IMPRIMIS 1844

Because Ideas Have Consequences
Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan 49242
December, 1986 Volume 15, No. 12

Renewing The Symbolic Contract

By Paul Mariani

Editor's Preview: Award-winning poet, author, and eacher Paul Mariani focuses on the importance of symbols in our lives, particularly in our understanding of he past and our own contributions to society. He liscusses the relationship of those contributions to anguage, "that complex symbolic currency we use daily and which we often take for granted." The symbols we revere and the language we use to illuminate them are angible signs of what we value in life as well as what we prefer, in Mariani's words, "to relegate to the dump."

Each generation makes it choices and evaluations ιbout what it wants to save and what it wants to relegate o the dump. The famous Unicorn tapestries, were educed to stable coverings for the duration of the French Revolution. These tapestries, the work of a 15th-century Belgian community of artisans laboring under master craftsman, had become by the end of the 18th entury a useless symbol thrown onto the heap as the leluge Louis XV had predicted drowned out the culture of the aristocracy. In this view of history, consider that museum basements with their revolving collections hemselves stand as symbols of fossilized symbolic contracts. True, the downward revision of symbols is ometimes made without an adequate accounting of alue, so that what is now thrown onto the image dump nay have once been thought worth killing for. Think or a moment about the various responses different ocieties might have to the burning of a cross, a Star f David, an American flag, Grant's face on a fifty ollar bill, the current exchange rate of Canadian currency. Each of these is a symbol and each receives its alue from what we are willing to pay for it. This is ot news, of course, but I think it is something about hich we must be periodically reminded, just as illness nakes us value our health the more.

And so with language itself, that complex symbolic currency we use daily and which we often take for granted. Because it is a kind of currency, language can be—and daily is—counterfeited for the sake of power and personal gain. It is what poets as different from each other as Edmund Spenser and Ezra Pound tried to warn us of, their voices becoming the more strident as the illness of corporate greed and the breakdown of a communal contract became more widespread and virulent. We have come in our time to distrust language in public places, a phenomenon which does not bode well for a working democracy. We believe we are lied to by representatives of the banks as well as by car salesmen. And surely the record of government officials on the score of public trust in our time is nothing either John Adams or Thomas Jefferson would have been particularly pleased with. The result is a corrosiveness in the fabric of our society which may eventually destroy

nprimis (im'-pri-mes), taking its name from the Latin term for "in the first place," is the publication of Hillsdale College's Center for Constructive Alternatives and the Shavano Institute for National Leadership. Circulation over 120,000 worldwide, established 1972. Complimentary subscriptions available.

our society, though we have learned, like the poor animals themselves, to adapt to a certain amount of toxic waste not only in our air and food and water, but—though no less tellingly—in our language as well.

Even a phrase like "symbolic contract" is be viewed by most Americans with either suspicion or, more likely, numbing indifference. Such issues simply do not seem to matter to us, we say, at least in any way that is going to affect our lives or our pocketbooks. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. The level of a society's culture, its art, the way it uses language and the ways in which the language itself creates our sense of reality do affect us and the very lives we live.

And yet, regardless of how our society ignores its poets, it still expects them to somehow counteract this corrosion of the symbolic contract by reviving language and its values to something like their former health. By poets, of course, I mean the conservators of the language which affects us all as members of a society: I mean our philosophers, our historians, our novelists, our teachers. In the *New York Sunday Times,* George Steiner called on American poets (by whom he also meant the larger community of writers) to re-evaluate their role in our society. One of the things he particularly warned us of here at home was that we, as members of a democracy, though guaranteed the right of free speech by our Constitution, run another risk, different from those faced in totalitarian states but no less insidious and destructive for all that: the danger of merely trivializing our literature.

If the poet is to escape the charge of triviality, it is necessary to take stock periodically, to re-examine both the seriousness of the poetic endeavor as well as the linguistic and symbolic contract which the poet maintains with one's society, one's world, and with the act of writing itself. Whom do we speak for, if we speak for anyone, and how are we to speak? Such questions must involve a prolonged examination of our role as poets—and by "prolonged" I mean a growing commitment which will last as long as breath itself lasts. The commitment itself will necessarily involve a hard and continuous look at our relationships with our world as well as with the language which holds each of us uniquely apart even as it binds us together in the human community.

