CONTENTS

American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey 1
The Eclipse of the Reformist Left 39
A Cultural Left 73

APPENDIXES
Movements and Campaigns 111
The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature 125

Notes 141
Acknowledgments 153
Index 155
National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement. Too much national pride can produce bellicosity and imperialism, just as excessive self-respect can produce arrogance. But just as too little self-respect makes it difficult for a person to display moral courage, so insufficient national pride makes energetic and effective debate about national policy unlikely. Emotional involvement with one’s country—feelings of intense shame or of glowing pride aroused by various parts of its history, and by various present-day national policies—is necessary if political deliberation is to be imaginative and productive. Such deliberation will probably not occur unless pride outweighs shame.

The need for this sort of involvement remains even for those who, like myself, hope that the United States of America will someday yield up sovereignty to what Tennyson called “the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World.” For such a federation will never come into existence unless the governments of the individual nation-states cooperate in setting it up, and unless the citizens of those nation-states take a certain amount of pride (even rueful and hesitant pride) in their governments’ efforts to do so.

Those 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—episodes
and figures to which the country should remain true. Nations rely on artists and intellectuals to create images of, and to tell stories about, the national past. Competition for political leadership is in part a competition between differing stories about a nation's self-identity, and between differing symbols of its greatness.

In America, at the end of the twentieth century, few inspiring images and stories are being proffered. The only version of national pride encouraged by American popular culture is a simplminded militaristic chauvinism. But such chauvinism is overshadowed by a widespread sense that national pride is no longer appropriate. In both popular and elite culture, most descriptions of what America will be like in the twenty-first century are written in tones either of self-mockery or of self-disgust.

Consider two recent novels: Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, a bestseller, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, a critical triumph which was not as widely read. Both are powerful novels. Readers of either may well think it absurd for Americans to continue to take pride in their country.

*Snow Crash* tells of a twenty-first-century America in which the needs of the entrepreneurs have won out over hopes of a free and egalitarian society. The country has been divided into small franchised enclaves, within each of which a single corporation—IBM, the Mafia, GenTech—holds the rights of high and low justice. The U.S. government has gone into business for itself and is one more corporate entity, running its own little enclaves. But the government is not even first among equals. There is no overall political entity, much less any sense of citizenship, that binds the eastern and western states together, or that links even the various districts of the big cities.

In *Snow Crash*, the relation of the United States to the rest of the world is symbolized by Stephenson's most frightening creation—what he calls the "Raft." This is an enormous agglomeration of floating hulks, drifting endlessly round and round the Pacific Rim, inhabited by millions of Asians who hope to jump ship and swim to North America. The Raft is a sort of vast international slum ruled by cruel and anarchic criminal gangs; it is quite different from the orderly franchises run by profitable business enterprises, respecting each others' boundaries and rights, in what used to be the United States of America. Pride in being an American citizen has been replaced by relief at being safer and better-fed than those on the Raft. Lincoln and Martin Luther King are no more present to the imagination of Stephenson's Americans than were Cromwell or Churchill to the imagination of the British whom Orwell described in his book 1984.

*Snow Crash* capitalizes on the widespread belief that giant corporations, and a shadowy behind-the-scenes government acting as an agent for the corporations, now make all the important decisions. This belief finds expression in popular
The view that the visible government is just a false front is a plausible extrapolation from the fact that we are living in a Second Gilded Age: even Mark Twain might have been startled by the shamelessness with which our politicians now sell themselves.\footnote{1}

Novels like Stephenson's, Condon's, and Pynchon's are not of social protest but rather of rueful acquiescence in the end of American hopes. Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* also assumes that democratic government has become a farce, but her novel is dominated by self-disgust rather than self-mockery. Its focus is on the relation of European-Americans to Native Americans and to the descendants of the slaves brought from Africa. Silko's novel ends with a vision in which the descendants of the European conquerors and immigrants are forced back to Europe, thereby fulfilling Native American prophecies that the whites would be a temporary disaster, a plague that would last no more than five hundred years. Silko portrays the American government collapsing amid riots and food shortages, as the descendants of the Maya and the Aztecs stream into California, Arizona, and Texas.

One does not need to know whether Silko has read Foucault or Heidegger to see her novel as offering a vision of recent history similar to the one which readers of those two philosophers often acquire. In this vision, the two-hundred-year history of the United States—indeed, the history of the European and American peoples since the Enlightenment—has been pervaded by hypocrisy and self-deception. Readers of Foucault often come away believing that no shackles have been broken in the past two hundred years: the harsh old chains have merely been replaced with slightly more comfortable ones. Heidegger describes America's success in blanketing the world with modern technology as the spread of a wasteland. Those who find Foucault and Heidegger convincing often view the United States of America as Silko does: as something we must hope will be replaced, as soon as possible, by something utterly different.

