

of fiction,” John Updike explained, it is distressing to learn that “what really counts is the aggrandizement of himself as a figure, a celebrity, a name brand.”

In keeping with Luce’s notion of America’s special place in the world, American authors who appeared on *Time*’s cover “tended to be defined as quintessentially [American] in their personality or subject matter,” Moran says. *Time* lauded Thornton Wilder, for example, for his ability to reproduce “authentic Americana,” and approvingly noted that John Dos Passos “attempts to organize [America’s] chaotic, high-pressure life into an understandable artistic pattern.” In addition, Moran says, the cover stories showed “an almost obsessive interest in the details of the writer’s popular commercial success,” with nary a hint that artistic excellence might sometimes go com-

mercially unrewarded.

Authors sometimes did say no. In 1954, Faulkner’s publisher urged him to agree to a new cover story in order to boost sales of *The Fable*. Faulkner, who had been “honored” in this way by *Time* once before, responded by asking for an estimate of “what a refusal would cost Random House,” saying he would gladly write his publisher a check to avoid the “distinction.”

Time had the “initially admirable” belief that culture was as much “news” as political and social events were, Moran says. But its cover stories “helped to create a kind of literary ‘star system,’” a forerunner of today’s blockbuster-oriented publishing scene in which a few “celebrity authors” receive vast amounts of money and publicity, while many “serious” authors find it hard even to get their books commercially published.

Rembrandt or Not?

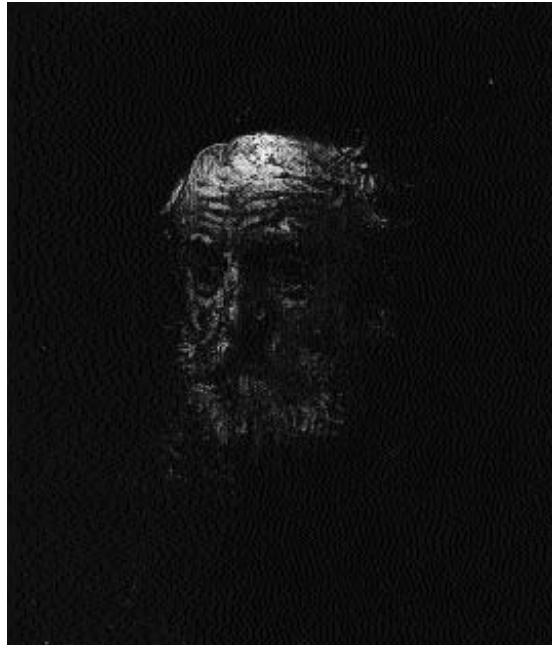
“Truth in Labeling” by Gary Schwartz, in *Art in America* (Dec. 1995),
575 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.

To call a painting a Rembrandt is to count it among the most prized creations of humankind. Until the mid-1960s, about 620 paintings possessed that distinction, with scholars, collectors, and museum curators agreeing that Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) had created them. Then a great purge began. Today, only about 300 paintings are considered indisputably genuine “Rembrandts.” Some 50 more are still in dispute.

The “Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt” exhibition last fall at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art highlighted the unsettling situation. It showcased 42 works once attributed to Rembrandt, of which only 18 are still unquestionably genuine. The Met’s curator of northern European paintings and its chief conservator disagreed so deeply about the other 24 that the museum took the unusual step of publishing two catalogues for the same exhibition.

The purge of ersatz Rembrandts began during the 1960s, explains Schwartz, a visiting professor of art history at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the author of *Rembrandt: His Life,*

His Paintings (1985). New analytical techniques, such as X-radiography, which can reveal previously painted areas beneath the surface layer, and pigment analysis, in which



Study Head of an Old Man was “definitely” an 18th- or 19th-century imitation—until tests showed the wooden panel was from c. 1630. It may be a genuine Rembrandt.

minuscule samples of paint are studied to learn their chemical composition, fueled the change.

In hopes of resolving the controversy, the Dutch government established the Rembrandt Research Project in 1969. Its experts would rule on authenticity and publish a corpus that everyone could agree on. But many curators—including the Met’s—rejected the verdicts, partly because the experts themselves were often divided.

Rembrandt’s own work habits and contemporaries complicate the authenticity problem. He painted in a range of genres and styles, he often supervised students who completed significant portions of his work, and his success inspired many excel-

lent imitations. Indeed, from the ashes of discredited Rembrandts, previously obscure painters such as Govert Flinck and Willem Drost have emerged and gained new appreciation.

Given all the uncertainties, Schwartz favors more honest labeling for the still-disputed Rembrandts. Don’t call them Rembrandts; label them instead with what is known of their provenance. Schwartz confesses that the “initial effect of such a change might be to stun auction houses, art dealers, collectors and teachers who have banked on” authenticity, but ultimately, he believes, they will come to recognize that a painting’s inherent quality depends on more than just the signature on it.

Do Critics Create?

“Richard Rorty Lays Down the Law” by Leon Surette, in *Philosophy and Literature* (Oct. 1995), Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, Journals Division, 2715 N. Charles St., Baltimore, Md. 21218–4319.

Among today’s literary critics, philosopher Richard Rorty has many admirers. A self-described “Deweyan pragmatist,” he thinks philosophers should abandon not only traditional metaphysics but also the early American pragmatists’ enthusiasm for the natural sciences, and instead adopt literary criticism’s “ironic” and “conversational” practices. While “enormously flattering” to literary critics, argues Surette, a professor of English at the University of Western Ontario, this proposal rests on a “highly selective” notion of literary criticism.

“For centuries,” Surette says, “it has been considered a moral duty for criticism to concede dominance and privilege to the object texts—the poems, plays, and novels.” This was true, for example, of the so-called New Critics of the mid-20th century, who eschewed virtually all knowledge of the author’s life and times and “prided themselves on being sensitive recording instruments whose readings were” free of “distortions” from outside the text. More traditional critics steeped themselves in the history and culture of the period in which the work was written in order to recover its original sense. In recent decades, however, theorists such as Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault have rejected this modesty and sought to put critical commentary on a par with imaginative creations, and critics on a par with artists. “Rorty buys into this cur-

rent trend—without, so far as I can make out, much *arrière pensée* [afterthought],” Surette says.

Literary critics have long seen their work as “the reinterpretation or redescription” of imaginative works, Surette notes. Rorty instead describes literary criticism as “the attempt to play off vocabularies against one another”—with each text and each critic in possession of a separate vocabulary. Rorty is not suggesting that critics “paraphrase the unfamiliar vocabulary of the artist into a familiar vocabulary,” Surette writes, because he believes that the sense of a text cannot be separated from its language. He sees the literary critic as a playful ironist, a kind of master of ceremonies. His ability to juggle different vocabularies finally enables him to create his own parallel discourses.

Rorty and the postmodern literary theorists he admires are trying to turn Plato on his head, Surette contends. In Plato’s *Ion*, Socrates asks Ion, a minstrel who recites epic poetry, “to choose between admitting on the one hand that he was an artist inventing what he only pretended to discover in Homer (and therefore a fraud), or on the other hand that he was out of his mind, possessed by Homer.

“Ion rather lightly chose to be considered out of his mind,” Surette writes, “and literary criticism has seconded his choice many times since.” Rorty and the current theorists,