² When Nussbaum speaks of literature as "sharing a commitment to the ethical relevance of particularity and to the epistemological value of feeling," there is little doubt that she casts literature as the privileged province of morality and the emotions and regards the literary imagination as intrinsically valuable (*Love's Knowledge* 175). In "Nabokov on Cruelty," Rorty claims that literary discussions should not hinge on "factitious" and "shopworn" philosophical phrases like "art vs. morality or style vs. substance," yet for Rorty literature is aligned with emotions and morality when novelists' depictions of cruelty, and the reader's responses to them, instruct one on how to act (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 141–68).

affective relations among individuals means that literature's place in public life will always be argued on emotive grounds, rather than political ones, thereby granting literature merely adjunct status in public discourse. Nussbaum's equation of literature with feelings, even quasi rational ones, puts her in the difficult position in *Poetic Justice* of defending an overtly sentimental and tendentious novel like Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* without a sense of irony or history. (Of course, Dickens in *Hard Times* is often as polemical as the utilitarians he parodies. Despite Nussbaum's proposition that Dickens and the utilitarians separate conveniently into novelistic-emotive and rationalist-theoretical modes of reckoning, recent literary scholarship has drawn compelling connections between Dickens and a tradition of Radical politics in which Bentham and the utilitarians played an influential part.¹³) Nussbaum's argument in *Poetic Justice* seems to hang on the notion that because *Hard Times* takes utilitarianism as its subject matter and opposes the harsh rationality of Benthamites to the spontaneity of the Sleary Circus, it is somehow politically relevant in a manner that, say, a novel by Margaret Laurence is not. Because Nussbaum does not tackle the novel's long history, nor consider non-sympathy-inducing texts like historical fiction or detective novels, her arguments are not answerable to large fields of literary criticism. How expansive are her claims about the political efficacy of novels, ultimately? Furthermore, sympathy, cruelty, or even aesthetic sensibility are not intrinsically valuable experiences, nor are they unproblematically available to the reader. And to say with Rorty that novelists are "connoisseurs of diversity" and the novel itself is a plurality of competing vocabularies is unhelpful, for it is unclear where these sorts of arguments about connoisseurship and vocabularies sort themselves out. The mere proliferation of points of view, or the rearticulations of the kinds of cruelty or humiliation to avoid, does not on its face render literature political. A powerfully political novel does more than simply play values off against one another: it functions, rather, as a formal horizon in which groups or bodies of population are brought into new arrangements with one another

¹³ See Sambudha Sen, "Bleak House and Little Dorrit: The Radical Heritage," *ELH* 65 (1998): 945-70; Kathleen Blake, "Bleak House, Political Economy, Victorian Studies," *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1997): 1-21; and, earlier, Marjorie Stone's "Dickens, Bentham, and the Fictions of the Law: A Victorian Controversy and Its Consequences," *Victorian Studies* 29 (1985): 125-54.

and the literary structure itself provides the interpretive means by which to adjudicate between one view and another, between one event and another.

A second area in which the concerns of literature and political theory have come together in recent years is the role of narrative. Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor propose that individuals understand their lives in terms of an unfolding story that structures human experience by charting causally the events of one's life.¹⁴ Human lives are shaped by what MacIntyre calls a "narrative quest" and the moral dimension of this narrative quest is the subject of Taylor's *Sources of the Self*. In *Sources*, Taylor maps out a theory of selfhood predicated on the notion that individuals are always oriented within a moral horizon that enables them to make qualitative distinctions about the desirability of various ends and goods. Because an "orientation to the good" is an inescapable feature of human life, the link between morality and selfhood for Taylor is that individuals need to find workable frameworks of morality through which they can give an account of themselves in the world: "Making sense of one's life as a story is also, like orientation to the good, not an optional extra.... Our lives exist in a space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer. In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going" (*Sources* 47). Narrative functions as a descriptive tool for Taylor, as it does for Sandel. In *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Sandel argues that making sense of human action, including political action, involves giving an account of the self that incorporates evaluative and explanatory meanings derived from one's loyalties and convictions as a citizen, member of a family, religion, community or nation (179). Here, self-understanding is constitutive of one's attachments to family or community, and this thick sense of identity is intended by Sandel as a response to the so-called neutral self of liberal theories stretching from Locke to Kant and Rawls. In general, narrative for Taylor and Sandel operates simply as a constitutive rather than critical device, a way of explaining ourselves to ourselves and of understanding the force in our lives of moral ties antecedent to choice. A more nuanced reading places *Democracy's Discontent*

