

13

THE WAY WE READ NOW

Oprah Winfrey, Intellectuals, and Democracy

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I might begin with a confession that will possibly resonate with many readers of a collection such as this, and, in so doing, pose it as a problem: I am embarrassed to be seen reading a novel that Oprah Winfrey has recommended. This extends to any novel on her now long list of recommended texts, but especially those identified with the circular symbol, the inscribed “O,” the not-quite-scarlet letter that marks out a text as having the Winfrey seal of approval. When Oprah has recommended books that I have also wished to read, I have gone to great lengths to obtain a non-Oprah copy: ordering Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* over the Internet from the U.K.; persuading (for which you should read begging) a sales clerk to sell me the window display copy—the last one without the symbol of shame—of Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*; and when, all else had failed, simply obliterating the Oprah logo with a black marker (how I long for the days when it was simply a removable sticker, not an integral part of the book jacket). I would like to justify this foible with some high-minded explanation, but the sad fact is that my motivation is sheer snobbishness. I simply worry that I, an academic and as such an ostensible intellectual, should be seen reading a book recommended by Oprah Winfrey; more accurately, I worry that people will think I am reading a book *because* Oprah recommended it.

I offer this confession not to alleviate my latent, antipopulist guilt—though I do feel better for having done so—but as a starting point for a reflection on Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club and its troubled and troubling

relationship with intellectuals and the ivory tower. It is a relationship that is made all the more troubling by the recent resurgence in interest among certain academics in the power of literature to offer us insight into other ways of living, thinking, and being in the world: insight that is said, by some at least, to be of benefit to the practice of liberal democracy. By liberal democracy is meant here, of course, a system of government with a commitment to popular rule, individual rights, and the rule of law, one that draws on the work on John Locke (1988), John Stuart Mill (1998), and John Rawls (1971). This interest in the alleged “othering” power of literature has its historical roots in Aristotle (1997), and in the nineteenth-century work of Adam Smith (2002) and Matthew Arnold (1993), but more recently it has come to play a significant role in the work of such philosophically and politically diverse luminaries as Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Martha Nussbaum’s *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* is an impassioned plea for the expansion of our moral imaginations as citizens, jurors, judges, and social scientists through the act of reading novels about those from whom we differ in numerous ways. Similarly, Richard Rorty has argued that reading novels generates “solidarity”—akin to the sort of “fellow feeling” identified by both Adam Smith and Martha Nussbaum—making us more attentive to the needs of others. In addition, he suggests that novels can also show us the kinds of cruelty of which we ourselves are capable, alerting us to the contingency of our own deepest convictions, and making us more tolerant of other perspectives. Nussbaum also believes that literature can alert its readers to the contingency of their own positions simply by depicting difference. “There is,” she writes, “no more effective way to wake pupils up than to confront them with difference in an area where they had previously thought their own ways neutral, necessary and natural” (*Cultivating* 32). Spivak has made similar claims about these values of contingency and solidarity in her *The Death of a Discipline*, arguing—in part at least—for a move away from the high Theory that has dominated literary studies in recent years, and a return to reading as a source of insight into practical social and political problems.

In light of this apparent convergence of literary theorists, political thinkers, and philosophers on the power of literature and reading to generate all sorts of useful moral and political insights, one might be forgiven for thinking that academics and intellectuals would welcome Oprah’s Book Club as an opportunity to see their pet theories put into political, philosophical, and literary practice. None of these thinkers has, however, seen fit to comment—in print at least—on Oprah’s undeniable success in getting

America reading, and those intellectuals who have chosen to comment on the Oprah phenomenon have been somewhat less than kind. Jonathan Franzen's public ambivalence about his novel *The Corrections* being selected, and then deselected by Oprah, was relatively mild compared to the late Alfred Kazin's (in)famous description of the Book Club as the "carpet bombing of the American mind" (Braun 8). Even when Winfrey was lauded by the organizers of the National Book Awards, receiving a medal on the fiftieth anniversary of the organization, they were keen to stress—in a "doth protest too much" kind of way that alerted everybody to their real motivation—that Oprah was being recognized for "a literary reason, not a marketing reason" (Minzesheimer 47).

