Awful Patriotism: Richard Rorty and the Politics of Knowing

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This essay addresses the current debates surrounding what some have labeled the Two Lefts: a "cultural left" and an activist left. Debate over this "divide" has made many strange bedfellows, but perhaps none quite so unheimlich as "liberal leftist" Richard Rorty and cultural conservative Harold Bloom. To be sure, Rorty has often alluded to Bloom's work, especially Bloom's notion of "strong poets," but in his most recent book, Rorty has appropriated Bloom in a particularly telling manner. In 1994, Harold Bloom published his polemic The Western Canon. At once eloquent and pathetic, it pressed all the right buttons. Bloom succinctly (or shall we say, reductively?) deployed his version of the "aesthetic" against any other approach. Cultural conservatives were gratified that someone of Bloom's stature had done them the service of voicing their interests in a highly visible and contestatory manner; more moderate sorts squirmed uncomfortably at Bloom's unabashed elitism and the shrillness of his tone; theorists and cultural studies folks were outraged at Bloom's absolute ignorance of their work and his resort to parody instead of anything vaguely resembling an engaged critique; and ethnic, minority, queer, and feminist critics had more than enough to be insulted by in his racist and sexist arrogance. So far out is Bloom's jeremiad that it probably came close to realizing his worst nightmare—it may have driven students screaming into all those horrid cultural studies classes to find out what was so seductive, so powerful as to corner The Canon. So I didn't worry too much about The Western Canon. That is, until I read Richard Rorty's essay "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature" and its companion pieces in Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America. What was Rorty, a self-proclaimed leftist, doing, calling to his aid the social and cultural archconservative Harold Bloom?

In the first part of my essay I ponder this strange alliance, particularly as it joins forces against ethnic studies (to be sure, its common target is more generally "theory" of any stripe or color, but I want specifically to address the issue of ethnic literary study). Rorty adapts Bloom's School of Resentment to characterize what he calls a certain, bad "knowingness," against which he poses "hope" and "inspiration." I want to examine more closely the nature and content of that destructive "knowledge," for it becomes clear that [End Page 37] this knowledge is for Rorty the recognition of Otherness as a politically (as opposed to merely ontologically) functional identity. This knowledge is disturbing to Rorty and deeply informs his notions of "patriotism" and Americanism. For him, such knowledge impedes the formation of a leftist politics. It is precisely the disjunction between the "knowing" discourse of the cultural left obsessed with identity politics and an activist political left (modeled after the old reformist left) that troubles Rorty.
My essay will be largely devoted to showing how Rorty's recent work develops his earlier work on "ethnocentrism" into an "Americanism" that erodes precisely the liberal foundations of that earlier work and discloses the weakness of its claims. I understand this development as compelled by a certain impatience with identity politics that is shared by a number of liberal and leftist critics of American political society, an impatience fueled perhaps not so much by a conservative threat as by a perceived threat from "within" progressive politics. Basically, I ask, how and why are knowledge and recognition of "difference" taken to immobilize progressive politics? To frame that same question in a slightly different manner--what is the presumed content of that "progressive" politics, and what assumptions do we have to make in order to arrive at that point of view?

Against the rather odd Bloom/Rorty pairing, set against "knowledge," one would naturally seek out an enemies list for possible allies. Rorty in fact begins his essay by providing us with one in the figure of Fredric Jameson, an archpractitioner of theory whose "antiromantic" skepticism Rorty finds both debilitating and depressing. Yet there are some terribly questionable passages in that deeply ambivalent work, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. These passages seem to contextualize the appearance of racial and ethnic peoples (indeed, all those formerly designated as Other to the Eurocentric Self) within a state of loss. Rorty's essay in fact makes an argument that, ironically enough, has something deeply in common with the author whom he begins his article by criticizing, indeed casting as his polar opposite. That point of commonality is nothing less than a discomfort with the appearance of the ethnic Other. Rorty and Jameson share the notion that the "knowing" or recognition of Otherness comes at a cost to politics and history.