¹⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self* and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1984).

within a wider context of understanding the important role of the past in forging American political identity and the need for societies to recognize the historical dimension of political groups tied to a common history and memory. A society's collective capacity for narrative—of returning to origins and tracing a coherent story forward—is bound up with the sense of its being involved in common sentiments and projects over time, and the link between the continuity of political identity and constitutional form dates back to Aristotle's *Politics*.¹⁵ But it is unclear from Sandel how non-linear narratives, which do not always strive towards (or achieve) the coherence necessary for the kind of identity building both he and Taylor propose, address political questions about mutuality, an identity-conferring heritage, and even ongoing moral responsibility en route to easing what he calls America's "storyless" condition.

My attempt to draw on Rawls's work to resituate the connections between literature and democracy, however, has less to do with any theoretical disagreement I may have with Taylor's moral phenomenology or with Rorty's endless play of competing vocabularies than it has to do with what is at stake in the interdisciplinary project as such: namely, what is to be gained or lost in preserving the distinctness of *literary* representations.¹⁶ While one may acknowledge that literature presents another way of knowing about human emotions or identity, I do not feel the force of that particular position as it has been presented by these critics. Literary representations do not need to be attached to accounts of moral psychology to claim public attention: to paraphrase Rawls's famous formu-

¹⁵ See *Politics*, ed. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946) 1276a–1276b. In the Anglo-American political tradition, Edmund Burke in 1790 argued that the British constitution specified the local and historical character of the political community against the universalism implied by natural rights theories: "We have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood, binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties, adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections.... Our liberty has a pedigree and illustrating ancestors. It has its bearings and its ensigns armorial. It has its gallery of portraits, its monumental inscriptions, its records, evidences, and titles"; see Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987) 30.

¹⁶ The defense of literature as a distinct mode of expression and analysis of course underwrote New Critical approaches to literary texts. For a more contemporary defense of this position, see Steven Knapp, *Literary Interest: The Limits of Anti-Formalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).

lation invoked in the epigraph to this essay, literature, too, can be political, not metaphysical. What seems to be at issue in this sort of interdisciplinary project is precisely the question of literary form. Certainly, the enormous influence Michel Foucault had in the academy over the last decades encouraged literary critics to adopt genealogical approaches to textual interpretation. These approaches historicized fiction by placing it within a specific socio-political horizon and assumed the commensurability, or at least comparability, among all discourses. This overdetermined view of history collapses what are often very different modes of expression into a single monolithic articulation. What is lost is any notion of the value of literary expression as a unique patterning of verbal elements distinct from other types of merely descriptive accounts of actual socio-historical phenomena or the presentation of philosophical arguments. Yet literature's distinctness does not rest, or does not simply rest, on its emotive capacity alone, on its being "in league with the emotions," as Nussbaum claims, for literature does not simply express emotional states like fear, anger, love, or desire, if indeed one knew what it meant to recognize these types of literary emotions.¹⁷

Nussbaum's view of literature's "ethical" ability to connect readers with "other people whose lives are distant from our own" (*Poetic Justice* xvi) raises a different kind of historical problematic, namely, the universalist claim that all social actors express and comprehend their experiences in the same way. It is controversial to argue for the interchangeability of social actors, as Nussbaum does. Needless to say, it then becomes questionable how "distant" those historical and cultural "other people" ultimately are. Rather, the distinctness of literature has to do with how a literary work presents itself as a framework of argumentation.

