

BERGSONIAN METAPHYSICAL UNDERCURRENTS IN RORTY'S LIBERAL
GRADUALISM

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By

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Abstract

The central thesis of *Bergsonian Metaphysical Undercurrents in Rorty's Liberal Gradualism* is that those who take the greatest risks for social reformations are always motivated by the feeling of being part of something indefinitely greater than themselves and their own moral communities (however capacious these may be): progress just is this vague sense of indefinite movement, or *becoming*. In works such as *Matter and Memory*, *Creative Evolution*, and *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Henri Bergson identified this sense of movement with time, the evolution of life, and the emotion of love respectively. Though he would probably laud Bergson's insistence that philosophy should be partisan, Richard Rorty would be less hasty in making Bergson's identifications, for Rorty thinks social progress is best served by gradual increases in our local sense of "us" effected by imaginary identification with others through literary exposures, not a mystical sense of oneness with all creation. Improvising on a Bergsonian note, I hold that one must already be an aspiring mystic, or moral hero, for one to get an expanded sense of "us" from reading literature. But such a lifestyle is incredibly difficult to maintain, requiring superhuman courage and moral reflection. It is only in the inspiring, active presence of a genuine moral hero that a readership will be able to make such efforts, and reliably take to literature the way Rorty would like in order to form his goal of a maximally capacious liberal utopia. Mystics act out of the metaphysical or religious conviction, whether real or imagined, that they are instruments of a great force of love. Rorty's own utopian project would then be dependent on (and, perhaps, even an unknowing product of) these spiritual, metaphysical undercurrents of social progress.

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SECTION I: Introduction

Although there is a lot of convergence between the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Richard Rorty, one difference is obtrusive: Bergson is a metaphysician, and Rorty a staunch anti-metaphysician. This thesis is essentially an attempt to span this one divide. Bergson and Rorty agree on contingency's profound extent, even as it applies to processes of linguistic redescription: metaphors are creative contingencies which can be culturally transformative of individuals and society. They are both romantics, since they agree that the self is empowered with an innovative agency that can sometimes make the difference in achieving unlikely causes. They also agree that the prevailing tendencies in modern societies to be closed, protective, and conservative, are taking our global civilization towards unprecedented and probably irreparable catastrophe. Nevertheless, they both have hope for the future: social progress towards the achievement of liberal democratic utopian visions is possible, and worth fighting for. For Rorty, this is mainly done by imaginative identification with others brought on by literary exposures, a project outlined in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson lays out his view that all such progress is dependent on the living presence of mystics, or moral heroes, who spread a certain emotional impetus, creative specifically of an open society, to any and all by their exemplary lives. In sections II and III, I argue that Rorty's liberal gradualism, which his project for literature is supposed to serve by facilitating slow and steady expansions in our sense of moral obligation, is actually dependent on the sporadic appearance of Bergsonian moral heroes down through history. In the conclusion, by appealing to their esteemed, common utopian vision of a

more open, liberal democratic society, I hope to show how Rorty might reconsider the value of metaphysics to his own utopian project, just if Bergson's creative emotion could be instrumental in actually bringing it about. Finally, after a brief dip into the sociology of ideas, I suggest that Rorty himself can be construed as an important agent of this creative emotion within the setting of academic philosophy. I think that if Rorty's project of progressive social reformation by literary exposures is cogent for anyone at the end of reading his book, it's because of the extent to which he embodied such an emotion.

SECTION II: Retrieving Bergson's Metaphysics from Nabokov's Limited Interpretation
as Critiqued by Rorty in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*

Rorty read Bergson's *Two Sources* and concluded it was just one more attempt at an "inverted Platonism," one more reactionary theory in which the world of particular material objects or representations is supposed to get us in touch with a higher reality, instead of Plato's contemplation of abstract general Ideas serving this purpose (see the footnote on page 152 in *Contingency*). Rorty's thought is that Bergson subverts and replaces Plato's emphasis on being with becoming. But an inverted Platonism is nonetheless a metaphysical theory, and is therefore suspect on Rorty's view. Curiously, this reference to Bergson in *Contingency* comes up during Rorty's analysis of Nabokov's attempt to fuse the aesthetic immortality granted by the longevity of the cultural relevance of great works of art with the metaphysical immortality of the artist's personality and soul. Rorty claims that the nature of Nabokov's attempt may have been influenced by Bergson's *Two Sources*. In Nabokov's *Strong Opinions*, at the pages Rorty cites and elsewhere, we do find a *very* sketchy account of Bergson's theory that artistic works of genius are products of a primal creative emotion, one felt in both the creator and the audience, and an admission of Bergson's influence on Nabokov. But, in the *Two Sources*, Bergson does a much better job than Nabokov (and Rorty) at qualifying this theory. In this section, I'm going to try and make Bergson's metaphysics look better than the limited Nabokovian interpretation of it which Rorty criticizes. Rorty criticized Nabokov for trying to make it seem as though all artists capable of producing "aesthetic bliss" by their works were destined to be tender, open, kind beings, when, in fact, self-

creating genius and indefinite moral capaciousness are seldom reconciled within the same individual.¹ However, Bergson thought artists creative of an open society (e.g., Dickens) can manage to hold these two, seemingly antithetical, traits together. I want to defend Bergson because, ultimately, I want to show how Rorty's own liberal gradualism depends on something like a Bergsonian metaphysical undercurrent personified by moral heroes.

Rorty reads Nabokov as an unapologetic aesthete, for whom private aesthetic bliss is the ultimate good. Rorty needs to undermine Nabokov's claims that "aesthetic bliss" is the highest form of consciousness and that it connects us to a world beyond our contingent one (CIS 151), in order to argue that there are other purposes to which great works of literature (e.g., books like Dickens' *Bleak House*, or Nabokov's *Lolita*) should be put, such as expanding our sense of solidarity, and that "people as gifted as Dickens have sometimes been able to do quite different things in the same book." (CIS 147) Aesthetic bliss occurs when one is struck by what Nabokov calls a "telltale tingle between the shoulder blades" at encountering the work of an artistic genius. (CIS 147) Rorty holds that Nabokov thought aesthetic bliss *should* exclude the experience of a "participative emotion" in the reader (e.g., at certain passages of *Bleak House*²), an emotion that moved and continues to move readers to take actions which diminish pain and suffering in their society. In short, Rorty thinks that, for Nabokov, aesthetic values always trump moral values, attributing to the latter the views that "the effect produced by the style as opposed to that produced by participative emotion is *all* that matters" (CIS

¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 159, hereafter CIS.

² For example, the chapter entitled "Jo's Will," which describes the death of the poor boy Jo, a tragic externality (in the sense of the word employed by economists) of the legal miasma at Chancery. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), pp. 522-534, hereafter BH.

147), and that there is always a hard and fast line to be drawn between these two purposes. Nabokov apparently thought this because he had no conception of real social hope, so that pretty much the only thing worth living for was creating artistic works of genius, and Rorty makes a plausible case for reading him this way (CIS 156) (to be covered in more detail a little later on in this section); other goals, political or social goals for example, were deemed either unimportant or futile by Nabokov. Rorty suggests that Nabokov looked for metaphysical support for this conviction of his (CIS 154), and found or remembered Bergson for this purpose. Even if this is really what Nabokov thought, and even if Nabokov's view was somehow influenced by Bergson, it is important to remember that *Bergson was not Nabokov*. I'm now going to argue that Nabokov, being the aesthete and artistic genius he was, took the aesthetic bliss from Bergson's theory and left behind the moral import of a particular form of aesthetic bliss, the aesthetic bliss of the people Bergson calls "geniuses of the will", or *mystics*. I hope to show how Bergson thought that the "participative emotion," so valued by Rorty for inspiring proactive efforts of social reform, and Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss" turn out to be *one and the same creative emotion* in certain cases.

In the *Two Sources*, during his exposition of the mystic's moral attitude of the "open soul", Bergson distinguishes between two types of emotion: 1) an emotion caused by representations; and, 2) an emotion productive of representations, concepts and ideas, and even works of art.³ The first is derivative, the second creative. The feelings given by the first sort of emotion are "limited in number", and "recognizable because they are

³ Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1977), p. 43, hereafter TSMR.

destined to spur us on to acts corresponding to needs.” (TSMR 41) I take Bergson to be speaking here of all manner of pleasures at gratifying or satisfying our biological necessities; it is therefore the pleasurable feeling we have at yielding to the pressure exerted by many of the quotidian habits that make up the culture of whichever society we belong to. (TSMR 51) The second sort of emotional states are “real inventions, comparable to those of a musician, at the origin of which there has always been a man.” (TSMR 41) In contrast to the first, the second form of emotion is not the well-being of pleasure, but rather the *joy* of creation. Each creation, be it scientific, artistic, or even moral, stems from its own particular creative emotion for Bergson, as felt by its creator and communicated to its audience: “That a new emotion is the source of great creations of art, science and of civilization in general there seems to be no doubt.” (TSMR 43) These two sorts of emotions are different in kind for Bergson, one implying subsistence and stagnation, the other movement and creation, and it is of course true that the second of these is a terribly romantic notion, since it is an “inner emotion” which has to express itself in the world by its novel creations. (TSMR 51-2)

Bergson thinks creative emotions can catch up and incorporate other pleasures and other previously created joys in the process of manifesting themselves: “Feelings akin to sensation, closely bound up with the objects which give rise to them, are indeed just as likely to attract a previously created emotion as they are to connect with an entirely new one.” (TSMR 42) For my argument, it’s important to stress that a process of emotional creation, even in instances of grafting other representations and creations onto it, is called *organic* by Bergson: “it [i.e., the creative emotion] is pregnant with representations, not one of which is actually formed, but which it draws or might draw

from its own substance by an organic development.” (TSMR 44) I take this qualification to indicate that, for Bergson, artificial creation is coextensive with evolutionary or even embryonic creation: they are all different aspects of the same metaphysical force of creative evolution, Bergson’s *élan vital*. This is important to understanding why Bergson thinks artists who affect social reforms to any extent (e.g., Dickens or Orwell) are agents of a real evolutionary force (i.e., a creative emotion) running through humanity and the rest of creation, usually associated most strongly with the lives of mystics. To demonstrate his idea of emotional grafting in creativity, Bergson uses the example of Rousseau’s mystical feeling of oneness with nature during the latter’s exile from Geneva on the isle of St. Peter in Lake Bièvre:

Thus mountains may, since the beginning of time, have had the faculty of rousing in those who looked upon them certain feelings comparable with sensations, and indeed inseparable from mountains. But Rousseau created in connection with them a new and original emotion... True, there are reasons why this emotion should fasten on to mountains rather than any other object; the elementary feelings, akin to sensations, which were directly aroused by mountains must have been able to harmonize with the new emotion. But Rousseau gathered them together, gave them their places, henceforth as mere harmonics in a sound for which he provided, by a true creation, the principle tone... a fresh emotion has arisen and used these pre-existing notes as harmonics, and produced... the sentiment of nature. (TSMR 42)

Trees and streams may give pleasures; for example, respite from the heat of day in high summer. Poets can even give new and interesting expressions of creative emotions with these particular elements of nature as their subjects; if they are talented and lucky enough, perhaps their creations will manage to yield aesthetic feelings pure enough to be called blissful, even joyous, and they will survive in history for a time. But instances of both of these may be caught up in another creative emotion, one that may not even be merely poetic or aesthetic in nature. Creativity is not limited to art or even technology’s

development of survival-solutions to the problematic situations we encounter in the world. Bergson and Rorty agree that creativity is applicable to morality as much as it is to science (as the “hand-maiden” of technology) or poetry, for that is just what Bergson thinks a mystic is good at doing, and that is what Rorty thinks we are forced to admit if once we admit the contingency of language: moralities are intelligent, human creations.

Rorty follows Donald Davidson in thinking of languages as creative and intelligent human inventions which allow individuals and their community to better cope with the world, including other individuals and their communities. (CIS 11) Bergson, too, shares this *instrumental* view of language; for humans: “language must be adapted... to the necessities of life in common. By language, community of action is made possible.”⁴ On this instrumental view, a language evolves according to its community’s adoption of new metaphors or redescriptions (CIS 19), as these are found to be useful for some contingent goal or problem deemed pressing by that community and its members. For Bergson, metaphor is what is distinctive about human sign-systems: “this tendency of the sign to transfer itself from one object to another is characteristic of human language.” (CE 158) Signs are semantically locked to their referents in the static communication systems of other species.

Metaphors are unparaphrasable in the terms of the language from which they are cobbled together because metaphors answer to new purposes and goals (CIS 18), and the old language was created only to deal with old problems and goals. It is in this sense that Rorty agrees with literary critic Harold Bloom that a poet, someone who comes up with new metaphors, is always parasitic on more conventional language users, both past and

⁴ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1913), p. 157, hereafter CE.

future: on past users because they maintained the terms out of which a poet's metaphor is constructed, providing a semantic ground or foil for the poet's linguistic novelties; on future users because they will be the ones to either adopt or reject the poet's metaphor, according to what goals or problems are important to them. (CIS 41) While describing a poet's challenge of expressing new ideas, Bergson makes this same point of how effective metaphors rely on the literal meaning of words as a foil for their newness, and therefore how a poet's work relies on conventional language users for its resources and longevity:

If these ideas find words already existing which can express them, for each of them this seems a piece of unexpected good luck and, in truth, it has often been necessary to assist fortune, and strain the meaning of a word, to mold it to the thought. In that event, the effort is painful, and the result problematical. But it is in such a case only that the mind feels itself, or believes itself, to be creative. It no longer starts from a multiplicity of ready-made elements to arrive at a composite unity made up of a new arrangement of the old. It has been transported at a bound to something which seems both one and unique [i.e., a new meaning], and which will contrive later to express itself, more or less satisfactorily, in concepts both multiple and common, previously provided by language. (TSMR 47)

If the instrumental view of language is a good one, then it follows that a language's success at facilitating the particular purposes of a community, or a community's dealings with particular problems, will tend to fix or "ossify" the inter-subjectively agreed upon meanings of its lexicon within a community. This process of semantic "ossification" results in lots of literalized metaphors, what Rorty and Davidson call "dead metaphors." (CIS 18) And, it also follows that semantic consensus within a community will tend to shift (i.e., community members become receptive and vigilant for new metaphors and new poets) only when that community's language is becoming less effective at dealing with that community's problems or achieving its goals. So, as a

general rule, as the contingent problems or goals of a community change, so too does the language of that community tend to change.

The instrumental conception of language applies to a given community's moral vocabulary as much as it does to its scientific vocabulary: morality and science merely reflect the diversity of the problems and goals which go a long way to defining that community's ways of life. For example, on this view, an individual's moral vocabulary would primarily answer to pressing sociopolitical needs, expressed by questions like "how should I treat other people in my community?" and "how should they treat me?" Likewise, an individual's scientific vocabulary would therefore answer to practical (e.g., alimentary) needs expressed by a question like "how can I get more predictive control over my environment?" This is why Rorty describes morality simply as "the voice of... a community which has grown up subject to the vicissitudes of time and chance, one more of Nature's experiments." (CIS 60) A community's moral vocabulary evolves as a community's moral problems and goals change: new social goals and problems call for new social metaphors and descriptions. In sum, Bergson thinks that "the morality of a human society may well be compared to its language" (TSMR 28), because, in Rorty's words, "the demands of a morality are the demands of a language." (CIS 60) These claims are made for the same reason: moralities are created and evolve in response to the contingently shifting sociopolitical goals and problems a given society is subject to over the course of its history.

I now want to show how Bergson helps us see that aesthetic bliss in Dickens' *Bleak House*, as prized and described by Nabokov, is explicable in terms of being an exciting and emotional part of the creation of a new, nascent form of society, called the

“open,” which mystics have as their social goal, and which they render attractive for others. But, counter what Rorty seems to think, such bliss is *no less* moral than aesthetic: participative emotion and aesthetic bliss don’t have to be “quite different things,” as Rorty says, after all. We don’t have to choose between aesthetic bliss or participative emotion in this case because, in Bergsonian terms, the bliss engendered by certain parts of *Bleak House* is a living part of the bliss of a soul transitioning from a closed to an open attitude, a soul caught up in the mystic’s dream of a transformation, *en masse*, from a closed to an open society.