I begin by examining how Rorty appropriates Bloom's "knowingness" as a way to smuggle in metaphysics under the guise of pragmatics. I then trace Rorty's notion of "ethnocentrism" from the 1980s to his most recent book and critique its own "vicious" ethnocentrism, as manifested in Rorty's appeal to patriotism as the solidifying and identifying force needed for "achieving America," and the particular focus he places on "inspirational" literature as an antidote to the knowingness of the cultural left. 2 Finally, I examine Rorty's unexpected overlap with the "knowing" Jameson. I argue that, in "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature," Rorty mischaracterizes both the critics whom he mentions prominently and their work, which forms the basis of his argument. He makes Bloom "relevant" to political discourse when Bloom insists on the nonmilitaristic character of "great works," and he calls Jameson "antiromantic" though there is a strain of romanticism in Jameson's book--it is most perceptible when he addresses precisely the same topics as Rorty: race and ethnicity. I conclude with a proposal for a way out of these binarisms.

**Liberal Ethnocentrism**

*Achieving Our Country* is comprised of three essays adapted from Rorty's 1997 William [End Page 38] E. Massey, Sr., Lectures in the History of American Civilization and two appended essays. In this essay I focus on "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature," which outlines Rorty's positive program for literary studies, and "The Cultural Left," which complements this positive program by setting forth the plight to which literature (read as Rorty tells us it is to be read) is to be the remedy. The remaining parts of *Achieving Our Country* contribute to Rorty's vision of America's past, present, and future along the same axes. His main thesis is that, while attention to issues of race, ethnicity, and gender have been and continue to be important in American political discourse, they have skewed leftist politics too far off the course of economic politics. Specifically, identity politics (the focal point of the cultural left) have fragmented the very alliance needed for social and political change. Great literary works may give us a vision of hope in the image of that collectivity. Rorty accuses the cultural left of pessimistically dwelling only on the fragments of social life, the discrete identities that are the product of social ills.
He begins "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature" by characterizing Jameson's Postmodernism as a "profoundly antiromantic book" ["IV" 125]. This antiromanticism is defined negatively against all that would foster hope rather than despair. Instead of inspiring utopian thinking, theory as "knowledge" spins its wheels in the sand, digging us deeper and deeper into mere knowledge of our abject condition. Rorty qualifies his comments on literary theory as being those of an "outsider." For the inside story, he turns to the literary professional, Harold Bloom, and in particular Bloom's naming of all those varied "theorists": "[they] [Bloom's School of Resentment] substitute knowing theorization for awe, and resentment over the failures of the past for visions of a better future. . . . [They can] ridicule anything but can hope for nothing" ["IV" 127]. 3 Mimicking Bloom's "divine" Oscar Wilde in his disdain for those who know the price of everything but the value of nothing, Rorty instead takes the side of awe--precisely that "thing" that frustrates the vanity of human knowledge.

Here I take a closer look at both the exact contents of that knowledge which can only be antiromantic, and its opposite term, "awe." I maintain that the latter necessarily takes recourse to a metaphysics Rorty adamantly and essentially denies: what can ultimately be the source of "inspiration" but that which exceeds representation, that is, a sublime from which we can only stand apart and in awe? Awe is deployed to both manifest and solidify Rorty's patriotism--patriotism is in this sense "awful." By its very nature it cannot be secured by knowledge, and hence it is unexaminable. Therefore, it is liable to be used in all sorts of illiberal ways.

This "awfulness" would seem to be at odds with Rorty's "liberal society," which he tells us "should aim at curing us of our 'deep metaphysical need'" [CIS 46]. Such a metaphysics underwrites Rorty's critique of "objectivity"--a court of final appeal situated at a remove from actual human beings. It is precisely this appeal to objectivity that outlaws inquiry and forecloses the possibility of liberal intellectualism. Rorty suggests that instead of objectivity it would be better to raise the gate on a wide-ranging philosophical inquiry that would have no predestination:

It would be better for philosophers to admit there is no one way to break such standoffs, no single place to which it is appropriate to step back. . . . We would [End Page 39] only have a real and practical standoff, as opposed to an artificial and theoretical one, if certain topics of certain language games were taboo--if there were general agreement within a society that certain questions were always in point, that certain questions were prior to certain others, that there were a fixed order of discussion, and that flanking movements were not permitted. . . . [CIS 51-52]

In short, the attempt to supply such foundations "presupposes a natural order of topics and arguments which is prior to, and overrides the results of, encounters between old and new vocabularies" [CIS 51-52].