What seems particularly galling to the literati is not just the rather predictable type of books that Winfrey chooses—for a long time they tended to be tales of individuals overcoming racial, sexual, or some other injustice—but also the way they are read. Rebecca Pepper Sinkler, for example, complains that:

The discussion on Oprah's Book Club is hardly rigorous. The conversation consists mainly of breathless enthusing—as much for the wild mushroom ravioli on a shallot reduction sauce as for the fictional fare. The novels seem to supply emotional rather than aesthetic epiphanies: There are frequent tears. One white guest, outspoken about she hadn't wanted to read about poor black people, underwent a conversion after reading *Song of Solomon*. On camera, she bore witness to the power of fiction to broaden the mind, and she was gathered back to the flock as a repentant sinner. (1)

Pepper concedes that although Winfrey has on occasion "displayed perfectly respectable literary judgment" in her choice of books, often the reader "response is more therapeutic than critical, more pop-psych than post-mod." She speaks for many perhaps when she confesses her fear, albeit in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek way—though only somewhat, that "Oprah was threatening my life's work" (1).

Ironically, however, it may well be that in provoking this kind of highly personal, often emotional, and surprisingly confessional response in her readers, Oprah Winfrey is doing more to engender the democratic values and insights sought by thinkers such as Nussbaum, Rorty, and Spivak than the thinkers themselves. For, at least as far as moral and political values are concerned, there appears to be an important difference in the way that

academics and intellectuals write and talk about novels and the way that non-intellectuals or “lay readers” do so. The former tend to speak in the objective or impartial voice, personifying the text and telling us what it or the author (who is similarly constructed) intends, along with the moral and political lessons that we should derive from our reading. Lay readers, such as those in Oprah’s Book Club, are, by contrast, notable for the frequency with which they draw attention to the contingency or subjectivity of their position, prefacing their comments with “I” statements such as “I thought,” “I think,” or “it seems to me.” It is a difference that suggests that it is Oprah, not the intellectuals, who offers us the best model of the use of literature to generate values that are necessary to the practice of liberal democratic society. Establishing this claim requires, however, a brief exposition of the most recent attempts to establish the connection between literature and liberal democracy.

Of the three thinkers who have recently sought to revive the connection between literature and liberal democracy, only two—Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty—offer a detailed account of the alleged link. Spivak simply gestures toward the claim in her typically elliptical style. Despite their deep philosophical differences, both Nussbaum and Rorty suggest that reading novels about people from whom we differ in a multitude of different ways will expand our moral imaginations, making us more sensitive to the needs of others, and, as such, better citizens of a liberal democratic society. Nussbaum’s and Rorty’s claims are predicated upon a similar approach to reading the novels they recommend: Each reads the text and tells us the lessons that readers will or should derive from it. Mr. Gradgrind will, according to Nussbaum, alert us to the dangers of excessive abstraction and formal modeling (*Poetic* 13–27); Charles Kinbote and Humbert Humbert, according to Rorty, to the need to be more sensitive to the suffering of others (*Contingency* 141–68). In this, both seem to be advocates of a “supply-side” theory of the novel; neither seems to be terribly concerned about the role of the reader. Nussbaum, for example, argues that the very form of the novel “constructs compassion in readers, positioning them as people who care intensely about the suffering and bad luck of others, and who identify with them in ways that show possibilities for themselves” (*Poetic* 66). Similarly, in his introduction to *Pale Fire*, Rorty presumes “to describe the reader’s reactions in the course of a first reading of the book” (v) simply by reading the text without any reference to an actual reader. In this, both seem to be guilty of what Jonathan Rose has called the “Receptive Fallacy”: identifying the response of readers by studying the text rather than the readers themselves (4). This focus on the text at the expense of actual readers is further evidenced by the appar-

ent need of Nussbaum and Rorty to champion their own interpretation of a given text at the expense of all other readings.