There are two basic forms of society for Bergson: the closed and the open. Human societies came closed from nature’s hands since that was the best way for individual humans to survive and prosper, as a tight group: “He [i.e., an individual] is part and parcel of society; he and it are absorbed together in the same task of individual and social preservation.” (TSMR 37) Given the state of our environment (i.e., limited amounts of suitable resources available) and our evolutionary development (i.e., our genetic inheritance), human social formations naturally evolved to be, at least initially, closed. Societies were originally closed because they had to compete with each other for survival. The open society, on the other hand, is an evolutionary potential made possible by a creative use of intelligence but not yet actualized (TSMR 84, 95), whose hope and vision has inspired mystics to lead lives that have in turn inspired progressive expansions in the moral communities of different closed societies all over the world periodically throughout history. So, actual human societies are in a process of *transition* from one social form to the other, and they yet remain in this mostly *mixed* state. If our transitional societies are ever to be actualized to a point sufficiently worthy of the name “open” (e.g.,

Rorty's maximally capacious liberal utopia), then Bergson thinks this development will have to be a *cultural acquisition*: "love of mankind is indirect and acquired." (TSMR 33) The open society is nothing like a Hegelian telos of the movement of history. Bergson insists that there is nothing in our genetic make-up or environment that will choose this way of existence for us; rather, it would be a matter of sheer human agency. (TSMR 33, 83-4)

Mystics exercise a power of attraction over those who aspire to follow their example. Their lives are expressions of a very special sort of creative emotion, one that wants to give birth to an open society, and one which utilizes all their intelligence in the striving for, and occasional achievement of, ends that contribute to this goal by actions that most deemed futile, unrealistic, and useless to attempt before their unlikely example. Their words do not impart a pressure as the impersonal laws of the city or tribe do; instead, their words and actions pique extra efforts and courage in us as we become enthused and attracted by the commitment and energy they display for the achievement of their social goal, an open society. The emotion they cultivate in themselves is in this way "infectious." (TSMR 53) Their soul is not closed; it is not wrapped up in themselves, nor in their community for the sake of themselves. (TSMR 38) Rather, it is characterized by a limitless love, immune to material pleasures and (what amounts to the same thing for the mystic's goal of creating a new form of society) material obstacles. (TSMR 52) Furthermore, they do not use authority to effect or regulate the progressive actualization of their utopian vision; instead, they appeal to a person's *inner authority* for self-generating the effort and self-discipline required to follow (or approximate as best that person may) the mystic's ascetic way of life. For mystics, no challenge is

insurmountable; they are indefatigable agents of the change they want to see in the world. (TSMR 39) “All is loved because all is creation,” *that* is the attitude of the open soul which perpetually feels at one with “life as a creative force”, and that is the attitude they engender to varying degrees of perfection in the souls of their followers. (TSMR 38, 54) Their theory of value is one of enthusiasm for joyous creative action; that is what they think is best. And this is far from the self-sufficient sense of pleasurable well-being accompanying subsistence’s torpor, which tends to characterize even the most dilated of our modern closed societies. When mystic leaders aren’t around to inspire us to act in a manner worthy of their example, we go back to the old, obdurate, closed way of life, since it comes more naturally to us, and requires less effort and less risk, and is often at least statically pleasurable even if it means we give up the possibility of feeling joy. (TSMR 78, 80) In the next section of this thesis, I will go into greater detail on the Bergsonian mystic. For now though, I want to emphasize that, for Bergson, cultural (or acquired) evolution and biological evolution are two modes of the same creative metaphysical force.

Since Bergson sees closed societies as stopping points in life’s creative effort (i.e. evolution), just as he sees different animal species as similar stopping points, it follows that every expansion of this original model of human moral obligation managed by a mystic is a *new species* of society. This follows because each expansion, be it horizontal (i.e., when new kinds of people get admitted into our sphere of moral obligation) or vertical (i.e., when members of different classes within the same society get admitted), brings us further and further away from the original evolutionary function and natural use of closed societies, thereby transforming them in this process. Mystics are therefore

“individuals who each represent, as the appearance of a new species would have represented, an effort of creative evolution.” (TSMR 97) And, these new societies must still compete with the extant, older, more restricted social forms. Bergson knows that evolution does not play “moral favorites”; he probably would have agreed with Rorty’s reading of what’s really important about Orwell’s *1984*: “He [Orwell] convinced us that there was a perfectly good chance that the same developments which had made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible. He did so by convincing us that nothing in the nature of truth or man or history was going to block that scenario any more than it was going to underwrite the scenario which liberals had been using between the wars.” (CIS 175) So, in as much as closed societies are genetic/instinctual products of evolution, mystics become sociocultural/intelligent conduits of evolution’s creative force when they bring new, evolutionarily viable moral transformations to closed societies. This is what Bergson means when he says: “There is a genius of the will [i.e., mystics, moral heroes] as there is of the mind and genius defies all anticipation. Through those geniuses of the will, the impetus of life traversing matter, wrests from it, for the future of the species, promises such as were out of the question when the species was being constituted. Hence in passing from social solidarity to the brotherhood of man, we break with one particular nature, but not with all nature.” (TSMR 58)

But, though mystics see no insurmountable obstacles to their goal, still they know these obstacles must be overcome. Present dangers and future pitfalls, cruelty and suffering in all its forms, and inequalities in the distribution of social benefits and hardships must all be neutralized as much as possible if the creative emotion of the open

society, if *love* is to spread everywhere. (TSMR 95-6) Now, for Bergson's purposes, Rorty's *Contingency* is a very useful book because it shows how reading literature can (but need not necessarily) make us more aware of some of these dangers and pitfalls, cruelties and sufferings, that we may never even have suspected (e.g., the "tendencies to cruelty inherent in searches for autonomy" (CIS 144)). So, Bergson might say that Rorty is doing good work helping us read authors in ways that clear the path for a mystical-moral transformation of society. I say this by way of making a first step in reconciling Bergson with Rorty's project of social reformation by literature. So, having brought Bergson closer to Rorty, I'm now going to work to distance Bergson from Nabokov, or, at least, from Rorty's Nabokov, which should have the effect of deepening the reconciliation I have begun between Rorty and Bergson. Rorty's project needs something like a creative emotion of love, embodied in a moral hero, for literature to be maximally efficacious in the way he needs to create his liberal utopia.

I think that Dickens was fired by what Bergson calls the creative emotion of the open society; I will argue that, contra Nabokov, it is *this* kind of aesthetic bliss at stake in the chapter entitled "Jo's Will" in *Bleak House*. To begin, consider Bergson's thoughts on genius in literature:

And what about literature and art? A work of genius is in most cases the outcome of an emotion, unique of its kind, which seemed to baffle expression and yet which *had* to express itself. But is not this so of all work, however imperfect, into which there enters some degree of creativeness? Anyone engaged in writing has been in a position to feel the difference between an intelligence left to itself and that which burns with the fire of an original and unique emotion, born of the identification of the author with his subject, that is to say of intuition. In the first case, the mind cold-hammers the materials combining together ideas long since cast into words and which society supplies in a solid form. In the second, it would seem that the solid materials supplied by intelligence first melt and mix, then solidify again into fresh ideas now shaped by the creative mind itself. (TSMR 46)

In this passage, Bergson is making the distinction between a creative use of intelligence and a conventional one. The first is given when artists feel within themselves a unique emotion that is an impetus to bring some sort of novelty into the world. In these cases, the reception is unsure and the result of the creative effort “problematical,” since novelty defies all attempts at interpretation framed from within the literal understanding of a language. Novelty always requires the audience to cross some semantic gap between the artist’s vision and the face value of the words artists borrow from their society’s language (since the literal meaning of a novel phrase will not make much sense); it always requires an expansion of appreciation. The audience itself needs to exercise a creative intelligence, in a real *effort*, as much as the artist whose work they are being asked to consider has done. By contrast, the second use of intelligence is the formulaic combination of previously existing ideas, tropes, or dead metaphors, whose semantic effect is calculable and sure; here, there is no metaphor, no disparity between what is said and what people tend to take as the meaning. In this second case, Bergson says intelligence’s exercise is “left to itself” (TSMR 42), determined by all the history, social conditioning and instinctual pressure of the society to which it belongs, but it is not saying anything new – rather, its exercise is, at best, that of a competent “social technician.” In contrast to this, with the first sort of intelligence it is the creative emotion itself which “incites intelligence to undertake ventures and the will to persevere with them.” (TSMR 43) Bergson chastises those aesthetic critics who are unable to value or recognize this difference between the two uses of intelligence; they are “blamed for not seeing precisely where the difference lies between that intelligence which understands, discusses or rejects – which in a word limits itself to criticism [according to some rule provided by the

morality or theory of value currently in vogue in a given society (TSMR 48)]– and the intelligence which invents.” (TSMR 45)

By distinguishing between creative and conventional uses of intelligence, and by noticing how critics sometimes miss the point of the indeterminate value of novel uses of language (or other material), sometimes refusing to even try and meet an author on the terms that author is creating or gesturing towards, I take Bergson to be making the same point as Rorty when he says that the “analogy between vocabularies and tools has one obvious drawback.”

The craftsman typically knows what job he needs to do before picking or inventing tools with which to do it. By contrast, someone like Galileo, Yeats, or Hegel (a “poet” in my wide sense of the term – “someone who makes things new”) is typically unable to make clear exactly what it is that he wants to do before developing the language in which he succeeds in doing it. His new vocabulary makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose. It is a tool for doing something which could not have been envisaged before prior to the development of a particular set of descriptions, those which it itself helps to provide. (CIS 13)

The use or interpretation of a new metaphor or new description is up for grabs by anyone who can use it persuasively enough, anyone who can attract an audience to make the effort of adopting his or her particular sense or use for the term: creators are hardly in control of what happens to their creations.⁵ Critics sometimes try and force certain fixed uses and interpretations onto new metaphors or redescriptions, making it seem like there is only one possible way they should be read, or only one possible purpose they should be used for. This is what Rorty accuses Nabokov of doing with Dickens in the chapter of *Contingency* entitled “The Barber of Kasbeam”, while quoting Nabokov’s insistence on

⁵ E.g., romanticism’s appropriation of Kant’s move to “divinize the self” (CIS 30), which put the imagination at the “center of the soul.” Kant found this horrifying since it effaced his idea that our moral being was our essential noumenal being. In this way, romanticism put aesthetics at odds with morality.

the priority of the purely aesthetic reading of *Bleak House*. But Bergson and Rorty can both ask Nabokov: why should the purely aesthetic reading be the most valuable, or preferable? Bergson would probably agree with Rorty's condemnation of the apparent absolutism of Nabokov's aestheticism: "Nabokov has to pretend implausibly, that Dickens was not, or at least should not have been, interested in the fact that his novels were a more powerful impetus to social reform than the collected works of all the British social theorists of his day." (CIS 147) But, even if Rorty would think we should resist the temptation to pose the question, it might be worth asking: what *made Bleak House* such an impetus? It might be worth asking because if anyone in Rorty's readership is worried about the mechanics of Rorty's project for literature as the best tool for social reformation, about why we might be justified in expecting literary exposures to increase the extension of our sense of moral obligation, then an explanation could help to alleviate their concerns and bring them on board Rorty's project.

A Bergsonian can take a glance at Dickens' life and suggest a plausible answer: Dickens' writing was fired by the creative emotion of the open society. A Bergsonian could claim *Bleak House* has "set up an impetus imparted to it by the artist, or rather, one which is the very impetus of the artist, invisible and present within the work." (TSMR 75) This impetus is really indistinguishable from Dickens' ability to "identify with his subject" in a way it would never have occurred to the vast majority of his readers: in Dickens' time, if you could already read, chances were you weren't poor enough to know what it was like to be *really* poor. The Dickens family was constantly threatened with financial ruin as Charles was growing up. Everyone in his family save himself was sent to debtor's prison when he was 11. They eventually got out, but Charles was still forced to

work at a warehouse labeling bottles for six shillings a week. He later taught himself shorthand, became a court reporter, and, at this vocation, was continuously confronted with the most terrifying egos of London society (e.g. lawyers, aristocrats, industrialists) and all of their cruel activities, not to mention the horrendous corruption and inefficiency of the legal system. (BH intro.) Almost any introduction to one of Dickens' books outlines these well-known biographical facts.

What Dickens was exceptionally good at was *articulating* for others the impetus he learned to feel so sincerely in his childhood. Charles was therefore caught in what Rorty calls an ironist's⁶ "interesting, meta-stable state" (CIS 73) of someone who was close enough to abject poverty all his childhood to sincerely worry about it, which allowed him to sustain his empathy for the pain, suffering and cruelties inflicted on the poor later on in his life, while at the same time being someone who happened to be able to nurture his talent for writing and become educated and eventually successful enough to be socially acceptable to the rich and cultivated (whether new industrialists or old money). His childhood experience gave him permanent doubts that the vocabulary which high society London was using to describe itself, the society he was gradually initiated into, was as enlightened and superior as it pretended to be (e.g., see the pitiful pretensions of *Bleak House*'s Mrs. Jellyby in the chapter "Telescopic Philanthropy"; or, Lady Dedlock's sardonic introduction in the chapter "In Fashion", or Sir Leicester's introduction in "On the Watch"). Since his life straddled the class divide, Dickens was in

⁶ For Rorty, an ironist is someone who: 1) has doubts that the language he or she has inculcated could ever provide *the* final vocabulary with which to cope with the world and other people; 2) thinks these doubts cannot be supported or dissolved by argument framed from within said inculcated language; and, 3) does not believe that said inculcated language is "closer to reality" than other languages inculcated by people in other societies. (CIS 73)

a unique position, and had the motivation besides, to do something no one had tried before in his society: he wanted to cause mass questioning of the notion of British institutional and industrial “progress” of his time by *emotional appeal* to the possibility of a different sort of society in those who had the power to change things. British social theorists could appeal to the intelligence of people who already shared their sympathies perhaps (e.g., well-intentioned philanthropists), but when it came to appealing to an emotion not already present in their readership, when it came to *creating* that emotion in others, they were lame. Dickens, on the other hand, is the unanimously acknowledged master of pathos. It is true that Dickens has often been accused of contriving caricatures of class and social type, but, in my opinion, it’s not clear that, at the time he was writing, people were at all aware of how closely they actually approximated the Dickensian personages. At that time, these were genuine creations that no one quite knew what to do with; later, after enough powerful people became embarrassed that these might be *self*-descriptions, the personages became justification for social reformations whose future extent Dickens could only at best have had a dim idea of when writing *Bleak House*.

Now let’s take a look at the imagery of the chapter entitled “Jo’s Will” in detail. I’m going to focus on a comparison that Dickens makes between Jo’s poor, doomed body and a rickety old cart in the first paragraphs of the chapter. He will return to this poetic image again and again, before finishing the chapter with it as well. Here is where it first appears: the benevolent Doctor Allan Woodcourt, upon finding Jo furtive and destitute in the grimy backstreets of London, brings him to a breakfast stall for some revival, and “lays his hand upon his pulse, and on his chest. ‘Draw breath, Jo!’ ‘It draws,’ says Jo, ‘as heavy as a cart.’ He might add, ‘and rattles like it’; but he only mutters, ‘I’m a-moving

on, sir.” (BH 523) Jo is dogged and stoic throughout his ordeal; he does not even know how to properly complain or say that he deserves better, for his “betters” command the language he must use to describe himself, so he is only able to see himself as they see him, which is just to say that he can’t really see himself at all: he is mostly invisible to them, and even if he occasionally manifests as some rude accident in their lives, then still a worthless and depressing exposure. It’s remarkable that, when Jo says anything in the book, it is generally some variation on apologizing for his existence; when anyone asks him anything, his favorite saying is “Wishermay die, if I don’t, sir.” (BH 527) Jo is obligated to use the inherited vocabulary people of higher socioeconomic standing have always used to describe him because, prior to Dickens’ writing, they have a semantic monopoly on the language. A “real Jo”, someone real whom his character approximated, would not yet be able to benefit from the widespread shift in the use of words Dickens was trying to effectuate by Jo’s own example in *Bleak House*.