Because it involves a dialogue between members of a society, the symbolic contract requires that society hear what the poet has to say, and, conversely, that the poet listen to society, not only to what that society says but equally to how it says it, so that the poet can then enter into the currents of that language and shape it in such a way that it reveals something significant about ourselves as a people and our own history. Hopefully, the poem should allow us to see ourselves more clearly in the words we use and in the way we piece those words, phrase by phrase, together. "Not until I have made of it (the language) a replica/ will my sins be forgiven and my/ disease cured," William Carlos writes in *Paterson.* "I must/ find my meaning and lay it, white,/ beside the sliding water: myself. . . ." Williams knew that what language gives us in return for spending it wisely is a glimpse at the truths about ourselves.

"Each generation makes its choices and evaluations about what it wants to save and what it relegates to the dump."

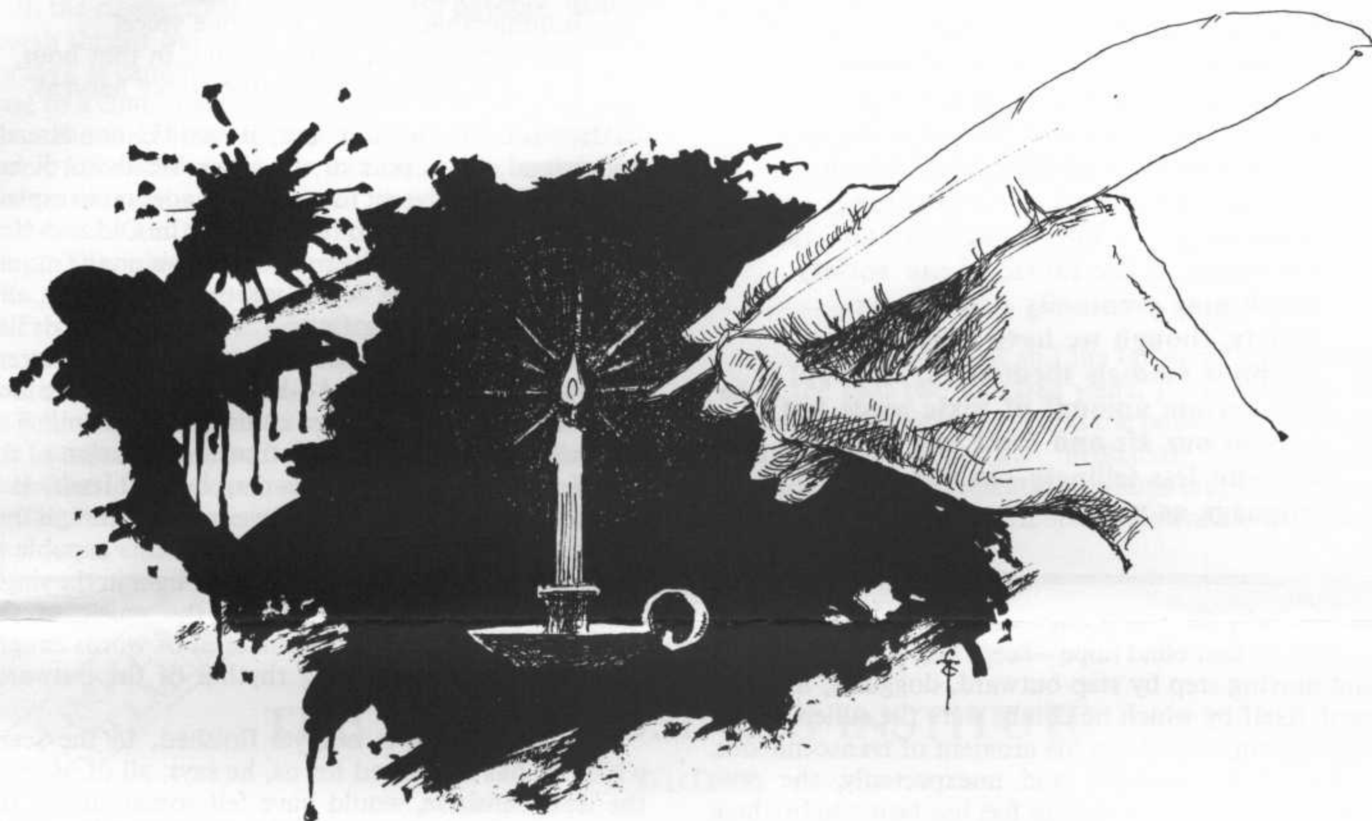
The poet, then, intent on rendering what he sees, by that act alone gives praise to the world and at the same time also renders a portrait of himself. But despite the anguished cry of Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, we cannot afford to awaken from the nightmare of history if to awaken is merely to enter the world of myth. (As attractive as it sounds to some of us, you cannot set up house in Disney World.) After *Ulysses,* Joyce opted for the world of dream, the result being the brilliant narcissistic echo-chamber of *Finnegan's Wake,* but that way, it seems to me, lies a labyrinthine dead-end. What the poet must attempt instead is to bear witness to his history as honestly as he can without succumbing to the extremes of optimism or despair. The act of the poem can mean a constant and deepening renewal of the symbolic contract with the people, in which the poem itself acts as witness. For it is in our poems, Williams has reminded us, that those coming after will know who and what we were as a people.