It is a distinctive feature of the contemporary work of literature and democracy that the thinkers involved identify the lessons one will, or should, derive from reading the books they recommend. All seem to be advocates of specific readings—precisely those that support the lessons they wish us to derive from our reading. While Martha Nussbaum is prepared to accept that different readers might draw different meanings from the text, she is nevertheless determined that through a process of “coduction”—a sort of conversational equilibrium identified by Wayne Booth—they will come to agree on the proper interpretation of the novel—that is, the one identified by Martha Nussbaum. She rejects, for example, Oscar Wilde’s reading of *The Old Curiosity Shop* in which he famously declared that “one would have to have a heart of stone not to read the death of Little Nell without laughing” on the grounds that it is “not a properly responsive reading of Dickens’s text” (“Defense” 353). For Rorty, too, despite comments elsewhere that would seem to commit him to some version of a reader-response theory (*Consequence* 151), there is a definite sense that his project requires agreement on a particular interpretation of given text. At times, Rorty seems to be something of a boo-hooray literary critic: awarding bouquets to those whose reading of the texts corresponds to his own, and brickbats to those whose does not (*Pale Fire* v–xvii). At others, he is similarly prepared to construct the author and his intentions. In reading *Lolita*, he writes, we are alerted to our own cruelty because we forget about the eponymous heroine of the text, and then remember in shame and guilt. We forget, he writes, “because Nabokov arranged for us to forget” (*Pale Fire* viii). Rather than simply assigning the books that they believe to be morally and politically beneficial and sitting back to watch as democracy flourishes, both Nussbaum and Rorty feel the need then to set out their own readings of the novels that they recommend. It is a somewhat puzzling trope.

Given that Nussbaum and Rorty spend so long setting out their own readings of the texts that they recommend, it is not obvious what is actually to be gained from reading in their thought. For it is not clear that having read, say, Nussbaum on Dickens or Rorty on Nabokov, that there is any benefit to be derived from reading the novels themselves. Reading about reading is, furthermore, unlikely to produce the outcome that they both appear to desire: It is rather like expecting to benefit from watching somebody else exercise. Nor is this the only problem associated with their approach to the texts. The suggestion that reading is simply a matter of

coming to an agreement on the meaning of a text seems not only to fly in the face of much contemporary literary theory, but also the everyday experience of reading. Almost all of us have probably had a friend who has urged us to read a particular book that changed his or her life, only to read the book and find it truly turgid. Both thinkers accept that some readers might draw different conclusions from a given text—hence Nussbaum’s theory of coduction—but both seem to suggest (Nussbaum explicitly, Rorty implicitly) that a failure to see the text in the way that they prescribe arises from some deficiency on the part of the reader, be it irrationality or a simple lack of perception. This account of reading is not only theoretically and empirically flawed, but also politically problematic.

Both Nussbaum and Rorty turn to literature because they believe it will expand the moral imagination of a liberal democratic citizenry, thereby generating greater tolerance and respect for other viewpoints. It is somewhat ironic that it does not appear to do the same for the thinkers themselves. Both write as if they have some unique insight into the texts that they recommend, insight that they are keen to impose on a citizenry in the latter’s own interests. Neither seems very interested in textual interpretations that do not match their own. As such, both seem to be guilty of a distinctly illiberal lack of tolerance for other viewpoints. Liberalism seems to demand listening to those other viewpoints and at least considering the possibility that they might be correct. It is precisely this that the “professional” approach to moral and political reading, that which constructs the novel and/or the author’s intent and the moral and political lessons to be drawn from the text, seems to prohibit. Nor are Nussbaum and Rorty alone in this. Valentine Cunningham complains about the third recent advocate of literature and othering: “Spivak can’t ever avoid thinking about herself in these thoughts about Others. And her namings of Third World women usually involve the loud naming of herself” (52). The point is, perhaps, that honed by years of experience in the demands of academic discourse and debate, Nussbaum, Rorty, and Spivak seem to be somewhat strident in their readings of the texts that they recommend. As academics, they all speak as if the text alone will do all the work on the citizenry, even as they seek to shape the responses of that citizenry with their own textual readings. Juxtaposing the professional responses to Bernard Schlink’s novel *The Reader* with those of the lay readers of Oprah’s Book Club illustrates the way in which it is the latter that seems more likely to promote the values of contingency, and solidarity, that the theorists of literature and democracy so desire.