Before the imagery of the cart is developed any further, Dickens skillfully employs a description of Jo that is designed to make him and others like him visible to their “betters” – only in this way will the metaphor of the cart be really effective. Ingeniously, this is not done by insisting on the innate value of Jo as a human being, or by bringing out what might be beautiful about him underneath all the grime and misfortune; rather, it is done by giving Jo a deliberately *anti-aesthetic* treatment (if you will), by emphasizing precisely all his broken *ugliness*, displaying a life already failed while still so young. Dickens is merciless with the reader in his relentless description of Jo, not allowing us to externalize or diminish the value of Jo’s pain by invidious

comparison to other so-called (more *exotic*) “sufferers” already recognized by London society, or by distancing ourselves from Jo’s presence (for the reader is choosing to read):

Jo is brought in. He is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle’s Tockahoopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby’s lambs; being wholly unconnected with Borriboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article. Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets, only in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him: native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish. Stand forth Jo, in uncompromising colors! From the sole of thy foot to the crown of thy head, there is nothing interesting about thee. (BH 526)

Dickens is showing readers how, in case they weren’t aware of it before, they actually might not have given a damn about Jo the whole previous five hundred pages of reading. One of two things are likely to happen at this point: either readers will keep right on reading, and continue to be oblivious to people of Jo’s ilk in their society, or else they will be suddenly struck by a terrific chop of pathos. Evidently, the latter happened more often than the former; of this historical reception in the readership, Bergson would give an explanation from the moral progress intimated by a creative emotion, creatively expressed. It is the same feeling periodically won by the interventions of heroic mystical leaders in history, even if Rorty would probably want to shy away from such a move.

After this description of Jo, it is impossible to think of oneself as truly enlightened and morally superior in London society, not even were we a well-intentioned philanthropist like Mrs. Jellyby, without first recognizing our prior ignorance of Jo and the poor people like him who were (and are) “dying thus around us everyday.” (BH 534) After this description (or *re*-description) of Jo, every time Dickens subsequently refers to the metaphor, readers are reminded of their shameful neglect, and how it’s already too

late to do anything about everyone who has already suffered for it. And they are equally powerless about Jo's plight; they can only watch him slowly snuff out.

As Jo's condition worsens, we are kept updated on "the cart's" deteriorating condition: "For the cart so hard to draw is near its journey's end, and drags over stony ground. All round the clock it labors up the broken steps, shattered and worn. Not many times can the sun rise, and behold it still upon its weary road." (BH 532) And, every time the other visiting "benevolent" characters require Jo to tell them his story again, despite his illness, the moribund boy diminishes ever more: even his benefactors don't realize they are being cruel here; even the "really liberal" liberals in the book, like Mr. Jarndyce and Doctor Woodcourt, are extracting a cruel price for their care from Jo, one he should not be compelled to pay. At the end, Jo's vision grows dark, and his spent cart comes to a trundling stop, now broken *and* blind. That's when Jo asks Doctor Woodcourt: "'Is there any light a-coming?' 'It's coming fast Jo.' Fast. The cart is shaken all to pieces, and the rugged road is very near its end." (BH 533) And then Dickens finally lets us have it: "The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!" (BH 534)

It is my contention that only someone fired by Bergson's creative emotion of an open society could have created such a metaphor, and employed it in such a calculated rhythm. For those susceptible, the moral sensitivity of the reader increases in proportion to the rate at which the cart's state deteriorates, so that when the cart's energy, when Jo's *will* (to highlight one of the chapter title's *entendres*), becomes absolutely dampened by the difficulty of its route, that's when the moral effect it creates hits the apex of its intensity in the reader. It's a remarkably creative use of intelligence, specifically *designed* to make socially (and therefore *morally*) visible what was invisible before. And what is it

creative of exactly? Bergson would not flinch to answer: “an opening soul,” and Bergson thinks enough opening souls will make up an opening society. (TSMR 213) Why couldn't a British social theorist have done this work? Well, perhaps he could have, but in that case he would only be doing *redescription*, not engaging in theorizing which is supposed to *find* the final description of the world or some significant aspect of it (e.g., the social aspect) (CIS 25-26), and most people tend to specialize in either one or the other.

What did Nabokov read in this chapter that could have communicated *pure* aesthetic bliss? Presumably the imagery, because it *is* beautiful. But, as Bergson tells us, beautiful imagery may be caught up in another creative emotion whose productive nature may in fact be moral. Given Dickens' history, and given the emotional response of his readers down through the years, and given the impetus to change that his books have proven to be, it is difficult to think he was just pretending to create out of a moral conviction in order to be superlatively aesthetically effective in this chapter. Probably only someone who was obsessed with art for art's sake would think *that*. It's difficult to believe that the beautiful metaphor of Jo's body as the rickety cart could have been made by a mere opportunist of sentiment, that the “moral frame” of the passage was just a contrived excuse for Dickens to dress it up with some pretty metaphors for the artistic credit, even if that *is* what Nabokov, aesthete that he was, might have ended up taking from it. Maybe, with this chapter of *Bleak House*, Nabokov saw himself where he didn't belong at all. Dickens loved detail, and metaphor, but he was hardly frivolous, still less an artist with sociopathic tendencies. If we are comparing the interpretation of *Bleak House* through Bergson's metaphysics to Nabokov's reading of Dickens, it's far more

likely that Dickens was inspired by a creative emotion of the open society than not, one that was subsequently engendered in most of his readers. It's far more likely that whatever aesthetic bliss *Bleak House* contains was achieved in the wider process of Dickens' artistic articulation of this greater emotion which encompassed it, of which it is a beautiful out-growth, or "harmonic", one of many. I don't think Dickens would have created much aesthetic bliss if he wasn't first fundamentally interested in the possibility of creating a new form of society.

However, this is not incompatible with acknowledging, at the same time, that this passage may have inspired some of Nabokov's most beautiful creative writing. And maybe that's just because, as Rorty supposes, Nabokov really did prioritize *the aesthetic value* of bright, heavenly redemption at the end of Jo's painful, pathetic and preventable death *over the moral value* of the sentiment created by the depiction of Jo's tragic path of life which ends in this chapter: the former is, after all, a beautiful image; the latter is, often, difficult to stomach, especially for someone not used to such grisly sights. It seems that Nabokov was captivated by this imagery of the light, the other world Dickens (or God) was transporting Jo to; perhaps Dickens' imagery in *Bleak House* even became Nabokov's own metaphysical realm of eternal aesthetic bliss where he sent some of his characters to die in his books, one that is supposed to replace and redeem all worldly suffering and pain.

Rorty thought Nabokov struggled to face up to the reality of suffering, especially that of someone like Jo: "His [i.e., Nabokov's] eccentrically large capacity for joy, his idiosyncratic ability to experience bliss so great as to seem incommensurable with the existence of suffering and cruelty, made him unable to tolerate the reality of suffering."

(CIS 155) Rorty thought that since Nabokov couldn't admit to himself the offensive reality of all the pain and suffering in the world, he did in his books what he could not do in real life: he ultimately anaesthetized characters who really suffered in his books – because that's what he had to do to himself (i.e., psychologically) in order to live with the reality of suffering – by sending them to another dimension of pure grace, one he was fortunate enough to walk around in every day. (CIS 155) He invented this metaphysical realm for himself over the course of his maturation, as a coping mechanism to render his dim but growing awareness that reality was often very cruel commensurable with the inordinate bliss of his childhood. This was how Rorty thinks Nabokov dealt with his extreme potential for pity, as the latter eventually fully came to realize (in his autobiography) how dumb his good luck was (CIS 157): Nabokov saves some of his most intensely suffering characters, the ones he deems worthy,⁷ with an aesthetic-metaphysical salvation, giving them at their end what he felt they deserved in life (e.g., Krug's son in *Bend Sinister*), just like Dickens did for Jo, because it made him feel better about being so gratuitously lucky himself. The difference between the two authors is that, owing to the particular creative emotion running through him, Dickens *really* identified with Jo's pain, sparing himself no cost of taxing pity, and he did not send Jo to heaven before doing his damndest to help us feel it too – Dickens never spares himself or his reader. Nabokov felt well the aesthetic bliss from this chapter of *Bleak House*, but it seems he had no sensitivity for the impetus that created it, since he was too shy of pain and suffering; he couldn't bring himself to see how such bliss was probably an outgrowth of a greater, encompassing creative emotion, born of the imaginative, *solidary identification*

⁷ For example, it seems that Lolita, dying after giving birth to a stillborn child, does not make Nabokov's cut for some reason.

with those in pain, one productive of an open society. Nabokov's imagination, great as it was, was not up to *that* sort of identification.

But, all this is not to say that art may not be appreciated for art's sake, that there is no playful or excessive use of art, on Bergson's view. Bergson can appreciate what Nabokov gets out of *Bleak House*, even if he would probably think that the creative emotion Nabokov thought was in play is limited compared to the one that Dickens was, in all likelihood, actually fired by. Given the details of Dickens' life, the quality of the writing itself, and how his works have been subsequently received and put to use, it seems overwhelmingly likely, at least to a Bergsonian if not to others, that *Bleak House* was born of a creative emotion specifically of the open society, and that it has tended to create this emotion in its readership as well. Bergson thinks our ability to create and enjoy literature originally served an evolutionary purpose: nature gave us a "myth-making faculty." The original function of this faculty was a religious one: it allowed members of a society to feel confident that beings (i.e., the subjects of the myths) more powerful than they were watching out for their welfare and that of their society; it also made members superstitious that, if they did not follow the rules of their society, if they acted solely according to the desires of their egos, then they would be punished by the gods of their society. (TSMR 124-25) However, once evolved, this faculty is open to all sorts of spandrel-uses, *exaptations*, from creative and intelligent human variation.

Bergson highlights this latter fact:

Let us take, then, in the vaguely and doubtless artificially defined realm of imagination, the natural "cut" which we have called myth-making and see to what use it is naturally put. To this faculty are due the novel, the drama, mythology together with all that preceded it. But then there have not always been novelists and dramatists, whereas humanity has never subsisted without religion. Very likely, therefore, poetry and fantasy of all kinds appear as

extras, benefiting from the fact that the mind knew how to make myths, but religion is what accounts for the myth-making function... Some need, individual perhaps, social in any case, must have required from the mind this kind of mental activity. (TSMR 108-9)

“Static” religion, the sort of religion which helps closed societies cohere, is the original, naturally determined creation of this myth-making faculty, since it binds society together, but, as historical conditions permitted them, other, more purely aesthetic applications of the faculty freely followed. Bergson thinks the myth-making faculty is quite as useful to an individual’s well-being as it is to society’s, thereby consolidating the faculty’s evolutionary value to our species: “Though indeed it plays a social role, it must also serve the individual, whom as often as not it is to the interest of society to favor. We may therefore presume that in its original form it brings added strength to the individual.” (TSMR 120) Bergson is speaking here of religion’s original conciliating, therapeutic effect on the individual’s dangerous ability to fixate on thoughts of his own death; and, also, of the individual’s belief in a religious deity’s ability to instill confidence in that individual despite the uncertainty of the efficacy of his actions for survival (e.g., during a hunt). But why limit our consideration to the faculty’s “original”, biological forms of usefulness to the individual?

If *any* development of this faculty (it need not be biological) should bring added strength (or even pleasure) to the individual *or* society, then this would only add to its value for us, and thereby ensure its continued existence, even if the value in these cases turned out to be “merely cultural.” The creation of art in the pursuit of aesthetic bliss is useful, and therefore valuable, both to individuals and society, quite apart from biological considerations, for all sorts of reasons. For example, it permits some “strong poets” to achieve literary immortality, as Rorty notes. (CIS 24-5) And, social scenes, cliques,

coteries, whole moral communities tend to form around its activity. It also assists some individuals in achieving otherwise improbable sexual conquests (e.g., Leonard Cohen's lines from *Chelsea Hotel #2* come to mind, referring both to himself and Janis Joplin: "we are ugly but we have the music," though the music is evidently enough of an advantage since he later modestly sings how he "can't keep track of each fallen robin"). Additionally, great artists can give their whole society a sense of identity and cultural value in competition with other closed societies for cultural greatness (e.g., at the Venice Biennale). And, of course, aesthetic bliss is its own intrinsic reward simply because, for those with the requisite sensibility, the tingles feel great.

For an intelligent being, anything is good if an effective, desired use for it can be found or created. Therefore, intelligence, as the faculty that can make a tool out of anything (TSMR 27), *de-essentializes* the function of everything, even the myth-making faculty itself and all its products. So, even if Bergson didn't spend a lot of time talking about the cultural value of certain creative, intelligent, exaptive applications of the myth-making faculty, still he can agree with Rorty that "there is nothing called the 'aim of writing' any more than there is something called the 'aim of theorizing.'" (CIS 145); and, that "We should stick to questions about what works for particular purposes." (CIS 148) For purposes of social reform, it turns out that Dickens' *Bleak House* was a great tool; this is no surprise if Dickens was fired by a creative emotion of the open society while writing it, as I have tried to argue on Bergson's behalf. But nothing prevented Nabokov from finding it worked pretty well as inspiration for his own private pursuit of aesthetic bliss in writing too. Both Rorty and Bergson help us see why we don't have to choose one or the other as the "essential purpose" of writing.

SECTION III: Bergsonian Metaphysical Undercurrents in Rorty's Liberal Gradualism;
or, When Merely Philosophical Differences make a Practical Difference

In the previous section, I wanted to distance Bergson from Rorty's Nabokov, in order to show how, far from hurting the possibility of actualizing something like Rorty's maximally capacious liberal utopia, Bergson construed his own metaphysics as being constructive of such an open society. We saw how Nabokov, at best, only had a limited conception of Bergson's metaphysics. I also argued that Dickens was most likely fired by a creative emotion of the open society in writing *Bleak House*, one which spread to enough of the readership that *Bleak House* ended up becoming a powerful tool of social reformation. Now I want to make a modest Bergsonian critique of Rorty's assumptions in laying out his project of social reformation through literature. I want to do this out of hope that it will ultimately make Rorty's idea of social reformation through literary exposures – a project Bergson would have agreed is important and valuable – even more cogent for a reader of *Contingency*. I'm going to argue that, without something like Bergson's concept of a creative emotion, living the liberal lifestyle is too taxing for a society to sustain *en masse*, so that a liberal utopia would never actually be born, its rhetoric never embodied in the society that touts it, since the effort would be too great; and, that the exemplary actions constructive and indicative of an actual liberal utopia could not be successfully executed without the confidence and courage such an emotion lends. The problem, as a Bergsonian sees it, is that Rorty does not seem to pay enough attention to the difference in the amount of *effort* and *courage* it takes to really live the liberal way of life, even including the way he thinks liberals should read literature,

compared to the lifestyles of other political/social formations (i.e., those characterized by the tendencies to close in on themselves).

Without recourse to something like a Bergsonian metaphysics, Rorty probably cannot not fully appreciate the *mixed* nature of morality from which Bergson's *Two Sources* takes its name. I will argue that, for Rorty, socialization, *even the socialization of a liberal subject*, is just the passive process of inculcating the language and habits of the moral community we happen to be born into. Rorty seems to think that, if once "programmed" (CIS 6) with a language of liberal values, individuals will tend to act according to these liberal values from the same pressure exerted on them by their society that would occur in a "primitive" social formation fresh from nature's hands, one without all the accretions of civilization. In Rorty's view, we can never get out of the closed society, because he doesn't think there is any such thing as "a love for humanity as such", so even a "liberal closed society" is assumed to exert the same kind of instinctual pressure on the individual to follow the rules as any other closed society. Presumably, in the process described in the last pages of *Contingency*, it is this pressure which is supposed to gradually extend our sense of moral obligation from ourselves to our families, to our communities, to our countries, all the way to the rest of humanity. This would make Rorty's view of moral obligation essentially the same as Émile Durkheim's, a view Bergson criticizes in *The Two Sources* for the same reason he would criticize Rorty's: neither takes into account the *mixed* nature of morality.

