Chapter Six

America as the Greatest Poem: Rorty, Whitman, and Baldwin on Pride and Shame

Any honest examination of the national life proves how far we are from the standard of human freedom with which we began. The recovery of this standard demands of everyone who loves this country a hard look at himself, for the greatest achievements must begin somewhere, and they always begin with the person.

—James Baldwin, “Nobody Knows My Name”

Fostering the “Emersonian combination of self-reliance and patriotism found in James and Dewey” has become a key political aim of Richard Rorty’s pragmatism. His recent work—most notably Achieving Our Country and the essays collected in Philosophy and Social Hope—weds an Emersonian affirmation of the creative power of individuals to imagine new possibilities to the cultivation of a national identity, a project that Rorty identifies with Whitman’s ideal of the United States themselves as “essentially the greatest poem.” Tempering Emerson’s individualism with the “quasi-communitarian rhetoric” of Whitman, Dewey, and James Baldwin, Rorty evinces a thoughtful conception of democratic politics as “Emersonian self-creation on a communal scale.” This will enable us, in a phrase he borrows from Baldwin, to “achieve our country”—to realize the enduring promise of America’s highest ideals (EHO, 2; AOC, 22, 8; PSH, 34).

Casting the imagination as “the cutting edge of cultural evolution,” the source of “new conceptions of possible communities” and “new ways of being human,” brings Rorty’s project in line not only with Emerson’s, but with other purveyors of a poetic pragmatism, like W. E. B. Du Bois, who, in Cornel West’s words, sought to create “new visions and vocabularies for the moral enhancement of humanity.”
Yet Rorty’s pragmatism departs from that of Emerson, Whitman, and neglected pragmatists like Du Bois and Alain Locke on an important point. These thinkers, to varying degrees, saw flaws in the national character and looked to literature, poetry, and art in general to alter it. The value of this poetic strand of pragmatist thought is that its affirmations of American culture are partial; what is affirmed is then turned against some aspect of the culture itself—for example, its racism, imperialism, or excessive materialism—in the name of moving it to a higher level. Importantly, these partial or detached affirmations did not preclude an ongoing commitment to the project of improving America.

Rorty’s conception of self-reliance on a communal scale raises a number of key issues for political theorists, including how to balance the tension that makes democratic collective self-renewal possible between a diversity of individual perspectives and communal ties, the question of the degree of connectedness of the social critic, how a democracy should best deal with a past about which it cannot be proud, and the relation of self-criticism to social criticism. I argue that the sentiment that binds Whitman to his country, like Baldwin, is love, not, pace Rorty, pride. Unlike pride, the bonds of love are strong enough to permit the kind of sometimes antagonistic relationship inherent in Baldwin’s famous remark, “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” Only against the background of a relation of love can what Baldwin called “the gravest questions of the self” be addressed.

The task of achieving our country and moving it to a higher level involves striking a balance between creative visions that we must attain and a communal bond to keep us together along the way. Too much of either, and the transformative project degenerates into detached radicalism or a static celebration of past glories and vague possibilities. Despite his affirmations in an Emersonian spirit of the need for “new conceptions of possible communities” and “new ways of being human,” Rorty ultimately capitulates to one pole of the combination of self-reliance and patriotism (PSH, 87–88). As a result, while he retains the sense of attachment inherent in the projects of Whitman and Baldwin, he elides their self-expressed criticisms. In Rorty’s vision of how best to “achieve” America, it is no longer possible, to paraphrase Stanley Cavell, to express one’s commitment to democracy by living in some measure against its culture.

ACHIEVING RORTY’S COUNTRY

The idea of America as an ongoing project, a work in progress whose greatness remains to be achieved, has been a recurrent way of thinking about the
American experiment, from the original Puritan “errand into the wilderness” to its secularized version in Emerson and Whitman of America as a poem whose greatness is as yet unsung, and to Baldwin’s exhortation to Americans, both white and black, to “end the racial nightmare” and “make American what America must become.” It rests in each of its guises on an implicit political theory and an implicit vision of political life. This vision is forward-looking—the political order is viewed not as it is but as it might be, in terms of imagined possibilities projected into a distant, unrealized but attainable moment—and transformative, inasmuch as it is committed to lessening the distance between an imagined possibility and current conditions.

Whitman opens the second paragraph of the original preface to *Leaves of Grass* with the assertion, “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.” He would spend the remaining four decades of his life attempting to convey the full meaning of this declaration. Rewritten and rearranged over the course of at least a dozen editions, *Leaves of Grass* grew from twelve poems to over three hundred as he tried to come to terms with the curious admixture of diverse parts and a single whole at the heart of this poetical nature, through a brutal civil war, the emancipation of its slaves, and his own becoming. Rorty glosses this passage in the following way:

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 define God as our future selves. (AOC, 22)

Noting that Whitman’s view, like James’s and Dewey’s, is “more secular and more communal” than its precursor in Emerson, Rorty quotes Cornel West’s description of Emerson’s conception of “the individual as America,” an “ideological projection of the first new nation in terms of a mythic self” that has appropriated God-like power for use in transforming the world.

Rorty emphasizes the secularist dimension of Whitman’s vision because it leads him to the two points he wants to underscore in order to assimilate Whitman to his pragmatic project, which by the mid-1990s explicitly links the pragmatist philosophy he used to critique the Cartesian-Kantian tradition in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* to an affirmative take on American politics. First, he focuses on Whitman’s remark in *Democratic Vistas* that America “counts . . . for her justification and success . . . almost entirely upon the future,” which he nicely connects to his larger pragmatist stance: “If there
is anything distinctive about pragmatism it is that it substitutes the notion of a better future for the notions of ‘reality,’ ‘reason,’ and ‘nature.’” Second, he interprets the substitution of our future selves for God as a recognition of the historical rootedness and fallibility of all human endeavor. This paves the way for Rorty’s argument that we substitute hope for transcendental knowledge: “Whereas Marx and Spencer claim to know what was bound to happen, Whitman and Dewey denied such knowledge in order to make room for pure, joyous hope” (PSH, 23–27).

In Rorty’s version of this project, hope, pride, and a forward-looking optimism dominate, as do the imagination and a sense of unrealized possibilities. His political vision rests on the principle that “national pride” is “a necessary condition for self-improvement.” In the absence of such pride and a recognition of America’s past achievements, majoritarian politics will lack the emotional component necessary for lively, imaginative, and committed public debate and collective action. This is the cornerstone of his political theory: “A shared sense of national identity” is “an absolutely essential component of citizenship” (AOC, 3–4, 32). Rorty does not seek a “simplenminded militaristic chauvinism”; he readily admits that there are abhorrent episodes in America’s past that surely are cause for a chastening of our pride. Yet for a nation to achieve itself, it is crucial that “pride outweighs shame” (PSH, 253).