Until Oprah reinvented her Book Club in June 2003, possibly bowing to the intellectual snobbery of Kazin and his ilk by deciding to choose “classics” such as *Anna Karenina* and *East of Eden*, her selections tended not to be of a sort to elicit too much academic discussion. Along with the works of Toni Morrison, Bernard Schlink’s *The Reader* was an obvious exception, drawing comment in *The New Republic*, *The London Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. In it, Schlink tells the story of Michael, a fifteen-year-old boy in postwar Berlin who has an affair with Hanna, a thirty-six-year-old woman who is later tried for having been a prison guard in the Nazi death camps. Hanna’s exact role in the atrocities and her guilt are somewhat complicated by the secret of her illiteracy: Although she is clearly guilty of some of the crimes for which she is charged, her inability to read means that she is also innocent of others. With questions of guilt and responsibility, and with dramatic ironies arising from the disparate levels of information available to the reader and to the characters in the text, the book seems almost tailor-made for moral and political discussion.

In almost every instance, the critics who wrote about the book adopted the previously identified “professional” approach to the text, constructing both the author and the novel’s moral and political intent. Martin Conway’s 1999 article “Compassion and Moral Condemnation: An Analysis of *The Reader*” was a particular case in point. Conway uses the events of *The Reader* as evidence to support his rejection of Martha Nussbaum’s theory of compassion. In so doing, Conway happily constructs the text and the author. “The novel” he writes, “questions the hard and fast distinction that one is either responsible or one is not” (287). Elsewhere Conway claims that “part of the power of the novel is that it operates in the midst of this conflict, refusing to simplify the tension. It does not dismiss the need for moral judgment about Hanna’s acts, yet it also refuses to sacrifice compassion” (287). Indeed, Conway personifies the text at various points: “the novel shows” (290); “as the book points out” (291); “the book thereby suggests” (291); “*The Reader* makes this plea” (297); “the novel questions” (297); and “the story acknowledges” (298). Conway’s construction of the text and the author not only obscures the origin of the claims that he is making—with his criticism becoming a kind of ventriloquism in which the text is made to speak for the critic’s claims—it contrasts sharply with the way in which the lay readers in Oprah’s Book Club responded to the text.

In a letter to Oprah read out on the 31 March 1999 show, Julie, a viewer, wrote “I can’t get over the fact that Michael was fifteen and Hanna

thirty-six. Hanna was a pedophile. I don't know why it's acceptable for a woman to behave in this manner and yet we as a society would be outraged if it were a fifteen-year-old-girl and a thirty-six-year-old-man. I just don't get it."¹ In the studio, Linda, a fifty-one-year-old mother of teenage boys, declared: "I know I am a good mother with high standards and morals. However, I am going out on a limb by saying that if my sons were to have had an early sexual experience, I would not be terribly upset if they had encountered someone like Hanna." In sharp contrast to the approach of Conway, both the letter-writing viewer and the Book Club participant presented their claims as their own, prefacing it with an "I" statement. Nor were they alone in doing so; every participant in the discussion made a similar move, either prefacing their claims with an "I" statement or otherwise identifying it as their own: "I didn't like the book"; "I thought it was a wonderful book"; "the book reached me"; "the book touched me"; "I think"; "I believe"; "I'm saying"; "I look at it this way"; and "If I was [sic] a Nazi." In response to one of the moral dilemmas depicted in the text, even the host herself declared, "I'm now saying he should have gone to her and not the judge. I'd have marched my butt up to the judge but now I'm going to reconsider."