Owing to his reluctance to endorse any form of metaphysics, Rorty does not seem to fully appreciate the Bergsonian point that liberal, democratic societies are the ones *furthest away from nature's original function* for societies: *actually living* in a manner

that is truly worthy of the dream of the collective, the indefinite capaciousness defining these societies, requires a constant exertion of *extra, personal effort* on the part of every single member against the original instinctual tendency for us to enclose ourselves protectively and conservatively within our own community or egos; and, often, even extra personal effort has not been enough to achieve significant and durable dilations in our sense of moral obligation. It is only when mystics (or “geniuses of the will”, “moral heroes”) are around us, pervading all society with the force of their charisma and personality, operating as “wave-guides” for everyone else’s moral courage by engendering in us the open attitude of an indiscriminate love, that a sufficient number of souls find the confidence and courage to take action for a maximally capacious society, despite opposition from the old, closed way of life. Only in this way will everyone’s sense of moral obligation remain dilated consistently enough, and their actions be potent and successful often enough, that Bergson’s ideal open society may be impressively approximated by Rorty’s actualized liberal utopian dream. Only through moral heroes is our sense of moral obligation able to sustain any additional concentric layers *even in times of hardship*, and a new form of society born. These moral heroes draw us after them by their own example, spreading the creative emotion of the open society to all, and attracting others to their cause, thereby instigating the most challenging moral transformations in our habits of action, *including our habits of reading literature*, helping us to get beyond merely rhetorical transformations. So, if my argument is successful, then even the progressive moral expansions of Rorty’s vaunted liberal gradualism would depend on the more sophisticated moral dynamics described in Bergson’s *Two Sources*.

Rorty essentially agrees with Charles Cooley and George Herbert Mead's conception of the self as a socially conditioned creation of the society to which it belongs (CIS 63-64): the self instinctually picks up the language and habits of the society it is born into; a society's language and habits are the tools with which the individual will construct and negotiate her own life and interpersonal relations, and with which the individual co-operates with other individuals for the preservation and benefit of society as a whole, for the continuance of *their community's* way of life. In this way, the individual and society form a single, interdependent social reality. This is why Rorty simply calls morality "the voice of ourselves as members of a community, speakers of a common language" (CIS 59); and, why he follows Oakeshott in thinking of society as "a band of eccentrics collaborating for purposes of mutual protection." (CIS 59) The need for mutual protection helps to explain why it is easier to identify with those from our own community than it is with those from outside it, why "our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as one of us, where us means something smaller and more local than the human race." (CIS 191) All of these points are summarized nicely by Wilfrid Sellars' claim, which Rorty endorses several times throughout *Contingency*, that morality is just a "matter of we-intentions, [and] the core meaning of an immoral action is, on this account, the sort of thing *we* don't do." (CIS 59)

In Rorty's philosophy, there is no analog to Bergson's creative emotion of the open society; Rorty's view is "incompatible with this universal attitude." (CIS 191) Nevertheless, Rorty's specific conception of the relation between the self, the community, and language is how Bergson characterizes the closed society, where it is

impossible to say whether the individual lives for society, or society for the individual (TSMR 37); both are self-centered, with language connecting each to the other. Bergson says: “It [i.e., moral obligation] is a virtual instinct, like that which lies behind the habits of speech. The morality of a human society may indeed be compared to its language.” (TSMR 28) In the context of this quote, Bergson is comparing the kind of commitment ants exhibit to their society to the kind that humans exhibit to theirs. Ant-behavior is coordinated by communication between members of an ant colony, and all communicative signs are given by nature through an instinct. Humans have a similar instinct of communication, but our signs are not fixed since they are creative and variable products of human intelligence; this non-fixity indicates signs of a completely different order than that of ants. Nevertheless, though the “habits of speech” be variable, the tendency to inculcate and follow *some* set of society-preserving habits of communication is as necessary to human survival as it is to ants, and was therefore likewise furnished by nature. The indefinite variability in the forms of our habits (including those of speech) is why Bergson says that our moral obligation is merely a “virtual” instinct, since this “obligation” is fixed in its forms of behavior in other species and is therefore more properly described as instinct. So, human societies exert a pressure on the individuals that comprise them to follow the local social habits (TSMR 55), all of the “local categorical imperatives” (to use Aldous Huxley’s way of putting this point), which is biologically analogous in its function to the unquestionable instinctual pressure that governs an ant’s behavior. So, like Rorty, Bergson thinks we are passively socialized according to the habits and customs that characterize our particular society: “Every instant we have to choose, and we naturally decide on what is in keeping with the rule. We are hardly

conscious of this; there is no effort... obedience to duty... is a form of non-exertion, passive acquiescence.” (TSMR 19) And, for Bergson, as much for Rorty, the “virtually” instinctual moral obligation in humans has for its primary and original aim the preservation of the particular society they belong to: “Who can help seeing that social cohesion is largely due to the necessity for a community to protect itself against others, and that it is primarily as against all other men that we love the men with whom we live? Such is the primitive instinct.” (TSMR 33) The difference between them is that, for Rorty, *there are only closed societies* and *their* survival concerns (which of course include the concerns of individual members), whereas for Bergson, there is another source of morality in addition, a creative emotion of the open society.

In the process of war, or any other form of sociocultural conflict for that matter, closed communities conquer other closed communities, and moralities succeed other moralities as the language of the conquerors is imposed, more or less successfully, on the conquered. Rorty puts this point as follows: “Socialization, to repeat, goes all the way down, and who gets to do the socializing is often a matter of who manages to kill whom first.” (CIS 185) Presumably, this is because the killers will be in a position to control or at least heavily influence what exactly socialization will consist in for the next generation, since, after killing or dispersing the former authorities, they will control much of the means of socialization. For Rorty, the authority figures of whatever society a maturing individual belongs to are the agents of socialization, of which the maturing individual is usually a more or less passive patient: “There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them – their ability to use language, and thereby to exchange beliefs and desires with other people.” (CIS 177) These beliefs and desires are

going to be mostly informed by the concerns of the community to which an individual belongs, with some selfish ones permitted alongside these, so long as they do not destabilize society too much. Socialization, then, for Rorty, is more often than not, a passive process, governed more or less completely by the authorities of the community in which individuals find themselves. If it wasn't, Rorty would not be worried with Orwell in *1984* that “the same developments which made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible.” (CIS 175) Their worry is that, if the wrong people get into power, then they could socialize Orwell and Rorty's idea of social hope completely out of existence, thereby creating a terminally dystopian society (from their perspective) in which Orwell's Winston Smith's occurrence appears to other members (e.g., O'Brien) as a bizarre political atavism that no one has the ability to recognize as valuable anymore. (CIS 183)

It is true that Rorty, like Bergson, thinks the evolution of language is nevertheless contingent on new inter-subjective agreements on the meanings of metaphors that exceptional individuals occasionally cobble together from previously existing linguistic elements; so, there is always some leeway for cultural evolution from individual innovation. But, such geniuses are rare; and, in order for them to have an effect on society, their new way of talking still has to be first disseminated for mass exposure (to say nothing of its *adoption* and subsequent *translation into action*, which are separate processes). In cases where the metaphor or redescription is taken to have some kind of moral import, the authorities of most communities will usually stifle its dissemination, for these linguistic innovations often entail, or at least endanger them with, the possibility of political displacement should they catch on in the populace, and authorities generally

don't like to give up power once acquired. So, even granted language's power of redescription, a power potentially transformative of society and its individuals, the passive socialization of the conventions of a given political authority are still the rule, and revolution (linguistic or otherwise) the exception.

For Rorty, ideally, liberal societies would prove to be exceptions to the general rule of authorities being seduced by their own power to control socialization, for, though these ideal liberal societies are as much contingent products of history as any other form of society, they would be “content to call ‘true (or ‘right’ or ‘just’) whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter.” (CIS 67) So, even the metaphors and redescriptions most challenging to the extant forms of morality and socialization in a given liberal society would get a fair shot at adoption in the ideal liberal society, where free speech would be amongst the most prized liberties. Even so, it seems that, for Rorty, socialization becomes passive again just as soon as the new metaphors become “dead,” or literalized, even in these most ideal liberal societies. And, *Rorty does nothing to explain the process of the adoption of the new metaphors or re-descriptions which are supposed to specifically effect expansions in our sense of moral obligation to, and treatment of, others.* There is no explanatory account of the instances of linguistic adoption which specifically make up the progressive moral steps of his own liberal gradualism; the *actual expansions* in our sense of moral obligation are never accounted for. He insists, again and again, that they *just happen*; they are as “contingent as a comet or a virus.” (CIS 183) In my opinion, this is the source of the most trenchant criticism of Rorty's proposal to effect a maximally capacious society through literary exposures; for exposure does not ensure a “gestalt-switch”, and

still less does it ensure *actions* worthy of the new liberal rhetoric. The important question for Bergson in the *Two Sources* is: on what are actual social and moral transformations towards the open contingent? The criticism is simply that Rorty does not seem to appreciate how hard it is, for many, to actually live the liberal lifestyle. I'm now going to develop this critique of Rorty in more detail, before attempting to show how Bergson's metaphysics of the creative emotion can help to address it, such that Rorty's proposal will become even more cogent for an audience than before the encounter with Bergson that is the objective of this thesis.

Rorty's liberal utopia, his idea of moral progress, involves effecting "the inclusion among us of the family in the next cave, then of the tribe across the river, then of the tribal confederation beyond the mountains, then of the unbelievers beyond the seas (and perhaps last of all the menials who, all this time, have been doing our dirty work)." He thinks that "We should stay on the lookout for marginalized people – people whom we still instinctively think of as they rather than us." (CIS 196) That's where reading literature comes in; Rorty thinks it's the best way to stay on the lookout for marginalized people whose suffering we were previously unaware of. The job of putting "their" story into "our" language, so that we can recognize them as members of a common moral community, "is going to have to be done for them by somebody else. The liberal novelist, poet, or journalist is good at that. The liberal theorist is usually not." (CIS 94) It's important to note that Rorty thinks that narrative forms featuring "thick, personal, descriptions" do allow us to reflect on the plight of the "other," but they "will not produce a *reason to care* about suffering. What matters for the liberal ironist is not finding such a reason but making sure that she notices suffering when it occurs." (CIS 93)

Presumably, this is because her enculturation was liberal from the get-go; she doesn't need to find a reason to care about suffering because she is apparently already in the unthinking, socially inculcated habit of doing so.

One may well ask: what is the great moral worth of merely noticing, of merely being a *spectator*, to cruelty and suffering? Isn't this *worse* than just being ignorant? Nevertheless, the imaginative ability to identify with "others" not already like "us" through thick, personal descriptions, the liberal ironist's special sort of moral know-how, is a local, contingent, and recently acquired ability, "associated primarily with Europe and America in the last three hundred years." (CIS 93) It is this kind of know-how that Rorty thinks will allow us to build a liberal utopia. However, if one wasn't already socialized a liberal, or if one does not already somehow have a liberal inclination, then it is far less likely that one will develop this know-how; so, in this case, one is probably not going to find a reason to care about suffering, for one may have already found reasons to enjoy suffering (e.g., masochistic or sadistic reasons), or perhaps one will just be indifferent to it, or maybe, like Nabokov, find it aesthetically offensive. So, while it is probably true, as Rorty thinks, that the most effective way of getting people to empathize with others is to get them to read thick, personal descriptions of people who are oblivious to the suffering of others (CIS 165), this can only be effective *for those readers who are already liberals* in Rorty's sense of the term, those readers for whom "cruelty is the worst thing that we can do." This is where we see who exactly Rorty's audience is: people who are already liberals; or, people who at least *think* they are already liberals (e.g., Dickens' Mrs. Jellyby from *Bleak House*).

The question of efficacy immediately arises: what makes Rorty think this will work? Rorty does nothing to motivate *why* liberals should constantly make the extra effort to make the experiment, to constantly be open to the possibility that the “other” may be suffering: he seems to think it just happens after a certain sort of contingent socialization. He also seems to think noticing suffering will effect preventative action, that it will translate into *lived* liberalism. In harping on Rorty’s reluctance to explain the mechanics of his project of liberal social reformation by literary exposures, I am *not* making an essentialist philosopher’s demand for a metaphysical or religious justification of liberalism’s superior moral value to other social formations – that’s not what’s at stake. I am merely pointing out that a metaphysical or religious explanation (especially one publicly endorsed by an active and charismatic moral hero like Martin Luther King, for example) would make Rorty’s project more cogent and attractive for Rorty’s own audience, who are (at least nominally) already liberals, and therefore already convinced of liberalism’s value.

Bergson thought that intelligent beings capable of improvising original actions as potential solutions to survival (or social) problems are also obliged to confront the intimidating possibility of their failure. (TSMR 140) What prevents this depressing possibility from being debilitating for us are reasons to believe that our actions will be successful. Unlikely actions which no one has pulled off before (e.g., building an indefinitely capacious liberal utopia by successive literary exposures) are especially intimidating. Metaphysical or religious reasons work well for the latter sort of potential actions because our usual sources of confidence are barren in their case: previous experience of such attempts is either depressing or non-existent, and, try as it might, an

intelligence left by itself cannot find much reason to hope for success with endeavors so risky. This is why Bergson tells us that metaphysical/religious belief “means essentially confidence.” (TSMR 152) It is “a reaction against fear.” (TSMR 153) From this purely pragmatic perspective, it doesn’t even matter so much whether the metaphysical or religious explanatory story we tell ourselves is necessarily “true” or not.⁸ The only thing it has to do is grant us the confidence to act; this is one of the myth-making faculty’s original biological functions. (TSMR 140)

Of course, Bergson recognizes that, today, such explanatory stories should be logically consistent, and, if possible, compatible with scientific observation (TSMR 23, 312-13); this is because, starting from the time of the Greeks, and especially after the Enlightenment, reason has gradually become a more and more powerful regulator of our action (and superstition less and less so), so the story had better be a good one by reason’s lights if it’s going to be able to lend us any confidence. If Bergson is right, then intelligence’s self-doubt is the source of the “deep, incurable metaphysical need” that Isaiah Berlin and Rorty think societies must jettison before being entitled to the descriptor “civilized.” (CIS 46) For Rorty, a morally *mature* society would be able to make confident and consistent social progress without any metaphysical comfort whatsoever. Bergson, on the other hand, thinks that civilization has only been built on the

⁸ William James makes this same point in *Pragmatism*, lecture VIII: “we cannot reject any hypothesis if consequences useful to life flow from it. Universal conceptions, as things to take account of, may be as real for pragmatism as particular sensations are. They indeed have no meaning if they have no use. But if they have any use they must have that amount of meaning. And the meaning will be true if the use squares well with life’s other uses.” (William James, *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 131, hereafter P)

confidence that metaphysical belief lends incorrigibly insecure human intelligence:⁹ the source of the Bergsonian moral hero's action-enabling courage and indefatigable social hope is his faith. As we will see, mystics are exceptional, privileged souls who are able to glean from quotidian experience enough faith to perform amazing acts of moral courage. These acts inspire a similar courage to act in others. I will argue in the conclusion that Rorty's recommendation that "society should aim at curing us of our 'deep, metaphysical need'" (CIS 46) is potentially dangerous to social progress since, for Bergson, the need is "incurable" precisely because it is so vital.

Assuming for a moment that, for the sake of his project's practicality, he should want to explain why liberals *should act* the way his maximally capacious utopia requires and why they really *should cultivate* the kind of know-how which makes them culturally distinctive, Rorty, being the anti-metaphysician he is, only has recourse to the social dynamics of closed societies from which to draw his explanations. So, it's very easy for a reader of *Contingency* to conclude that Rorty assumes a liberal socialization (including a liberal habit of reading literature) is effected exclusively by the social pressure characteristic of closed societies. But, Bergson thought that the kind of know-how that liberals are required to constantly develop and exercise, the kind that Rorty calls on every liberal to cultivate and use, is fundamentally different from behavior resulting from the social pressure exerted by a closed society. By the conservative rationale of closed societies, it's very hard to come up with any reasons whatsoever why liberals should read literature the way Rorty wants, since closed societies and their members are concerned

⁹ And, on this point, I agree with James that the historical litmus test seems to read in Bergson's favor: "the use of the Absolute is proved by the whole course of men's religious history." (P 131)

exclusively with self-preservation, not the expansion of moral obligation. Bergson thought the liberal lifestyle required much more effort and courage than what the passively followed lifestyles of the closed society require; and, he acknowledged that the liberal lifestyle was therefore far more *unlikely* and *difficult* than the less artificial ethological alternatives which come more naturally to us.