And the poet will, if his words are to survive the moment of his writing, sooner or later have to stand up and be counted. This is very hard to do because the poet really has no more guarantees than the next person that what he or she stands for is the truth. "What is truth?" a mocking Pilate asked Christ shortly before he gave the order to have him crucified, and the mockery of the question has reverberated down the ages,

About the Author

A well known poet, Paul Mariani is also a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts where he teaches twentieth century British and American poetry courses. He is the author of eight books and dozens of articles and reviews. Dr. Mariani has received particular critical acclaim for his biography, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (1981) featured in the *New York Times Book Review* and nominated for the American Book Award. His most recent publication is *Prime Mover: Poems* (1985).

ike a word dissolving in the caves of Malabar. Seamus Heaney, one of our foremost contemporary English-language poets, has tortured this question back and forth in his poetry for twenty years in attempting to bear witness to the vicious civil strife in Northern Ireland, a parochial affair—as Yeats before him knew—with international implications. The specific question for him has been how to bear witness to the wrongs inflicted on his people, the Catholic minority in north-



ern Ireland, and at the same time bring a necessary distance and more universal perspective to the larger political issues at stake. He has also had to learn how to speak so that he can be taken seriously yet not be perceived as being so much of a threat that—as happened to Garcia Lorca during the Spanish Civil War—he becomes a mark for one of the extremist factions and so winds up as one more slashed and hooded victim in a bogfield. For one truth which has not changed much in the last several thousand years is that it is difficult for any poet to go on singing with his throat cut.

If it is the role of American poetry in our time to bear witness, a role thrust upon us as a people who have willy nilly come of age, to address serious issues seriously, what will this mean for American poetry? The twenty-year experiment with what we call "confessional poetry" is behind us now, as is—hopefully—the more recent poetry of linguistic narcissism and escapism. We had better be aware of this if our poetry is not to be relegated to the dust bin in the coming millenium which is, after all, only a little more than a decade away. Will the voices of the new world and a sign of their times be Neruda and Paz and Parra rather than Ammons and Ashbery and Merrill? And will our own poetry turn out to have turned prematurely decadent, lilke the face of a man who keeps his boyish looks until he wakes up one morning gray-faced and old, without ever having experienced the vigor of middle age? I hope not.