Such people find pride in American citizenship impossible, and vigorous participation in electoral politics pointless. They associate American patriotism with an endorsement of atrocities: the importation of African slaves, the slaughter of Native Americans, the rape of ancient forests, and the Vietnam War. Many of them think of national pride as appropriate only for chauvinists: for the sort of American who rejoices that America can still orchestrate something like the Gulf War, can still bring deadly force to bear whenever and wherever it chooses. When young intellectuals watch John Wayne war movies after reading Heidegger, Foucault, Stephenson, or Silko, they often become convinced that they live in a violent, inhuman, corrupt country. They begin to
think of themselves as a saving remnant—as the happy few who have the insight to see through nationalist rhetoric to the ghastly reality of contemporary America. But this insight does not move them to formulate a legislative program, to join a political movement, or to share in a national hope.

The contrast between national hope and national self-mockery and self-disgust becomes vivid when one compares novels like Snow Crash and Almanac of the Dead with socialist novels of the first half of the century—books like The Jungle, An American Tragedy, and The Grapes of Wrath. The latter were written in the belief that the tone of the Gettysburg Address was absolutely right, but that our country would have to transform itself in order to fulfill Lincoln’s hopes. Transformation would be needed because the rise of industrial capitalism had made the individualist rhetoric of America’s first century obsolete.

The authors of these novels thought that this rhetoric should be replaced by one in which America is destined to become the first cooperative commonwealth, the first classless society. This America would be one in which income and wealth are equitably distributed, and in which the government ensures equality of opportunity as well as individual liberty. This new, quasi-communitarian rhetoric was at the heart of the Progressive Movement and the New Deal. It set the tone for the American Left during the first six decades of

the twentieth century. W. E. B. Du Bois and John Dewey, as we shall see, did a great deal to shape this rhetoric.

The difference between those of the first decade of the twentieth century and the majority of their contemporaries is the difference between agents and spectators. In the early decades of this century, when an intellectual stepped back from his or her country’s history and looked at it through skeptical eyes, the chances were that he or she was about to propose a new political initiative. Henry Adams was, of course, the great exception—the great abstainer from politics. But William James thought that Adams’ diatribe was an expression of irreversible moral and political decline was merely perfunctory. James’ pragmatist theory of truth was in part a reaction against the sort of detached spectatorship which Adams affected.

For James, disgust with American hypocrisy and self-deception was pointless unless accompanied by an effort to give America reason to be proud of itself in the future. The kind of proto-Heideggerian cultural pessimism which Adams cultivated seemed, to James, decadent and cowardly. “Democracy,” James wrote, “is a kind of religion, and we are bound not to admit its failure. Faiths and utopias are the noblest exercise of human reason, and no one with a spark of reason in him will sit down fatalistically before the croaker’s picture.”

According to Rand, it is think that the spectatorization of the average American, lower being reduced to passivity, is due to the sort of liberal rhetoric that teaches people that they are private acts (private, personal, economic) are not politically relevant and that political relevance can only be acted on according to formal political mechanisms (e.g., laws, institutions, etc.).
In 1909, at the beginning of his book _The Promise of American Life_, Herbert Croly echoed James:

The faith of Americans in their own country is religious, if not in its intensity, at any rate in its almost absolute and universal authority... As children we hear it asserted or implied in the conversation of our elders. Every new stage of our educational training provides some additional testimony on its behalf... We may distrust and dislike much that is done in the name of our country by our fellow-country-men; but our country itself, its democratic system, and its prosperous future are above suspicion.\(^3\)

If anybody attributed this sort of civic religion to Americans today, it would be assumed that he was speaking only of the chauvinists—of the Americans who think of John Wayne rather than of Abraham Lincoln as our representative man, and of America as invincible rather than as kind. Novels like Silko’s, Stephenson’s, Mailer’s, and Pynchon’s are our equivalent of Adams’ resigned pessimism.

It rarely occurs to present-day American leftists to quote either Lincoln or Whitman. It is no longer the case that, in Croly’s words, “every new stage of our educational training provides some additional testimony” on behalf of Americans’ faith in their country. On the contrary, a contemporary American student may well emerge from college less convinced that her country has a future than when she entered. She may also be less inclined to think that political initiatives can create such a future. The spirit of detached spectatorship, and the inability to think of American citizenship as an opportunity for action, may already have entered such a student’s soul.

In this first lecture I shall try to describe the role of Whitman and Dewey in creating the image of America which was ubiquitous on the American Left prior to the Vietnam War. I say “image” rather than “myth” or “ideology” because I do not think that there is a nonmythological, nonideological way of telling a country’s story. Calling a story “mythical” or “ideological” would be meaningful only if such stories could be contrasted with an “objective” story. But though objectivity is a useful goal when one is trying to calculate means to ends by predicting the consequences of action, it is of little relevance when one is trying to decide what sort of person or nation to be. Nobody knows what it would be like to try to be objective when attempting to decide what one’s country really is, what its history really means, any more than when answering the question of who one really is oneself, what one’s individual past really adds up to. We raise questions about our individual or national identity as part of the process of deciding what we will do next, what we will try to become.

