

Between Quarrel and Gratitude: Culture, Democracy, America

by

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"It's a wretched business, this virtual quarrel of ours with our own country." So speaks Rowland Mallet, the unfulfilled aesthete and unhappy consciousness of Henry James's early novel, Roderick Hudson (1875).¹ The cultural historian Constance Rourke quotes this Gilded Age confession of wretchedness in the preface to her American Humor: A Study of the National Character (1931) - - quotes the line in order to distance herself from it, from its fatalistic conviction that between America and culture lies an unbreachable gulf.² Art belongs to Europe, business to America: that's what Mallet means, and Rourke evokes the old genteel apothegm in order to deny it. Mallet's speech serves Rourke by contrast, and her opposition to it, the polarization she implies between Mallet's quarrel and her own grateful enjoyment, as she puts it, of the culture she studies, opens directly on the issues I want to discuss.

Those issues concern criticism more than art, and culture more than criticism -- ideas of culture which have undergirded American self-criticism. What I want to explore are some of the consequences which have flowed from the conflation in American criticism since the early nineteenth century of the terms culture, democracy, and America -- from the convertibility Whitman

insists upon between the word democracy and the word America.³ My theme concerns American exceptionalism in the sphere of cultural theory and criticism, and my purpose is to try out some observations regarding the current debate over the disquieting question, whether a program for cultural democracy can any longer rely on an idea of America for its leading figure of hope.⁴

A quarrel with America, Rourke continues in her preface, began after the Civil War, though traces had appeared earlier; "it has deepened; it has occasionally grown ponderous; it has often been bracing; at times it has narrowed to a methodical hilarity." These are attitudes, one might speak of them even as modes or genres, of cultural criticism (ponderous, bracing, sarcastic), which define her own undertaking by contrast -- her own splendidly unwretched business of embracing the native. "This book," she writes, "has no quarrel with the American character; one might as well dispute with some established feature in the natural landscape." Nor does she mean even to enter the quarrel by explicitly defending her subject, but only "gratefully" to pay a debt: "This study has grown from an enjoyment of American vagaries, and from the belief that these have woven together a tradition which is various, subtle, sinewy, scant at times but not poor."⁵

One of the most durable of the scholarly works responsive to Van Wyck Brooks's call in the late teens for a "usable past," Rourke's American Humor thus launches its argument by disassociating itself from two of the cardinal perceptions underlying that project: first, that, in Brooks's words, America has "had no cu-

mulative culture," and two, again in the voice of Brooks, that "the spiritual welfare of this country depends altogether upon the fate of its creative minds."⁶ As Joan Rubin argues in her important study of Rourke, American Humor engages in a polite but determined polemic with Brooks's view of an impoverished culture in need of regeneration (and regulation) from above -- a difference in stance toward "our country" as the subject of criticism and interpretation. In the brief space of her preface Rourke ventures onto a terrain of contested interests, between those who quarrel and those who enjoy gratefully -- indeed between antagonism and gratitude (according to Nietzsche, the proper attitude toward serious art) as motives for writing about one's own culture. And by attaching her enjoyment to "American vagaries" -- humor, she writes "is a lawless element, full of surprises" -- she implies something less than reverential toward the refined, the symmetrical, the regular and regularized: the idea of high culture and art presumably cherished by those who quarrel rather than enjoy. With a gesture so deft many readers miss it, Rourke erects a context for her book which implicates her readers in a secondary cultural drama. At stake are choices at once ethical and aesthetic, between conflicting ideas of cultural value and attitudes on the part of the historian or critic.⁷

To be sure, Rourke admired Brooks, wrote that no other critic had "given so strong an impetus to the study of popular forces in relation to the artist."⁸ Still, her subject alone implies a chiding rebuke to the politically-charged agon of the radical cultural critics: the continuities of folk and popular

traditions, and especially (more than half the book is devoted to this) the symbiotic relation, the intricate web of indebtedness of all the major writers from Emerson to Henry James, and contemporaries like Frost and even Eliot, to the bursting, lawless energies of everyday vernacular comedy in America. Even as she accepts the cultural mission of articulating a "usable past," Rourke revised the Brooksonian notion of an undernourished, repressed, and discontinuous literary-cultural life in the American past, as well as the corrolary notion that native popular culture, especially its frontier elements, represented only ideology in support of acquisitive, expansive capitalism, and narrow chauvinism. True, her own treatment of American humor eschews ideological analysis or assertion, except for the positive ideology of a polymorphous nativist art she expressed in the precept: "the artist often seems to need less of critical persuasion and sympathy than an unstudied association with his natural inheritance" -- the people's vernacular culture.²