This distinction between the way in which lay readers and professionals talk about the moral and political implications of the novels they read is hugely significant for the possibility of engendering democracy through literature. Unlike professional readers who appear to struggle for some methodology that will lift them out of their own subjectivity and allow them to talk with some degree of impartiality about the texts, lay readers instinctively seem to understand that, when they are talking about the novels they have read, they are talking about their own moral and political reactions. As Oprah Winfrey notes in her discussion of responses to *The Reader*, "the we that you refer to, yourself [sic] is based upon your own personal history." Professional critics, on the other hand, who are more accustomed perhaps to talking about the literary qualities of a text, its structure, or the way in which it seeks to impact on a reader—questions that can be spoken of with a certain degree of impartiality—seem to seek this same impartial voice in the moral and political discussion. Their motivations for so doing may be mere conceptual error, or a rather more insidious desire to gain some kind of authority in moral and political discussions, seeking the cultural weight that comes from adopting the "objective" voice. Either way, however, it is clear that as far as generating values of benefit to liberal democracy are concerned, the lay approach to texts characterized by Oprah Winfrey's audience is a far superior source, not least because it appears that the professional critics mis-

understand the source of any possible moral improvement that arises from literary discussion.

Implicit in all the recent attempts to theorize the relationship between literature and democracy is a conversational element, be it Nussbaum's theory of "coduction," Rorty's conceptualization of liberalism as an ungroundable conversation into which he seeks to draw as many people as possible (1989), or Spivak's attempt to make us more sensitive to the demands of the "Other" (2004). In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas argues that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, conversations about books in literary salons "provided a training ground for critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself—a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on genuine experiences of their novel privateness" (29). Such literary debates were, he claims, instrumental in the development of the public sphere and the rise of democracy. It may well be, therefore, that if we do indeed see any moral and political benefit arising from reading certain novels, then it is the conversation about the book, rather than the book that itself, that is doing the work. This would seem to be corroborated by David Miller's work on deliberative democracy. Miller notes that participants in games modeling resource allocation were more likely to choose altruistically when they were permitted a few moments of conversation with their fellow choosers than when they entered the process with no prior contact (190–91). Literature may provide the common ground for such discussions to begin. Furthermore, in their undeniable capacity to draw us in to situations to which we might not otherwise attend, and to consider possibilities that we might otherwise overlook, novels are particularly well suited to their role as the ostensible subject matter in a political conversation, though no more so, perhaps, than films, or even some poems and songs. Nevertheless, this should not blind us to the real source of the potential moral and political improvement: the conversation with and among our fellow citizens. In their tendency to construct the author and the text and to adopt the impartial voice, the ventriloquism of the professional critic may obscure the origin of these values, and, in so doing, potentially undermine them in two ways: first, by simply diverting attention away from the real source of moral and political improvement, and, second, by promoting a self-defeating form of political dialogue.

"Despite their familiarity with the classics," wrote K. K. Ruthven famously, "professors of literature do not appear to lead better lives than other people, and frequently display unbecoming virulence on the subject of one another's shortcomings" (184). The archness of much contemporary

professional literary discussion is, perhaps, a function of the adoption of the objective voice—especially now that so much of literary critical discussion is concerned, in one way or another, with the political—a mode of discourse that encourages academic debate rather than moral or political discussion. The difference between a debate and a discussion is, of course, that one can win a debate but not a discussion. In bringing the professional approach to texts into the moral and political realm, thinkers and critics such as Nussbaum, Rorty, and Spivak are, perhaps, turning what might better be a moral and political discussion (which may in and of itself generate the values of contingency and solidarity that they all claim to seek) into a moral and political debate. It is a mode of discourse that is less likely to produce the values alleged to be of benefit to liberal democratic societies, evidence of which is, perhaps, to be found in the shrillness of the exchange between Richard Posner and Martha Nussbaum over the ethical value of literature (Nussbaum “Defense”).² In Oprah’s Book Club, by contrast, the conversation about moral and political values generated by the novel *The Reader* is clearly very much of a discussion, not least because each of the participants is prepared to acknowledge themselves as the source of their claims. As such, the ensuing discussion is, it seems, far more likely to generate the values of contingency and solidarity that Nussbaum, Rorty, and Spivak all desire than the approach that these theorists adopt in their own work.