Now, Rorty was aware that many would be skeptical about his project for literature. Consider this exchange between literary critic E.P. Ragg and Rorty in an interview featured in *Philosophy and Literature* from 2002:

ER: One of the arguments in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* is that reading books encourages empathy: that we can empathize through the solidarity of imagining other people's pain. Books are supposed to do this. But isn't that position rather idealistic? Wouldn't a pragmatist happily concede that literary, or any linguistic communication, depends upon the intersection of vocabularies, on reaching "inter- subjective agreement," and that, as ironists, we can't be sure whether or not vocabularies will fulfill such useful purposes as being able to empathize? After all, the ironist you describe in *Contingency* needs to read as many books as possible to optimize the possibility of consensus, but knows that we cannot answer the Nazis by getting them to read Anne Frank.

RR: We can't be sure, but we know that it's happened in the past. We know of the effect that Dickens, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Orwell, and others, have had on the way we think about politics and contemporary social issues. I think that the fact you need intersubjective agreement is perfectly compatible with the fact that a whole lot of people can suddenly undergo a gestalt switch as a result of reading a novel. ...

ER: But wouldn't you say that one of the things literature can do is to question the ability of language to perform useful communication? Doesn't literature point up the limitations of the marks and scratches human beings transact? Or does that sound too de Manian? I am thinking of what Richard Poirier calls the "illusion of literature's resourcefulness" and the misguided notion in Humanities teaching that, again, reading books will make us better people.

RR: I think they often have made us better people. I can't see why Poirier

thinks it's an illusion. It doesn't always work, but it isn't that we have many better tools. So we might as well use the tools we have.¹⁰

Ragg's worry is that Rorty's hope is "idealistic" because, apparently, there's no reliable way to *ensure* that literary exposures will increase the sensitivity of conscience in a readership; or, that increased sensitivity of conscience will lead to increased sensitivity in conduct. Just because a whole lot of people can "suddenly undergo a gestalt switch as a result of reading certain books" does not mean they will. Furthermore, this initial worry is compounded by the de Manian thought that owing to the indefinite interpretability of literary texts,¹¹ the hope of arriving at Rorty's ideal use of literary exposures is further away than ever: given the vast number of interpretations possible, how are we to know that the reader will arrive at the most socially useful interpretation of *Bleak House*? For example, what prevents more Nabokovian purely aesthetic interpretations and evaluations of Dickens from occurring and being privileged over Rortian readings? Will insisting on the social value of certain interpretations of literary works be enough to get us a readership worthy of a liberal utopia? Isn't this a case of special pleading on Rorty's part? And, even if it is occasionally effective, we could be waiting a long time for the project to bear fruit, if it's true that, as Rorty says, "we can't be sure, but we know it has

¹⁰ Richard Rorty. E. P. Ragg. "Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An Interview with Richard Rorty," *Philosophy and Literature*, 26, 2 (October 2002), p. 372.

¹¹ Speaking of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, de Man says: "The structure of the text is not one of question and answer, but of a question whose meaning as question, is effaced from the moment it is asked. The answer to the question is another question, asking what and why one asked, and thus receding ever further from the original query. This movement of effacing and forgetting becomes prominent in the text, and dispels any illusion of dialectical progress or regress... the text becomes the successive and cumulative experience of these tangles of meaning and of figuration." Paul De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 98-99.

happened in the past.” So, is it a reliable form of change? Maybe Rorty’s gradualism will take so long that closed societies will tear each other to pieces, or deplete all the resources on the planet, or cause an ecological catastrophe by some other means, before they can grow into the global polity Rorty envisions, the “great human adventure, one carried out on a global scale.”¹² In short, how do we know Rorty’s proposal would ever work? Just because something has happened in the past does not mean it will reoccur in the future, especially on the mass scale required to avert the imminent disasters that now loom before our global civilization. If we don’t know it would work, if we have little confidence in its possibility, why should we take the risks, and make the exhaustive effort to try it by ourselves? Better to just take care of our own, and “be” a liberal only when circumstances make it convenient.

I outline these doubts in an admittedly facile manner not because Rorty does nothing to address them (since he has said something about most of these), but rather as an illustration of the kind of fears and concerns that I think deflate socially expansive, liberal efforts in Rorty’s readership *even despite Rorty’s counterarguments*. Bergson thought that doubts like these cripple action, and therefore paralyze efforts to create the open society. Where Rorty’s project is concerned, intelligent reflection, far from augmenting confidence, actually intensifies insecurity. Writing of a nascent liberal wrestling with these questions and fears, Bergson tells us that

a generous nature, eager to sacrifice itself, experiences a sudden chill at the idea that it is working “for mankind.” The object is too vast, the effect too diffuse. We may therefore conjecture that if a love of humanity constitutes this morality [i.e., the morality of the open society, the feeling of its creative emotion], it constitutes it in much the same way as the intention of reaching a

¹² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1999), p. 239, hereafter PSH.

certain point implies the necessity of crossing an intervening space. In one sense it is the same thing; in another sense it is something entirely different. If we think only of the interval and the various points, infinite in number, which we still have to pass one by one, we shall be discouraged from starting, like Zeno's arrow, and besides there would be no object, no inducement. (TSMR 36-7)

I think it is this kind of discouragement that the majority of readers of Rorty's *Contingency* remain debilitated by, even after they get to the conclusion. And I don't think any amount of counterarguments or countervailing insistence will turn the majority of Rorty's readers around from being petrified by it, because *it's not a job philosophy can do*. My argument is simply that, as Bergson indicates in this passage, upon reflection, our own efforts seem too small and inconsistent in proportion to the scale of the social problems they are supposed to address, and the number of "intervals" (or obstacles) can seem too great to overcome, and more can be thought up all the time by someone without any enthusiasm to muster the effort for the experiment or the courage to take its risk (e.g., Nabokov), so that every counter-argument offered by Rorty's camp can be countered by a philosopher from the opposing camp, and the whole endeavor is therefore taken to be irredeemably hopeless. In short, too many people, even people who call themselves liberals, lack real social hope. But Rorty's utopia will never get off the ground if it cannot first obtain some sort of activating traction, some active force of attraction, in his readership.

Rorty knew as well as Bergson that mere insistence or special pleading is not enough to get a readership to act in a manner worthy of a liberal utopia. As Ragg pointed out in the exchange I quoted above, Rorty was aware that it is probably unlikely that a full-fledged Nazi will suddenly grow repentant after reading Anne Frank's diary, though

I do want to insist, at the same time, that stranger things have happened.¹³ Rorty's realization is an echo of the Bergsonian observations that the "teachers of the young know full well that you cannot prevail over egoism by recommending 'altruism'" (TSMR 36); and, that, speaking of those without social hope, "no amount of speculation will create a [moral] obligation or anything like it; the theory may be very fine, I will always be able to say that I will not accept it, and even if I do accept it, I shall claim to be free and do as I please." (TSMR 48) So, one could even be socialized as a liberal, and still claim, with Nabokov, that one will read *Bleak House* however one pleases, for whatever purpose one pleases, and leave it at that. One can force children to read Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, or something like it, in the hopes that these children will then be able to better empathize with colonized peoples, and those children could even get *As* on their book reports, but children are forced to do all sorts of homework they are not really invested in, and from which they do not end up taking much meaning. Furthermore, what if a child in that class has a (racist) father like Derek's from *American History X*? The basically closed formation of society that we have inherited still has a lot of historical inertia, a lot of probative social clout already going for it, which can be very intimidating for potential proselytes, and which must somehow be overcome in the process of transitioning to a more open society.

¹³ Rorty says we should give up the idea that "liberalism could be justified, and Nazi or Marxist enemies of liberalism refuted, by driving the latter up against some argumentative wall – forcing them to admit that liberal freedom has a "moral privilege" which their own values lacked." (CIS 53) There is no non-circular way to philosophically justify liberalism's moral value over other sorts of political views. The best we can do, Rorty thinks, is have a conversation about why we disagree with them if they are willing to talk, maybe expose them to some choice literature that seems to be good for our idea of social reformation, and hope for the best while not really expecting it.

However, though Rorty and Bergson agree they may be unlikely, and despite the challenges posed to their emergence, proselytes *do*, on occasion, occur. By proselyte, in the context of my argument, I simply mean someone who has moved from merely self-identifying as a liberal *to really acting as a liberal*. In even rarer instances, by whatever conflux of contingent circumstances, when enough of these proselytes are born at once, we get a revolution. I think that Bergson offers a very good description of this process of mass proselytization, or, put in Rortian terms, Bergson offers a very good description of how a lot of people can remain open to, and come to adopt and act on, a new metaphor or redescription even when it is unfashionable, unconventional, or even *dangerous* to do so. Mass proselytization almost always involves the presence of a mystic, or moral hero, as its proximate cause. This amounts to saying that, without impressive historical precedents of moral heroes who really stuck their necks out, people like Martin Luther King for example, works of art like *Annie John*, or *American History X*, would not have found enough audience members willing to make the experiment of facing up to the cruelty depicted in them (i.e., the experiment Nabokov was so terrified by), and they therefore would have had no use as tools in the pedagogy of social reformation. Put another way, this amounts to saying that Rorty's gradualism is dependent on irruptions of what Bergson in *The Two Sources* essentially described as radical activism by brave, inspired individuals; for Bergson thinks it is "futile to maintain that it [i.e., a sense of universal justice] takes place gradually and automatically, as a consequence of the state of mind of society at a given period of its history. It is a leap forward, which can take place only if society has decided to try the experiment; and the experiment will not be tried unless society has allowed itself to be won over, or at least stirred. Now the first [i.e., the leap]

has always been given by someone. [i.e., a mystic].” (TSMR 74) If the Bergsonian claim is true that such primary activism is funded by an infectious, creative emotion of the open society, then this emotion, or something very much like it, would form a metaphysical undercurrent coursing through Rorty’s liberal gradualism.

I construe Rorty’s liberal (i.e., someone who thinks cruelty is the worst thing we can do) as one who goes a long way to approximating Bergson’s conception of the mystic. I think this helps make plain the difference in the degree of personal effort required to live the liberal lifestyle (even including reading books the way Rorty requires for his liberal utopia as a part of this lifestyle) compared to living a “closed lifestyle.” I will show what I mean by a “closed lifestyle” by reference to Rorty’s reading of Nabokov, and Dickens’ Mrs. Jellyby, and, lastly, to someone whose soul is on the verge of opening without quite managing it yet. I’m then going to show how the presence of a mystic, or some other sort of moral hero, operates as a “wave-guide” for the cultivation of the creative emotion of the open society in the rest of us.

Bergson characterizes the attitude of the open soul, of the mystic, as one of infinite charity, a charity that “would persist in him who possesses ‘charity’, though there be no other living creature on earth.” (TSMR 38) And, looking at the lives of the mystics, one gets “an impression of coincidence, real or imagined, with the generative effort of life.” (TSMR 54) This “impression of coincidence” needs some explanation. Bergson thinks life is a force immanent in matter that “wrests from it what it can” (TSMR 209), which is just an accumulation of potential energy (CE 115), in order to “graft” the largest possible degree of indetermination onto the necessity of physical forces. (CE 114) Life does this by organizing matter into instruments, creating and using them in one and the

same movement, as “an invisible hand plunging into iron filings” organizes relations of amazing complexity in a single gesture. In this way, life’s organization (i.e., the processes of cellular differentiation leading to the diverse structures of the body) of an organ is “but a number of obstacles overcome... to secure an uninterrupted channel for the functioning of the faculty.” (TSMR 54) Now, mystics are ascetics; their love of contemplation means they have little time for material pleasures. They don’t feel material needs or think of material obstacles as being as insurmountable as the rest of us do; and, since they are also instrumental in evolving a new formation of society (i.e., the open), Bergson asks us: “is it surprising that a soul which no more recognizes any material obstacles should feel itself, rightly or wrongly, at one with the principle of life?” (TSMR 54) His idea is that, owing to their undaunted attitude towards the practical material limits human beings face, mystics secure an “uninterrupted channel” for the formation of the open society, as the process of cellular differentiation secures an organ’s faculty. If everyone reduces their material dependence and consumption like a mystic, and if everyone becomes preoccupied with the mystic’s vision of an open society and the world’s deep inherent beauty, then there will be a lot less reason to fight with each other, or for societies to war with each other. Between their indiscriminate charity for all existence and their “feeling of oneness with the life force,” or *élan vital* (TSMR 250), I take Bergson to be claiming that the mystic feels a sense of moral obligation for nothing short of existence as such: the mystic’s is the most far-reaching sort of animism, where everything deserves our attention and contemplation, nothing is neglected and everything is terribly interesting; theirs is a “love that extends to all nature.” (TSMR 38) So, they live in a constant state of ecstatic appreciation and wonder. This claim on the scope of the mystic’s sense of moral

obligation is prefigured by Bergson's cosmology in *Creative Evolution*, where he suggests that there is "a duration immanent to the whole of the universe." (CE 11); and, that this "Whole progresses [i.e., is a universal becoming]... it may be in the manner of a consciousness." (CE 10)¹⁴ On my reading, mystics are absorbed in the attempt to spiritually connect with such ontological possibilities, though they may call it God depending on where they are from and what epoch. This would make Bergson's an early attempt to sketch out what David Brooks calls "neural Buddhism," a term used to describe the belief-system of someone who thinks that mysticism and science are complementary pursuits, not adversarial.¹⁵ Since they have managed to love everything, and care about the evolution of everything, mystics get their love of humanity "for free," as it were. But it's hard enough to cultivate this kind of caring and interest just for humanity; and, this is only one of the requisites to be a "moral hero" – the other is *action*.

There is a final stage of mysticism that Bergson thinks only the Christian mystics have consistently attained; this is the stage of action, beyond mere contemplation, actions that help to create a more open society than previously existed. (TSMR 227) There is no heroism without action. A moral hero is someone who has made a habit of spending himself on the tremendous effort against the tribal and selfish tendencies of the closed

¹⁴ I think that Arthur Mitchell's translation of *Creative Evolution* is imprecise here. In English, "whole" implies completeness, as if describing something that has finished becoming. This is the opposite of Bergson's conception of the universe. In the French original, Bergson uses, and capitalizes, the *indefinite* adjective "tout," which translates roughly into the English "all." If Bergson had wanted to describe the universe as being the "whole," he would have better used something like the definite French adjective "entier." Here is the French original for the reader's comparison: "le Tout... progresse peut-être à la manière d'une conscience?" Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice* (Bibliothèque de Philosophie contemporaine: Presses Universitaires de France, 1941), p. 10.