Not a theorist but a pedagogue -- in part this may explain her unfashionableness today -- Rourke chose to foster association, what she also called "possession," by recreating in a lyrical prose which reached out to a broad popular audience, what she perceived as the vital links between folk life and artistic expression. A woman of the cultural left, modernist rather than antiquarian in her tastes, a friendly critic of 1930s Marxism, an anti-fascist activist in the years before her early death in 1942, Rourke pledged herself to the goals of democractic cultural criticism. Americans, she wrote "do not have that strong and nat-

ural association with evidences of the past which is still commonplace in other countries." By evidence she meant not only verbal culture but things, sounds, and movements -- tales, song, furniture, paintings and photographs, theatre and dance. When she died at age 56 she was at work on a projected three-volume "history of American culture" -- "evidence of enough native culture," writes Joan Rubin, "to convert a generation of disenchant-ed artists."¹⁰ In a review of the posthumus collection brought out by Van Wyck Brooks as The Roots of American Culture, Alfred Kazin wrote: "She sought what so many modern Americans have lost, what so many Europeans have established as the first principle of a human existence -- the sense of locality, the simple happiness of belonging to a particular culture."¹¹

I don't want to overstate the differences between Rourke and her friend Brooks, nor do I mean to applaud her work uncritically -- her sense of the "folk" and its "simple happiness" harbored an unreflective mystique, and the general absence of self-reflection in her work cannot be shrugged off.¹² But in her stance of gratitude toward what she may too uncritically assume to be the "roots" of a national culture, and in her refusal of the intellectual's stance of alienation, Rourke anticipated debates currently in progress. This is not to say that her formulation of a dilemma between hypostasized choices of attitude adequately represents the deeper dilemmas of democratic cultural criticism, which arise, as John Dewey understood best among twentieth century American democratic theorists, from the conceptual separation of culture from society, of art from experience, and

most fundamentally, the idea of democracy from its actualization in economic life (the realm of labor and the marketplace). The absence of any sign of such objective alienations from Rourke's work can help us better grasp what is wrong with her posing of simple antinomies, along with what may be right, restorative, perhaps prophetic, in her valorization of gratitude.¹³

In one light, to be sure, it makes no sense to speak of a "choice." Intellectuals may indeed will themselves into alienation as a self-initiation into the social construct of "intellectual" in capitalist regimes, but this is not to say that alienation is not real, objective, palpable, and that criticism is merely a grouch. A history of the fluctuation between quarrel and gratitude in American criticism would have to combine a social history with a sociology, an institutional account of criticism as a vocation, a class identity, with an social account of ideologies. The sociology would have to consider how the idea of culture itself enforces certain postures, and how the conjunction of culture, democracy, and America has enforced a particular set of intellectual difficulties. The simple polarization of Rourke's version of the choice would need to be disentangled from that history of roles, postures, vocational maneuvers, ideological alignments -- a continuing interplay of social blindness and insight. What follows intends to cut some paths toward such a history, by tracking Rourke's dilemma both forward and backward.

Quarrel and gratitude persist as an echoes. In "Criticism and American Cultural Repair" Robert Dawidoff raises the dilemma

into a matter of contemporary urgency. He writes that "cultural criticism is what we have come to call the genres of Americans examining America in light of their expectations for it....a priori standards to which American culture was meant to measure up." Criticism creates its object as failure; quarrel is pre-condition -- quarrel not so much with politics or social policies or the actual structures of marketplace exploitation, but with culture -- the dark chasm between theorized and actual democracy. "The assumption remains in force," writes Dawidoff, "that formal, high, and, especially, literary culture should provide the standards by which democratic culture should be judged...How little democratic reality ever satisfies the critics' hope for it."¹⁴