On at least one front, Rorty makes an important and much-needed point. The contemporary left has indeed lost significant ground to the right in the larger conversation about America as a result of its failure to articulate a coherent vision of what America should be that touches the sources of national identity and patriotism. Yet by casting this problem in terms that pit “the politics of difference” against national identity, and multiculturalism against patriotic attachments, Rorty does more to entrench these antagonisms than to alleviate them. A return to a nationalistic, state-centered politics is surely a nonstarter; some third way is needed—a point we will return to below (PSH, 252–53).

Rorty’s position holds that “a nation cannot reform itself unless it takes pride in itself—unless it has an identity, rejoices in it, reflects upon it and tries to live up to it.” This is an echo of Whitman’s assertion that “two or three really original poets” are needed to deepen the democratic commitment by giving “more compaction and more moral identity (the quality most needed) to these States.” However, Rorty tends to conflate pride and identity; identifying with one’s country as one’s own is not the same thing as taking pride in it. To be fair, he does allow that an identification with America does not preclude shame at “the greed, the intolerance, and the indifference to suffering” that are also present. Indeed, when Rorty asserts that “you can feel shame over your country’s behaviour only to the extent to which you feel it is your
country.” I think he is on stronger ground than when he equates identification with pride and suggests that “a left that refuses to take pride in its country will have no impact on that country’s politics” (PSH, 253–54).

Rorty’s rebukes of the “unpatriotic,” “postmodern,” “cultural” left for “refusing to rejoice in the country it inhabits” have become familiar (PSH, 252). In these instances, he parts company with the Whitman of *Democratic Vistas*, whose pride had been chastened by the persistent shortfall of moral and religious character in relation to America’s material success. By contrast, Rorty seems interested in getting people to be proud of America in the present and to celebrate her past—that is, for what she has become, rather than for what she will or may become. This is precisely his beef with people like Foucault and Heidegger—namely, that they refuse to take pride in what their civilization has already achieved. What ignites Rorty’s ire is that “readers of Foucault may often come away believing that no shackles have been broken in the past two hundred years” (AOC, 7). In these moments Rorty’s project abdicates the critical function so crucial to both Whitman and Baldwin and becomes merely an effort to redeem America’s past rather than to improve its present.

To be sure, Rorty is right to criticize leftist intellectuals guilty of the sort of forgetting that elides the fact that America is *their* country, no matter how much disdain they harbor for particular aspects of her culture. This forgetting may account for the failure of certain leftist stances to resonate with the American citizenry. As Whitman knew, democracy must get “a hold in men’s hearts, emotions and belief” if it is to succeed. But never losing sight of the fact that she is your country is not the same thing as taking pride in it. For Rorty, the problem with postmodern, “cultural” leftists, then, is not simply that they refuse to identify with America, but that they refuse to take pride in her achievements and credit her advances. Put another way, while Whitman’s pride in America’s future was a way of remaining committed to the project of correcting present failures, which in his view were nothing to be proud of, Rorty seems to insist that we be proud of America’s past and present while we are attempting to reform it—something I believe limits the transformative power of his project.

Cultivating a national identity and the emotion of national pride is for Rorty the work of narrative and stories: “inspiring stories” about “what a nation has been and should try to be” that incite a nation to self-improvement (AOC, 3, 15). It is a job for literature—for the novel, in particular, which he has called “the characteristic genre of democracy” (EHO, 68). He links this narrative project to his philosophical critique by arguing that “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” (AOC, 13).
While this would appear to place Rorty in the tradition of Whitman’s call for a “national literature” in *Democratic Vistas*, an echo of Emerson’s search for a bard to sing the as-yet-unsung song of America in “The Poet,” Rorty’s view of literature as a “civic religion” is more Arnoldian than Emersonian. Rather than “liberating gods” who “unlock our chains and admit us to a new scene,” Rorty envisions a “religion of literature” capable of inspiring and generating hope (AOC, 136). Only on this basis can the kind of moral community united by a shared national identity that he believes is necessary for a meliorative politics be forged. That is, he wants to assimilate individuals to a preexisting national identity rather than provoke them to generate a new one by following their own muse. For Emerson, by contrast, hope is only transformative when linked to the innovative power of “genius,” to the creative capacity of ordinary individuals. Rorty’s exaltation of hope without an embrace of individual creativity severs a linkage that was crucial for Emerson, but for Whitman as well, who held that “a nation like ours . . . is not served by the best men only but sometimes more by those that provoke it—by the combats they arouse.” Whitman’s ideal of a “truly grand nationality,” which he attributes to John Stuart Mill, entails not only “a large variety of character,” but “full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and conflicting directions.”

**PRIDE VS. LOVE**

Ironically, it is the very figures whom Rorty invokes who have done the most to gesture toward some third way, beyond simply accepting or rejecting “America.” Whitman, in particular, was acutely attuned to the tension between diversity and union, between “Individualism” and “Patriotism,” in America:

> Must not the virtue of modern Individualism, continually enlarging, usurping all, seriously affect, perhaps keep down entirely, in America, the like of the ancient virtue of Patriotism, the fervid and absorbing love of general country? I have no doubt myself that the two will merge, and will mutually profit and brace each other, and that from them a greater product, a third, will arise. But I feel that at present they and their oppositions form a serious problem and paradox in the United States.

Whitman thought this a question “which time only can answer,” and was merely suggestive about the form of this reconciliation, insisting only that it was “our task to reconcile them.” Yet to what extent is such a reconciliation possible at all?
To be sure, this passage from his *Democratic Vistas* admits of a certain faith. Although the tone and message of *Vistas*, written a decade and a half later, differs from the untempered optimism of his original 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, in 1871, Whitman was still with “as yet unshaken faith” in America and its democratic experiment. Clearly, the Whitman of *Vistas* is more aware of the flaws in the American moral character—for instance, the “hollowness of heart” and the “atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout”—and has a keener sense of the darker underside of America’s material and productive successes. Somewhat disillusioned, Whitman conveys a sense that there is much work still to be done. As one reader put it, “He has not lost his faith in the future, but the future is the only thing which gives him hope. . . . It is simply that he must imagine a golden age to come rather than hail one that is here.”

This is a significant point when it comes to Rorty’s approach. *Vistas* has been called a “chastisement” by one of America’s “best lovers.” Indeed, the operative sentiment that binds Whitman to his country is love, not pride. Only the mode of a lover’s chastisement enables Whitman to criticize America while remaining committed to the project of achieving a better future. As we have seen, Rorty quotes with praise Whitman’s notion that America “counts . . . for her justification and success . . . almost entirely upon the future” (PSH, 26–27). But he glosses it as a pragmatist critique of representationalism rather than as a political stance. As a result, he elides the critical implication of Whitman’s stance: Whitman transferred all questions of America’s justification to the future because he found little in the present to be proud of. I want to argue that substituting love for pride will greatly improve Rorty’s vision.