As an example of such a process of decision, consider James Baldwin’s book _The Fire Next Time_. Early in that book
Baldwin says, "This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it." This lack of forgiveness can easily take the form it does in the theology of the Nation of Islam—with whose prophet, Elijah Muhammad, Baldwin describes an encounter. The Black Muslims say that white people started out as homunculi created by a diabolical scientist. This hypothesis seems to them the best explanation for the inhuman cruelty of the slave auctions and the lynchings.

Those who accept Elijah Muhammad's story use it to convey the wholehearted, gut-wrenching disgust for white America which is manifest in Silko's novel. But as Baldwin's narrative of self-creation unfolds, we watch him combining a continued unwillingness to forgive with a continuing identification with the country that brought over his ancestors in chains. "I am not," he writes, "a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores." "

In another passage Baldwin says, "In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women." He ends his book with a sentence which has been quoted over and over again: "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world." The difference between Elijah Muhammad's decision about how to think of America and the one reached by Baldwin is the difference between deciding to be a spectator and to leave the fate of the United States to the operation of nonhuman forces, and deciding to be an agent.

I do not think there is any point in arguing that Elijah Muhammad made the right decision and Baldwin the wrong one, or vice versa. Neither forgave, but one turned away from the project of achieving the country and the other did not. Both decisions are intelligible. Either can be made plausible. But there are no neutral, objective criteria which dictate one rather than the other.

For the same reasons that I think there is no point in asking whether Baldwin made the right decision, I think there is no point in asking whether Lincoln or Whitman or Dewey got America right. Stories about what a nation has been and should try to be are not attempts at accurate representation, but rather attempts to forge a moral identity. The argument between Left and Right about which episodes in our history we Americans should pride ourselves on will never be a contest between a true and a false account of our country's his-
tory and its identity. It is better described as an argument about which hopes to allow ourselves and which to forgo.

As long as our country has a politically active Right and a politically active Left, this argument will continue. It is at the heart of the nation’s political life, but the Left is responsible for keeping it going. For the Right never thinks that anything much needs to be changed: it thinks the country is basically in good shape, and may well have been in better shape in the past. It sees the Left’s struggle for social justice as mere troublemaking, as utopian foolishness. The Left, by definition, is the party of hope. It insists that our nation remains unachieved. As the historian Nelson Lichtenstein has said, “All of America’s great reform movements, from the crusade against slavery to the labor upsurge in the 1930’s, defined themselves as champions of a moral and patriotic nationalism, which they counterposed to the parochial and selfish elites which stood athwart their vision of a virtuous society.”

Insofar as a Left becomes spectatorial and retrospective, it ceases to be a Left. I shall be claiming in these lectures that the American Left, once the old alliance between the intellectuals and the unions broke down in the course of the Sixties, began to sink into an attitude like Henry Adams’. Leftists in the academy have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right in making cultural issues central to public debate. They are spending energy which should be directed at proposing new laws on discussing topics as remote from the country’s needs as were Adams’ musings on the Virgin and the Dynamo. The academic Left has no projects to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by building a consensus on the need for specific reforms. Its members no longer feel the force of James’s and Croly’s rhetoric. The American civic religion seems to them narrow-minded and obsolete nationalism.

Whitman and Dewey were among the prophets of this civic religion. They offered a new account of what America was, in the hope of mobilizing Americans as political agents. The most striking feature of their redescriptions of our country is its thoroughgoing secularism. In the past, most of the stories that have incited nations to projects of self-improvement have been stories about their obligations to one or more gods. For much of European and American history, nations have asked themselves how they appear in the eyes of the Christian God. American exceptionalism has usually been a belief in special divine favor, as in the writings of Joseph Smith and Billy Graham. By contrast, Elijah Muhammad and Leslie Marmon Silko are examples of inverted exceptionalism: in their visions, white America will be the object of special divine wrath.

Dewey and Whitman wanted Americans to continue to think of themselves as exceptional, but both wanted to drop any reference to divine favor or wrath. They hoped to sep-
rate the fraternity and loving kindness urged by the Christian scriptures from the ideas of supernatural parentage, immortality, providence, and—most important—sin. They wanted Americans to take pride in what America might, all by itself and by its own lights, make of itself, rather than in America's obedience to any authority—even the authority of God. Thus Whitman wrote:

And I call to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious
about God.  

Whitman thought there was no need to be curious about God because there is no standard, not even a divine one, against which the decisions of a free people can be measured. Americans, he hoped, would spend the energy that past human societies had spent on discovering God's desires on discovering one another's desires. Americans will be curious about every other American, but not about anything which claims authority over America.