For Dawidoff, and for Andrew Ross in his recent book, No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture, as if by definition intellectuals have viewed the popular as "anti-intellectual," sealing themselves off from what Ross calls "the affective world of popular taste," and Dawidoff the "happiness" Americans get in their daily lives, even in their mass-produced music and dance and comedy. The "exercise of cultural taste," according to Ross, "remains one of the most efficient guarantors of anti-democratic power relations." While Dawidoff, an historian, addresses himself to an American Studies tradition of intellectual criticism, and recognizes an alternative line drawn from Jefferson through Emerson and Whitman to Dubois and Dewey, Ross, a literary critic, writes in a language immersed in post-structuralist and post-modernist "theory." He takes his bearings from Gramsci, Foucault, Bourdieu, Lacan, Derrida, and foresees "the withering away

of the universal intellectual" in the wake of Foucault's "specific" intellectual. Emerson and Constance Rourke get no mention in his book, and Whitman barely. Describing popular culture as a "site of contestation," Ross's voice is more representative of the current style of argument among academic radicals than is Dawidoff's more traditional American range of reference. But both call for intellectuals to drop the stance of alienation and adopt a new agenda, in Ross' words, "specific to the politics of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation." Both see the end of something -- older definitions of popular-democratic culture which have confirmed intellectuals in their alienation, their quarrel, and have prevented the accumulation (or recognition) of the kinds of debts toward actual culture -- debts of the sort Rourke designed her book to repay in gratitude.¹⁵

Dawidoff differs from Ross in his concern to salvage something from an American tradition -- a tradition of explicitly American democratic cultural thought all but swept away recently in the flood of European critiques. Identified as consensual, celebratory, and individualistic, a high-flown version of popular Americanism, the cultural visions of Emerson and Whitman in particular are described as complicit with "the American ideology," an exceptionalist doctrine fusing Puritan sacred history with Enlightenment liberalism -- a bourgeois ideology masquerading as American freedom. While this analysis, argued elegantly by Sacvan Bercovitch in his American Jeremaid, has proved a powerful critical tool, especially for ideological readings of rhetorical figures and patterns, it does leave us bereft of the democratic

cultural tradition several generations of intellectuals and radicals including the New Left of the 1960s had evoked as a dissenting tradition, against both "Americanism," the native version of capitalist ideology, and what Santayana called "the genteel tradition" -- the antagonism between a Europeanized intellectual and aesthetic realm and the vulgar sphere of everyday business and industry.¹⁶

The delegitimizing of Emerson and Whitman and their version of cultural democracy follows from the radical historicising, the calling of everything into question, which has recently captured the imagination of the academic intelligentsia -- a new generation of critics and scholars who define themselves by an aggressive Nietzschean skepticism toward all legitimacies founded on reason. "Only that which has no history is definable," concluded Nietzsche from his perception that "whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it." It is a vision of meanings always at risk in a contest of wills and of interests, no meaning capable of asserting itself as transcendent except on grounds of will, and thus discreditable by any other will. Such radical historicism discards all claims based on transcendent reason; it recognizes no transcendents, and suspects any such claim as ideology, a maneuver on behalf of disguised interests. But even as it discards old authorities, as Thomas Haskell has argued, historicism might also provide constructive alternatives in the form of a better balanced, more pragmatic sense of value and relevance. Moderated by a political

desire to seek a future in the past, historicist criticism might aim at achieving a more useable past rather than no past at all.¹⁷

Rourke's distinction between quarrel and enjoyment can help us better see and define contradictions which have dogged the democratic cultural tradition in American thought -- contradictions experienced as ambivalence toward the actualities of popular American democracy. For both postures -- judging the culture by what is missing; accepting the culture as one's own ground of identity and creativity -- arise from a common motive: to transform the idea of America into a cultural nationality, a place, a people, an ethos based on shared traditions, manners, habits of mind and feeling and action.