Though he remained cryptic, Whitman’s notions of “adhesiveness” and “amativeness,” conceptions of forms of attachment—a social bond—held in place through friendship, fraternity, and sexual love, suggest the contours of the potential third way to which he alluded. As he suggests in the above passage, “love” of country is, literally, the key element. But it must be tempered or chastened in some way by “Individuality” or, in another parlance, by difference, for America to move itself to a higher state.

Baldwin strikes a similar chord in his vision of how America might achieve its promise. He believed that the “relatively conscious” whites and blacks to whom this task fell must, “like lovers, insist on and create, the consciousness of others.” Love occupies an important place in Baldwin’s vision of how America is to be achieved. As a complex, many-sided but enduring bond, only love is potent and tenacious enough to sustain the paradoxical relationship of African Americans to their country. This relationship, Baldwin argued, writing in 1951, is not simply one of “oppressed to oppressor, of master to slave,” nor is it “motivated merely by hatred.” Settling merely for hatred was the error common to Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, as well as
Richard Wright’s portrayal of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. The conceit of this hatred is that it betrayed the fact that the relationship of blacks to America was “literally and morally, a blood relationship.” Unlocking the “altogether savage paradox of the American Negro’s situation” would be impossible “until we accept how very much it contains of the force and anguish and terror of love.”

For Baldwin, we might say, love is the condition of growth. “Love,” he said, “does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up.” A familiar refrain in Baldwin’s writings on race and America is the idea that at some level “a failure to look reality in the face,” either by America collectively, as a nation, or individually, was somehow at the root of racial problems. Bringing America to see itself “as it really is,” and getting whites to see not only blacks as they really are but to accept themselves as they really are, becomes the sine qua non of achieving our country. Love is essential to this kind of self-acceptance, both individually and collectively: “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” He continues, “I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”

Although Baldwin occasionally waxed romantic and spoke of “a freedom that was close to love” and made remarks like, “if love will not swing wide the gates [to the acceptance of blacks], no other power will or can,” he was by no means quixotic in his embrace of love. Rejecting Christian love as “a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair,” he was acutely aware that “power is real, and many things, including, very often love, cannot be achieved without it.” He noted, reflecting on the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation, that “had it been a matter of love or justice” and not of “the realities of power in this difficult era,” the decision “would surely have occurred sooner.”

For Baldwin, almost incredibly, love is the name for the connection between both blacks and whites, and between blacks and the country that brutally enslaved their forebears. On the first count, this is exemplified by his repeated insistence that “Whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. We are part of each other. What is happening to every Negro in the country at any time is also happening to you.” On the second, it is evidenced in the resoluteness of his belief, in the face of his own seething hatred, that “I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores.” The key point is that love means accepting America, warts and all, and making it one’s own through a commitment to seeing through the project of making it a better place. Any effort at achieving
our country must begin from a full embrace of where we now are and who we are now, not merely who we want to become.\textsuperscript{19}

In the end, the importance of love resides in the fact that “the question of this color, especially in this country,” involved, inescapably, “the graver questions of the self,” a point we will discuss further below. The racial tensions in America, Baldwin believed, were “rooted in the very same depths as those from which love springs, or murder.” He could easily have used the word “loved” rather than “liked” when he asserted that “no one, after all, can be liked whose human weight and complexity cannot be, or has not been, admitted.”\textsuperscript{20} The implication remains that in the absence of love, and in the absence of attention to the “graver questions of the self,” which in my view are indeed absent in Rorty’s merely public assertions of a “we” consciousness, any connection that is forged will lack a fundamental recognition of the other’s full humanity.

\section*{COMMUNITY, INNOVATION, AND DEMOCRATIC SELF-RENEWAL}

The notion of achieving our country is a claim about democratic self-renewal, about the capacity of a collectivity to transform itself from within. At bottom, it rests on a deep tension dramatized by Rorty’s notion of self-reliance on a communal scale. This tension is inherent in the interplay between individualism and patriotism at the heart of Whitman’s affirmation of America’s “poetical nature.” The individual generation of “new conceptions of possible communities” and “new ways of being human” that Rorty embraces in both an Emersonian and Whitmanian vein conflicts with the need to recognize what we have in common with others, which is a precondition of collective identity, and thus of political agency.\textsuperscript{21}

This tension surfaces in Rorty’s work in the form of a thinly veiled fear. It is a fear, oddly enough, that Rorty shares with Sheldon Wolin. Rorty, like Wolin, fears that an excessive emphasis on the recognition of differences will erode the communal prerequisites of political action.\textsuperscript{22} While for both thinkers there is a certain amount of quasi-ideological antipostmodernist bias animating these fears, they also express a fundamental problem at the heart of their commitments to democratic collective self-transformation: the tension between community and innovation, between “discovering the common and creating new commonalities, respecting old boundaries and installing new ones.”\textsuperscript{23}

Wolin’s vision of politics is sustained by a distinction between the mundane, everyday functioning of democratic procedures and the rarer, more
“fugitive” moments of genuine democracy marked by the collective expression of the will of the demos. His understanding of the transformative power of democracy rests on a quintessentially Emersonian insight about the creativity of ordinary individuals. But, given his strong commitment to the demos as a collective, a commitment Emerson was much more guarded about, Wolin must harmonize this innovative capacity with the collective preconditions of democratic action: “The possibility of renewal draws on a simple fact that ordinary individuals are capable of creating new cultural patterns of commonality at any moment.”

Rorty, similarly, wishes to affirm both the creative or imaginative capacity of individuals, which he describes as a matter of generating new metaphors, and the collective or communal bases of shared identification that enable collective agency. This is particularly germane to his affirmation of Whitman’s poetic ideal. As Rorty puts it, “Nations rely on artists and intellectuals to create images of, and to tell stories about, the national past” (AOC, 4). Yet, because rooted in individual aesthetic visions of the world, not only will there be a plurality of different stories, but the individualistic nature of these stories may undermine the unity of vision inherent in patriotism or national pride. As I noted earlier, this tension is inherent in the complex form of national attachment that Whitman posits in Vistas, with its origins in Mill’s Humboldtian stress on the diversity of character. Rorty insightfully perceives the roots of Whitman’s “truly grand nationality” and traces it back to the epigraph to Mill’s On Liberty, which quotes Wilhelm von Humboldt on “the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity.” However, Rorty interprets Mill and Humboldt’s “richest diversity” and Whitman’s “full play” as antitranscendentalist claims against the idea of an “authoritative guide [e.g., “Plato’s or even Christ’s] to human conduct.” He then contrasts this “romance of endless diversity” with contemporary multiculturalism and affirms a Whitmanesque notion of public life as a “poetic agon, in which jarring dialectical discords would be resolved in previously unheard harmonies”—a very attractive ideal, to be sure, but one that would seem at odds with Rorty’s arguments for a public realm guided by a shared liberal “we” consciousness. To put it another way, Whitman’s ideal of variety in unity is a far cry from a public sphere defined by a “firm distinction” between public and private that ensures that individual forms of life remain outside the political realm rather than providing an arena where “jarring discords” collide (AOC, 22–25).