Against the deadening effects of a metaphysics that preordains the course of inquiry, Rorty poses the idea of an inventive, "poetic" culture:

We need a redescription of liberalism as the hope that culture as a whole can be "poeticized" rather than as the Enlightenment hope that it can be "rationalized" or "scientized." . . . A poeticized culture would be one which would not insist we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to touchstones which are merely cultural artifacts. It would be a culture which, precisely by appreciating that all touchstones are such artifacts, would take as its goal the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts. [CIS 53-54]

In this crucial passage we find collected together a number of key issues: against the Enlightenment values
of rationality, science, and objectivity (that is, "knowledge"), we find the "liberal" (and, one might add, romantic) values of free inquiry, to which belong both the plasticity of the intellect and the notion of culture as continually refashioned and reanimated by encounters with the new.

This "poeticized culture" is complemented by a vision of liberal society that is ever widening its circle. Rorty urges "us" to

extrapolate further in the direction set by certain events in the past—the inclusion among "us" of the family in the next cave, then 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, of those menials who, all this time, have been doing our dirty work). This is a process which we should try to keep going. We should stay on the lookout for marginalized people—people whom we still instinctively think of as "they" rather than "us." . . . The right way to construe the slogan is as urging us to create a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have. The wrong way is to think of it as urging us to recognize such a solidarity, as something that exists antecedently to our recognition of it . . . So understood, philosophy is one of the techniques for reweaving our vocabulary of moral deliberation in order to accommodate new beliefs. [CIS 196]

Here the agglomerative nature of poeticizing becomes manifest and sets up the tension that will make Rorty's patriotism so problematic. Like a hungry organism, this liberal ethnocenter relies on such agglomeration not only to replenish its lifeforce but to legitimize its claims of inclusion and hence to authenticate its very identity. 4 Such a [End Page 40] program of inclusion is therefore instrumental rather than (necessarily) humane.

This becomes all the more clear in Rorty's essay "On Ethnocentrism" (a reply to Clifford Geertz), wherein he advocates a democracy that

employs and empowers both connoisseurs of diversity and guardians of universality. The former insist that there are people out there whom society has failed to notice. They make these candidates for admission visible by showing how to explain their odd behavior in terms of a coherent, if unfamiliar, set of beliefs and desires—as opposed to explaining this behavior with terms like stupidity, madness, baseness or sin. The latter, the guardians of universality, make sure that once these people are admitted as citizens, once they have been shepherded into the light by the connoisseurs of diversity, they are treated just like all the rest of us. [529, my emphasis]

For such an opponent of Enlightenment, this metaphor seems out of place. "Connoisseurs of diversity" usher the Other into the circle of light, which illuminates them as particularly "coherent." This light washes out any difficult substance that might have inhered in those subjects prior to their appearance in the circle and refigures them as accessible in some fashion or other. It is that process of making intelligible (and hence "eligible" for citizenship) that shows the great faith Rorty has in the elasticity of his "circle of we," but leaves us to wonder about the exact nature of that transformative, phenomenological process.

That elasticity is underwritten by a certain imaginative capacity that clearly shows why Rorty is so taken by literature. It is the ability to enter into an Other's fantasy, an ability to entertain a common ground, that is essential to the liberal self-image. Other peoples' stories, which convey and are conveyed by a certain "final vocabulary," must touch a nerve, must be recognizable in some correlate manner:

The liberal ironist needs as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies
as possible, not just for her own edification, but in order to understand the actual and possible humiliation of the people who use these alternative final vocabularies. . . . For public purposes, it does not matter if everyone's final vocabulary is different, as long as there is enough overlap so that everybody has some words with which to express the desirability of entering into other people's fantasies as well as into one's own. [CIS 91-93, my emphasis]