This motive itself generates contradiction. There is a certain value in considering language itself as historical action. Tension between quarrel and gratitude arises in part at least from the conjunction of the key terms: culture, democracy, America. Raymond Williams has shown that culture arose as a keyword in England in response to industrialization; the word came to stand for those harmonies of social relations and cultural ecosystems rapidly eroding under the pressures of industrial capitalism. Culture came to mean "whole way of life," something destroyed which might stand as a model for something new. It is what Van Wyck Brooks imagined as "a living culture," which in 1917 he wrote still survives "everywhere in Europe, in spite of the industrialization of society...It is because the social fabric is complicated enough for art and music and thought

to have an organic share in it that artists and musicians and thinkers develop as richly and beneficently as they do."¹⁸

For Brooks the beguiling image of organic culture symbiotic with a social fabric complicated enough to nourish art also projected an image of "nation" -- "a living, homogeneous entity, with its own faith and consciousness of self."¹⁹ This sense of culture as both organic and national lay at the base of the idea of a possible America Brooks shared with Rourke and others of their generation: a nation on the model of residual preindustrial ways of life. But as Randolph Bourne would argue, homogeneity was doomed to frustration in the face of uncontrollable multiplicity in the actual American population, whose only resources for an integral cultural identity counted on patriotic fervor and the debased commercial culture Brooks and his group deplored.

I will have more to say about this misalliance between the theme of cultural nationality and everyday life in the United States, but first, the collective idea of a lost culture of social wholeness needs to be seen in context with another current in the nineteenth century idea of culture, one which located wholeness not outside but inside individuals, in harmonious inwardness and individuality. In his Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1795), Schiller, for example, conceived of culture as a dialectical process in which antagonisms of real life appear as internal conflicts and divisions, and the "soul" is described a field on which rage the battles of history. But Schiller also argued that as an ideal, culture is itself implicated in this inner turmoil. Thus the very idea of a superior inner realm

inflicts a "wound upon modern humanity," a division between inner faculties and sensuous experiences equivalent to violent separations occurring in historical societies:

The essential bond of human nature was torn apart, and a ruinous conflict set its harmonious powers at variance....State and Church, law and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was separated from labor, means from ends, effort from reward. Eternally chained to only one single little fragment of the whole, Man himself grew to be only a fragment; with the monotonous noise of the wheel he drives everlastingly in his ears, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of imprinting humanity upon his nature he becomes merely the imprint of his occupation, of his science.

Schiller's originality, as Frederic Jameson puts it, was to transfer division of labor and class conflict from "the social classes to the inner function of the mind, where it assumes the appearance of a hypostasis of one mental function over against the others, a spiritual deformation which is the exact equivalent of the economic alienation in the social world outside."²⁰

Schiller insisted that culture, the source of the wound, can also be its healing power, that education in the free play of the senses can bring about "a total revolution...in the whole mode of perception," that culture, with its ideal of unity, can reunite work and play, matter and feeling, freedom and necessity -- can finally produce an "aesthetic state" in which individuals may

"grant freedom by means of freedom." The path of aesthetics leads to political solutions, "since it is through Beauty that we arrive at Freedom." Schiller raises culture, or the pursuit of freedom through beauty by means of aesthetic education, into a model of the universal state: "Here, then, in the realm of aesthetic appearance, is fulfilled the ideal of equality which the visionary would fain see realized in actuality also." But where, he asks in conclusion, does such a state exist? Only in "every finely tuned soul," or "like the pure Church, or the Pure Republic, only in a few select circles where it is not the spiritless imitation of foreign manners but people's own lovely nature that governs conduct."²¹

History disappoints culture, stands against it, defies its dream of wholeness. The idealist theory of culture holds together, then, a negative and a positive moment: a moment of alienation, Schiller's "wound," Hegel's cancelling or rending asunder of "all relations" which prevent the self from realizing its universality; and an activist moment of reform, Schiller's aesthetic education, and in a different register, Matthew Arnold's "aliens," those who have achieved their "best self" through the "inward operation" of culture (which for Arnold is objectified not in any existing social fabric but in "the best that has been thought and said") and undertake reform as "sovereign educators" of a society misruled and misshaped by its divisions of Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace.²²

Arnold's invention of a specialized terminology for cultural analysis reflects perfectly the historical task assumed by this

idea of culture: how to describe from within culture culture's relation to what it is not, what lies "outside" itself (in its own topographical delineation of the world in which it appears as an antithesis). Deriving its terms of analysis from itself, from behavior (manners, tastes, etc.) signifying inner states, culture thus constructs the world in such a way that only it provides correctives.