While Rawls's theories of justice and liberalism do not take into account literary texts or other cultural artifacts, his interest in outlining the conditions for just and equitable relations among in-

¹⁷ In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum argues, "Literature is in league with the emotions. Readers of novels, spectators of dramas, find themselves led by these works to fear, to grief, to pity, to anger, to joy and delight, even to passionate love. Emotions are not just likely responses to the content of many literary works; they are built into their very structure, as ways in which literary works solicit attention" (53).

dividuals in a constitutional democracy bears on what one might consider literature's commitment to the liberal principles of pluralism and uncoerced deliberation. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls uses the device of the original position—in which individuals engage in an exercise of social co-operation and choose together, behind a veil of ignorance, the principles by which to assign rights, duties, and the distribution of social benefits among social members—to construct a regulative framework that gives public expression to a conception of justice as fairness. Rawls makes use of this framework in *Political Liberalism* to argue that the scope of justice as fairness is political, not metaphysical; that is, he insists on the distinction between a comprehensive moral and philosophical doctrine of liberalism like Kant's or Mill's and a political liberalism limited in scope to the domain of public institutions, procedures, and traditions that all citizens recognize and accept as fair. He founds his conception of political liberalism on the idea of "reasonable pluralism," which recognizes that modern democratic society is characterized "not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of *incompatible* yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines" (*Political Liberalism* xvi). For Rawls, the ongoing project of a liberal democracy is to find a publicly acceptable political conception of justice that does not rely for its justification on the content and values expressed in any one comprehensive belief or doctrine. The thrust of Rawls's public philosophy entails finding the minimum point of agreement among social members who agree to disagree. Such a conception of justice, therefore, must be partial in scope and independent of *a priori* claims about personhood, collective identity, or the inevitability of certain beliefs or values.

The arguments Rawls puts forward in *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism* are open to a range of comments, but I will restrict myself to those that seem relevant to the analysis of form I am advancing and its implications for literary interpretation. Certainly, it would be a mistake to try to import wholesale the astonishing breadth and complexity of Rawls's theories, or to try to adopt anything like a literary original position or assume a veil of ignorance on the part of either the author or the reader. The critical purchase of Rawls's work to the study of literature lies in his outline of a field of study he calls "political." For Rawls, "political" pertains to the relation among persons in a constitutional democracy framed by social, political, and economic institutions. These

public institutions and traditions fit together into a system of co-operation in which ongoing collective actions and choices are made. The values that underwrite the basic structure, that is, the values of freedom and equality chosen in the original position, are independent of any comprehensive doctrine and are publicly recognized. For Rawls, the basic structure provides a set of guidelines of inquiry that “specify ways of reasoning and criteria for the kinds of information relevant for political questions,” thereby enabling citizens “to conduct fundamental discussions within a framework of an agreed upon conception of justice” (*Political Liberalism* 226). By taking the basic structure as the *subject* of political liberalism, Rawls outlines a political field limited in scope and formal in character that refrains from commenting upon structures of values pertaining to non-public and private spheres. Given the fact of reasonable pluralism, the basic structure is an enabling condition of democracy because it provides a unified structure within which individuals may settle their differences and envision social co-operation. By focusing on the basic structure as political, Rawls can claim that pluralism is not a “disaster,” but rather “the natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free institutions” (*Political Liberalism* xxiv).

Rawls’s view of the basic structure of society as the proper subject of political interest brings us back to considerations of literary form and to New Critical investments in the structure of a literary work as the proper subject of literary interest. In *The Verbal Icon*, Wimsatt argues that a literary work of art “is a complex of detail” (77), a verbal construction in which emotions, objects, and events are brought together into a single representative context. Through the use of ambiguity, paradox, irony, and so on, these emotions and objects and events are brought into new and highly particularized relationships with one another such that the exercise of literary evaluation involves working through the tensions and conflicting attitudes that inevitably arise from these new relationships. Thus, what enables one to distinguish good literature from bad literature—or, famously, to distinguish between a skilful murder and a skilful poem—has nothing to do with the twin fallacies of intention and affect, but has everything to do with how the literary object comes together as a whole. Says Wimsatt: “The wholeness [of a literary work] is not just a form or a genre but a form arising out of a certain kind of matter; wholeness is a certain organization of meaning in words.... This meaning is not determined