Kenneth Rexroth claims that Whitman invented the idea of "the realization of the American Dream as an apocalypse, an eschatological event which would give the life of man its ultimate significance." He goes on to say:

Other religions have been founded on the promise of the Community of Love, the Abode of Peace, the King-

dom of God. Whitman identified with his own nation-state. We excuse such ideas only when they began 3,000 years ago in the Levantine desert. In our own time we suspect them of dangerous malevolence. Yet Whitman's vision exposes and explodes all the frauds that pass for the American Way of Life. It is the last and greatest vision of the American potential.  

Everything Rexroth says in this passage seems to me correct, except for the phrase "last and greatest." Whitman had successful imitators in his attempt to tie up the history of our nation-state with the meaning of human life. Perhaps because I am a philosophy professor, and have a special interest in philosophical restatements of moral ideals, I think that John Dewey was the most successful and most useful of these imitators.

Whitman explicitly said that he would "use the words America and democracy as convertible terms."  

Dewey was less explicit, but when he uses "truly democratic" as a supreme honorific, he is obviously envisaging an achieved America. Both Dewey and Whitman viewed the United States as an opportunity to see ultimate significance in a finite, human, historical project, rather than in something eternal and nonhuman. They both hoped that America would be the place where a religion of love would finally replace a religion of fear. They dreamed that Americans would break the tradi-
tional link between the religious impulse, the impulse to stand in awe of something greater than oneself, and the infantile need for security, the childish hope of escaping from time and chance. They wanted to preserve the former and discard the latter. They wanted to put hope for a casteless and classless America in the place traditionally occupied by knowledge of the will of God. They wanted that utopian America to replace God as the unconditional object of desire.

They wanted the struggle for social justice to be the country’s animating principle, the nation’s soul.

“Democracy,” Dewey said, “is neither a form of government nor a social expediency, but a metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature.” For both Whitman and Dewey, the terms “America” and “democracy” are shorthand for a new conception of what it is to be human—a conception which has no room for obedience to a nonhuman authority, and in which nothing save freely achieved consensus among human beings has any authority at all. Steven Rockefeller is right to say that “[Dewey’s] goal was to integrate fully the religious life with the American democratic life.” But the sort of integration Dewey hoped for is not a matter of blending the worship of an eternal Being with hope for the temporal realization, in America, of this Being’s will. It is a matter of forgetting about eternity. More generally, it is a matter of replacing shared knowledge of what is already real with social hope for what might become real.

The word “democracy,” Whitman said, “is a great word, whose history . . . remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted.”

Forgetting about eternity, and replacing knowledge of the antecedently real with hope for the contingent future, is not easy. But both tasks have been a good deal easier since Hegel. Hegel was the first philosopher to take time and finitude as seriously as any Hobbesian materialist, while at the same time taking the religious impulse as seriously as any Hebrew prophet or Christian saint. Spinoza had attempted such a synthesis by identifying God with Nature, but Spinoza still thought it desirable to see things under the aspect of eternity. Hegel rejoined that any view of human history under that aspect would be too thin and abstract to be of any religious use. He suggested that the meaning of human life is a function of how human history turns out, rather than of the relation of that history to something ahistorical. This suggestion made it easier for two of Hegel’s readers, Dewey and Whitman, to claim that the way to think about the significance of the human adventure is to look forward rather than upward: to contrast a possible human future with the human past and present.

Marx, unfortunately, has been the most influential of the left-wing Hegelians. But Marx mistakenly thought that Hegel’s dialectic could be used for predictive as well as inspirational purposes. That is why Marxists have produced the
form of historicism which Karl Popper rightly criticized as impoverished. But there is another form of Hegelian historicism which survives Popper’s criticisms intact. In this form, historicism is simply the temporalization of what Plato, and even Kant, try to eternalize. It is the temporalization of ultimate significance, and of awe.

Dewey’s philosophy is a systematic attempt to temporalize everything, to leave nothing fixed. This means abandoning the attempt to find a theoretical frame of reference within which to evaluate proposals for the human future. Dewey’s romantic hope was that future events would make every proposed frame obsolete. What he dreaded was stasis: a time in which everybody would take for granted that the purpose of history had been accomplished, an age of spectators rather than agents, a country in which arguments between Right and Left would no longer be heard.

Dewey read a lot of Hegel when he was young. He used Hegel to purge himself first of Kant, and later of orthodox Christianity. Whitman read only a little, but what he read was enough to make him exclaim with delight. “Only Hegel,” Whitman wrote in his notebooks, “is fit for America—is large enough and free enough.”15 “I rate [Hegel],” he goes on to say, “as Humanity’s chiefest teacher and the choicest loved physician of my mind and soul.”16

Hegel’s philosophy of history legitimized and underwrote Whitman’s hope to substitute his own nation-state for the Kingdom of God. For Hegel told a story about history as the growth of freedom, the gradual dawning of the idea that human beings are on their own, because there is nothing more to God than his march through the world—nothing more to the divine than the history of the human adventure. In a famous passage, Hegel pointed across the Atlantic to a place where as yet unimagined wonders might be worked: “America is the country of the future . . . the land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical arsenal of old Europe.”17