In the American version this disjunction between inside and outside, between the idea of culture and its social challenge, is made over into an even sharper polarization between Utopia and History, into an even more intense fluctuation between negative and positive moments, alienation and activism, quarrel and gratitude. To put the matter schematically, for Emerson and especially Whitman the already achieved political egalitarianism of the American polity founded on "natural rights" endowed the term America with a unique or exceptional power in regard to culture. Culture implied democracy; America provided an actual polity founded on constituted principles of equality (for propertied white males, at least, in the founding formulation). Yet America remained blind or unknown to itself. Once culture awakened America to itself, to the fact that it had already realized the conditions culture needs to achieve the externalization of inner harmony, then the true America would appear: a historical society signalling the end of history.

Culture would confirm and ensure what America promised: egalitarian society, social body united without distinction bet-

ween civil and political realms, between private life and the machinery of governance. Under aesthetic leadership America itself might be Schiller's "finely tuned soul," individuality writ large, or Whitman's epic "myself." Through an art of the common, the familiar, the low -- "the meal in the firkin; the meal in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and gait of the body" -- Emerson proclaimed in 1837, "A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men." Or in Van Wyck Brooks's less succinct, more passionate version eighty years later: "As soon as the foundations of our life have been reconstructed and made solid on the basis of our own experience, all these extraneous, ill-regulated forces will rally about their newly found center; they will fit in, each where it belongs, contributing to the essential architecture of our life. Then, and only then, shall we cease to be a blind, selfish, disorderly people; we shall become a luminous people, dwelling in the light and sharing our light."²³

America as culture, the fine tuning of countless equal souls, like leaves of grass: an aesthetic dream has clung tenaciously to the civil and political meanings of America, played a leading part in movements in the arts, in criticism, and with the flourishing of American Studies, in the academy -- and doubtless lies at the source of Mallet's wretched quarrel and Rourke's gratitude. The dream itself accounts at least in part for the very contradiction which results in the schizoid dialectic between dream and nightmare which has preoccupied virtually every

generation of artists and thinkers since the founding of the republic. For the same idea of culture which pledges universal equality, which the political idea of America pledged to Whitman a prophecy of fulfillment, inevitably sets itself against that which exists -- already existing democracy, the democracy of popular life with vulgarities and crudities and sheer happiness in physical pleasures. Quarrel cannot be helped; culture, as Hegel delineates its moves in his Phenomenology, is born in oppositions, makes its affirmations only through its negations. Culture "inverts" "vulgar views," Emerson wrote in "The American Scholar," and produces a privileged state of consciousness in which the mind is brought "to call that apparent which it used to call real, and that real which it used to call visionary." He put the relation between culture and practical democracy or popular life like this:

Men, such as they are, very naturally seek money or power, and power because it is as good as money, -- the "spoils," so called, "of office." And why not? for they aspire to the highest, and this, in their sleep-walking they dream is the highest. Wake them and they shall quit the false good and leap to the true, and leave government to clerks and desks. The revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture.

And Whitman in "Democratic Vistas," at pains to reconcile quarrel with enjoyment, resorts in the end to a rhetorical gambit by which the cold scrutiny of the moral microscope, which earlier in

the essay had diagnosed actual culture as a "dry Sahara," gives way to a phantasmic vision of the "coming unsped days" in which "we see our land, America, her literature, esthetics, etc., as, substantially, the getting in form, or effusement and statement, of deepest basic elements and loftiest final meanings, of history and man -- and the portrayal (under the eternal laws and conditions of beauty,) of our own physiognomy, the subjective tie and expression of the objective, as from our own combination, continuation, and points of view." Should this not happen, America will "prove merely a passing gleam" -- as he warned in the opening pages of the essay, "the most tremendous failure of time."