We must reach outward beyond ourselves at the same time that we maintain a deep humility: moongrasp and earthshod as it has been since the early anthropoids hunkered in the mud, staring up at the nailparing of the moon. And since we are children of the Romantics, let us consider a passage from Wordsworth as an emblem of the symbolic contract the poet must be continually renewing. At the conclusion of *The Prelude,* Wordsworth recalls a time from his youth when he made the ascent up Mount Snowdon, the highest peak in Wales, during one midsummer's night. He thought to do this, he says, in order to watch the sun rise from that spectacular and sublime vantage.

In darkness, and accompanied by a friend, a shepherd guide, and the shepherd's dog, Wordsworth's small party begins the climb up the mountain in dark and fog, the poet not even sure that he or the others will be able to see the sun rising for all their effort. There is nothing at all spectacular about the journey: some small talk among the men and then silence as each

moves back into his own thoughts. Only once is the silence broken as they climb upward, and that by the barking of the dog letting the others know it has discovered a hedgehog among the crags. What heightens even this unspectacular event, Wordsworth insinuates, is the unfamiliar worth and the dark he is surrounded by, which seems to deepen as each man moves on now alone. Only the poet's eagerness to move beyond the darkness—that blind hope—keeps him going, head bent and moving step by step outward, doggedly, as if the earth itself by which he climbs were the sullen enemy holding him back from his moment of transcendence.

"Because it is a kind of currency, language can be — and daily is — counterfeited for the sake of power and personal gain . . . In our time, we have come to distrust language in public places, a phenomenon which does not bode well for a working democracy . . . The result is a corrosiveness in the fabric of our society which may eventually destroy our society, though we have learned, like the poor animals themselves, to adapt to a certain amount of toxic waste not only in our air and food and water, but—no less tellingly—in our language as well."

And then, suddenly and unexpectedly, the poet notices that the ground at his feet has begun to brighten and with each step to brighten more. He looks up, and there, just there, he sees. . . . But let Wordsworth speak for himself:

The Moon hung naked in a firmament
Of azure without cloud, and at my feet
Rested a silent sea of hoary mist.
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still ocean; and beyond.
Far, far beyond, the solid vapours stretched,
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the main Atlantic, that appeared
To dwindle, and give up his majesty,
Usurped upon far as the sight could reach.

A heavenly ocean, made up of the full summer's moonlight reflecting back off the top layer of the fog below, out of which the poet had just ascended replaces, for the moment, the might of the North Atlantic, overshadowing and usurping its majesty. Now it is the queen of night which takes precedence over the masculine sea as she seems to gaze "from her sovereign elevation" upon the "billowy ocean" of mist and fog. All is meekness and silence. Or almost all. For, as the poet gazes on this heavenly vision, he becomes aware of the sound of water from a rift—some "fixed, abysmal, gloomy, breathing place." Once made conscious of that intrusion from below, it becomes to the poet's sensitized ear nothing less than a counter-force to the heavens' serenity, a roar

of waters, torrents, streams
Innumerable, roaring with one voice!
Heard over earth and sea, and, in that hour,
For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens.

The vision is fleeting, but, if we did not already understand the import of the scene Wordsworth has been at pains to present to us, he now goes on to explain what is in effect his own rewriting of the Old and New Testament versions of the transfiguration on the mountain. It is an emblem of the poetic imagination, this scene, feeding "upon infinity" as the poet broods like God over "the dark abyss" before the creation, intent on listening for the voices—language itself—"issuing forth to silent light/ In one continuous stream." The symbolic contract is, then, the transubstantiation of the bread of language into a meaning beyond itself. It is this towards which the language rises and, though that sound will never reach the heavens, seems capable at moments of lifting itself into the silent light in the single and continuous stream which is the music of the imagination, the turn and turnabout of words caught up in the all-encompassing rhythm of the outward-spinning poem.

But Wordsworth is not yet finished. In the scene which he has re-created for us, he says, all of us, even the least sensitive, would have felt something of the power of what had transpired that night. This ability to begin with the quotidian—a shepherd's hut, a becalming fog, the bark of a dog who has uncovered a hedgehog, the doggedness of three men trekking up the mountain—and to transform it all, lifting us the reader not only by the scene itself, but by the subtle modulation of the language as it rises into a higher key: This is Wordsworth's own masterful usurpation of the Miltonic sublime.