Now these "fantasies" are not simply the projections of individuals—they form the repertoire of social values and allegiances that reinvigorate and sustain the ethnoscross historical time. Rorty makes the role of literature clear: "[t]he principal backup for historiography is not philosophy but the arts, which serve to develop and modify a group's self-image by, for example, apotheosizing its heroes, diabolizing its enemies, mounting dialogues among its members, and refocusing its attention" ["Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism" 585]. When Geertz points out the narrow and fixed quality of this formulation, Rorty counters by once again supplying the liberal credo:

Our bourgeois liberal culture . . . is a culture which prides itself on constantly adding on more windows, constantly enlarging its sympathies. It is a form of life which is constantly extending pseudopods and adapting itself to what it encounters. Its sense of its own moral worth is founded on its tolerance of diversity. The heroes it apotheosizes include those who have enlarged its capacity for sympathy and tolerance. Among the enemies it diabolizes are the [End Page 41] people who attempt to diminish this capacity, the vicious ethnocentrists. ["On Ethnocentrism" 526, my emphasis]

I want to draw particular attention to two problems as we close out this summary of Rorty's articulation of ethnosc and the role of literature in sustaining it. First, the points of tension between "pride," "adaptation," and "tolerance." Let us recall Rorty's comments on what I called "agglomeration" and the way such action legitimates the liberal sensibility. To acquire otherness does not necessarily lead to "adaptation." It is more likely the case that otherness will be "shepherded" and domesticated rather than that the ethnosc will be "poeticized." Let's look at that "tolerance" extended so generously to those shepherded in. Simply put, if the liberal ethnosc is adaptive, then what is there to "tolerate"? The second problem is that tolerance, that the hallmark of liberalism, is simply incalculable. To what lengths does tolerance extend before it loses its grip and the liberal ethnosc becomes shapeless and indistinct? When does in tolerance become a virtue rather than the mark of viciousness? Richard Bernstein puts it thus: "[d]espite Rorty's manifest plea for extending the principle of tolerance, the latent content of what he says can lead to the worst forms of intolerance unless he is prepared to distinguish (even locally and historically) pernicious and benign forms of ethnocentric appeals" [550].

Finally, there is already in his work of the mid-1980s the specific application of ethnocentrism to Americanism. Rorty argues that one necessarily "falls back" on certain "labels" that one instinctively feels at home with, instinctively feels are correct and real points of identification:

Consider . . . the attitude of contemporary American liberals to the unending hopelessness and misery of the lives of the young blacks in American cities. Do we say that these people must be helped because they are our fellow human beings? We may, but it is much more persuasive, morally as well as politically, to describe them as our fellow Americans—to insist that it is outrageous that an American should live without hope. The point . . . is that 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]

The specification of certain forms of "us," the shrinkage of the "circle of we," becomes a pragmatic issue. He writes: "[i]t is natural for us to look about for other terms which will serve to mark off—if only
temporarily and for certain purposes—the center of our self from its periphery. Typically, the terms we fall back on are self-consciously ethnocentric: being a Christian, or an American, or a Marxist..." ["On Ethnocentrism" 531-32, my emphasis]. Whether this is "natural" or not is not the issue—what is at stake are the limits of poeticizing culture, of incorporating "new vocabularies," and the assumptions behind that signifier "American." Do we know, in other words, whether that common name is agreed upon and endorsed by all those whom Rorty generously interpellates as such? Do they accept the conditions of admission to the light? Are they committed to the agenda that has been set up in advance of their interpellation? Of course, all identity politics operate within such problematics. What is distinct about this case is the magnitude and consequences of national identifications and the particular moral charge of "patriotism."

Furthermore, how can the forward-looking, margin-searching project of liberalism be content with the "natural" conservatism of this passage? Again, Rorty's qualification ("if only temporarily and for certain purposes") strikes me as weak and unconvincing, for when does "temporary" become extenuated to be practically long-term? 5 At base what we [End Page 42] [Begin Page 44] find here is a rationalization of a stalled process of poeticizing and the assumption of a consensus on such historical constructs as "Christian, American, Marxist." This is awfully easy to do when one occupies the center so comfortably. All others must come to pay homage, asking to stand in its light for recognition as tolerably proximate to that unexamined core.