The rhetoric of the jeremaid, as Bercovitch shows us, employs dissent not for its own sake but on behalf of ultimate consent; it affirms the covenant by deriding the people for falling short of its high demands. To the extent that a similar logic operates in cultural criticism, to that extent America has been a disabling concept, for it clouds the eye of critics with distorting visions of a special, an exceptional destiny. When Whitman writes in "Democratic Vistas" that he "shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms," he implies not so much a sacred mission but a concept of culture as the trigger to conversion: culture as the realization of America as democracy, and democracy as America. Moreover by culture he does not mean what actually but putatively exists -- a diffusion of the idea of equality into manners, politics, family life, daily existence: "forms of art, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that exists." It means the creation by the literati of "an American

stock-personality." It means, in short, inverting vulgar views on behalf of culture. There is little in Whitman's essay to suggest that any basis for this transformation exists in actual culture apart from the diffusion of the political forms of equality -- unlike "Song of Myself" or "Song of the Open Road," where what exists suffices. Now, facing America after the Civil War, with corruption everywhere, and money-making "our magician's serpent," he confesses his dividedness, the contradictory nature of his views or vistas. The polarization of quarrel and gratitude lies at the base of Whitman's anguished thought in this troubled essay. "To him or her within whose thought rages the battle, advancing, retreating, between democracy's convictions, aspirations, and the people's crudeness, vice, caprice, I mainly write this essay."

If "Democractic Vistas" no longer inspires conviction as it once did for Brooks and Randolph Bourne and Hart Crane, is it because the convertability of America and democracy seems no longer credible, or even desirable as a cultural project? For does not the interchangeability of the terms democracy and America in effect mystify both terms, remove them from their actual histories of struggle and conflict -- and make the anti-democratic realities of racism and sexism and economic exploitation seem aberrations rather than structural features of a divided society? To view America in a secular way, as a society torn by conflicting interests, pulled apart by struggles over power and wealth, divided by color and gender and social class as much as by region and ethnic distinctiveness, its history shaped more by commodity

production and its deformation of labor and individuality than by sacral or cultural ideals, continually restructured by the privileged to maintain and further and reproduce privilege -- to view the society in the light of history cannot help but jolt the tradition in which the name America served as the necessary precondition for cultural democracy.

Has the convertability of America and democracy taken an ironic revenge by disabling democratic criticism from reaching outside its rhetorical consolations to rigorous social analysis -- from rising beyond jermemaid to programs for fundamental change and reconconstruction? The term America has made it seem that culture's enemy was false culture, the imitation, in Whitman's words, of Europe's "gorgeous history of feudalism." For all their exaltation of the affirmative features of culture, particularly the ideal of harmonious individuality which Whitman especially recreated as the central figure of his democratic-American mythos, celebrants of the democratic possibilities embedded within "America" have failed to see or acknowledge incoherence and contradiction -- how, for example, democractic individuality is has been appropriated as marketplace individualism: in John Dewey's words, "a perversion of the whole ideal of individualism to conform to the practices of a pecuniary culture." Other "perversions" (or are they inevitable and natural functions of any heavily armed nationalism?) include systematic acculturation known as "Americanization," and imperial arrogance directed outward in the name of a transcendent "America." "Once America thinks of itself as the only place of grace," as Werner Sollers

has written, "once true human universalism is narrowly compacted into the American Dream, it becomes an obstacle to its own self-declared transcendent ends."²⁴

Thus the impasse of cultural criticism which clings to an idea of America as its central trope. Those transcendent ends, must they now be abandoned? Another possibility may have opened recently in the theme and theory of multiculturalism, with its open negation of the traditional version of American universalism. It is worth recalling Randolph Bourne's increasingly pertinent argument in his essay of 1916, "Trans-National America." Bourne urges a reinvestigation "of what Americanism may rightly mean." "No intense nationalism of the European plan can be ours," he writes, and proposes "a new and more adventurous ideal: "Do we not see how the national colonies in America, deriving power from the deep cultural heart of Europe and yet living here in mutual toleration, freed from the age-long tangles of races, creeds, and dynasties, may work out a federated ideal?" The colonies of differences "live here inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. They merge but they do not fuse." Thus, he argues, "we shall have to give up the search for our native 'American' culture."²⁵

Bourne's alternative to cultural Americanism is to embrace the multiple cultural languages, the heteroglossia of the practical democracy of American streets. Dawidoff revives the program with his "goal of repair" which "must supplant the pleasures of isolation." What is required, he writes, is a cultural history which "repairs the division between the genres of cultural criti-

cism and the rest of the culture." Historicism might provide a constructive mode for an activist scholarship and criticism by desanctifying the terms culture, democracy, and America, submitting them to even more rigorous social and political reexamination. "The cultural question," writes Dewey, "is a political and economic one before it is a definitely cultural one."²⁶ The cultural question fluctuates; it encounters new conditions of possibility and negation in the form of consumer culture, mass culture, information culture, post-modern culture -- and most urgently, the multi-culture which at once promises an historic enlightenment and a profound decentering of "America." Clearly the old agonized duality of quarrel and gratitude no longer compels, except as a lesson in the pitfalls of conflating culture, democracy, and America.