In the first instance, there appears to be a greater degree of civility in the moral and political discussions generated by the mode of reading in Oprah’s Book Club. In response, for example, to Linda’s suggestion that she would not mind too much if her sons had an early sexual encounter with somebody like Hanna—in which she implied that the relationship between a thirty-six-year-old woman and a fifteen-year-old boy was not as problematic as other discussion participants had suggested—Cassandra strongly disagreed. Far from adopting the objective or impartial voice of the professional critic, however, she simply said “I disagree with you.” Her measured tone, far different from the shrillness of much of our contemporary moral and political discourse, then allowed her to articulate her reasons for disagreeing. Cassandra says of Hanna: “she was really a classic abuser to me. Because she—he never really knew where he stood. He even toward—to the end, he really never knew. He was always somehow trying to turn himself inside out to please her.” Even as she makes her claim, Cassandra personalizes it (“to me”) and in so doing mitigates her apparent moral judgment, facilitating a more productive exchange. The personalization of the claim and the presentation of reasons stand in stark contrast to the professional approach in which the

text is presented as if it decides self-evidently between competing moral and political claims. It may be, of course, that in the studio context the Leviathan-like figure of Oprah or the presence of the book's author imposed a certain amount of discipline of the discussion, and we cannot entirely discount this possibility, but it seems that there is a qualitative difference between the lay and professional moral and political debates arising from textual discussion, and that Oprah is not the only variable. In her memoir of quite a different reading group *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi notes a similar difference between the way in which some academics and lay readers read and talk about the texts they read (69), noting how "the novels we escaped into led us finally to question and prod our own realities, about which we felt so hopelessly speechless" (38–39).

The suggestion here then is that we might rethink the way in which recent attempts to establish a connection between literature and democracy by recognizing that it is not so much the books themselves that generate values of benefit to liberal democratic societies, but rather the discussions *about* the books. We might also recognize that despite the apparent disdain of academics and intellectuals for Oprah's Book Club, it is her approach to reading that seems to generate the most profitable discussion of moral and political issues. Indeed, there seems to be a double benefit here: First, Oprah's approach seems to encourage moral and political discussion, rather than debate; second, it also seems to encourage participants to bring up topics that they might not normally feel comfortable in bringing to the public sphere. Like Winfrey who identifies herself as "a survivor of sexual abuse" in *The Reader*-based discussion, Lynn declares that she is "a Jew, a lawyer, a mother, a daughter, [and] a victim of an abusive relationship." Such self-identification, though mocked by professional critics, may allow Book Club participants to recognize that a different position from their own on the events depicted in a novel may well arise from a different life-experience in a way that promotes the sort of empathy valued by Martha Nussbaum. Indeed, that one from whom one differs so significantly—the Book Club's studio participants are generally drawn from a diversity of socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds—shares an interest in a novel may well be the first step on the road to some sort of solidarity, the kind that comes from recognizing a fellow reader, or even a fellow enthusiast for a particular author. One cannot, perhaps, imagine other circumstances under which a group as diverse as the one Oprah assembled for her Book Club on *The Reader*—they included a young mother, a middle-aged African American man, and a Jewish woman—would actually be able to engage in so civilized a

discussion about the central moral and political values of empathy, compassion, and responsibility, especially one that concerned the always politically sensitive topic of the Holocaust.