Whitman probably never encountered this passage, but he knew in his bones that Hegel should have written that sentence. It was obvious to him that Hegel had written a prelude to the American saga. Hegel’s works, Whitman said, might “not inappropriately be this day collected and bound up under the conspicuous title: Speculations for the use of North America, and Democracy there.”18 This is because Hegel thinks God remains incomplete until he enters time—until, in Christian terminology, he becomes incarnate and suffers on the Cross. Hegel uses the doctrine of Incarnation to turn Greek metaphysics on its head, and to argue that without God the Son, God the Father would remain a mere potentiality, a mere Idea. Without time and suffering, God is, in Hegel’s terms, a “mere abstraction.” Hegel verges on saying something Whitman actually did say: “The whole theory of the special and supernatural and all that was twined with it or
that the American experiment in self-creation would succeed. The price of temporalization is contingency. Because they rejected any idea of Divine Providence and any idea of immanent teleology, Dewey and Whitman had to grant the possibility that the vanguard of humanity may lose its way, and perhaps lead our species over a cliff. As Whitman put it, “The United States are destined either to surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism, or else prove the most tremendous failure of time.” Whereas Marx and Spencer claimed to know what was bound to happen, Whitman and Dewey denied such knowledge in order to make room for pure, joyous hope.

The trouble with Europe, Whitman and Dewey thought, was that it tried too hard for knowledge: it tried to find an answer to the question of what human beings should be like. It hoped to get authoritative guidance for human conduct. One of the first Europeans to suggest abandoning this hope was Wilhelm von Humboldt, a founder of ethnography and a philosopher who greatly influenced Hegel. In a passage which Mill used as the epigraph for his On Liberty, von Humboldt wrote that the point of social organization is to make evident “the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity.” Whitman picked up this particular ball from Mill and cited On Liberty in the first paragraph of his Democratic Vistas. There Whitman says that Mill demands “two main constituents, or sub-strata, for a truly

Neither Dewey nor Whitman, however, was committed to the view that things would inevitably go well for America, 
educed out of it departs as a dream… It is not consistent with the reality of the soul to admit that there is anything in the universe more divine than men and women.”

Whitman, like most American thinkers of the nineteenth century, believed that the Golgotha of the Spirit was in the past, and that the American Declaration of Independence had been an Easter dawn. Because the United States is the first country founded in the hope of a new kind of human fraternity, it would be the place where the promise of the ages would first be realized. Americans would form the vanguard of human history, because, as Whitman says, “the Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” They are also the fulfillment of the human past. “The blossoms we wear in our hats,” Whitman wrote, “are the growth of two thousand years.”

Whitman thought that we Americans have the most poetical nature because we are the first thoroughgoing experiment in national self-creation: the first nation-state with nobody but itself to please—not even God. We are the greatest poem because we put ourselves in the place of God: our essence is our existence, and our existence is in the future. Other nations thought of themselves as hymns to the glory of God. We redefine God as our future selves.

Another as politics ended this contingency by stating itself in the legal framework of the politics of certainty, it gave up on the project of hoping for democratic love and embarked on the project of guaranteeing democratic order…
grand nationality—1st, a large variety of character—and 2d, full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions.\textsuperscript{23}

Mill and Humboldt's "richest diversity" and Whitman's "full play" are ways of saying that no past human achievement, not Plato's or even Christ's, can tell us about the ultimate significance of human life. No such achievement can give us a template on which to model our future. The future will widen endlessly. Experiments with new forms of individual and social life will interact and reinforce one another. Individual life will become unthinkably diverse and social life unthinkably free. The moral we should draw from the European past, and in particular from Christianity, is not instruction about the authority under which we should live, but suggestions about how to make ourselves wonderfully different from anything that has been.

This romance of endless diversity should not, however, be confused with what nowadays is sometimes called "multiculturalism." The latter term suggests a morality of live-and-let-live, a politics of side-by-side development in which members of distinct cultures preserve and protect their own culture against the incursions of other cultures. Whitman, like Hegel, had no interest in preservation or protection. He wanted competition and argument between alternative forms of human life—a poetic agon, in which jarring dialectical discords would be resolved in previously unheard harmonies. The Hegelian idea of "progressive evolution," which was the nineteenth century's great contribution to political and social thought, is that everybody gets played off against everybody else. This should occur nonviolently if possible, but violently if necessary, as was in fact necessary in America in 1861. The Hegelian hope is that the result of such struggles will be a new culture, better than any of those of which it is the synthesis.\textsuperscript{24} This new culture will be better because it will contain more variety in unity—it will be a tapestry in which more strands have been woven together. But this tapestry, too, will eventually have to be torn to shreds in order that a larger one may be woven, in order that the past may not obstruct the future.