Rorty's 1985 essay "Solidarity or Objectivity?" explicitly circumscribes intellectual accountability and comments particularly on knowledge. In this essay Rorty is clear in his defense of a solidarity that owes no explanation of itself to anything outside: "[i]nsofar as a person is seeking solidarity, he or she does not ask about the relation between the practices of the chosen community and something outside that community" ["SO" 3]. That outward, exocentric gesture is for Rorty part of Enlightenment humanism that might be traced as far back as the Greeks: "[i]t was perhaps the growing awareness by the Greeks of the sheer diversity of human communities which stimulated the emergence of this ideal" ["SO" 4]. Rather than try to find a common yet abstract "humanity," for Rorty it is better to pragmatically deal with the more manageable and real contingencies of the day. That manageability is in large part attributable to staying within one's ethnos and refusing the need to justify oneself to anything or anyone outside the group:

We should say that we must, in practice, privilege our own group, even though there can be no noncircular justification for doing so. We must insist that the fact that nothing is immune from criticism does not mean that we have a duty to justify everything. We Western liberal intellectuals should accept the fact that we have to start from where we are, and that this means that there are lots of views which we simply cannot take seriously. ... To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and the others. The first group—one's ethnos—comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible. ["SO" 12-13]

As with his evocation of tolerance, Rorty evades any attempt to specify how and when "we" can ascertain whether or not that conversation is "fruitful." The alibi of solidarity is used to underwrite the disobligation of justifying the ethnos to the outside, thus making membership in that group both privileged and fraught. This passage is especially vexing since the degree of fruitfulness is precisely the litmus test for whether or not one's interlocutor "shares enough of one's beliefs." The circularity of his argument is exasperating, but less so than the manner in which this rhetoric can serve to fortify and legitimize a range of "vicious" liberal activities. 6 Ethnos is confused with demos; we end up with an appeal to a national identity rather than political citizenship. And it is now, after outlining Rorty's positively envisioned ethnocentrism and its troubles, that we can turn to Rorty's elaboration of ethnos as patriotism. Liberalism assumes its own goodwill, and this is the linchpin that "awe" is to secure and at the same time remove from scrutiny.
Ethnocentrism's Discontents, or the New Taboos of "Leftist" Politics

In the 1990s, a number of books penned by liberal and leftist critics joined the conservative [End Page 44] attack on identity politics. Like conservatives, these new voices blamed identity politics for eroding the core of American social life, for "disuniting America" [see Schlesinger; Tomasky]. In his most recent work, Rorty follows most particularly the argument and tone of Todd Gitlin's 1995 book *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*. This may seem odd, since in that book Gitlin is highly critical of Rorty's antifoundationalism. Yet I will argue here that in adapting Gitlin's book, Rorty inadvertently but inescapably lapses from his antifoundationalism. His writings on patriotism cannot but take recourse to precisely a foundationalism that grounds political action at the expense of all those things that Rorty claims legitimize liberal society—the adaptation of "new vocabularies" and "marginalized peoples." In *Achieving Our Country* (a phrase borrowed from James Baldwin, who is Rorty's model of one who criticized American racism without giving up on America), we find the image of exactly the antithesis of the liberal society Rorty promotes in his earlier work. I claim that here we find an ethnocenter where "certain questions [are] always in point, . . . certain questions [are] prior to certain others, and [there is] a fixed order of discussion, and . . . flanking movements [are] not permitted. . . ." [CIS 51-52]. Here, the socioeconomic is posed against issues of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity as the focal point of liberal politics and therefore of American identity.