There seems then to be something about the abstraction that arises from being seen to discuss literary characters rather than oneself that permits meaningful—and morally and politically useful—dialogue about difficult topics. The lay-reading approach that we see in Oprah's Book Club generates a double perspective—something that is always useful in critical thought—with the participants benefiting from the abstraction of the discussion of literary characters, while nevertheless contextualizing by personalizing their own claims. Indeed, in addition to the solidarity that seems to emerge from these kinds of discussion—which in itself suggests that politically useful empathy requires only recognition rather than understanding or agreement as in the Nussbaum model—the discussion also seems to generate contingency. It emerges not only from the apparently instinctive “I” statements that precede the moral judgments of such discussants, but also from the act of reading and discussing with others. An unidentified audience member notes that her reading of the text led her to listen and talk to others in a new way. “I have to say I read the book because I’m German. I was born in Germany. My parents are German; my relatives are all German. And that was the first time something really, really, made me think about what my family did, what my relatives did, what my grandparents did. . . . And now I’m very, very interested and I’ve started asking my father questions.” The lay approach to reading—which we might characterize as having a certain humility before the text—promotes exactly this sort of questioning. The professional and decidedly “knowing” approach of Nussbaum, Rorty, Spivak, and Conway seems to promote not listening and questioning, but telling and asserting, the sort of thing that draws Valentine Cunningham’s ire in his *Reading After Theory*.

The theoretical claim that reading certain novels will make us better citizens of a liberal democratic society seems to flounder on a problematic account of textual interpretation, one in which the text seems to be doing all the work. It is an approach that obscures the real origin of the moral and political claims under discussion: those of the critic. The textual approach that we see in Oprah's Book Club—that which has drawn the scorn of certain professional writers and critics—seems to stand as an important corrective to this claim, for it suggests that the conversation about the texts is equally—if indeed not more—important than the reading itself. The way that readers speak about the texts has, in itself, important consequences for

the way in which this conversation, and with it the likelihood of important moral and political values, develops. Nevertheless, to regard the “Oprah approach” as a cure-all for the problems posed by the professional approach to reading and moral values would be something of a mistake. The response to *The Reader* was by no means as universally constructive as the earlier examples suggest. The sexual relationship between the fifteen-year-old Michael and the thirty-six-year-old Hanna drew a great deal of potentially problematic comment.

As Winfrey herself noted, “all of my friends with sons, and particularly a friend with a son who is the same age, were really upset with me about choosing this selection because they . . . felt it was abuse.” Indeed, Winfrey read out a letter from a Chester and Joy Goode, public schoolteachers, who declared:

We watch your show with regularity. We must, however, tell you that your choice for your book club this time, *The Reader*, that discusses sex between a fifteen year old and an adult is reckless. In a day and time when people are questioning morals and young people are struggling to find the answers and love in a time when people like Mary Kay LeTourneau have disgraced the relationship between adults and children, you have chosen a book that not only romanticizes immoral choices but will feed it in a frenzy to the American people. We are so very disappointed.

Where public schoolteachers lie on the lay–professional reading spectrum is not exactly clear, though here they choose the professional mode of address: adopting the objective voice (“immoral choices”) and condemning the book for its depiction of an allegedly abusive relationship. Although Winfrey herself tried to mitigate such a claim—“You can love the book without loving the relationship”—this tendency to project one’s own moral values onto the texts uncritically as if they were absolutes is a major stumbling block to the development of the values beneficial to liberal democracy. For the book to be morally and politically useful, it seems that it must be capable of disorienting its readers: the sort of thing we see when Linda, having just declared that she would not mind if her teenage boys had a sexual relationship with somebody like Hanna, observed, “Yes, that statement does shock even me.” We see the same thing when John, a middle-aged African American member of the Book Club, addresses the author, Bernard Schlink, directly. “One of the things I know about reading” he said, “is when something is unsettling, I

have done a lot of thinking, and you have caused a lot of unsettling, Professor"; or indeed, when an unidentified reader responds "Absolutely" to Winfrey's question: "Did you come away from this book feeling differently about yourself, your life, this life, this time?" Texts, that is, must be able to exercise a dialectical impact on their readers.