¹⁵ David Brooks. "The Neural Buddhists." *The New York Times* 13 May 2008. Op-ed.

society, such that he is perpetually aware of the potential for cruelty both in himself and others, and who then *works ceaselessly* to minimize this cruelty (e.g., St. Francis of Assisi). So, by Rortian standards, these “geniuses of the will” are *extremely* proficient liberals, masters of liberalism’s special sort of moral know-how, and natural, fluid *practitioners* besides. However, as Bergson remarks, the lifestyle of the mystic is too tough for many; it would probably break most people:

In defining mysticism by its relation to the vital impetus, we have implicitly admitted that true mysticism is rare... If all men, if any large number of men, could have soared as high as this privileged man, nature would not have stopped at the human species [i.e., nature would have just actualized the open society when we became a species], for such a one is in fact more than a man... Mysticism reveals, or rather, would reveal to us, if we actually willed it, a marvelous prospect: we do not, and in most cases we could not, will it; we should collapse under the strain. (TSMR 213-14)

What kind of “marvelous prospect” is Bergson referring to here? Presumably, some near approximation of the open society. Probably it would look something like this sketch of a society from Rorty:

We should raise our children to find it intolerable that we who sit behind desks and punch keyboards are paid ten times as much as people who get their hands dirty cleaning our toilets, and a hundred times as much as those who fabricate our keyboards in the Third World. We should ensure that they worry about the fact that the countries which industrialized first have a hundred times the wealth of those which have not yet industrialized. Our children need to learn early on to see the inequalities between their own fortunes and those of other children as neither the will of God nor the necessary price for economic efficiency, but as an evitable tragedy. (PSH 203)

Here, Rorty is recommending some really radical changes in our habits of thought and action. The problem, obviously, is that actually living this way, averting the “evitable tragedy”, is a massive psychological and practical undertaking. The kind of perpetual Socratic self-interrogation Rorty seems to require from your average self-proclaimed

liberal growing up means that he must face up to the crushing ethical weight each and every one of his actions has in the world, he must pursue every externality caused by his internalities (i.e., his inculcated habits of action) down to the last etiological detail. And, while doing this, he must also stay on top of how the tendencies of the closed society in himself are adapting to the changes made towards the open society; for example, what good is a movement to “go green” if it is commandeered by marketing strategists to pursue more unethical and unsustainable economic practices? In short, if it only intensifies those tendencies of capitalism most dangerous to Rorty’s liberal utopia? The harsh truth is that *there is no way* to “ensure” (to use Rorty’s word) one’s children will turn out to be good liberals, that they will worry about the same things Rorty does, because it’s not a matter of simply instinctually programming them with the appropriate liberal values. Parents worry whether their children will turn out to be “good” or not precisely because they know they are not in complete control, and that it is actually up to the child, in each and every case, to make the choice to muster the individual effort necessary to live the liberal lifestyle and grow up to avoid all the trappings of conservatism, *even when it is most difficult to do so*.

I think the mistake that Rorty makes which Bergson brings out is that this shift in the attitude of our souls from the closed to the open is not a matter of mere socialization; it is a matter of willfully choosing to constantly efface, as nearly as possible, all the natural social instincts in us throughout the whole relevant portion of our ontogeny. But mystics *live* this sort of effort as a matter of their privileged course, since their soul has

already obtained this attitude by “connecting to God”;¹⁶ their society, if they have one, is the evolving universe, and they do not really “belong” to themselves, so they fear nothing risking themselves in radical activism – from their perspective, it is probably not even radical, or exceptional; it is just the thing to be done, part of their “flow of life.” Mystics think of themselves as instruments of God, or, what is the same thing for Bergson, a force of evolution creative of an open society, so that it is actually God (a.k.a. creative evolution) who acts through them for the actualization of this “marvelous prospect”, and they therefore never feel hopelessly limited by their energies, or pessimistic and alone in their activity. (TSMR 231-32) This attitude makes them resilient to physical and emotional fatigue, simple-minded but canny, very daring, open to change, and yet humble and focused on their goal, all at the same time. (TSMR 228) Crucially, it also means their social hope is indefatigable.

It is the constant strain which accompanies the effort to approximate the Christian mystic’s state that distinguishes the liberal lifestyle from the instinctual, “passively acquiesced to” lifestyles of closed societies. It seems that, to use Bergsonian terms, Rorty wants to use the instinctual socialization of the closed society to create a society worthy of being called open; that’s how Rorty wants us to “keep trying to expand our sense of us as far as we can.” (CIS 196) But Bergson thought this is impossible, because instinctual pressure is very different from the emotional impetus creative of the open society:

in reality, the family group and the social group are the only ones ordained by nature... [the social instinct] may chance to overflow and to operate with a

¹⁶ Whether this connection be real or imagined is less important than the practical effect its belief has in those who hold it. Bergson does not need to require or presuppose anything about the truth of this connection for his point to be taken that mystics do not struggle with instinctual closed-mindedness because of the strength of this particular belief they all share.

luxury value beyond its natural frontiers, it will never go very far... The mystic love of humanity is a very different thing. It is not the extension of an instinct, it does not originate in an idea. It is neither of the senses nor of the mind. It is of both, implicitly, and is effectively much more. For such a love lies at the root of feeling and reason, as of all other things. (TSMR 234)

For Bergson, love of humankind is not gotten by the extension of an instinct to a wider and wider set of people, as Rorty seems to think; the social instinct and the love of humanity are different in kind. (TSMR 35) The “luxury value” that Bergson speaks of in this quote refers to times when members of a society enjoy an excess of material wealth, so that their entitlement to the liberal label is never really tested by action because they are never squeezed by their circumstances. Bergson equates the mystic’s love of humanity with the creative force of evolution, since this love has for its aim the creation of a new form of society, and societies are products of evolution, as are all other things for him. Speaking of the attitude of the moral hero, who is a conduit for this force of evolution, Bergson tells us: “the second attitude is acquired; it calls for, has always called for, an effort. How comes it that the men who have set the example have found other men to follow them? And what is the power that is in this case the counterpart of social pressure? We have no choice. Beyond instinct and habit there is no direct action on the will except feeling.” (TSMR 39) This feeling is, of course, *love*, the creative emotion of the open society as I described it in the last section, but sometimes it is easier to feel and make the effort to act out of this emotion than it is at other times.¹⁷ During times of war,

¹⁷ In an essay entitled “On Ethnocentrism,” Rorty speaks of those authors specializing in thick, personal description, such as anthropologists and journalists, as sometimes managing to be “agents of love.” (Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 206) This may be true, in certain cases, but the power of attraction these authors are able to emanate pales in comparison to a Martin Luther King, or mahathma Ghandi, or Mata Amma. And, if my argument is successful, then even the writings of Rorty’s “agents of love” are only reliably effective

or scarcity, or under peer pressure when everyone else in the class is cultivating solidarity by picking on one poor soul, it is very difficult to muster the confidence and effort to speak out and take action against injustice; in these instances, liberalism becomes a “luxury” we can no longer afford. It is in the difficult times that “special moral obligations” (as the ethicists call them) tend to emerge in the behavior of a society’s members, even despite a prevailing liberal, humanistic rhetoric, and the scope of our sense of moral obligation shrinks around consanguineous and communal affiliations. As Bergson puts this point:

Oh I know what society says, it has I repeat, its reasons for saying so [i.e., the closed society’s tendencies always aim at self-preservation, whether that be of the individual or society as a whole; these tendencies are antithetical to the ones that characterize the open society], but to know what it thinks and wants, we must not listen too much to what it says, we must look at what it does. It says that the duties it defines are indeed, in principle, duties towards humanity, but that under exceptional circumstances [e.g., war], regrettably unavoidable, they are for the time being, inapplicable. (TSMR 31)

The problem is that war *is* the natural state; Bergson’s sardonic tone here indicates that, in his opinion, it is not an “exceptional circumstance” at all – it is the norm. Yet, to contrast his view with Hobbes’, the grim human situation given from nature is not selfish individual versus selfish individual, but rather society versus society, or, translated into Hobbesian, *leviathan versus leviathan*. So, the mixed nature of actual morality means that the conduct of liberal societies often falls short of the pretensions of their name, when

in the way Rorty would like if a real mystic is around anyway. However, as I intend to show in the conclusion, Rorty is suspicious of the mass mobilizations mystics achieve by their “connection to God,” and of their inability to privatize their religious beliefs. He thinks such charisma, the mystic’s use of love, is, more often than not, dangerous for social progress. I think that’s why Rorty is not able to go quite so far as Bergson in construing love as a metaphysical power of creation and evolution, equivalent to what mystics mean by “God.” By contrast, Bergson thinks it is only by love’s unmitigated “evangelical” force, as it is publicly endorsed and personified by an active moral hero, that society is able to achieve anything like Rorty’s maximally capacious liberal utopia.

circumstances make it too difficult to live the vaunted way of life authentically, as it is proclaimed in various liberal policies (both personal and foreign), and we revert – perhaps, as Bergson thought, we even *devolve* – to the closed way of life once again.

Although it may seem less important by comparison to other, perhaps “grandier” liberal acts (e.g., formulating a constitution), Rorty’s nevertheless *integral* act of reading literature with the open attitude of a liberal ironist is still a very taxing element of the liberal lifestyle, especially in a worried, conservative cultural atmosphere indicated by the prevalence of terms like “the war on terror” or “illegal aliens,” and fears of imminent, planetary ecological catastrophe. Reading a book (to say nothing of going through one’s quotidian routine) while constantly maintaining vigilance for cruelty, both in oneself and others, requires exhausting, exacting attention, directed both inwards and outwards. But, for a genuine liberal, it would be worth doing if Rorty’s claim is true that: “Just insofar as one is preoccupied with building up to one’s private kind of sexual bliss, like Humbert [i.e., the little girl-obsessed protagonist of *Lolita*], or one’s private aesthetic bliss [e.g., Nabokov]... people are likely to suffer still more.” (CIS 164) Rorty thinks this is what happens if we do not direct our attention inwards. If we do not direct our attention outwards, then we will be in danger of not noticing people like Dickens’ Jo’s pain and suffering. In general, for the purpose of living a liberal lifestyle, it is always important to “notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you they are suffering.” (CIS 164)

But what if people are boring? Or what if they just want to complain and are not really interested in helping themselves? What if our own lives are so important and busy that we just don’t have the time or energy to care about theirs? Bergson might say that

questions like these, as well as the need to answer them, are symptomatic of “closed souls,” for they would never occur to those with open souls who do not argue but lead and teach by lived, ascetic example. I’m now going to sketch three different versions of closed souls by their hypothetical moral reactions to someone like Jo’s plight in *Bleak House*. The first is a soul who reads with his ego, the second with her community, and the third is a soul who is in the process of transitioning from the closed to the open attitude but who yet lacks the confidence and courage to act the way he feels he should do inside. All of these variations have in common a concern for self-preservation, and an absence of movement and action for social reformation. My contention is simply that it is easier and therefore more likely for one to read books in one of these three states (since they require less effort and come more naturally to us) than it is with the attitude of an open soul.

Nabokov’s purely aesthetic reading of *Bleak House* which Rorty criticizes in *Contingency* stems from the desire of the individual to outlast death. It came from someone who wanted to go down in history and not be forgotten, and someone who was trying to do Dickens a favor by ensuring his place in the literary canon too; but, more than that, it came from someone who also wanted to tie his “highly unfashionable concern for metaphysical immortality together with the more respectable notion of literary immortality.” (CIS 150) On Rorty’s reading, Nabokov wanted to find some connection between aesthetics and metaphysics, so that he could be comforted in his fear of personal extinction at death: he wanted to somehow buy himself into a real eternal after-life with the aesthetic value of his art. If he could show how Dickens should have gotten in to such an eternity by the aesthetic tingles effected by his art in *Bleak House*, then he could rest easy knowing that (considering himself to possess a genius comparable

to Dickens’) he would be admitted as well. Either way, whether literary or metaphysical, Nabokov wanted to use aesthetic tingles to achieve a sort of immortality, and therefore self-preservation, even if, to a historicist-nominalist like Rorty, one of these outcomes appears more plausible than the other. Both of Nabokov’s concerns with immortality are self-centered. The private pursuit of aesthetic bliss is one thing reading literature is good for, but when it becomes an obsession linked to one’s fear of death, it can prevent one from acknowledging that literature may be used for other purposes as well, like imaginative identification with the suffering of others. It is hard to be worried about others, Dickens’ Jo for example, when one is worried about oneself so much. Bergson thought that the fear of death was possible only in an intelligent being capable of self-reflection; and, that it has deleterious consequences both for the individual and society. (TSMR 130) If individuals know they will die, then they will become depressed (TSMR 131), and are at greater risk of becoming sociopaths (TSMR 122) or, if not going quite so far, then at least of becoming extremely self-centered; all of which tends to produce a pleasure-obsessed society of “exaggerated comfort and luxury for the few, rather than liberation for all.” (TSMR 309) The religious tendency of human beings, the myth-making faculty, is a solution which nature evolved to deal with this problem that our power of intelligent self-reflection poses. Religion, Bergson tells us, referring to closed or “static” religion, “is a defensive reaction of nature against the representation, by intelligence, of the inevitability of death.” (TSMR 131) Nabokov’s was a curious attempt to retrieve an exaptive use of the myth-making faculty (i.e., aesthetic tingles) for one of its original functions: comfort at the thought of one’s own death.

The second variation of a closed soul is Mrs. Jellyby from *Bleak House*. Her soul is closed because her sense of moral obligation is limited to only those apparent sufferers and victims of cruelty her particular society has deemed it fashionable to notice and address. At first, she seems to be a liberal, wanting to alleviate the supposed suffering of Africans from “Borriboola-Gha”, but it turns out she is only a liberal because of the social credit she gets from other members of her society for yielding to the pressure they impose on her to follow *their* habits: in Mrs. Jellyby’s London, being a “telescopic philanthropist” is part of fitting in with a particular clique. As Richard, one of the protagonists, observes upon meeting her, one of her own dirty, unkempt, and uneducated children was falling down a whole flight of stairs while her face “reflected no uneasiness” and her eyes “could see nothing nearer than Africa.” (BH 32) She says importantly that “her work involves [her in] correspondence with public bodies, and with private individuals anxious for the welfare of their species all over the country.” Together, they hope to have “two hundred healthy [English] families cultivating coffee and educating the natives.” (BH 33) These are her reasons for telling Esther (another young protagonist) how gratifying her work is; and then she wonders that Esther never thought of “turning her own eyes to Africa.” (BH 33) Esther is surprised at the question because she is a rural girl, socially inexperienced and ingenuous, and because she knows that Mrs. Jellyby *already knows* she has no idea of Africa; she doesn’t understand that, by this interjection, Mrs. Jellyby is trying to figure out whether Esther belongs or wants to belong in the philanthropic clique, she doesn’t realize that it’s actually a *probe*. Mrs. Jellyby has eyes and ears for Africa, and even converses about the “Brotherhood of Humanity” with Mr. Quale (a fellow philanthropist) (BH 36), but is completely oblivious to the squalor

surrounding her, even when it includes her own children. Evidently, she morally identifies with London high society more strongly than she does with her own family; probably, this is because her ego is better gratified by being included in the former social group than it is in the latter, perhaps since the former is of greater socioeconomic standing than the latter. In any case her moral development apparently features this peculiar idiosyncrasy: her sense of moral obligation (indirectly) expanded horizontally (i.e., by including some Africans), but not vertically (i.e., since she ignores all deprivation within her own community). Were she to read about someone like Jo, or pass him in the street for that matter, he would not register on her moral radar: street urchins aren't exotic enough to be worth saving in her moral community; she could do something for him but, from her perspective, there is no point, no gain in social status. She only sees what is useful for her to see. Bergson might describe her moral filter as being "ideo-motory" (TSMR 211), that is to say, this filter is activated upon exposure to certain forms or representations, but totally misses others (e.g., Jo). Each society filters moral obligation like this in its members. The filter is designed to help others like "us", because such noticings help our society survive and cohere, besides endearing us to the rest of our herd. But this is why such filters indicate a "closed soul," one whose sense of moral obligation is limited; their obligation to appreciate what is going on around them always stops somewhere this side of the unlimited. By contrast, the attitude of the open soul is a constant movement: mystics have no filter, they are indiscriminate in their registration and appreciation of experience. This is one of the reasons why Bergson says "between the first morality and the second, lies the whole distance between repose and movement." (TSMR 58) Unlike the open, the closed soul always hits some stopping point in its sense

of moral obligation; no matter how wide the circle has been opened, it has stopped dilating. Mrs. Jellyby is someone whose sense of moral obligation has expanded *indirectly* to incorporate Africans, for she seems to be only concerned about Africa insofar as it is the sort of thing that people who would probably call themselves liberals in her society do, but it's not clear that her Africans really need help, and she should be embarrassed to speak of the "Brotherhood of Humanity" and yet maintain such obliviousness to the needs of those closest to her. On my admittedly harsh (yet I hope nonetheless plausible) reading of Mrs. Jellyby, she is a self-satisfied liberal moralist who congratulates herself too soon for being "sufficiently liberal" (a way of speaking that has no meaning from the perspective of an open soul), enjoying the social credit being fashionably moral gets her.