The tension between individual creative energies and the terms of collective attachment is not so easily disposed of. When push comes to shove and the two conflict, Rorty, like Wolin, will always be more inclined to sacrifice individuality to preserve commonality. (For Emerson, by contrast, it was the
reverse.) Nevertheless, Rorty insists that there is no incompatibility between “respect for cultural differences” and the brand of “American patriotism” he advocates. It seems to me that he is genuine in this commitment and is not an adherent of what he calls an “arrogant, bellicose nationalism.” Because he limits the terms of this commonality to the exclusively affirmative stance of national pride, however, he must reject most expressions of difference or individuality for “refusing to rejoice in the country it inhabits” (PSH, 252–53). Put differently, because he does not adequately differentiate between pride and identification, it becomes impossible to engage with one’s country by continually arguing with it—that is, by refusing to rejoice in it lest we neglect the work that remains to be done.

The larger issue at stake in Rorty’s appropriation of Baldwin and his criticisms of postmodern difference politics concerns the degree of attachment of the social critic to her society. Here the tension between innovation and community is brought into bold relief. Rorty’s appropriation of Baldwin’s stance tends to emphasize the communal or connected side at the expense of the creative or innovative side. Baldwin is an exemplar for Rorty because of his ability to combine “a continued unwillingness to forgive [America for its racial crimes] with a continuing identification with the country that brought over his ancestors in chains (AOC, 12).”26 From Rorty’s vantage, the strength of Baldwin’s stance is twofold: first, for all his criticisms of America, he never stops thinking of it as his country, and second, because he refuses to allow his disgust with the racist side of the American character to lead to a resignationist withdrawal from the project of collective self-improvement.

For Rorty, both a claim about attachment or identification with one’s country and a claim about moral or political agency are at stake. As we have seen, Rorty argues that the refusal of the postmodern or “cultural” left to identify with America has contributed to a “detached” and “spectatorial” malaise that permits the right to dominate national politics. But he does not stop there: the problem with the postmoderns is not simply that they refuse to identify with America—this in my view is a more warranted criticism—it is, Rorty asserts, that they refuse to take pride in her achievements and credit her advances.

Rorty’s stance sets him against the idea that social criticism requires radical detachment and makes him an advocate of what Michael Walzer has called “connected criticism.” The connected critic, Walzer holds, is neither emotionally nor intellectually detached from the society she inhabits. A “local judge,” the connected critic is “one of us” who appeals to local principles, proffering social criticism from within. For Walzer, social criticism is a by-product of a larger activity that he calls “cultural elaboration and affirmation”—the work of “priests and prophets; teachers and sages; storytellers, poets, historians, and writers generally.”27
Rorty conceives a similar process when he speaks of social criticism as the work of “cultural reweaving.” The point is that criticism must take place in and through a set of values shared with one’s fellow citizens. We become critics “naturally,” as Walzer tells it, not through detachment—that is, not through either transcendence or estrangement—but through engagement: “by elaborating on existing moralities and telling stories about a society more just than, though never entirely different from, our own.”

Stories—that is, nontranscendental, contextualized narratives of self-understanding—about “what a nation has been and should try to become” are likewise a part of Rorty’s project of achieving our country. Both Walzer and Rorty uphold a pragmatist understanding of beliefs as linked to plans of action: stories are more than a matter of setting out where we are and how we got here; they are crucial to the process of “deciding what we will do next” and “what we will try to become.” Like Walzer, who sees cultural elaboration as “intended to set people in motion,” Rorty argues that stories are the key ingredient in “persuading a nation to exert itself.”

But can a “connected” critic really be critical? Rorty never really addresses this issue and tends to skim over it when he casts the only available options as “piecemeal reformism” or “total revolution.” Walzer explicitly addresses it, but the tension between community and innovation, between connectedness and criticism, emerges here as well. One of the aims of the connected critic is to “create a new awareness among his own people of what is being done in their name.” In the case of South African poet Breyten Breytenbach, the topic of an insightful chapter of Walzer’s, this is a matter of “creating a new Afrikaner consciousness” to supplant the one on which the subjugation of blacks rested. But if the critic is to generate this new consciousness, to what is he to remain connected? Walzer gets around this problem by mitigating the degree of newness of the critic’s vision. It is less the creation of a new consciousness, he argues, than “a change in the relative weight” of the emphases of the old consciousness. “The new culture is never wholly new; it is in large part a rearrangement of ideas already present in the old.”

I mention this case because the creation of a new consciousness is an essential part of Baldwin’s program of achieving our country. Rorty appropriates Baldwin’s emphasis on both identification and political agency, but he neglects the crucial role of this novel consciousness. Both “a new black man” and “a new white man” are needed, Baldwin thought, if we are to reach the point where we recognize that “this world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.” As we have seen, Rorty too celebrates the creative production of “new conceptions of possible communities.” But this commitment amounts to little more than lip service because of Rorty’s insistence on a singular “we” identity in public. Visions of new possibilities do certainly grow...
out of elements that are already present and not de novo. But Baldwin’s “love” for America is strong enough to withstand his novel vision of what America must become without tempering the force of its innovativeness and inherent criticism. Integration, on Baldwin’s novel view, means “that we, with love, shall force our [white] brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.” This surely is connected criticism. But, importantly, the terms of the connection are different.

**TOWARD A DETACHED ATTACHMENT**

The traditional defense of detached social criticism makes critical vision dependent on the critic’s radically detaching herself from the everyday, shared world to ascend to some Archimedean standpoint to either invent the truth (the romantic model), to discover it (the natural law model), or to receive it through divine revelation (the religious model). What these perspectives share is the assumption that critical or moral principles are only available when one steps back from one’s social position and local attachments. Both Walzer and Rorty reject this transcendental assumption and argue for a kind of connected criticism articulated both through and from the realm of our parochial attachments. But not all detachment is radical and transcendental. This is a possibility I want to consider in this section—the possibility of a “detached attachment,” in George Kateb’s paraphrase of Whitman, as the crucial element in democratic self-renewal.

A key difference between Walzer’s and Rorty’s accounts of connected criticism is that while Walzer insists no less firmly than Rorty on the attachment of the critic to the shared beliefs and values of her fellow citizens, he allows for the possibility that this relation may be an ambiguous or “antagonistic” connection. Walzer’s evocative metaphor for the functioning of connected criticism is “Hamlet’s glass”—a mirror “where you may see the inmost part of you,” as Hamlet puts it. Quoting Breytenbach, Walzer suggests that the critic “holds his words up to us like mirrors.” What makes this a critical activity, Walzer holds, is that we are not happy with what we see in the mirror: “The point of holding up the mirror is to demonstrate that the ideal order is not here, or that we’re not there. The stories that we tell ourselves about the realization of freedom and equality are untrue: one has only to look in the glass and see.”