"The level of society's culture, its art, the way it uses language and the ways in which the language itself creates our sense of reality do affect us and the very lives we live."

And this, Wordsworth suggests, is what the strong poet is capable of engendering in the reader as both

enew the symbolic contract of the poem. For the poet as the ability to deal with all experience and not just vith the sublimity of mountain scenes in a similar ashion, as Wordsworth himself demonstrated again nd again, whether he dealt with boyhood memories r a nutting expedition or a chance meeting with a leech atherer in the woods. Wordsworth's is essentially a acramental vision of nature, and all images are herefore capable of revealing their larger symbolic ignificance in the hands of the capable imagination.

In the closing lines of the Snowdon passage, Words-vorth throws out to us his heirs a challenge. Poetry, e says, is capable of a profound moral dimension so hat by a continual meditation, not on sensible impres-ions (he would have included an over-reliance on elec-ronic information systems, cinema, video, and music) ut on the rhythms of life itself, it can offer, like prayer nd meditation, "that peace which passeth understan-ing." This is his own claim, and, as with T.S. Eliot after im, we know from what source he has lifted his words. n fact, he tells us further, the poet must come at last o rely on "moral judgments which from this pure ource/ Must come, or will by man be sought in vain."

And what is this pure source? Tellingly, Wordsworth as purposely skewed the syntax and pronominal eference in these closing lines (as he has done before n *The Prelude*) so that the pure source refers co-equally to the Holy Writ and the informed poetic imagination. We may take issue with Wordsworth's high claims for poetry, but for him, as for Emerson, Whitman, Brown-ing, Tennyson, and Arnold after him, the poet's moral obligation both to himself and by extension to others was very great indeed.

"What the poet must attempt instead is to bear witness to his history as honestly as he can without succumb-ing to the extremes of optimism or despair. The act of the poem can mean a constant and deepening renewal of the symbolic contract with the people, in which the poem itself acts as witness."

And while the world and the language have chang-ed in the past two hundred years, I do not think the major poets believe any less in the powers of the poetic imagination, though political, ideological, psychological, and scientific systems may have altered the poetic and metaphoric strategies available to poets.

LIMITED ENROLLMENT

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Let us move forward in time some hundred and fifty years to consider for a moment Wallace Stevens' late claims for the single candle of the imagination at nightfall, how in a time of radical doubt he still opts for "the obscurity of an order, a whole,/ A knowledge, that which arranged the rendevous," whether we call it the self or that obscure nameless "other" he is willing now to summon up by the name of God. Having tried for forty years to find a meaning which would suffice, he seems satisfied, finally, like the contemplatives, to dwell together with that obscure Other in the growing dark, "In which being there together is enough."

An old man wrapped in a shawl at evening, in a room lit by a single candle. We are a far cry from the poet ascending the sacred mountain into the light of the full

"Eventually it is up to us to do what we can to make sure that time chisels us as we would want, so that the myth we leave behind us is one to which we can add our signature. To do that, we will need the best models available, and the best models are still the classics, those works which have survived in the crucible of time."

moon. Nevertheless, out of the essential poverty of the human condition, Stevens has found a sustaining solace for himself and for us. And this revaluation, this too, is a renewal of the symbolic contract, in a language which, even if we do not understand its syntactic swervings and complexities, its intricacies of doubt, still soothes us with an honest music.

Is what I have said too insistent for contemporary American tastes? Is it not out of keeping with a view of language with affinities to the big bang theory of the universe, where, the more we stare into the heart of the word, the more it dissolves, like the blow-up of print, into shades of black and white, atoms shimmering in a state of constant unrest as they continue, like the stars themselves, to fly outward from the center? Do we not all take it for granted today that in this post-Heisenbergian world of ours language keeps shifting away from us even as we try to hold it from slipping through our hands?