by size, title, or genre definitions, but by the value principle of variety in unity or the reconciliation of opposites" (51). To bring forward yet another famous example, Cleanth Brooks in "The Heresy of Paraphrase" makes a similar claim, stating that the "goodness" of a poem is not judged on content, but on the "structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; whereby the principle of unity which informs [the literary work] seems to be one of balancing a harmony of connotations, attitudes, and meanings."¹⁸ Here, emphasis is placed on the inlay of relationships within the literary work, where literary evaluation involves the working out of these relationships, rather than emphasizing literature's connection with non-literary modes of discourse or one's own experiences in the world. By claiming that a literary work is not the critic's own nor the author's own but "is detached from both" and becomes the "peculiar possession of the public," Wimsatt and Beardsley argue for literature's place in public life.¹⁹

Literary critics such as Steven Knapp in *Literary Interest: The Limits of Anti-Formalism* and Frances Ferguson in *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* have also turned to questions of formalism to establish fruitful connections between literary texts and socio-political structures.²⁰ Ferguson, as well as Catherine Gallagher and Steven Goldsmith, approaches literature and politics as being equally invested in the very issues of formal representation that emerged in the constitutional debates surrounding the French Revolution and franchise reform in nineteenth-century England; consequently, these issues seem to arise as characteristically modern ones.²¹ In *Literary Interest*, Steven Knapp builds on New Critical ideas about literary value to argue in favour of what he calls "literary interest." Why we should care about liter-

¹⁸ Cleanth Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," in *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947) 195.

¹⁹ W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *The Verbal Icon* 5.

²⁰ Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (London: Routledge, 1992) and "Canons, Poetics, and Social Value: Jeremy Bentham and How to Do Things With People," *MLN* 110 (1995): 1148–64.

²¹ Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) and Steven Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993).

ary texts, why they should be of *interest* to us, Knapp proposes, has nothing to do with their relationship to truth or rightness, or because they provide so many models of admissible behaviour, but instead has something to do with how literary texts further citizens' dispositions. If a literary work of art is a complex linguistic organization that functions as a framework for measuring or producing analyses of value, Knapp argues that a particular element within the literary structure acquires meaning (or gains literary value) only through its associative connection or interrelationship with other elements in the structure. Thus an element such as an object, event, or action is constantly being revalued by virtue of its placement within different literary works, and consequently a reader's response to or understanding of that element is being continually revised. In Knapp's view, literature constructs new conceptions of thought and value out of previous resemblances between objects and our usual responses to them by placing them in new relations with one another (85–86). The contribution of this kind of formal analysis to actual political thought, he claims, rests precisely in its capacity to generate new representations, and therefore new meanings, of objects or events. In fact, the very complexity of literary structures, the semantic interplay of metaphor and simile, may even present ineffable objects as the "subject" of the literary work, as Wimsatt has argued:

Even the simplest form of metaphor or simile ("My love is like a red, red rose") presents us with a special and creative, in fact a concrete, kind of abstraction different from that of science. For behind a metaphor lies a resemblance between two classes, and hence a more general third class. This class is unnamed and most likely remains unnamed and is apprehended only through the metaphor. It is a new conception for which there is no other expression.²²

Wimsatt's "new conception" is new precisely because it cannot be measured against ontological, metaphysical, or other merely descriptive accounts of similar phenomena. It seems to me that liter-

²² W. K. Wimsatt, "The Concrete Universal," in *The Verbal Icon* 79.

ary texts, as fields of complex relationships, become analogous representations of collective life wherein individuals and events do not exist in isolation but are always connected to someone or something else. If literary texts are public and deliberative structures of meaning, then they also become important occasions for reasoning about a society's present and future well-being in the form of public policy. Moreover, the process of revision, and in particular *self*-revision to which Knapp points, presents a strong case for the political efficacy of literary texts and reinforces the importance constitutional democracies place on diversity of thought and the freedom for citizens to change their minds.