There is, I think, little difference in doctrine between Dewey and Whitman. But there is an obvious difference in emphasis: the difference between talking mostly about love and talking mostly about citizenship. Whitman's image of democracy was of lovers embracing. Dewey's was of a town meeting. Dewey dwelt on the need to create what the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit has called a decent society, defined as one in which institutions do not humiliate. Whitman's hopes were centered on the creation of what Margalit calls, by contrast, a civilized society, defined as one in which individuals do not humiliate each other—in which tolerance for other people's fantasies and choices is instinctive and habitual.\textsuperscript{25} Dewey's principal target was institutionalized selfish-
ness, whereas Whitman’s was the socially acceptable sadism which is a consequence of sexual repression, and of the inability to love.

Dewey disliked and distrusted Franklin D. Roosevelt, but many of his ideas came into their own in the New Deal. Whitman’s hopes, on the other hand, began to be realized only in the youth culture of the 1960s. Whitman would have been delighted by rock-and-roll, drugs, and the kind of casual, friendly copulation which is insouciant about the homosexual-heterosexual distinction. The historiography of the Sixties has come to be dominated by New Left politics, but we need to remember that lots of young people in the Sixties viewed Tom Hayden with the same suspicion as they viewed Lyndon Johnson. Their principal concern was cultural rather than political change. Dewey might have approved of the rock-and-roll culture in a guarded and deliberate way, but Whitman would have thrown himself into it wholeheartedly.

Dewey would not have expressed his desire to exalt and encourage his country by saying, as Whitman did, that he “who would be the greatest poet” must “attract his own land body and soul to himself and hang on its neck with incomparable love and plunge his seminal muscle into its merits and demerits.” But Dewey might have written other bits of Leaves of Grass—for example, “I speak the password primeval ... I give the sign of democracy;/By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.” One can also imagine him writing:

Logic and sermons never convince,
The damp of night drives deeper into my soul.

Only what proves itself to every man and woman is so,
Only what nobody denies is so.

These passages in Whitman can be read as presaging the doctrine that made pragmatism both original and infamous: its refusal to believe in the existence of Truth, in the sense of something not made by human hands, something which has authority over human beings. The closest Hegel got to this pragmatist doctrine was his dictum that philosophy is its own time held in thought.

Despite this historicism, Hegel could never bring himself to assert the primacy of the practical over the theoretical—what Hilary Putnam, defining the essence of pragmatism, has called the primacy of the agent point of view. Dewey, like Marx in the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, took the primacy of the practical all the way. His pragmatism is an answer to the question “What can philosophy do for the United States?” rather than to the question “How can the United States be philosophically justified?” He abandoned the question “Why should one prefer democracy to feudalism, and
self-creation to obedience to authority?” in favor of the question “Given the preferences we Americans share, given the adventure on which we are embarked, what should we say about truth, knowledge, reason, virtue, human nature, and all the other traditional philosophical topics?” America will, Dewey hoped, be the first nation-state to have the courage to renounce hope of justification from on high—from a source which is immovable and eternal. Such a country will treat both its philosophy and its poetry as modes of self-expression, rather than ask its philosophers to provide it with reassurance.

The culminating achievement of Dewey’s philosophy was to treat evaluative terms such as “true” and “right” not as signifying a relation to some antecedently existing thing—such as God’s Will, or Moral Law, or the Intrinsic Nature of Objective Reality—but as expressions of satisfaction at having found a solution to a problem: a problem which may somehow seem obsolete, and a satisfaction which may someday seem misplaced. The effect of this treatment is to change our account of progress. Instead of seeing progress as a matter of getting closer to something specifiable in advance, we see it as a matter of solving more problems. Progress is, as Thomas Kuhn suggested, measured by the extent to which we have made ourselves better than we were in the past rather than by our increased proximity to a goal.

Late in his life, Dewey tried to “state briefly the democratic faith in the formal terms of a philosophical proposition.” The proposition was that democracy is the only form of moral and social faith which does not “rest upon the idea that experience must be subjected at some point or other to some form of external control: to some ‘authority’ alleged to exist outside the processes of experience.” This formulation echoes Whitman’s exclamation, “How long it takes to make this American world see that it is, in itself, the final authority and reliance!” Anti-authoritarianism is the motive behind Dewey’s opposition to Platonic and theocentric metaphysics, and behind his more original and far more controversial opposition to the correspondence theory of truth: the idea that truth is a matter of accurate representation of an antecedently existing reality. For Dewey, the idea that there was a reality “out there” with an intrinsic nature to be respected and corresponded to was not a manifestation of sound common sense. It was a relic of Platonic otherworldliness.

