



Richard M. Weaver Award winner Josef Pieper (l) and T.S. Eliot Award winner Octavio Paz (r) pose with John Howard and Thomas Fleming.

The poetry of tradition is rooted in human occupations as they are pursued from dawn to dark, from season to season, on land and sea, through harvest and winter, in war or peace. It is associated with festivals and rituals, both sacred and secular; and the distance between sacred and secular is not forbiddingly immense, as in our modern times. It is an art designed for oral performance, preserved in human memory and the oral tradition that also preserves ballad and folk song; and maybe it is lost for that very reason. And even when written by known poets, great poets indeed, it still reflects the standards and qualities of a poetry sung or spoken rather than a poetry read with the eye only. It has a place in life, a use in life; it is not a fancy thing, not a luxury, not a toy, not sheer entertainment—though it has the faculty, all the same, in Sidney's phrase, of holding children from play and old men from the chimney corner. It is a recognized function of civilized life . . .

—from Donald Davidson, "The Lyric of Tradition,"
December 1989

The false mysticism of an arbitrarily constructed jargon as well as the exactness of a pseudo-philosophical scientific terminology—both are making us forget that the road leading from true philosophy to genuine poetry has already been paved: It is only

the water of plain language, by its undemanding simplicity permitting the light to penetrate it to the bottom, that is capable of being changed into the wine of poetry.

—from Josef Pieper, "On Clarity," April 1988

Speaking for myself, I find that both high culture and moral philosophy are too often in the hands of people who, while they have excellent judgment, have a limited sense of humor. The arts of ridicule and satire can be employed to demolish vulgarity, stupidity, crude and cruel behavior. Ridicule is a strong and effective weapon. It should, I think, be studied as a means of expressing an honest literature in the world today.

For myself, moreover, I cannot dismiss any manifestation of mass culture *en bloc*. We should always observe; we should find what is preservable and precious among the welter of cultural phenomena with which we are constantly bombarded. This needs self-discipline, it needs self-training on the part of those gifted with ingenuity of approach and with comprehension. Culture, after all, concerns the human spirit. A too narrow and severe discrimination can tend to annihilate ourselves, everything around us. And all to no effect.

—from Muriel Spark, "Living With Culture," April 1993

In life, of course, there are many forms which are meaningful in themselves and of great value. I think, for instance, of good manners. Some of my college students of the 1960's, believing themselves to be naturally good and loving, rejected good manners along with certain other things, such as attractive dress and correct grammar, which they believed to be artificial. That was a sad mistake. Manners are no more coercive than a dance step is coercive, and indeed they are liberating: Seating ladies and opening doors for people, and writing thank-you notes to grandmother, are acts of compliance with a code, but they also facilitate social dealings and the growth and expression of true kindness. The forms of religion can also be benignly enabling. Eleanor Clark, when living in Italy, found herself drawn toward the Roman Church, and she asked an Italian Catholic friend how she could best find out whether Catholicism was for her. The friend said, "Go to Mass. Kneel when the others kneel. Do and say what the others do and say. Ultimately you will have a Catholic experience."

—from Richard Wilbur, "Good Manners, Good Literature,"
September 1997

THE UTOPIAN NIGHTMARE

If we cannot expect the peace people to listen to reason, it is because theirs is a movement springing from the decadence of Christian life and from the moral paralysis of those whose lives have been robbed of any transcendental dimension. The curious belief of the peace people that the specter of nuclear annihilation can be exorcised by a series of public moral gestures becomes intelligible when we attribute to them a profane variation on Christian eschatology, from which divine providence and original sin have both been deleted, leaving only a fury of moral activism and the groundless certainty that the obdurate realities of history and human nature can be overcome by the sheer power of moral commitment.

—from John Gray, "The New Eschatology of Peace," April 1989

Advocates of collective security who wish to substitute concepts of "justice" for "national aggrandizement" greatly underestimate the ability to win wide acceptance of what constitutes justice when vital interests clash. The same problem of subjective interpretation applies to branding one side or another as the "aggressor." The related principle, that borders are never to be changed by force, is tantamount to proclaiming that the present divisions of the world are so perfect they should be frozen in time. This is untenable, as the world has always been a dynamic system, something of which Americans should be well aware given the role westward expansion has played in American history and mythology. The application of universal ideals (which are, in fact, not universally accepted) divorced from practical

politics and concrete considerations of security, geography, resources, and aspirations is simply unsuited to the world as it is.