A dialectical text, according to Stanley Fish, is one that forces its readers "into a rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by" (1). It is one that forces them to think differently about the world and the way that they live. Fish's work (especially his later work) suggests, however, that whether or not a text has a dialectical impact is—in part at least—a function of how it is read. The readers in Oprah's Book Club happily read themselves into the text, imagining themselves in the dilemmas depicted therein, especially with regard to the question that Hanna raises during her trial: "What would you have done?" Nevertheless, they also seem to recognize, unlike the public schoolteachers Chester and Joy Goode, that this world depicted in the text is a world that is somewhat different from their own. There is both familiarity—that which allows the readers to see themselves in the text—and unfamiliarity—that which generates contingency by making readers uncertain or uncomfortable in their literary surroundings. It is precisely this mix of familiarity and unfamiliarity, comfort and discomfort, that creates the sort of critical self-reflection that generates the potentially useful moral and political discussions that we see in Oprah's Book Club. However, for lay readers in particular, though by no means exclusively, the problematic tendency to conflate these literary and nonliterary worlds is always there: We see it in John's question to the author of *The Reader*, "How autobiographical is this?," and in Winfrey's seconding of it, "Yeah, that's all of our questions, really." Schlink's response is, however, instructive for the role of the academic or the intellectual in this exercise of trying to generate moral and political values that are useful to liberal-democracy.

"Well, Oprah, I mean—of course, in such a book, there go autobiographical elements, but I wrote a novel," declared Schlink in response to Winfrey's question. "That means it's not an autobiographical tale that I wrote." Indeed, he continues, "It's a book about my generation, so it's also a book about me, but not to specify what element is autobiographical and what isn't." In so doing, Schlink identifies his literary world as neither simple autobiography nor complete fiction; he portrays it as both a world that we know and one that we do not. As such, he cultivates the very familiarity, and unfamiliarity, that allows readers both to see themselves in the text and to see

themselves potentially transfigured by it. His reluctance to specify and map out what it is that makes the text both familiar and strange potentially disrupts the “knowing” responses of readers such as Joy and Chester Goode and, indeed, or Nussbaum, Rorty, and Spivak. In this we see, perhaps, a model for teaching our students how to use literature to think and talk about politics, recognizing, in Italo Calvino’s words, “that no book that talks about a book says more than the book in question” (128–29).

Describing her motivations for choosing particular books, Oprah Winfrey declared: “I want books that can pull you into the story, take you different places and allow you to connect and expand your vision of other people in the world” (Pepper Sinkler 1). It is a motivation that is shared by the likes of Nussbaum, Rorty, and Spivak. Nevertheless, Oprah’s Book Club suggests that the text is not enough; the way that people read and talk about texts has a direct impact on the likelihood that a particular novel is going to have positive effect on liberal democratic society. There appears to be a balance that must be struck between encouraging citizens to read and letting them read; between generating their interests in texts and standing back and allowing the texts to do their work on and through readers. Describing her approach as “Socratic,” Martha Nussbaum declares: “The most important ingredient of a Socratic classroom is obviously the instructor” (*Cultivating* 42). Winfrey’s work suggests otherwise. Instructors such as Nussbaum, Rorty, and Spivak seem anxious to insert themselves between the reader and the text, to mold and shape the outcome of the discussion. Winfrey’s Book Club suggests that they should also learn to listen. It does not mean, however, that there is no role for the instructor. If they wish to use literature to generate the values of contingency and solidarity, then they can encourage this by facilitating the dialectical impact of texts: teaching their students to see that text as another world, both similar and different from their own. This will generate both the comfort and discomfort that is necessary for democratically productive conversations. Thus, perhaps, academics and intellectuals should see Oprah Winfrey not as a threat, but as a useful ally in a common and worthy cause.

I began this piece by confessing an embarrassment. I will end by confessing a hope. Both are related to Oprah’s Book Club. The embarrassment was the possibility of being seen with a book that Oprah recommended. The hope is that perhaps one day my embarrassment will end: that Oprah, or at least her Book Club, will cease to be a target of intellectual snobbery such as my own. For, in stark contrast to the approach of literary intellectuals,

Oprah has not only gotten America reading, she has also gotten her talking, too. It is the combination that is most likely to produce the values beneficial to liberal democracy that are championed by Nussbaum, Rorty, and Spivak. Perhaps, it is time that she received our respect.

Notes

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1. All references are to "Oprah's Book Club." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. 31 Mar. 1999.
2. For a discussion of these differences, see Stow 2000.

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