The recognition of these other markers of identity has destroyed the "historical ideals of the Left," according to Gitlin: "[t]he cant of identity underlies identity politics, which proposes to deduce a position, a tradition, a deep truth, or a way of life from a fact of birth, physiognomy, national origin, sex, or physical disability" [126]. Such demands for recognition come at the cost of solidarity: "[t]oday, we witness an exhaustion of that core belief shared by Americanism and by the historic ideals of the Left: a belief in progress through the unfolding of a humanity present--at least potentially--in every human being" [Gitlin 85]. Rorty would bristle at such a suggestion, as it would access precisely a metaphysics of "humanity":

Solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation--the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us." [CIS 192]

We will see that the "pain and humiliation" legible as "similar" are restricted in Rorty to a particular set of pains and humiliations. They can include those which emanate from racism, sexism, and homophobia (to name only the most prominent sources) only insofar as those grievances do not interfere with the priority of the economic. For both Rorty and Gitlin, attention to such issues, while laudable in the past, has not increased the well-being of most "Americans." Indeed, it is implied by both that this attention contributed to the worsening of American social life: "[d]uring the same period in which socially accepted sadism has steadily diminished, economic inequality and economic insecurity have [End Page 45] steadily increased" ["CL" 83].

In order to substantiate his claim that identity politics has had a detrimental effect on progressive political work, Gitlin gives a revisionist history of the rise of ethnic consciousness. He asserts that by 1969:

Community organizations ceased to be of interest to [the New Left] because the project was not to make a common America but to break up the one that existed. Identity groups was where the action was . . . the American Indian Movement seized the former prison island of Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay on Thanksgiving Day 1969. In Northern cities, Puerto Rican
groups organized. In the West and Southwest, Chicanos were doing the same--César Chavez's farm workers in California, Reis Tijerina's land grant movement in northern New Mexico, an antiwar Chicano Moratorium in Los Angeles, Chicano intellectuals launching the journal _Aztlan_. In California, young Chinese Americans insisted on their distinct needs as an interest group. [134-35]

Gitlin completely and conveniently ignores the fact that such organizations came about as a response to racist attacks by the State (legislation to disenfranchise local control of education; dispossession from ethnic and racial neighborhoods called "urban development" but better understood as land grabs to found late capitalist restructuring of urban space; the creation of indentured labor from Mexico, and so on). Instead, Gitlin dismisses such struggles as merely fashionable: "[a] political imperative to cut across academic boundaries and address poverty and inequality in the larger world? Not of interest, not sexy. Identity politics amounted to demobilization into a cloister" [148]. It is bizarre to hear an inhabitant of that cloister ignore the fact that the movements he has just outlined more often than not crossed academic boundaries to radicalize students and speak to community groups precisely about how the most egregious examples of poverty and inequality tended to fall upon women and minorities (and still do).

This escape from reality is echoed in Rorty, who laments the fact that, according to him:

> Nobody is setting up a program for unemployed studies, homeless studies, or trailer-park studies, because the unemployed, the homeless, and residents of trailer parks are not "other" in the relevant sense. To be other in this sense you must bear an ineradicable stigma, one which makes you a victim of a socially accepted sadism rather than of economic selfishness. ["CL" 80]

Rorty criticizes the cultural left, which "prefers not to talk about money." Instead, he claims, "[t]he academic Left believes . . . we must teach Americans to recognize otherness" ["CL" 79]. 2 It is the investment in that sort of knowing that Rorty finds counterproductive. To fuel his attack on identity politics, Rorty ignores both the fact that economic studies are already the focal point of urban studies, sociology, political science, and history, and that it is precisely in ethnic studies departments that such work goes on as well. 10 Where Gitlin's distortions and half-truths are attributable to his rootedness in [End Page 46] a particularly remembered sixties, Rorty's are rooted in a nostalgia for the reformist left that is equally partial. Neither can afford to see how today all sorts of coalitions and discussions draw strength from the added number of participants who see their interests recognized and incorporated into that discussion, instead of being placed on the back burner and ignored.