Both philosophers identify a dual function of “culture criticism,” in Rorty’s phrase, as a matter of, first, “elaboration” (Walzer) or “rewiring” (Rorty) of current beliefs and values, and, second, of expressing the culture’s hopes and aspired-to ideals. Much less strident in his critique of philosophy’s
metaphysical presuppositions, Walzer has no problem asserting that the critic “shows us to ourselves as we really are” and “exposes the false appearances of his society.” Rorty would likely object to the “mirroring” metaphor in Walzer’s statement that “the critic elaborates the hopes, interprets the ideals, and holds both against his mirror image of social reality.” Yet accurate representations of current conditions are, on Walzer’s scheme, essential; without the contrast between the way things are now and our aspirations of how they should be, the critical enterprise loses its bite.\(^3^4\)

This leads to a major difference between Rorty and Walzer on the critic’s relation to present conditions, and on the question of pride. Because his antirepresentationalist position rules out any claims about the nature of “reality,” Rorty’s connected critic must stop at the portrayal of our ideals, the “dream country” for which we hope, and eschew “the one to which [we] wake up every morning.” From this move, it follows that the attitude most appropriate to our ideals and aspirations is one of prideful optimism toward the future rather than the disgust or betrayal evoked by present failures. On this point, Rorty is explicit: while an emotional involvement with one’s country may naturally take the form of either “intense shame” or “glowing pride,” politics will not be “imaginative and productive” unless “pride outweighs shame” (AOC, 101, 3).

The point of the critic’s holding a mirror up to society on Walzer’s account is the revelation that we don’t like what we see in the reflection. Thus, criticism only has a grip on those “who are uneasy with the mirror image,” which Walzer believes will be a large majority. By contrast, Rorty’s insistence that pride must outweigh shame ensures that a felt sense of compromise on the part of society’s members for its shortcomings is never experienced.\(^3^5\)

This sense of one’s self being compromised by the shortcomings of one’s society, I want to argue, rather than pride, is a prerequisite of democratic self-renewal. In other words, to modify Rorty’s phrase, shame is a condition of growth. Such compromise is only possible, paradoxically, under a kind of connection that admits of some detachment. Or, better, the kind of alienation from one’s society or disgust with it inherent in shame can only be a condition of growth when expressed in the form of a continued commitment to changing it. What Kateb calls detached attachment is another name for the kind of agonized relation to democracy that Stanley Cavell has eloquently described in the context of Emersonian moral perfectionism as the uniquely democratic possibility of “living with, and against” one’s culture, and for the possibility that Walzer seems to allow for when he speaks of an ambiguous or “antagonistic” form of connectedness.\(^3^6\)

There are two points I wish to make in the remainder of this chapter about the notion of detached attachment that underscore its relevance to the project
of democratic self-renewal expressed in achieving our country. The first in-
volves demonstrating that the idea of a detached attachment is compatible
with the forms of connectedness that both Walzer and Rorty seek and does not
violate their concerns about radical or transcendental detachment. The second
is to try to outline what makes detached attachment central to Baldwin’s un-
derstanding of how we are to achieve our country. Briefly put, it has to do
with making self-transformation a critical component of collective transfor-
mation—something that Rorty’s notion of “Emersonian self-creation on a
communal scale” suggests but never realizes.

As to the first point, the version of moral perfectionism that Cavell ad-
duces from Emerson’s writings is understood, first and foremost, as some-
thing “essential to the criticism of democracy from within.” What makes
perfectionism “necessary” to democracy is its aim of not “excusing democ-
ocracy for its inevitable failures, or looking to rise above them, but in teaching
how to respond to those failures, and to one’s compromise by them, other-
wise than by excuse or withdrawal.” Detached attachment, a notion Kateb
discerns in both Emerson and Whitman, is similarly a way of engaging
thoughtfully with one’s world. Although it involves a “partial but studied
disengagement,” it is not a call for solipsistic withdrawal. Instead, it seeks to
establish a “poetical attachment to things and beings” in order to enable what
Emerson called “an original relation” to reality, but also to cultivate a greater
openness toward others. 37

A poetical attachment to things means, on this Whitmanesque reading, “to
become attached with unreserved love.” Such a relation is only possible by
becoming detached from oneself and the immediate attachments of one’s
everyday world, but “without, of course, pretending to be able or wanting to
abandon them.” Even though Whitman’s idea of “adhesive love” is “unrelated
to tight collectivity,” Kateb nevertheless thinks that “adhesiveness” is not the
best model for understanding this democratic connectedness because it under-
mines the individualism Whitman sought to promote and, most impor-
tantly, because “it serves the sinister project of nationalism.” Instead of adhe-
siveness, Kateb argues, democratic connectedness is a matter of “receptivity
or responsiveness” to others. 38

Interestingly, both Walzer and Rorty offer George Orwell as an exemplar
of connected social criticism. 39 Both emphasize his connectedness; the
“mainstream” (Walzer) tenor of his social criticism; his steadfast resistance to
pat, ideological solutions; and the fact that he never sacrificed the suffering
of flesh-and-blood individuals in the name of abstract principles. In an in-
sightful and original essay, Walzer does better than the standard accounts that
attribute this simply to Orwell’s “ordinary decency.” He accounts for Orwell’s
virtues by noting that “Orwell was faithful to what he was. . . . His success
has something to do with his ability, on all his journeys, physical and intellectual, to take himself along.”

I think this remark captures something fundamental, not just about Orwell and connected criticism, but about politics more broadly that both Cavell and Kateb are trying to convey—namely, that the full force of our selves or our character must be present in all our commitments. Baldwin makes the similar point that white Americans, if they are to change, must overcome “the individual uncertainty,” the “inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives,” so that they can “be present in all that one does.” This insight is also central to Walzer’s conception of connected criticism in that the “hopes and ideals” we glimpse in the critic’s mirror, he argues, “have an actual location—in our ‘souls,’ in our everyday consciousness of the moral world.” This, I want to argue, is a marked improvement on Rorty’s understanding of achieving our country, which, by contrast, involves only the “public” parts of our selves, leaving our “souls,” if you will, at home when we enter public life.

However, the problem with Walzer’s account is that it assumes a static conception of “soul” or self. He praises Orwell because, throughout the different experiences and provocations of his life, he was always able to stay “faithful to what he was,” and he always “managed to connect his old self and his new politics.” It is important for Walzer to insist on this static self because the only alternative, as he casts it, is the kind of detached or disconnected criticism that he identifies in Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. On this latter model, which Walzer is writing against, the critic must first “escape his own condition” and “universalize” himself before he joins a political struggle, so that “he transforms himself even as he transforms the world.” Now severed from all particularistic ties, this detached critic is more likely to take the kind of abstract view that places critical principles ahead of one’s fellow citizens—precisely Rorty’s critique of the postmoderns. What keeps Orwell connected, by contrast, is, in a phrase of Baldwin’s, his “moral center.” The lesson of what I have been calling detached attachment is that this moral center must not be understood statically.