And yet language does not change so fast that the human spirit, which seems to me to be the only force capable to moving at a rate faster than light, cannot easily keep up with language's continental drifts. If therefore the imagination is still capable of discovering an obscure order of what is possible, then we come back once more to the idea of a symbolic contract, to that which makes an order acceptable. Listen to what Joseph Brodsky has said in a recent interview. "Basically," he reminds us, "one writes not about what surrounds or happens to one; it's a very Marxist attitude that the actual living conditions determine the operation of the consciousness. Obviously, it's true, but only up to a certain point, after which the consciousness, or conscience, starts to determine the nature of the living conditions, or the attitude towards them, anyhow."

When we were young, the world shaped or misshaped us as it saw—or did not see—fit. But as we get older, we learn to shape our world according to our own best lights. Eventually it is up to us to do what we can to make sure that time chisels us as we would want, so that the myth we leave behind us is one to which we can add our signature. To do that we will need the best models available, and the best models are still the classics, those works which have survived in the alembic of time's fire. We are jack, joke, poor potsherd, Hopkins wrote after he had undergone the ordeal of near madness, the record of which we have in the terrible sonnets he cared to let no one see while he lived. This realization of our mortality is our tie to what Wordsworth called the rift of earth, and—it seems—we are indeed patch, matchwood and immortal diamond.

But in the list of things to be burned in Nature's Heraclitean bonfire (the bonniest thing being ourselves) Hopkins' violent pun reminds us there is also that about us which abides. For at its best the poem must still remind us that, whatever else we are, we have value, we have within us that which is immortal diamond. So the poet, it seems to me, must believe, or else he is damned to move—as few poets are unreservedly willing to do—towards a killing nihilism. If we are poets, the tongues of our communities, then our earthbound barks and animal grunts and blurts and stutters must also bear witness to what transpires in the Heraclitean fire and light of our remaking, a remaking which occurs largely in the words, and in the signs, we make our own.

DONOR NEWS

THE NEW TAX LAW:

As you are aware, the new tax law will affect the amount you may deduct on your federal tax return for charitable contributions. By giving now, you will still be able to take advantage of existing regulations, particularly if your gift is in the form of stock or appreciated property.

A Christmas Potpourri

nce 1972, IMPRIMIS readers have had access to the pinions of a number of thinkers addressing a wide riety of topics. These quotes selected from presentaons printed in each year's Christmas issue, reflect that riety and provide a valuable perspective from which consider American life and values.

There is No Urban Crisis"
. Stanton Evans - 1972

". . . the loss of liberties implied by so much conntrated power and so many coercive programs is the al 'crisis' in our society, far surpassing the imagined isis of the cities."

A Post-Agnew View of Media Credibility"
hn Chamberlain - 1973

"As a people we are all too prone to identify a hilosophy, a Weltanschauung, with a man, ignoring e fact that ideas stand wholly on their own. We duce our knowledge to a symbolic shorthand in pernality. . ."

The Noble Lie and The Women's Movement: quality Will Be a Long Time Coming"
r. Susan Leeson - 1974

"Unless new sets of myths more in accord with isdom are developed for the governing of modern civil ciety — to say nothing of the structure of the modern mily — the 'liberation' of women will be impossible."

Bureaucracy vs. the Private Sector"
eorge C. Roche III - 1975

"How we earn our livings, plan our lives and educate r children are all decisions made more and more by e public sector. Somewhere along the way we have rgely lost the problem-solving capacity, the diversity d the freedom which the competition and the volunry association of the private sector provides."

"We have sought to preserve equality with dignity, d to encourage the recognition of equal worth and utual respect. It would be a betrayal of our entire story if we now surrendered our freedom and dependence, and meekly submitted to the thousands pages of detailed rules and regulations which the ireaucratic mind seeks to impose on us."

"The Something-For-Nothing Syndrome"
Leonard E. Read - 1976

"Rising above the prevailing mediocrity requires of the individual that he or she recognize that a good society stems exclusively from the habit of right thinking and doing on the part of its citizens. . . .To rise above mediocrity is nothing less than aligning one's self with reality, that is, participating right now in an input of thoughtful, responsible citizenship that makes an increasing take-out possible not only for self but for generations to come."