There is one more variation of the closed soul I would like to outline before concluding; I think this sort even comprises the majority of Rorty's readership. If I'm right about this, then that would also make it the most important to address. This is a soul in which the creative emotion of the open society would be stirred to some scintilla at reading of Jo's plight, and yet the emotion remains so weak that it cannot move someone to act on its behalf. In these cases, there is recognition of the feeling, and awareness of the creative project of an open society, so art and moral education have done what they could to open someone's soul, but still there is no action: the agency is not adequate to the calling. Bergson describes this state of the soul as follows:

Loyalty, sacrifice of self, the spirit of renunciation, charity, such are the words we use when we think of these things. But have we, generally speaking, in mind at such times anything more than words? Probably not, and we fully realize this. It is sufficient, we say, that the formula is there; it will take on its full meaning, the idea which is to fill it out will become operative, when the occasion arises. It is true that for many people the occasion will

never arise or the action will be put off till later. With certain people the will does make a feeble start, but so feeble that the slight shock they feel can in fact be attributed to no more than the expansion of social duty broadened and weakened into human duty. (TSMR 36)

Bergson supposes that people (e.g., Rorty) tend to mistakenly take such a pique in their conscience (perhaps brought on by literary exposure to Jo's plight, for example) for a product of the social instinct, when it is, in fact, a small tug from the creative emotion of the open society. So, when they think of what the emotion is tugging them towards (i.e., the love of humanity as such), attributing this emotion to the social instinct usually defuses the soul's opening, since, upon reflection, we find we do not share enough in common with others to trump the special moral obligations we have to people from our own society in times of hardship. We know what the tug of loyalty, self-sacrifice, and charity feels like, and we know the meaning of the words, but still we find we cannot live them. When it is time to act in these ways, we too often become conservatives, too often we are reduced to mere spectators; we hesitate too long, and the moment for action has passed before we have mustered the courage to do the act we would have liked to perform. Leading up to the event we are liberals, but the closer we get to taking the plunge the more apprehensive we become, until we are completely arrested by the time we reach the edge of action. Meanwhile, we can tell ourselves we are liberals easily enough, but we can also put off paying for the title with admirable action indefinitely; and, unless we are constantly being completely honest with ourselves about our failures in this regard (which, as we saw, requires herculean, mystical efforts at self-reflection), "moral interest" for loaning ourselves the liberal label is not going to accumulate, so there would be no incentive and no imperative to pay it off.

We can use the liberal, caring label for free, getting along and bonding with others in our society who likewise use the label (e.g., people like Mrs. Jellyby), and our own consciences are guilt-free so long as we concentrate on the social perks of using this label, and not the question of our right to it. Unlike Mrs. Jellyby and Nabokov, these closed souls *can* actually pick up people like Jo on their moral radars, for reading Dickens has stirred something of the creative emotion of the open society in them, but, and perhaps this is what makes this form of the closed soul worse than the others, they tend to just watch people like Jo extinguish, *knowingly*. That is to say, since we knew the universal obligation when we felt it, we may sometimes, in moments of self-awareness, when we can bear them, come to be ashamed of ourselves for shying away from its action: we knew what we should have done, the brave mystic has given us the example, but, when it really counted, we were morally impotent. In any case, whether we find the strength to admit it to ourselves or not, we have failed.

We failed because we had no confidence that we could deal with the risks involved; we lacked action's requisite *courage*. In trying to help others, we may be hurt ourselves (even merely inconveniencing ourselves is often enough of a deterrent to action), and we suspect we may be alone in our efforts anyway, so there would be little point in risking ourselves. And, turning on one's society can be dangerous: if you stick your neck out for someone whose ways are not your own, you may ostracize yourself from your own society, and, once on the outside, you may not even be recognized by the victim you were trying to help as a well-intentioned savior, for he comes from his own closed society too.

Bergson thinks that the presence of a mystic, or moral hero, creates a social atmosphere in which a readership would be attracted to take to Jo's description in the way Rorty imagines is necessary for the creation of his liberal, utopian approximation of Bergson's ideal open society. (TSMR 48) In their presence, our egos are checked, and the "ideo-motory" filters provided by our communities are neutralized: we are no longer worried about the preservation either of ourselves or our particular society, for we have a bigger project now. Someone whose soul was open, someone who was in the process of becoming part of the mystic's exciting experiment of an open society, would take from *Bleak House* the same intensity of creative emotion of the open society that Dickens put into it. When a mystic is around, whether in body or thought, we find we can dig a little deeper, give a little more of our attention to others, risk a little more in ethical action for them. And, we find that the prospect of a failed social reformation is no longer so intimidating; we find that we are not so easily defeated by defeat. This is not to say that there will not be any people who turn out to be insusceptible to the mystic's charisma and inspiring example, but only that the mystic operates as a *wave-guide* within the population of his society so that appreciably more people will find that they are able to make the effort and maintain the confidence living the liberal lifestyle requires.

A wave-guide is simply a medium within a medium, which facilitates some form of work or effort better than the surrounding medium in which it is situated. We saw how a soul on the verge of opening is worried that it is acting alone and dangerously, and that the effect of its potential action would be too *diffuse* in the existing (closed) state of society for it to be worth risking. Mystics do not worry about such things, for they do not live for themselves; neither are they concerned with the preservation of society, because a

particular historical social form is no more important than any other part of the evolving universe. Mystics' courage and unflagging faith in themselves allows them to repeatedly succeed at actions others would have no hope to even attempt; but, once others witness the mystic's success (or even failure), they realize they are not alone, and admiration of the mystic's courage and the consequent love of his or her person awakens a courage in them that they never thought they could possess. (TSMR 53) Everyone becomes caught up in the creative emotion; everyone becomes fired by the moral hero's dream of creating an open society. The open morality works by imitation of a moral hero who is the propagator of a creative emotion of the open society, not by social pressure exerted by an instinct to follow maxims. (TSMR 50) The open morality is therefore *personified* by the moral hero. (TSMR 34)

So, mystics are wave-guides channeling the courage it takes to maintain and act out of social hope, continuously “pulsing” courageous acts that resonate with the rest of their society, acts that are then *echoed* by the rest of society as best as they can, which eventually add up to a more open formation *en masse*. Under the mystic's influence, our efforts stop being diffuse; they *ramify* other efforts. To be sure, in societies where moral heroes are present, morality would remain mixed between the closed and the open, yet the mixture would change its proportions drastically enough that it would become qualitatively different: a new form of society really would be born. If Bergson is right, then it would only be in the presence of a mystic that a society's members would *reliably* be capable of reading literature in the way Rorty requires, and of actually practicing the lessons they learn there, in order to form Rorty's maximally capacious liberal utopia. In

that case, Bergson and Rorty's merely philosophical difference (i.e., to be or not to be a metaphysician) would make a practical difference to achieving Rorty's vision.

SECTION IV: Conclusion; or, Rorty as a Modern Approximation of the Bergsonian
Mystic

The practical difference that Bergson's metaphysics might make to achieving Rorty's maximally capacious society is the only way I can think of more fully reconciling these two philosophers. Since the liberal utopian dream is a common aspect of their thought, since it is more important than their own egos for these authors, it follows that each would be amenable to help and constructive criticism from others in the process of progressively actualizing it. Thus, comparatively minor differences of theoretical opinion may be set aside for the sake of the common project that these authors are invested in and want to achieve, in the same way that Rorty is happy to call his differences with Habermas "merely philosophical" (CIS 67), for their values are the same, and Rorty takes a lot from Habermas' own efforts on liberalism's behalf. I think this would be the only way to get Rorty to concede that, in the Bergsonian instance at least, *metaphysics has its value to continuous liberal social reformations just if it can help to actually achieve something of the utopia* all these reformations are aiming at. In the attempt to more fully reconcile Bergson and Rorty, I think it is best to make a brute appeal to the pronounced, socially ameliorative tone distinctive of Rorty's pragmatism; that is to say, I think it is best to make the stakes limpid, and then simply claim that these stakes are high enough by his own theory of value that Rorty should consider giving up his reservations about metaphysics, if only such efforts of philosophical theory could be useful enough that the common utopian dream is advanced to some sufficiently impressive extent. I have been trying to argue that Bergson's is one such metaphysics, since it would bring all of the

liberal metaphysics-lovers sympathetic to Bergson on board Rorty's utopian project for literature, all those who wanted an explanation as to why they should expect the project to be successful if they were to feel confident enough to make the effort to try it (including everyone from different religions for whom the Bergsonian claim that all mystics (no matter their religion) are conduits of the same metaphysical force of creative evolution (a.k.a. God) would ring true). At the same time, applying Bergson's metaphysics to Rorty's project should allow Rorty to retain many liberal ironists who have little reason to be offended by Bergson who agrees with them on the culturally transformative power of redescription and on contingency's profound extent, and who requires only their admission that the theory of evolution is a useful way of talking.¹⁸ Such a Rortian-Bergsonian hybrid model of society would be able to acknowledge the pragmatic value of a spiritual, nonsectarian *élan vital* in a thoroughly contingent and, at times, dangerously unpredictable material universe. The "social glue" that would keep such a society together, the glue that Habermas apparently thinks Rorty could not provide by contingency alone (since, for Rorty, remember, contingency has a monopoly on ontology (CIS 67, 83)),¹⁹ would, on Bergson's view, be provided by a special sort of

¹⁸ I don't see any necessary reason why a Rortian liberal ironist may not respect Bergson's *élan vital* as a useful component in someone else's final vocabulary, if not in her own *provisional* one as well. Liberal ironists are often as morally timid as the rest of us, and are therefore equally in need of the mystic's inspiring example to fund their own ethical efforts. Such an ironist need not believe that Bergson's way of talking gets any "closer to reality" than Neo-Darwinian descriptions of biological phenomena. It may simply suffice for her to be impressed by the acts such a belief makes possible in mystical moral heroes; it may suffice for her to admit that it is socially useful, in the same way she could admit that Neo-Darwinian descriptions are scientifically useful.

¹⁹ Rorty writes: "Habermas assumes the task of philosophy is to supply some social glue which will replace religious belief, and to see Enlightenment talk of 'universality' and 'rationality' as the best candidates for this glue." (CIS 83)

contingency, a *spiritual intervention*: the force of attraction emanated by moral heroes.

Bergson describes the love these heroic leaders inspire in their followers:

Sure of themselves, because they feel within them something better than themselves, they [i.e., moral heroes] prove to be great men of action, to the surprise of those for whom mysticism is nothing but visions, raptures, and ecstasies. That which they have allowed to flow into them is a stream flowing down and seeking through them to reach their fellow men; the necessity to spread around them what they have received affects them like an onslaught of love. A love which each one of them stamps with his own personality. A love which is in each of them an entirely new emotion, capable of transposing human life into another tone. A love which thus causes each of them to be loved for himself, so that through him, and for him, other men will open their souls to the love of humanity. (TSMR 99)

If Bergson is right, only under the inspiration of mystics would liberals be able to live up to the radical expectations of change described in Rorty's sketch of a liberal utopia. And there would probably be a lot fewer ironists in such a society, since heroically inspired social reformations take up a lot of time and energy, such that one would have much less of these resources for the decadent projects of private perfection which tend to consume ironists (e.g., pursuit of private aesthetic bliss or literary immortality, or redescribing oneself in one's journal such that one is no longer defined by one's past) (CIS 96); and, in such a mystically inspired society, there would presumably be less interest in attempting these anyway. To be clear, there would be nothing like a ban on an ironist's projects, so one could still be a liberal and an ironist as Rorty claims is possible and preferable (CIS 198); it's just that the majority of society would probably be interested in other projects (i.e., creating a more open society).

Rorty and Bergson agree that religions are just specific instances of metaphysics, since religions are typically comprised of a set of beliefs in some associated metaphysical doctrine (e.g., that the soul outlasts the death of the body), but Bergson is not nearly as

suspicious of religion and metaphysics as Rorty is. There are three reasons that I can find why Rorty is so suspicious of religion/metaphysics: 1) it is a “conversation stopper”, since it makes some topics *taboo* (CIS 51-2, PSH 171); 2) each religion, being its own particular brand of metaphysics, leaves its proponents open to skeptical, anti-essentialist doubts and deconstructions (CIS 196); and, 3) it is too often used to justify gratuitous cruelty.²⁰ These objections all revolve around the drawbacks that what Bergson calls “closed religions” pose to social progress, drawbacks that Bergson well recognized. But Bergson also thought that religion need not be closed; it could be *open to social progress*, even superlatively facilitating it with a mystic leader or moral hero at its head.

In response to the first objection, Bergson criticizes primitive societies for being susceptible to taboos; he would agree with Rorty on the ridiculousness of them, even in their contemporary forms, and on their detrimental effect on social progress. Bergson defines a progressive society as one without any taboos (TSMR 138); in the ideal society, no topic is too sacred to be discussed. And, as an early proponent of “neural Buddhism”, it’s hard to see how Bergson’s metaphysics makes anything obviously taboo, since he thinks, far from being incommensurable, religion and science complement each other’s pursuits, so they should keep talking to each other: giving something a religious or metaphysical description should not get in the way of giving it a scientific description. For example, Bergson’s *élan vital* is probably not going to help us discover what “junk DNA” is exactly – that’s not what Bergson’s concept is good for. What it is good for, Bergson thinks, is providing a basic, scientifically-certified, metaphysical-spiritual

²⁰ Richard Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 31, 1 (Spring, 2003), pp. 142, 145.

description of evolution which shows how the open society is a viable experiment that we can have the confidence and courage to choose to make as a promising way forward in dealing with the catastrophic problems currently threatening our global civilization.

In response to the second objection, Bergson tried to base his metaphysics on the scientific knowledge of biology and energetics available to him at the time. Rorty himself frequently recurs to analogies from evolution (e.g., CIS 16), so if it is good enough for him, if evolution is resistant enough to skepticism that Rorty uses it, he should let it be good enough for Bergson too. Every theory is open to doubt, but it's hard for me to think of a theory with more evidence and utility going for it than evolution, and Bergson's *élan vital* is just a spiritual reading of evolution.²¹ Moreover, if it's true, as Allen says, that the physics and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the evolutionary biology since Bergson's time have made his metaphysics look good,²² then this would mean that it has remained an

²¹ I have little desire to defend Bergson in contemporary debates in evolutionary theory. I leave this to philosophers like John Mullarkey (e.g., see the collection of essays edited by him in *The New Bergson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999)) or Keith Ansell Pearson (e.g., see *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life* (London: Routledge, 2002)), both of whom downplay Bergson's talk of metaphysical tendencies, and emphasize his idea of evolution being, fundamentally, a creative phenomenon which defies anticipation. For my own part, from what I am able to understand of modern evolutionary theory, I take Bergson's modest claim that "*life is like a current passing from germ to germ through the medium of a developed organism*" (CE 27) to be basically and *banally* true. I can't think of any way in which the modern synthesis of Mendel and Darwin's theories (i.e., Neo-Darwinism) can falsify it, for Bergson is only making a suggestive simile based on utterly uncontroversial scientific observations. Yet, for morally expansive spiritual purposes, Bergson's *élan vital* is none the worse off for being scientifically banal in this way. I tend to think of Bergson and his concept in the same way William James thinks of Vivekananda's use of Hinduism's universal spiritual life principle: "Remember Vivekananda's use of Atman: it's indeed, not a scientific use, for, we can make no particular deductions from it. It is emotional and spiritual altogether." (P 131)

²² Barry Allen. "The Use of Useless Knowledge: Bergson Against the Pragmatists," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 42 (2013), pp. 2, 14.

epistemologically resilient penumbra around the expansion and development of scientific knowledge for more than a century now. So, such epistemological resilience would make it a very good story by reason's lights, and it could therefore lend metaphysically inclined liberals a lot of action-enabling confidence. And, to alleviate Rorty's worry of essentialism, Bergson's account of evolution respects contingency as much as Rorty should like: "...the current [i.e., life] might never have found a free outlet – even to this inadequate extent [i.e., as found on earth] – in which case the quality and quantity of creative energy represented by the human species would never have been released at all on our planet." (TSMR 211) Life itself could have gone another way on Bergson's view; biopoiesis might never have even occurred on earth.