The analogue between literary and political formalism that I am attempting to draw may be fleshed out more fully in light of Rawls's discussion of the injustice of slavery in *Political Liberalism*. The statement that slavery is unjust is not, for Rawls, a particularly forceful position to adopt, because one could easily identify a number of "similar facts" (the phrase is Rawls's) about injustice, such as tyranny is unjust, exploitation is unjust, or religious intolerance is unjust, without necessarily giving an account of why they are so. What is required is a way of reasoning that helps to identify such actions or practices and offer an explanation as to why they violate some shared political conception of justice. Within Rawls's framework, slavery is unjust not simply because it allows some persons to own others as property, but because slavery, like exploitation or religious intolerance, violates a network of related values such as toleration, mutual respect, and a sense of fairness that together undergird a democratic society's public conception of what justice is all about. Here, political liberties are not stand-alone liberties, nor are they intrinsically valuable; rather, they require institutional expression and justification. What is important here for Rawls is that the deliberative framework gives members of society a means of organizing all of the relevant "facts"—namely, the prejudicial treatment of individuals and their beliefs—into a coherent conception of justice such that individual members can identify a particular action as unjust and give an account of their reasoning to other members in terms that can be recognized and understood. In this respect, the basic structure functions as the expression of public reason:

The point of the ideal of public reason is that citizens are to conduct their fundamental discussions

within the framework of what each regards as a political conception of justice based on values that the others can reasonably be expected to endorse and each is, in good faith, prepared to defend that conception so understood. This means that each of us must have, and be ready to explain, a criterion of what principles and guidelines we think other citizens (who are also free and equal) may reasonably be expected to endorse along with us. (*Political Liberalism* 226)

The parallel between political constitutions and literary texts is that a literary text is understood as a forum for reasoning about ineffable objects such as harm or security or equality, as well as a mechanism for testing and explaining one's reasons to others. I do not mean to suggest here that what counts as evidence or argument in literary interpretation is equivalent to what counts as evidence in real life: I only wish to point out the necessity of making an argument at all. Thus the importance of identifying actions as harmful, in literary or political structures, involves the activity of deliberation, of producing a coherent argument or account of such actions, rather than thick description, emotional responses, or the Rorty-like accumulation of so many kinds of cruelty societies should avoid.²³

Despite Rorty's professed agreement with Rawls's notion of political liberalism,²⁴ identifying the basic structure as political makes apparent, to my mind, the chief difference between Rawls's and Rorty's conceptions of the political: whereas Rawls takes seriously the regulative function of the basic structure in adjudicating among incommensurable doctrines, Rorty's defence of democracy amounts to little more than an endorsement of harmless free speech in a political culture predicated on a pragmatic contest of vocabularies conducted by individuals who are, incomprehensibly, in a constant state of self-irony (*Contingency* 89–94). Thus for Rorty, irony

²³ This last point is drawn in particular from Michael Walzer's view that literature participates in democratic deliberations because poets and novelists are able to respond "in detail, thickly and idiomatically," to controversies over what he calls the "thinness" of abstract philosophical principles (*Thick and Thin* 52).

²⁴ See Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* 175–96.

alone must bear the explanatory burden of moral and political action, as well as accounting for why political-historical changes arise at all.