Detachment need not mean a radical cutting off from society and membership; this is the fundamental point that Cavell and Kateb make via their readings of Emerson and Whitman. Nor must it translate into a groundless abstraction from all concrete others. Because he takes Orwell’s self-constancy as a standard, Walzer rejects Sartre’s approach to criticism because, on the Sartrean view, the critic must “invent himself as a social critic” and create “a new life.” The “failures” of Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s social criticism in the context of the Algerian war can thus be attributed to “the radical character of their self-criticism.” However, in rejecting the idea that the critic transforms
herself as she transforms the world, even though he does it for good reasons, Walzer needlessly rules out the possibility of detachment and self-criticism tout court.\textsuperscript{53}

The tension that causes Walzer to insist on a static, particularist self to which the critic can remain connected is the same tension that causes Rorty to privatize the creative energies of the self—namely, the tension between community and innovation, and the tendency for the latter to undermine the former. Emersonian moral perfectionism and the detached attachment it entails allow the critic both to offer a new vision of the world—as a higher, unattained but attainable state of current conditions—and to avoid the radical detachment that both Walzer and Rorty find pernicious because it understands these visions as a function of the self’s becoming. And, since the critic remains connected to her particular values as well as to the values of her world, the vacuity of the abstract, universalist conception is avoided.

The most eloquent and compelling statements of the position I want to affirm are Cavell ruminating on Emerson. Elaborating the relation to democratic life of the kind of detached attachment we have been discussing, he explains that the “training and character and friendship Emerson requires” should be understood as

preparation to withstand not its rigors but its failures, [the] character to keep the democratic hope alive in the face of disappointment with it. . . . The distance of any actual society from justice is a matter for each of us to access for ourselves. I will speak of this as our being compromised by the democratic demand for consent, so that the human individual meant to be created and preserved in democracy is apt to be undone by it.\textsuperscript{44}

The self-transformation or becoming implied in this last line is the key. Cavell further describes this as “an expression of disgust with or a disdain for the present state of things so complete as to require not merely reform, but a call for a transformation of things, and before all a transformation of self.” The possibility that this entails—and the one which is squeezed out of existence in both Rorty and Walzer—is the possibility of a democratic collective self-transformation driven neither by a “longing for total revolution” nor by merely “giving voice to the common complaints of the people.”\textsuperscript{45}

The cultivation of “a new mode of human being, of being human,” which Rorty invokes in his Emersonian moments, is on this view not something that “comes later than justice but that is essential in pursuing the justice of sharing another’s fate.” As I intimated above, the cardinal requirement of Emersonian perfectionism is “that we become ashamed in a particular way of ourselves, of our present stance,” not as a prelude to detachment and spectatorship, as
shame is understood by Rorty, but as “a sign of consecration to the next self.” Perfectionism, at bottom, is a way of relating to the world that enables us to see not only ourselves but, simultaneously and inevitably, the possibilities of our world “in a transformed light.” Anything less, I want to assert, will be inadequate to Baldwin’s program for achieving our country.

ACHIEVING OURSELVES: SELF-CRITICISM AS SOCIAL CRITICISM

In this final section, I will try to link the particular relation to the world of detached attachment that I have outlined to Baldwin’s project of democratic self-renewal. The promise of Rorty’s argument in Achieving Our Country is that it goes beyond providing a conception of social criticism by addressing the crucial phase of transformation and actual change that follows the critical moment. “Philosophy,” he has argued, in one of his more suggestive ideas for what should come after metaphysics, “should stop trying to provide reassurance and instead encourage what Emerson called ‘self-reliance’” (PSH, 34). In other words, philosophy should give up on the quest for certainty, as Dewey called it, and instead foster imagination, “thinking up interesting alternatives to one’s present beliefs.” Indeed, Rorty has recently suggested that we understand his pragmatism precisely as “an attempt to alter our self-image” (PSH, 72).

I welcome the appearance of these themes in Rorty’s thought, and I believe that he is on the right track here. On the most sympathetic reading, changing the way we describe ourselves—what he calls “self-redescription”—is in important ways a prelude to actually changing ourselves, and by extension, transforming our world. The question is whether his effort to wed the work of self-transformation to a patriotic orientation in a bifurcated way—namely, via his “firm distinction” between public and private, what he has called “a collage of private narcissism and public pragmatism”—is adequate to the task of achieving our country (ORT, 210).

Specifically, my central criticism of Rorty’s approach is that it divorces self-criticism from social criticism so as to betray both Baldwin’s fundamental insight that the politics of race in America “has everything to do with ourselves” and the creative ambiguity inherent in the idea of “the individual as America.” Although he values individual projects of self-creation and makes the necessary space for such projects a priority in his “liberal utopia,” by casting self-examination as an inherently private matter of no bearing on public life, Rorty renders the kind of deep introspection Baldwin thought essential to achieving our country superfluous to politics. In the end, Rorty’s conjunc-
tion of distinct modes of private self-creation and public moralism proves inadequate when juxtaposed to Baldwin’s engagement with a community and his demand that people change themselves.47

Part of the problem has to do with their divergent understandings of our relation to the past. Rorty’s appeal to Emersonian self-reliance is part of the project of extricating ourselves from unhelpful, past—mostly transcendental—ways of looking at the world. Once we have been “unfitted” for “listening to transcendental stories,” Rorty holds, it will be possible to substitute the idea of creating a better future for the attempt to escape time and history, and for philosophy to take up what Dewey called the social and moral strifes of the day (PSH, 68–69). Yet the phrase “self-reliance” merely serves as a proxy for hope in Rorty’s scheme. The independent spirit of Emerson’s “The American Scholar” that Rorty evokes here turns out to be merely a way of scoring antiphilosophical, with a capital p, points. On Rorty’s reading, one of the reasons behind Dewey’s evasion of representationalism was that it had become an impediment to developing a sense of self-reliance (ORT, 17). Changing the picture we have of ourselves is indeed for Rorty an important way of freeing ourselves from outmoded philosophical vocabularies of the past. When it comes to politics, however, his attitude toward the past is very different; we must tell “inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation’s past” if we are to produce the kind of optimism about the future that will keep citizens engaged (AOC, 3).