"The American Food Machine and Private Entrepreneurship"
Earl L. Butz - 1977

"We must not be lulled into believing that somehow we will be able to exist as an isle of affluence in a sea of human misery. A hungry world will not allow it."

"International Cooperation"
Edward Teller - 1978

"From energy to food to weather it has become very clear indeed that all of us living on this planet are neighbors, and we'd better find ways to behave as good neighbors."

"The Continuing Promise of America"
Jay VanAndel - 1979

"People still have faith in themselves and their ability. They have only given up on the politicians in power. They do not show symptoms of malaise. They want the skeptics, the doomsayers and the government to get out of the way so that they can get on with the business of fulfilling the promises of America."

"The Moral Sources of Capitalism"
George Glider - 1980

"Throughout history, most of mankind has lived cramped, impoverished lives in materially affluent countries because of an absence of the metaphysical capital that is most crucial to progress: the trust in others, the hope for the future, the faith in a providential God that allows freedom and prompts the catalytic gifts of capitalism."

"Capitalism Under the Tests of Ethics"
Arthur Shenfield - 1981

"The morality inherent in the institution of private property, and embodied in respect for the sanctity of contract and in the work ethic is cogent evidence for the positively moral effects of capitalism upon the behavior of individuals."

"The Only Way to Peace"
Winston S. Churchill II - 1982

"There is one condition, however, even worse than a balance of terror, and that is an imbalance of terror. . . .

"Yes, we have peace as our objective. But let us do it through our strength, and let us have our aim multilateral disarmament, not any unilateral freeze on unilateral disarmament, which could only be catastrophic."

"I, Pencil: My Family History as Told to Leonard E. Read" - 1983

"The lesson I have to teach is this: *Leave all creative energies uninhibited.* Merely organize society to act in harmony with this lesson. Let society's legal apparatus remove all obstacles the best it can. Permit these creative know-hows freely to flow. Have faith that free men will respond to the invisible hand. This faith will be confirmed."

"Punk Rock, Prufrock, and the Words We Live By"
Tom Landess - 1984

"That is what Odysseus's language says of his nature, that he holds firm to that middle ground in the hierarchy of being where many has always stood, where he is something more than animal, something less than angel."

"America's Cracked Mirror: The Theatre in Our Society"
Raymond Pentzell - 1985

"Simply, we cannot escape the demands of worth by chasing mere economic 'health': worth measured by standards of ethical truth, intelligence, authentic feeling, or artistic form. . . . It is, I think, mostly a matter of envisioning, from our standpoint within tradition, what to seek afresh — and then doing the seeking with honesty and acumen."

Thoughts . . . .

from George Roche

Ideas Still Have Consequences

The recent elections were a disappointment for those of us who had been encouraged to see the overall direction in which the Reagan administration has attempted to move our country during the past six years.

It's hard to avoid shaking our heads in bewilderment at the most popular president in recent memory losing control of an already narrowly-held senate. And the many Republican victories at the state level do little to clear a very confusing political picture.

"What can American voters be thinking?" we might ask. How can they so love Ronald Reagan and then impede his ability to complete his programs?

Perhaps it's more important than ever to keep in mind historian Richard Weaver's observation (with which Hillsdale is so closely identified): "Ideas have consequences."

We might protest that ideas seemed to have very little to do with this fall's election results. But we should take solace in the fact that if the ideas represented by the Reagan presidency are truly worthwhile, they will prevail over the long term.

Because in the end, it is ideas that move the world, not political parties or individual political figures, no matter how charismatic, popular or even beloved.

It was a vision of America—a set of ideas effectively expressed—that brought Ronald Reagan to the White House in the first place. And now, during the final months of the president's time in office, it is for those of us who champion such ideas to find new ways of expressing them—clearly, understandably, persuasively.

That's what we try to do through the pages of IMPRIMIS as well as in the various programs of Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives, Shavano Institute for National Leadership, the Von Mises lecture series and the Family Business Institute.

Let me assure you we will not be discouraged from fulfilling that mission, no matter what the results of any election. I hope we have your support.

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