The recognition of history and difference is inexpedient to Rorty's call to arms: "[t]hose who hope to persuade a nation to exert itself need to remind their country of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of. They must tell inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation's past . . . ." ["CL" 3-4]. 11 Rorty is impatient about all this abstract theorizing and "knowing": "[t]his Left will have to stop thinking up ever more abstract and abusive names for 'the system.'" This is perhaps understandable; we might even sympathize with him and see this as a plea to not become incapacitated by drawing finer and finer distinctions. Yet it is disturbing to note Rorty's assumption about who retains the privilege of deciding who "we" are (certainly not those claiming that that identity should contain certain elements), who decides which critiques are "taboo." And it is even more disturbing to see where he points "the left" instead--it is to "start trying to construct inspiring images of the country. . . . Outside the academy, Americans still want to feel patriotic" ["CL" 99]. It is here that we return to the problem of what "inspiration" is all about, what "image of the country" Rorty wishes to paint, and what "patriotism" is to entail. Now obviously Rorty will say that that's exactly the kind of "knowledge"-seeking that keeps us immobilized and cynical, but I don't think so. For all sorts of people are being asked to suspend or even
forget parts of history on the faith that this great Liberal Hope has their basic interests at heart. We are told that we must not only sign on to Rorty's agenda but indeed "shudder in awe," for that ability is "the best feature of human beings" ["IV" 129, my emphasis].

We return to metaphysics. Rorty wants to jettison notions of a "common humanity," yet his aesthetics are precisely that which confirm the content of a transcendent "human being." And this is where literature comes into play so forcefully. Rorty seeks a transcendental form to mediate and anchor his "pragmatics": it will be the narrative form of the nation. This prereflexive, intuited "shudder" is nothing less than a sublime, unexaminable, objective, but invisible thing out there called "our country." While Rorty's liberalism would say that that unexaminable quality is precisely the unfoundable liberal society constantly in progress, we have to remember that that progress is only possible when the inertia of identity politics is lifted by declaring it off-limits. And he declares this partitioning not only by deploying Gitlin's "historical" argument, but by mimicking the conservative, mystical aesthetic of Harold Bloom:

"Inspirational value is typically not produced by operations of a method, a science, a discipline, or a profession. It is produced by the individual brush strokes of unprofessional prophets and demiiurges. You cannot, for example, find inspirational value in a text at the same time that you are viewing it as the product of a mechanism of cultural production. To view a work in this way gives [End Page 47] understanding but not hope, knowledge but not self-transformation. For knowledge is a matter of putting a work in a familiar context--relating it to things already known."

If it is to have inspirational value, a work must be allowed to recontextualize much of what you previously thought you knew; it cannot, at least at first, be itself recontextualized by what you already believe. ["IV" 133]

This is nothing less than the basic dialectical argument of art (toward ever-increasing self-knowing through encounters with the foreign). But note how important it is for Rorty to mandate that this encounter be restricted to that agglomerative poetics we have noted earlier. While he insists that this encounter is to reshape us (rather than the inverse), we remember that image of the Other "shepherded into the light" and that in this circle of light certain concerns have been made taboo. In the last sentence, Rorty's rhetoric is particularly tricky: "[If it is to have inspirational value, a work must be allowed to recontextualize much of what you previously thought you knew; it cannot, at least at first, be itself recontextualized by what you already believe." Note the temporal qualification: to be inspired, you have to be caught off guard, as it were. Yet this recontextualization is set against its opposite--after an instant, it may be in turn recontextualized. This seems a viable enough process, yet, again, one cannot ascertain the limits of liberal goodwill, its capacity to reach backward to a conservative position, its will to know particular experience.

While Rorty insists on incorporating "new vocabularies," on not declaring at the onset any topic taboo, his prescriptions for political action are specifically dismissive of race, ethnicity, sexuality (indeed, nearly everything that is not reducible to the economic), and hence the value of "self-transformation" becomes suspect, for what has been transformed in the "old reformist left"? This reduction is rationalized by Rorty's pragmatics--but a pragmatics disobliged from "liberalism" [see Shusterman]. While one might say that Rorty's liberalism is still alive and well in the discursive realm (that is, that he has not foreclosed discussion of these issues, but merely relegated them to the "private" sphere), nowhere in Achieving Our Country is there any serious treatment of what he calls "cultural politics." The premises of his liberalism allow him to occupy uncritically the ethnocenter, now declared "America," and from that vantage point to evaluate all that would be "permissible." Hence, his argument against cultural politics is simply anecdotal, partial, and, often, distorted.