—from William R. Hawkins, “*The Surrender of Political and Military Sovereignty*,” October 1995

It was fashionable, for a time, to ask the silly question, “If we can put a man on the moon, why can’t we solve our social problems?” The reason we cannot solve our social problems is precisely the reason we *can* put a man on the moon. That is to say, it was our pragmatism in general and our scientific and technological mentality in particular that made our great material achievements possible. The essence of this mentality is the problem-solving approach. The scientific method isolates problems and solves them: It cannot take the broader view, for anything beyond the immediately demonstrable, testable, measurable, and provable is by definition unscientific. Americans are parodies of the scientific mentality: When anything goes wrong, we fix it, and do not take into account the possibility that our principles may be unsound. We have, for instance, been appalled to learn in recent years that our children are reaching college without having learned to read. Some people responded to the discovery by seriously proposing that we should reorganize the entire educational system from kindergarten upward—and they were branded elitists, racists, or reactionary dodos. Far fewer people considered the possibility that the commitment to universal education is inherently futile, and that other means of civilizing children should be explored. Instead, the nation did what it always does: It tackled the immediate problem by instituting remedial reading classes in college and by dispensing with literacy tests.

—from Forrest McDonald, “*On the Study of History*,” February 1991

Frivolity has in the 20th century become a plague of Western societies; and not least of contemporary American society. Of course, many of the greatest achievements of our Western societies and of the United States in particular have fostered this frivolity. The technological and economic progress that have made life easier have obscured our grasp of the fundamental difficulties of human existence. The admirable progress of scientific knowledge and of medical science have made us think that there are no insoluble problems. Nothing is thought to be beyond the powers of the ratiocinative mind, provided with sufficient powers to realize its aspirations. The progress of science, it is thought, will release us from moral obligation and moral dilemmas. The reverence for human life has become fainter. Frivolity in the face of serious things: That is the charge that I make against collectivist liberalism.

—from Edward Shils, “*Liberalism: Collectivist and Conservative*,” July 1989



Edward Shils (l) chats with Rockford Institute board members Henry Regnery and Clyde and Marian Shuhan.

THE WRITER AND HIS WORLD

Art happens, said Whistler; *die Rose ist ohne Warum*, the rose has no why, wrote Angelus Silesius. To explain beauty is to explain it away. . . . When a literary experiment is a failure, as in the case of *Finnegans Wake*, we worship it and we take good care not to read it; when it succeeds, as in the cases of the Lewis Carroll books and *Leaves of Grass*, we think of it as easy and inevitable.

—from Jorge Luis Borges, “*On Walt Whitman*,” March 1984

As a small boy, entranced by the written word, I never had the slightest desire to drive a locomotive, pilot an aircraft, captain a ship. The supreme achievement seemed to me to be that of one who had written a book: any kind of book. All through my teenage years I struggled with the short story, the novel, the play, the poem. I was like the man in the story who leapt on his horse and tried to ride off in all directions. Another difficulty lay in finding something to write about. I looked at the circumstance of my small-town rural life and decided, with supreme snobishness, that it didn’t match up to my literary ambitions. Unfailingly, I wrote about worlds I had never known. Poetry—and poetry was becoming my principal interest—was away and somewhere else. Nobody told me that the raw material of poetry, like the raw material of all art, resides quite simply under one’s nose.

—from Charles Causley, “*What Gift?*” February 1991

Our images of vice are well defined, dramatic, sharp-edged, and energetic. And why not? We live in vice, all of us; we are handy to its smells and tastes, its appetites and brutalities. Our visions of virtue, however, are pallid and dropsical, puny and naive. When we paint an urban utopia, it turns out looking like a plush hotel lobby; when we draw a rural one, it looks like an expensive golf resort. Twenty-four karat boulevards and a mastery of harp technique: These are our common images for heaven. Dante was able to depict a paradise made up of infinite gradations of light, of the kinds and degrees of virtue that described God’s goodness; these were immediately apprehendable by the senses, the mind, and the soul. Yet it is that poet’s images of hell that most people recall. In fact, most readers of Dante never



From left: John Howard, Forrest McDonald, Charles Causley, Thomas Fleming.