In response to the third objection, though horrible atrocities have occurred in the name of religion and those who masquerade as moral heroes, I think Bergson would have to admit that this has been the price of having any moral progress at all: the combination of intelligence and undeniable charisma in someone sometimes hurts social progress, but it's hard to see how such risks can be eliminated without also eliminating the possibility of effecting significant social reformations towards a more open society entirely. Rorty agrees with Bergson that we are dependent on geniuses to help us progress culturally, and, more specifically, morally as well. Indeed, this is why Rorty thinks he gets a lot of flack from other academics, who, as I understand Rorty's thought, are apparently made to feel like a bunch of expensive hacks by comparison to the geniuses: "I insist that we're all at the mercy of people of genius. They can, and should, kick over the chessboard. A lot of people really hate the idea that the next genius to come down the pike is going to kick over the chessboard at which they have been sitting all their lives. That's the main

animus people have against my stuff.”²³ This being the case, it is very interesting how Rorty *does not allow* that a Bergsonian moral hero who usually has strong, public religious convictions (to put it mildly), and who thereby performs courageous acts which inspire others to live the liberal lifestyle, is of *primary* importance for purposes of social reformation:

So we secularists have come to think that the best society would be one in which political action conducted in the name of religious belief is treated as a ladder up which our ancestors climbed, but one that now should be thrown away. We grant that ecclesiastical organizations have sometimes been on the right side, but we think that the occasional Gustavo Gutierrez or Martin Luther King does not compensate for the ubiquitous Joseph Ratzingers and Jerry Falwells. History suggests to us that such organizations will always, on balance, do more harm than good.²⁴

I think his reluctance to acknowledge the pre-eminent importance of moral heroes for social reformation goes back to his gradualism, which itself may be explained by his distrust and consequent rejection of metaphysics: moral heroes are *too* persuasive because they convince others they are connected to something greater than other human beings; in this way, they incite social changes that are *too* fast and *too* dangerous. After a revolution, we might replace a dysfunctional democracy with an intractable fascism or dictatorship.²⁵

²³ Richard Rorty. E. P. Ragg. “Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An Interview with Richard Rorty” *Philosophy and Literature*, 26, 2 (October 2002), p. 392.

²⁴ Richard Rorty. “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 31, 1 (Spring, 2003), p. 142.

²⁵ In a letter to his friend from graduate school, and by then fellow professional philosopher, Milton Fisk from 1971, Rorty writes: “I think that nothing but a revolution in this country is going to make it possible for millions of people to lead a decent life, but I still don’t want a revolution in this country – simply because I’m afraid of finding something worse when the revolution is over.” Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 327, hereafter MAP.

For Rorty, it is the strong poet, the one who uses words in new and interesting ways, who is the hero of the ideal liberal utopia. (CIS 53) For Bergson, it is the genius of the will who leads by example. Rorty thinks persuasive rhetoric is the most important medium of social change (CIS 51-2); Bergson thinks this importance belongs, on the contrary, to activism. It is the courageous act that makes morally expansive rhetoric persuasive, and potent, where the courage is given by a creative emotion of the open society, usually spread by a moral hero. Courageous action can persuade people to do what no amount of charming words or ratiocination could; and, action inspires confidence in others to take action. Poetry, taken by itself, might be good for achieving aesthetic bliss, but without action, it's impotent for purposes of liberal social reforms.²⁶ Unlike an eloquent book or fancy speech, the *real presence of an active mystic* (e.g., as exemplified by Ghandi's salt march) cannot be argued against, indefinitely interpreted, or neglected; mystics are more *striking* and *attractive* than literature or poetry. The former appeal to everyone, or at least they cannot be ignored even if they are disliked by a few crusty holdouts in times of revolution, but the latter appeal only to people with the inclination, and enough spare time and freedom besides, to read, and, even then, as I have

²⁶ By insisting on the importance of the moral hero's action to social reformations, I agree with Alexandre Lefebvre that Bergson is making "an observation most often associated with the later Wittgenstein: for an utterance or question (or institution) to make sense, the necessary forms of life must be in place to motivate it and sustain it." (Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie Allison White, *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 211) So, in order to play a new moral language game (e.g., going from a local to a universal sense of justice), one needs new moral conditions. Nothing will change moral conditions but risky actions which will inevitably conflict with the old ways of doing things. Moral heroes are therefore moral "game-changers," since they are the first ones to act for socially progressive change, lending their life to the nascent form of open morality. After exposure to a moral hero's inspiring, risky example, even utopian projects as seemingly unlikely as Rorty's may begin to look attractive and feasible to a readership.

argued, they are only reliable in the way Rorty wants them to be if a mystic is around to bring those works, their words, to life.

Rorty thinks that whatever good moral heroes do in the service of human liberty by the indefinitely capacious societies they organize around themselves is outweighed by the cost that pretenders to moral heroism have exacted on social progress throughout history by the closed societies they organize: better if we could just get along without them. By contrast, Bergson would say that *it is only by the historical precedent of moral heroes like Martin Luther King that moral progress is made at all*, so that, when they occur, however sporadically, they actually redeem all the hurt caused by misappropriations of mystical enthusiasm by other charismatic agents, the ones working for the closed society. But Bergson is no Panglossian: the hurt caused is a real and terrible price, a consequence of having war as the natural state of competing closed societies endowed with primitive instincts and big weapons. However, despite the cost of occasional backfires, Bergson's gambit is that we won't be able to get along without moral heroes at all – *we'll go extinct*. (TSMR 317) He thinks our situation is more desperate than we would like to admit. Metaphysics/religion is a bullet we, as liberals, have to bite, for Bergson. By kicking all the “philosophical [and religious!] props from under bourgeois liberal societies,”²⁷ as Cornel West puts it, Rorty thinks he is doing human freedom a great service. But, if Bergson is right, then, at worst, Rorty's “philosophy” could work like a dangerous spiritual autoimmune disease, potentially compromising our ability to be receptive to the next socially progressive mystic leader

²⁷ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 206, hereafter AEP.

who comes along, if we find ourselves (perhaps jadedly) calling his or her talk of “love” platitudinous: by wanting to kill our receptivity for the dangerous moral leaders who use metaphysics or religion, Rorty is in danger of killing our receptivity for the beneficial ones as well. These latter sort of leaders cannot keep their religious convictions private as Rorty would like (PSH 169), for their personal mystical beliefs are why they are able to act for public benefit so confidently and inspire others to do the same; as Bergson says: “democracy is evangelical in essence and [its] motive power is love.” (TSMR 282)

If, as Bergson thinks, a metaphysics or religion of universal fraternity is the only way to achieve and sustain a liberal utopia even in times of hardship, then we shouldn't throw away this “ladder” (i.e., “political action conducted on the basis of religious belief”) as Rorty recommends: if we toss away the ladder at the level we are on, how will we get it back if we ever need it to climb still higher, in order to reach the next utopian stage of freedom? And, as we have already seen, without the ladder, Rorty also deprives himself of the explanatory resources that would probably make his own project of social reformation for literature more cogent for those readers who wanted an explanation of why his project might be successful, those readers who are not willing to act for a liberal utopia without some metaphysical assurance of success. Rorty himself admits that a liberal ironist “cannot offer the same sort of social hope as metaphysicians offer.” (CIS 91) I think this deficiency in the doxastic quality of the social hope offered by a society completely bereft of metaphysics is decisive for the infeasibility of Rorty's project for literature for most readers as it stands at the end of *Contingency*.

Yet, all of this is not to say that there will be no readers who get to the end of *Contingency* and find that it really is cogent for them, and that they can now better read

and act as a liberal working towards a maximally capacious society. But I think that these (minority) cases may be explained by the extent to which Rorty himself approximates the Bergsonian moral hero. I'm proposing that, the more one knows about Rorty's life and about the books he read and thought were important, the more cogent, inspiring, and *activating* Rorty's project for literature becomes. So, if I'm right, then, for many engaged humanities students at least, Rorty could probably be something of a moral hero. I think Rorty is someone who (early on) contracted and managed to utilize the creative emotion of the open society without being able to admit it later. As Cornel West has observed: "Rorty's own antiprofessionalism goes beyond that of Dewey, just as Dewey's political activism is far more extensive than that of Rorty. Yet, Rorty's promotion of Dewey is principally motivated by the ambitious project of resurrecting pragmatism in contemporary North Atlantic philosophy, and he has virtually single-handedly succeeded in doing so." (AEP 199) This ambitious project of academic transformation was not easy to pull off; it took a lot of courage and effort, and could easily be construed *as its own form of activism*, peculiar to the setting of contemporary North Atlantic philosophy. And, Rorty's reading of Nabokov at the end of chapter 7 in *Contingency* is a brilliant appropriation of a self-creating genius' work for the creation of a more open society. So, the way Rorty practices what he preaches is inspiring for the right audience: it's not self-immolation, but it's still pretty impressive.

I argued in section II that, owing to the idiosyncrasies of his past and his willingness to challenge the social authorities of his time with his writing, and the affect his writing has had on subsequent social reformations, it seems that Dickens was fired by the creative emotion of the open society, an emotion that was identical to his ability to

identify with people like Jo from *Bleak House*. I think the same goes for Rorty, and even Bergson. I want to conclude that Bergson and Rorty themselves, like Dickens before them, can be admired for how they approximate the mystic's soul. The undeniable attraction some people exhibit for their work would then be exemplary of the emotion all three were fired by, and, which all three did their best to articulate and fan in their own way.

All the little contingencies and personal choices that add up to each of their individual personalities, styles, and points of view, and which comprise the exceptional lenses they applied to the world in their works, act like a force which engages the reader despite the difficulty of their works, and whatever inconsistencies, errors, or flaws that they contain: no one else saw or was able to articulate the viewpoint of the poor in early industrial Britain like Dickens; no one else saw or was able to articulate the relation between evolution, mysticism, and the liberal democratic hope of creating a more open society like Bergson; no one else could read the works and life of a self-creating genius-aesthete of Nabokov's caliber in such a way as to appropriate these seemingly inappropriate tools for the construction of a maximally capacious liberal utopia like Rorty. These were all extraordinary and inspiring feats. Each author is admirable for his sheer willingness to stick his neck out very far from the artistic or intellectual establishment of his time for the creation of a new, open society which they all believed in: they all *risked a lot in acting* for social reformation in the way that seemed best to them, given each of their historical contexts and venues of work. With Rorty, this meant an American leftist patriot who grew up to work as a professional philosopher in academia. I don't think any of them were merely being contrarian, or merely in it for the

money or the job security, or the social or artistic credit incidentally incurred; by whatever complex of causes, all these authors developed rare, open souls, and worked tirelessly to open the souls of others. In a sense, then, according to the Bergsonian theory of the mystic, it's their autobiographies, the way they wrote their own lives, even more than their logic (though of course this helps to make a message coherent), which inform their style and make their convictions and projects cogent, and which inspire their readers to change their own lives and perform their own acts for social reformation. It's their identity as people, their agencies and individualities, which appeal to, even while they engender it, a creative emotion of the open society in us. It's difficult, for me at least, to separate their lives from the shared, implicit if not explicit, "sociology of the open" so evident in the creation of each of their ideas, works and projects.

In Neil Gross' *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (2008), it's claimed that previous sociologists of ideas have given too much credit either to society (e.g., Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies*), or to the unconscious drives of the ego of an individual member of society to stand out from the rest of the herd (e.g., Pierre Bourdieu, *Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*), and not enough to the *agency* of the individual proponent of a particular idea within an academic setting. (MAP 238-239) However, the lesson to take from Bergson is that it is easy to see how these earlier attempts at a sociology of ideas tended to reduce the production of a thinker's ideas to the needs of his or her community, or his or her own ego, since, as we have seen, that is just what closed societies and their members are concerned with: *survival* in a certain set of conditions and circumstances. This is also not surprising since Bourdieu's subject, Heidegger, is a rather good example of someone with a closed soul, and it can be

argued that Collins' subject, institutionalized professional philosophy, is, or has been, a good example of a closed society. So, a Bourdieuan egoistic-strategic reading views Rorty's unfashionable metaphysical sympathies during graduate studies as a move made by someone wanting to stand out from the crowd to better jockey for a prestigious academic position; it credits a lot to Rorty's ego, his reactive need to be an individual. (MAP 245-6) Likewise, a Collinsian reading of Rorty as someone who made the most of his opportunities (i.e., his "social capital," as Bourdieu puts it) to study at and be a part of high-status philosophy departments like those of Chicago and Yale, and eventually Princeton, credits much to the circumstances, values and interests of the community of New York intellectuals Rorty came from. (MAP 248) Gross wants to add individual agency to the mix of determining factors that explain a given "great thinker's" ideas, counting Rorty amongst these. This is where Gross starts describing how important Rorty's sense of "self-concept coherence" was to the production of Rorty's oeuvre (MAP 267-8, 272), reading the resuscitation of pragmatism achieved later on in Rorty's career as an act that allowed Rorty to tell himself and others a consistent story about the development of his own life from early American leftist patriot, to professional philosopher, to academic activist. The choices defining Rorty the professional philosopher and Rorty the rebellious grad student can be explained by Collins and Bourdieu's theories respectively (i.e., social pressure and libidinal pressure), but only Gross' could explain Rorty the academic activist.

I think any strong sense of the word "agency" always implies an original *effort*, *sui generis*, an assertion of one's unique self at the moment of action, and of who one is striving to become, in spite of ubiquitous instinctual drives and social circumstances. This

would mean that the self is, essentially, a *creative individual*; irreducible to a *mere* effect of the latter two determining factors. I suppose this is why I like Gross' sociology of ideas, and Bergson's mystics, and even Rorty's philosophy (when he's writing of Bloom's "strong poet," for example): they are all romantics in their own way; they all think the self is empowered to make the changes which, at least occasionally, achieve the redemption of unlikely causes. It would be nice if we could sometimes make a difference in this way. But, on my Bergsonian view, Gross' explanation is not complete without some description of the source of the sustained, extra effort involved in exercising Rorty's agency to the effect of "single-handedly resurrecting pragmatism in North Atlantic philosophy," in West's words. Perhaps, as Bergson thought, it could be an emotion? Unfortunately, Gross follows Collins in limiting the idea of "emotional energy" to the acquisition of social solidarity with one's community (MAP 248): the higher the (socioeconomic) status of the group one enjoys solidarity with, the higher the return of emotional energy. But that's what Bergson called mere pleasure. I don't think the social instinct can yield enough pressure to pursue America's "athletic democracy" for as long and hard and sincerely as Rorty did, or create works as controversial and estranging as *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, or *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Such motivation is more likely to produce a Mrs. Jellyby than a Richard Rorty. Rather, I think that, when times got tough, Rorty was fired by expressions of Dewey's social hope,²⁸ or

²⁸ E.g., "An American democracy can serve the world only as it demonstrates in the conduct of its own life the efficacy of plural, partial, and experimental methods in securing and maintaining an ever-increasing release of the powers of human nature, in service of a freedom which is cooperative and a cooperation which is voluntary." John Dewey, Jo A. Boydston and Larry A. Hickman, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Volume 14 (Charlottesville, Virginia: IntelLex Corporation, 2009), p. 368.

poetic images of this same hope provided by Whitman's verses, for example, poetry that was itself a joyful expression of the creative emotion of the open society.

As I have argued in this thesis, Bergson's creative emotion of the open society is a plausible source of the extra effort required for sustained activism, one productive of ideas, works of art, poetic imagery like Whitman's "athletic democracy", and all manner of utopian projects; and, one which (probably owing mostly to the rich cultural environment his parents provided) I think Rorty felt early on and around which his identity as a leftist American patriot was ballasted, lasting him all throughout his challenging and ultimately successful experiment with academic activism. Moreover, since Bergson's creative emotion is infectious, it would also explain the inspiring effect reading *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* had on me at least, and some others in our society it seems (if not yet enough to realize Rorty's vision), to care about and work harder (if still not hard enough) for Rorty's maximally capacious approximation of Bergson's ideal open society. Despite that, I still think we are all probably "at the mercy" of the emergence of a new "genius of the will" for most of the rest of society to be able to match our interest in Rorty's project, and for our own efforts to become potent and consistent enough, to redeem our civilization from imminent tragedy and retrieve our future to make what we will of it. And maybe that really could be an "endless, proliferating realization of Freedom" (CIS xvi), as Rorty envisions.

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