The importance of identifying and arranging what counts as the relevant facts in literary as well as political contexts means that certain events or experiences are not intrinsically meaningful, nor are they inevitably valuable; instead, they must be accounted for in a manner that is available to all members who participate in the collective enterprise of evaluation. Viewed in this light, literature's contribution to political life is not only (yet importantly) that it presents further opportunities to deliberate; the criterion of structure also means that literature, like public discussion in Rawls's basic structure, becomes *disengaged* from *a priori* claims about the intrinsic value of certain attitudes or social goods or, in light of Nussbaum's project, of the literary imagination itself. In other words, literature does not necessarily need to be hooked up to questions about the good life, to Sandel's civic republicanism, or even to Nussbaum's emotional knowledge to be robustly political. More precisely still, the "material" of literature, to borrow Wimsatt's term, does not have to be recognizably political—that is, literature needn't be about political events or punishment, nor contain the language of rights and democracy—in order to address relevant public issues about mutuality and relatedness. "Poetry," Wimsatt claims in "Explication as Criticism," "entertains no beautiful ideas or words as such. Its materials, unlike those of sculpture, do not have to be high-class."²⁵ Indeed, a successful poem can even be about "dung-hills" he argues, because "inside literature there are no ends and means, only parts and wholes" (239). Consequently, even dung-hills can acquire new meanings through poetic representation because their literary significance is not specified in advance or outside of the collective activity of interpretation.

To consider a literary work as a deliberative framework within which objects are reconstituted is not an argument for relativism; nor, I hasten to add, is the reproduction of stable meanings in either literature or politics the aim or telos of such deliberations. Cleanth Brooks writes that when a line of poetry like "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" from Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" becomes detached from its poetic context, it becomes a banal and obvious

²⁵ W. K. Wimsatt, "Explication as Criticism," in *The Verbal Icon* 239.

statement to make and one that's of no particular literary interest to the reader.²⁶ He goes on to say that this is because the line's extraction from the poem means that the reader is no longer conscious of the ways in which metrical pattern and metaphor modify its meaning in unpredictable and unforeseen ways. The predictability of outcomes is equally undesirable in constitutional democracies. For Rawls, it is crucial that in a well-ordered democratic society citizens can come together to evaluate public policy and deliberate about constitutional essentials only if they feel that the outcomes of their discussions are not specified in advance. "This means," says Rawls, "that citizens do not think there are antecedent social ends that justify them in viewing some people as having more or less worth to society than others and assigning them different basic rights and privileges accordingly."²⁷

Literature's capacity to generate new representations, and therefore new meanings, without recourse to something like fellow-feeling or moral personhood seems remote from the questions of identity or emotional rationality that characterize the works of Taylor, Sandel, and Nussbaum. My aim here has not been to dismiss the importance of self- and collective-identity formation expressed in literary texts and political constitutions, nor has it been to wash away the deep texture of passions, and passionate attachments, that literature so powerfully conveys. It has been simply to acknowledge the sorts of ethical-political issues that questions of form place before us. To consider how values such as pluralism or equality may be embedded in novels or constitutions is another way of thinking about how they might be part of our shared life together, and this too is a way of shaping political identity. To insist as I have on the specificity of literary expressions may also be an unusual stance to adopt in an interdisciplinary project, because it raises the question of how to adjudicate between discrete modes of discourse without recourse to common points of reference. One powerful answer is that renewed attention to literary structure is a way that literature can endure interdisciplinarity at all because it reduces the tendency to read all texts the same way, as all being equally invested in the same theoretical or ideological concerns and outcomes. To paraphrase Rawls here, the incommensurability

²⁶ Cleanth Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," in *The Well-Wrought Urn* 208–10.

²⁷ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* 40; 72–73.

of literary and non-literary structures is not a disaster; rather, it acknowledges that there will always be different and comprehensive ways of evaluating beliefs and experiences. Reading literature is an enabling condition of making comparisons because the complexity of verbal interplay disrupts on the level of form those tendencies to read all texts the same way or to expect a harmonic view of our experiences in or understandings of the world. And because objects are constantly being reconstituted within various modes of representation, the activity of deliberation or working through correlations or differences among events or objects, even ineffable ones, is an important activity to undertake and one that is a consequence of living in a robust liberal democracy. Here, literature is political because it plays an important part in how society reasons publicly about its convictions and evaluates its collective enterprises, and this exercise of public reasoning is the proper subject of both literary and political interest.