Baldwin once said that “an invented past can never be used.” There is a sense in which he is wrong about this: an invented past can be both effective and dangerous as a political force. But what I think he meant is that, to the extent that we still cling to “chimeras” and do not face certain unseemly facts about ourselves and our country, we preclude the possibility of change. By “change,” he meant not change “on the surface but in the depths . . . change in the sense of renewal.” Americans, he believed, are still “trapped in a history which they do not understand.” Until this past is not only understood but faced and confronted, America will remain captive to it and barred from meaningful change. This is why self-examination is needed: “The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, so history is literally present in all that we do.” If we are not capable of this self-reflection, Baldwin warned, we “may yet become one of the most distinguished and monumental failures in the history of nations”—an echo of Whitman’s belief that “the United States are destined either to surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism, or else prove the most tremendous failure of time.”48

There are occasions in Rorty’s writing where he leaves the door open for a method of identifying with one’s country not grounded in pride. For example,
at times it seems only necessary to “derive our moral identity, at least in part, from our citizenship in a democratic nation-state, and from leftist attempts to fulfill the promise of the nation” (AOC, 97). Indeed, he has asserted that “we should face up to unpleasant truths about ourselves,” but with the caveat that “we should not take those truths to be the last word about our chances for happiness, or about our national character” (AOC, 106). Yet the “idea of a national identity” and “the emotion of national pride” remain for Rorty in a complementary relationship and constitute the critical force behind political involvement. His statement about confronting past wrongs is followed by a reaffirmation of his call for “shared utopian dreams.” Not taking pride and “rejoicing” in one’s country becomes synonymous with admitting that one’s country is incapable of reform and abandoning the project of achieving our country (PSH, 252). Perhaps when it comes to a certain species of postmodernist, this assertion holds. But Baldwin provides a perfect counterexample where it does not. Rorty, however, mistakes the nature of Baldwin’s connection to America to be one of pride rather than love.49

To be fair, it also should be pointed out that Rorty intends the “episodes and figures” of the past to serve as ideals or exemplars to which the country should then endeavor to “remain true,” as hopes that the country would have to transform itself to fulfill (AOC, 3–4, 8). Yet while Rorty’s projection of hopes and ideals to spur collective change appears to echo the Emersonian idea of an unattained yet attainable self that pulls us out of our current state onto the plane of becoming, it fails to accommodate the necessary concomitant that “in criticizing my society for its relative disadvantages I am in effect criticizing myself.” The crucial point about perceiving the shortfall of one’s society in terms of its own ideals is that one feels that the “compromised state of society, since it is mine, compromises me.” This same insight lies behind Walzer’s mirror and Baldwin’s idea that whites’ estrangement from blacks is a measure of their estrangement from themselves. The “story of the Negro is the story of America—or, more precisely,” he adds, “the story of Americans,” because of this fact: “What we really feel about him is involved with all that we feel about everything, about everyone, about ourselves.”50

What makes Rorty’s pragmatism potentially so suited to Baldwin’s reading of American racial politics is that Baldwin’s idea of achieving our country is in large measure a matter of changing the self-descriptions of whites—that is, of altering their self-image. Baldwin argued that only once whites had abandoned the self-descriptions that rest on the assumption of black inferiority would “the Negro problem” cease to be “needed.” Here, existing “models of how to live” would not be sufficient, particularly those proffered by whites; “new standards” would be required, standards which will arise only from a “fruitful communion with the depths of [their] own being.” This is the Emer-
sonian theme of innovation through self-creation. Such ongoing transformation of our self-descriptions needs to be an integral part of the ongoing project of achieving our country.\textsuperscript{51}

But if the process of democratic self-renewal is an ongoing one, what becomes of the theme of commonality? For Baldwin, like Rorty, the idea of achieving our country entails a common identity. But for Baldwin, this identity can only come about through a continued confrontation with the past, not a prideful affirmation of some “dream country,” and through the arduous work of critical self-examination necessary for becoming who we are as Americans. It is worth noting that Baldwin, like Rorty, did think it important to recognize that “the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful,” but it is also “something of an achievement.”\textsuperscript{52} But to the extent that this recognition becomes a shield for taking refuge from the past and not a goad to continued struggle, it is an obstacle rather than a stimulus to achieving our country. The crucial difference is that the need to achieve an identity and to become who we are, to adapt a phrase of Nietzsche’s, is what binds us together, not the identity that has already been achieved itself. In other words, it is precisely a commitment to the (unfinished) American experiment that makes this project ongoing and gives rise to the continual possibility of democratic renewal, not a commitment to a static identity.

Baldwin never tired of pointing out what was wrong with the portrayal of the black condition depicted in Richard Wright’s \textit{Native Son}. Part of the reason it fails for Baldwin is that both Bigger Thomas and the well-meaning liberal whites in the story, like Jan and Bigger’s attorney, Max, never get beyond categories of identity and self-description that still “need” the problem of race. Wright’s depiction of Bigger’s all-consuming anger and hatred, and the pride endemic to the liberal hope of redeeming it, are two sides of the same coin of the denial of Bigger’s “human weight and complexity.” This is exemplified in Max’s summation at the end of Bigger’s trial. His address, Baldwin argues,

seems to say that, though there are whites and blacks among us who hate each other, we will not; there are those who are betrayed by greed, by guilt, by blood lust, but not we; we will set our faces against them and join hands and walk together into that dazzling future when there will be no white or black.\textsuperscript{53}

Baldwin describes this as “the dream of all liberal men, a dream not at all dishonorable, but, nevertheless, a dream.” The problem with an identification with this “dazzling future” is that it locates the work that needs to be done elsewhere than with we ourselves. This is the problem with Rorty’s appeal to a future “dream country” as well. Severing democratic renewal from renewal
at the level of our selves ensures that there will be no renewal, only reen-
trenchment in a different form. The work that needs to be done resides pre-
cisely “in the heat and horror and pain of life itself where all men are betrayed
by greed and guilt and blood lust and where no one’s hands are clean.” Love,
the “torment and necessity” of love, is the only bond capable of seeing us
through this work.34

CONCLUSION

I concur with Rorty’s assertion that “we have to work out from the networks
we are, from the communities with which we presently identify” (ORT, 202).
In his essays of the 1980s, this was for Rorty largely a negative claim, a way
of scoring points against transcendental and foundationalist approaches.
More recently, it has become the basis for the positive political program of
achieving our country where an inclusive, nonessentialist collective identity
of “we liberals” serves as the nonfoundationalist ground of a transformative
pragmatism. Yet too strong an attachment to “the communities with which we
presently identify” can become a recipe for self-protective stagnation rather
than collective self-improvement. “New conceptions of possible communi-
ties” and “new ways of being human” must be created, though without dis-
rupting the forms of attachment that make a transition from the present state
to some improved future condition possible.