Repudiating the correspondence theory of truth was Dewey’s way of restating, in philosophical terms, Whitman’s claim that America does not need to place itself within a frame of reference. Great Romantic poems, such as “Song of Myself” or the United States of America, are supposed to break through previous frames of reference, not be intelligible within them. To say that the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem is to say that America will create the taste by which it will be judged. It is to envisage our nation-state as both self-creating poet and self-created poem.
So much for my interpretation of Whitman’s and Dewey’s attempts thoroughly to secularize America—to see America as the paradigmatic democracy, and thus as the country which would pride itself as one in which governments and social institutions exist only for the purpose of making a new sort of individual possible, one who will take nothing as authoritative save free consensus, between as diverse a variety of citizens as can possibly be produced. Such a country cannot contain castes or classes, because the kind of self-respect which is needed for free participation in democratic deliberation is incompatible with such social divisions.

For Whitman and Dewey, a classless and casteless society—the sort of society which American leftists have spent the twentieth century trying to construct—is neither more natural nor more rational than the cruel societies of feudal Europe or of eighteenth-century Virginia. All that can be said in its defense is that it would produce less unnecessary suffering than any other, and that it is the best means to a certain end: the creation of a greater diversity of individuals—larger, fuller, more imaginative and daring individuals. To those who want a demonstration that less suffering and greater diversity should be the overriding aims of political endeavor, Dewey and Whitman have nothing to say. They know of no more certain premises from which a belief might be deduced.

This conception of the purpose of social organization is a specifically leftist one. The Left, the party of hope, sees our country’s moral identity as still to be achieved, rather than as needing to be preserved. The Right thinks that our country already has a moral identity, and hopes to keep that identity intact. It fears economic and political change, and therefore easily becomes the pawn of the rich and powerful—the people whose selfish interests are served by forestalling such change.

I do not think that subsequent American leftists have made any advance on Dewey’s understanding of the relation between the individual and society. Dewey was as convinced as Foucault that the subject is a social construction, that discursive practices go all the way down to the bottom of our minds and hearts. But he insisted that the only point of society is to construct subjects capable of ever more novel, ever richer, forms of human happiness. The vocabulary in which Dewey suggested we discuss our social problems and our political initiatives was part of his attempt to develop a discursive practice suitable for that project of social construction.

To take pride in collaborating in this project is not to endorse what Baldwin called the collection of myths to which white Americans cling: that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honor-
ably with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors, that American men are the world’s most direct and virile, that American women are pure.\textsuperscript{33}

The sort of pride Whitman and Dewey urged Americans to feel is compatible with remembering that we expanded our boundaries by massacring the tribes which blocked our way, that we broke the word we had pledged in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and that we caused the death of a million Vietnamese out of sheer macho arrogance.

But, one might protest, is there then nothing incompatible with American national pride? I think the Dewey-Whitman answer is that there are many things that should chasten and temper such pride, but that nothing a nation has done should make it impossible for a constitutional democracy to regain self-respect. To say that certain acts do make this impossible is to abandon the secular, antiauthoritarian vocabulary of shared social hope in favor of the vocabulary which Whitman and Dewey abhorred: a vocabulary built around the notion of sin.

People who take this latter notion seriously find Dewey and Whitman childlike, naive, and dangerous. They see both as lacking a sense of the tragic, of the abyss. For such people, it is a fundamental moral fact that the commission of certain acts—acts which can be specified without regard for historical changes or cultural differences—is incompatible with further self-respect. But Dewey has a different conception of the fundamental moral fact. For him what makes us moral beings is that, for each of us, there are some acts we believe we ought to die rather than commit. Which acts these are will differ from epoch to epoch, and from person to person, but to be a moral agent is to be unable to imagine living with oneself after committing these acts.

But now suppose that one has in fact done one of the things one could not have imagined doing, and finds that one is still alive. At that point, one’s choices are suicide, a life of bottomless self-disgust, and an attempt to live so as never to do such a thing again. Dewey recommends the third choice. He thinks you should remain an agent, rather than either committing suicide or becoming a horrified spectator of your own past. He regards self-loathing as a luxury which agents—either individuals or nations—cannot afford. He was quite aware of the possibility, and indeed the likelihood, of tragedy.\textsuperscript{34} But he utterly repudiated the idea of sin as an explanation of tragedy.

People who take the notion of sin seriously—admirers of Saint Augustine such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Jean Bethke Elshtain—are appalled by this line of thought.\textsuperscript{35} They view it as merely the light-minded, Californian view that one should treat any crime one happens to commit as a useful learning experience. But Andrew Delbanco gets Dewey exactly right when he says that for him “evil was the failure of imagina-
tion to reach beyond itself, the human failure to open oneself to a spirit that both chastises one for confidence in one's own righteousness and promises the enduring comfort of reciprocal love. There is a sense in which all of Dewey's thought was an extended commentary on Emerson's remark 'the only sin is limitation.' Delbanco goes on to say, correctly, that this understanding of evil was basic to the Progressive Movement in American politics, and to its confidence in education and social reform. He is also correct when he concludes that "such a view of the human imagination as restless within established forms had no room for the idea of a fixed standard by which deviance from the truth could be measured and denounced."[38]

