

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,

Vermeer's Mission

Why did the 21 paintings by Johannes Vermeer (1632–75) recently exhibited at Washington's National Gallery of Art excite so much enthusiasm? James F. Cooper, editor of *American Arts Quarterly* (Fall 1995), offers an explanation.

It is possible, of course, to enjoy Vermeer's art purely on the aesthetic level. . . . But, ultimately, what one takes away from a Vermeer painting is a sense of the artist's sincere, humble desire to reconnect with the sacred, expressed fiercely on canvas without consideration of profit, career, or reputation. The small output of work during Vermeer's lifetime (only 36 known canvases), his reluctance to show them to potential clients who might not appreciate their spirituality, his dedication to craft and excellence, all attest to his mission.

This mission Vermeer discovered only through trial and error. He began as a painter of historical and religious pictures in the grand manner, only to discover that the spiritual and aesthetic qualities he sought in his work were to be found in commonplace objects within the Dutch home. View of Delft (c. 1661) depicts Vermeer's home town bathed in a translucent glow. Girl with a Red Hat (c. 1665) is one of the great portraits of Western art, rightly world famous through a myriad of reproductions. Even the most sensitive reproduction, published on the finest European presses, however, cannot fully capture the mysterious spiritual essence of Woman Holding a Balance [c. 1664]. No reproduction to date has captured the quality of light that shafts gently through the darkness of this humble Dutch interior, illuminating the frame of the window with a touch of gold that resembles part of a cross, and transfiguring the figure of a woman lost in thought as she holds a small weighing scale in her hand. This light, filtering through a window curtain, transforms a Dutch housewife into an archetypal figure of the Virgin Mary. A reproduction of The Last Judgment above her (a work owned by Vermeer, who supplemented his income as an art dealer) reinforces the religious allegory to weighing souls at the Last Judgment. A simple scene of a woman weighing pearls has been transformed by Vermeer's hand into one of profound, spiritual significance.

however, have simply chosen the other horn of Socrates' dilemma. They insist that the critics are artists, but, at the same time, they say they remain critics, whose works somehow arise from Homer, Dante, or Shakespeare. This having it both ways may not

bother postmodernists, but it does worry other sorts of literary critics, Surette notes—and Rorty has not shown them a way out of the dilemma. Instead, Surette warns, the much-admired philosopher is simply trying "to lay down the law" for literature.

OTHER NATIONS

Turkey's TV Revolution

"Packaging Islam: Cultural Politics on the Landscape of Turkish Commercial Television"
by Ayşe Öncü, in *Public Culture* (Fall 1995), 124 Wieboldt Hall, Univ. of Chicago,
1010 E. 59th St., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

For most of the 20th century, official Turkey has resolutely kept Islam in the closet. On state-controlled TV, evidence of the faith was seen only in weekly 15-minute homilies delivered by a state official in secular garb, and in limited mosque broadcasts

on officially designated holidays. The overall impression from what was shown (and not shown) by the Turkish Television and Radio Authority (TRT), reports Öncü, a sociologist at Bogaziçi University in Istanbul, was that Islam remained "a primordial force" requir-