¹ Henry James, Roderick Hudson (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1960), 40.

² Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of the National Character (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1931), ix.

³ Walt Whitman, "I shall use the words American and democracy as convertible terms." "Democratic Vistas," John Kouenhoven (ed), Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose (New York: Random House, 1950), 461.

⁴ A notion increasingly generalized in historicist criticism, "American exceptionalism" once had a quite specific designation: the theory that "special conditions" prevailing in American

society and culture accounted for the failure of socialism to take hold as a viable political alternative. For a recent review of this notion in its doctrinal and its figurative senses, and an important critique of conventional "American Studies" as mired in exceptionalist theory, see Michael Denning, "The 'Special Conditions': Marxism and American Studies," American Quarterly 38, 3 (1986), 357-80.

⁵ Rourke, 10.

⁶ Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," in Claire Sprague (ed), Van Wyck Brooks: The Early Years (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), 219-226.

⁷ Joan Shelley Rubin, Constance Rourke and American Culture (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Rourke, ix.

⁸ Rubin, 53.

⁹ Rourke, 302.

¹⁰ Rubin, 40.

¹¹ Quoted in Rubin, 194.

¹² See Gene Bluestein, The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), especially 66-81.

¹³ As Robert B. Westbrook points out, although Dewey never

worked out a theory of culture as an analytical concept, tantalizing references to such a concept appear throughout his writings. John Dewey and American Democracy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). See especially John Dewey, Individualism Old and New (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962 [1930]), and Freedom and Culture (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963 [1939]).

¹⁴ Robert Dawidoff, "Criticism and American Cultural Repair," American Literary History 1, 3 (1989), 665.

¹⁵ Andrew Ross, No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture (New York: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁶ Sacvan Bercovitch, The American Jeremaid (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," in Winds of Doctrine (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 186-215.

¹⁷ Nietzsche quoted in Thomas L. Haskell, "The Curious Persistence of Rights Talk in the 'Age of Interpretation,'" Journal of American History, 74, 3 (December 1987), 984-1012. In regard to historical democracy in America as an object of historicist criticism, Haskell remarks, 990: "Democracy is not an offspring of Reason alone: it not only can tolerate, it even requires a rather large dose of historicism's uncertainty, for if we felt that our knowledge of the good was epistemologically beyond question there would be no occasion for cultivating the democratic habits of tolerance and pluralism."

- ¹⁸ Raymond Williams, Culture and Society (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1960); Brooks, "Toward a National Culture, in Sprague (ed), 189.
- ¹⁹ Brooks, "Our Awakeners," in Sprague (ed), 203.
- ²⁰ Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1965), 39; Frederic Jameson, Marxism and Form (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 87.
- ²¹ Schiller, 132, 138, 140.
- ²² See G.W.F Hegel, The Phenomenology of Mind (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967 [1806]), "Culture and its realm of actual reality," 514-558; Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1971 [1867]).
- ²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" (1837); Brooks, "The Culture of Industrialism," in Sprague (ed), 202.
- ²⁴ John Dewey, Individualism Old and New, 18; Werner Sollers, Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 261.
- ²⁵ Randolph Bourne, "Trans-National America," in Olaf Hansen (ed), The Radical Will: Randolph Bourne, Selected Writings, 1911-1918 (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 248-264.
- ²⁶ Dewey, Individualism Old and New, 124; also see Freedom and Culture, 23: "The state of culture is a state of interaction of many factors, the chief of which are law and politics, industry and commerce, science and technology, the arts of expression and

communication, and of morals, or the values men prize and the ways in which they evaluate them; and finally, though indirectly, the system of general ideas used by men to justify and to criticize the fundamental conditions under which they live, their social philosophy."