Delbanco has his doubts about whether we can afford to abandon the idea of such a standard. Leo Strauss, Harvey Mansfield, and many others have no such doubts. They see belief in such a standard as essential to individual and social decency. But what these critics see as Dewey's naiveté and light-mindedness I see as his intellectual courage—the courage to abandon the idea that it is possible to attain, in either science or morals, what Hilary Putnam calls a "God's-eye view." Dewey abandoned the idea that one can say how things really are, as opposed to how they might best be described in order to meet some particular human need. In this respect he is in agreement with Nietzsche, and with such critics of "the metaphysics of presence" as Derrida and Hei-

dgger. For all these philosophers, objectivity is a matter of intersubjective consensus among human beings, not of accurate representation of something nonhuman. Insofar as human beings do not share the same needs, they may disagree about what is objectively the case. But the resolution of such disagreement cannot be an appeal to the way reality, apart from any human need, really is. The resolution can only be political: one must use democratic institutions and procedures to conciliate these various needs, and thereby widen the range of consensus about how things are.

Those who find this line of philosophical thought horrifying do not agree with Dewey and Foucault that the subject is a social construction, and that discursive practices go all the way down. They think that moral idealism depends on moral universalism—on an appeal to universally shared demands, built into human nature, or to the nature of social practice. I have argued against this claim in the past, and I shall not use these lectures to do so again. Instead, I shall end by returning to the contrast between agents and spectators with which I began.

I said earlier that we now have, among many American students and teachers, a spectatorial, disgusted, mocking Left rather than a Left which dreams of achieving our country. This is not the only Left we have, but it is the most prominent and vocal one. Members of this Left find America unforgivable, as Baldwin did, and also unachievable, as he did not.
This leads them to step back from their country and, as they say, "theorize" it. It leads them to do what Henry Adams did: to give cultural politics preference over real politics, and to mock the very idea that democratic institutions might once again be made to serve social justice. It leads them to prefer knowledge to hope.

I see this preference as a turn away from secularism and pragmatism—as an attempt to do precisely what Dewey and Whitman thought should not be done: namely, to see the American adventure within a fixed frame of reference, a frame supplied by theory. Paradoxically, the leftists who are most concerned not to "totalize," and who insist that everything be seen as the play of discursive differences rather than in the old metaphysics-of-presence way, are also the most eager to theorize, to become spectators rather than agents. But that is helping yourself with one hand to what you push away with the other. The further you get from Greek metaphysics, Dewey urged, the less anxious you should be to find a frame within which to fit an ongoing historical process.

This retreat from secularism and pragmatism to theory has accompanied a revival of ineffability. We are told over and over again that Lacan has shown human desire to be inherently unsatisfiable, that Derrida has shown meaning to be undecidable, that Lyotard has shown commensuration between oppressed and oppressors to be impossible, and that events such as the Holocaust or the massacre of the original Americans are unrepresentable. Hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left—principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness. The Whitmanesque hope which lifted the hearts of the American Left before the 1960s is now thought to have been a symptom of a naive "humanism."

I see this preference for knowledge over hope as repeating the move made by leftist intellectuals who, earlier in the century, got their Hegelianism from Marx rather than Dewey. Marx thought we should be scientific rather than merely utopian—that we should interpret the historical events of our day within a larger theory. Dewey did not. He thought one had to view these events as the protocols of social experiments whose outcomes are unpredictable.

The Foucauldian Left represents an unfortunate regression to the Marxist obsession with scientific rigor. This Left still wants to put historical events in a theoretical context. It exaggerates the importance of philosophy for politics, and wastes its energy on sophisticated theoretical analyses of the significance of current events. But Foucauldian theoretical sophistication is even more useless to leftist politics than was Engels' dialectical materialism. Engels at least had an eschatology. Foucauldians do not even have that. Because they regard liberal reformist initiatives as symptoms of a discredited liberal "humanism," they have little interest in designing new social experiments. This distrust of humanism, with its retreat from practice to theory, is the sort of failure of nerve which leads people to...
abandon secularism for a belief in sin, and in Delbanco’s “fixed standard by which deviance from the truth can be measured and denounced.” It leads them to look for a frame of reference outside the process of experimentation and decision that is an individual or a national life. Grand theories—eschatologies like Hegel’s or Marx’s, inverted eschatologies like Heidegger’s, and rationalizations of hopelessness like Foucault’s and Lacan’s—satisfy the urges that theology used to satisfy. These are urges which Dewey hoped Americans might cease to feel. Dewey wanted Americans to share a civic religion that substituted utopian striving for claims to theological knowledge.

In the remaining lectures I shall be contrasting the Deweyan, pragmatic, participatory Left as it existed prior to the Vietnam War and the spectatorial Left which has taken its place. One consequence of that disastrous war was a generation of Americans who suspected that our country was unachievable—that that war not only could never be forgiven, but had shown us to be a nation conceived in sin, and irredeemable. This suspicion lingers. As long as it does, and as long as the American Left remains incapable of national pride, our country will have only a cultural Left, not a political one.