This is the most sympathetic reading of Rorty’s notion of “Emersonian
self-creation on a communal scale.” Its greatest virtue resides in its commit-
ment to starting where we are now, rather than transcending it in the name of
some abstract principle. So often in contemporary life, criticism of America
from both the left and the right is expressed in a spirit of self-disgust that is
quick to distance itself from the present state of affairs. What postmodern
leftists who participate in the “America Sucks Sweepstakes” share with reac-
tionary voices of perpetual moral indignation like William Bennett and the
late Allan Bloom is this sense of deep revulsion to all or some part of where
and who we are now. Their criticisms are articulated not in terms of a trans-
formed vision of current conditions but some foreign set of values, whether it
is a Continental radicalism that is alien to the American spirit or some version
of man’s timeless truths. The important point that Rorty gleans from Bald-
win’s model of social criticism is that one needs to embrace one’s culture as
it is now, warts and all, in order to transform it. A commitment to achieving
our country is a commitment to what William James called the project of
“raising the tone of democracy,” a project that can only be fulfilled through
values generated from within. Rorty’s problem is that rather than starting
from where we are now, he seeks to ground this project in a romanticized past and who we want to become instead.\textsuperscript{55}

The question that remains is whether this kind of connectedness is best expressed in terms of a relation of prideful affirmation or one of a lover’s chastisement. As I have argued, only the latter enables the kind of detached attachment necessary for a truly transformative critique of democracy’s shortcomings from within. To be sure, \textit{pace} Rorty, the category of identity is indeed operative here. But Baldwin’s insight, which echoes Whitman’s \textit{Democratic Vistas}, is that we need to remain connected, not to a particular vision of America, or to the terms of a particular identity, but to the project of transforming it. The actual form this vision will ultimately take cannot be worked out in advance, nor will it ever be permanently resolved; it must continually be defined and redefined as the struggle for its achievement among many different voices proceeds. After all, the image that Whitman so eloquently evoked is one of democratic \textit{vistas}, in the plural. And the particular vista championed by Rorty—his liberal utopia—represents only one way, and not necessarily the best way, to “achieve our country.”

\section*{NOTES}


7. Daniel S. Malachuk argues that the end of the Cold War marks the point at which Rorty begins to recognize that there is still in fact work to be done in the liberal public sphere. Prior to this, it was enough in Rorty’s view to simply “cherish liberal institutions in the face of Soviet imperialism.” Since the fall of communism, Rorty increasingly sees pragmatism as a progressive force and relies more heavily on James.

8. For a lucid discussion of Rorty’s narrative of the left’s demise and many of these issues more generally to which I am indebted, see George Shulman, “Hope and American Politics,” *Raritan* 21, no. 3 (2002): 1–19.


10. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 323.


15. By contrast, Rorty has asserted that the “liberal ironist,” an embodiment of lived, pragmatist individuality, “thinks that recognition of a common susceptibility to humiliation is the only social bond that is needed” (CIS, 91). The problem here is that the ironist’s individuality never impacts the shared terrain.


24. Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” 43. He continues, “Individuals who concert their powers for low income housing, worker ownership of factories, better schools, better health care, safer water . . . and a thousand other common concerns of ordinary lives are experiencing a democratic moment.”

25. Rorty understands multiculturalism as suggesting 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.”(AOC 24).

26. Interestingly, Rorty often adopts the language of “forgiveness” in this context and accuses the postmoderns for believing that America has “sinned” beyond redemption. For a discussion of Rorty’s views on sin, see Shulman, “Hope and American Politics.” Shulman argues that for Rorty, sin signifies the past and its power, something that jeopardizes the hope and promise of a better American future.


29. Rorty, AOC, 3–4, 11–13. Walzer describes them in this way: “The argument is about ourselves; the meaning of our way of life is what is at issue. The general question we finally answer is not quite the one we asked at first. It has a crucial addition: what is the right thing for us to do?” in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 23.


35. Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 231n. I should point out that there are a few places where Rorty mentions that reading certain novels can “unsettle” readers—see for example TP, 323. However, in these instances, there is no mention of pride, which is precisely my point.


39. See Walzer’s chapter on Orwell in *The Company of Critics*; Rorty’s chapter on Orwell in *Contingency*; and his essay “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” where Rorty reads Dickens through Orwell and praises both for their connectedness as social critics.


41. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 43–44; Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 231. For Rorty’s view, see chaps. 4 and 5 of *Contingency*. Charles Molesworth makes a similar point in his gloss on Whitman’s line that “personal force is behind everything . . . the self is always present in what we see and desire and project, and that any politics that does not address the powers of selfhood is doomed to distortion.” See “Whitman’s Political Vision,” *Raritan* 12, no. 1 (1992): 102. A similar sentiment can be found in Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999): “No part of the self (deliberative reason, reflective self-consciousness) [exists] abstracted from substantive commitments” (14).

42. Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 121–21, 140–41; Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 6. Interestingly, Baldwin made a similar observation when he said he distrusted Richard Wright’s association with “the French intellectuals, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and company” because “ideas were somewhat more real to them than people.” See Baldwin, “Alas, Poor Richard,” in *Nobody Knows My Name*, 148.


45. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 46. The “longing for total revolution” is a phrase Rorty borrows from Bernard Yack (see Yack’s book by the same title). Rorty discerns it in anyone not willing to reconcile his or her political aspirations to his Deweyan “piecemeal reformism.” The last phrase is from Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 16. I am suggesting that his view of social criticism as merely “evoking the core values of his audience in a powerful and plausible way” is not enough to achieve the kind of transformation that Baldwin’s achieving our country requires. Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 89.


47. Baldwin, “In Search of a Majority,” 112. Shulman makes this point about Baldwin in “Hope and American Politics,” 18–19.


49. On at least one occasion, Rorty does evince a kind of political theory of love, although he does not relate it to the nation as such. He argues that “the moral tasks of liberal democracy” are divided between the “agents of love” and the “agents of justice.” We can think of the former as “connoisseurs of diversity” who endeavor to have society recognize the differences of all its members, and the latter as “guardians of universality” who make sure people who have been admitted as citizens are treated equally. “It is well for society,” he continues, that most of the time “justice has to be enough.” Still, the goal, which takes the form of his familiar partitioned stance, is “the
ultimate synthesis of love and justice . . . an intricately-textured collage of private narcissism and public pragmatism.” The recognition of difference thus becomes a private matter with no necessary connection to public life. See ORT, 205–10.

50. See Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 28; and Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone,” 18; see also *The Fire Next Time*, 44.

51. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 22, 96–97. One of the engines of this ongoing self-transformation is the “self-decentering” involved in our responses to the demands of the other. On this point, see Fred Dallmayr, “Beyond Fugitive Democracy: Some Modern and Postmodern Reflections,” in *Democracy and Vision*, 72–75. This may be what Baldwin had in mind when he remarked that “the only way [the white man] can be released from the Negro’s tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself,” in *The Fire Next Time*, 96.


53. Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone,” in *Notes of a Native Son*, 35.


55. William James, “The Social Value of the College Bred,” in *William James: Writings, 1902–1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), 1248. Though he admitted that tone was “a terribly vague word to use,” James held that “by their tone are all things human either lost or saved. If democracy is to be saved it must catch the higher, healthier tone.” For Rorty’s discussion of Jonathan Yardley’s phrase “the America Sucks Sweepstakes” and why he has borne the brunt of criticism from both the left and the right, see PSH, 3–22.