
The Legacy of Peter Viereck: His Prose Writings

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Much of Peter Viereck's prose writing was framed as an attempt to define a proper conservatism for our time. In 1950 when he published *Conservatism Revisited* the ideas in vogue among American intellectuals were those of socialism and "progressive" liberalism. The word "conservatism" signified a bias favoring business and a preference for minimal government. Viereck's emphasis on moral and cultural questions and his advocacy of ideas drawn from the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions made him an oddity. He sharply criticized the secular religions of progress that offer salvation through politics. He inveighed against what he called "a morally illiterate culture of unhappy and untragic pleasure-seekers" without roots in "the universals of civilization."¹

Conservatism Revisited had been preceded in 1941, when Viereck was in his mid twenties, by his first book, *Metapolitics*, an insightful and pioneering—if philosophically somewhat immature—study of the origins of German National Socialism. The book was profoundly influenced by Irving Babbitt, the controversial Harvard professor (1865-1933). Babbitt had demonstrated the morally opposed potentialities of the imagination, including the arts, and the crucial role of the imagination in shaping human life. *Metapolitics* traced the disastrous role of perverted imagination

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¹ Peter Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited* (Rev. and exp. ed.; New York: The Free Press, 1962; first published in 1949), 49. (Hereinafter cited as *Revisited*.)

and correspondingly perverse politics in Germany. *Conservatism Revisited*, which is a generally admiring study of Prince Metternich, described a vastly different type of leadership. In Viereck's view, Metternich attempted, through creativity and aristocratic restraint and balance, to meet the challenges of an age of transition. This book was followed in the next few years by four prose works that continued Viereck's effort to define conservatism and, more generally, the spirit of humane civilization. Though from time to time he would revise, update and supplement these books, sometimes substantially, what he published in the 1950s contains the core of his contribution in prose. That these books are now dated with regard to many specific illustrations and the historical circumstances in which they were written does not significantly reduce their value. Their central themes as well as numerous particular insights are easily adapted to the present. That Viereck wrote less prose than poetry after the 1950s may indicate his sense of which medium allowed him to speak in the most profound and timeless manner. Perhaps he was also discouraged by unperceptive reading of his prose and by an apparent lack of interest in his ideas.

Though Peter Viereck received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1949 for *Terror and Decorum*, his unwillingness over the years to follow poetic fashion limited critical attention to and appreciation for that part of his achievement. The significance of his work as a poet during a long life has yet to be fully recognized. This article, however, will deal only with his prose writings.

A non-conformist conservative

In the 1950s some of Viereck's views—for example, his acceptance of elements of the Welfare State, his concern about civil liberties, and his criticism of Senator Joe McCarthy—blunted the edge of criticism from the left and even earned him qualified praise from some liberals, but these reactions could not conceal a deep tension between his central ideas and the general trend in intellectual circles. Yet Viereck could not comfortably align himself with what was then called conservatism. In the preference for laissez-faire economics he saw a prejudice unduly favoring utilitarian values and economic interests. He thought of his own position as representing a "new" American conservatism, one closer

to the great Western traditions and appreciating the need for moral and other restraints on the market. He would find insufficient emphasis on the need for such restraints in William F. Buckley, Jr.'s *National Review*, which was started in 1955.

Viereck
censured by
National
Review.

National Review became a catalyst for the quickly expanding movement that became most widely associated with the conservative label. That movement did not, in spite of Viereck's early prominence, come to regard him as one of its leading figures. A major reason was the opposition that he encountered in *National Review*, whose definition of conservatism differed less from the then-typical American use of the term. The approval that Viereck received from the so-called "liberal establishment" and his deviation in practical politics from positions that Buckley and his circle deemed essential created unease and irritation. Viereck was not willing, for example, categorically to denounce the New Deal, and he argued against rigid, aprioristic notions about the proper functions of government. Though a vigorous anti-communist, he objected strongly to Joe McCarthy. Some contributors to *National Review* also had reservations about the Wisconsin senator, but Buckley himself wrote extensively in McCarthy's defense.

In 1956 Viereck published *Conservatism: From John Adams to Churchill*, a small survey and anthology of European and American ideas. *National Review* senior editor Frank S. Meyer, a convert from communism, summarily dismissed Viereck's attempt broadly to define conservatism as "counterfeit."² This sweeping judgment was based not so much on the book's contents as on Meyer's general impression that in practical politics Viereck was at heart a liberal. These and similar reactions elicited from Viereck some sharp attacks on his detractors, which only worsened the mutual distancing.

Conservative
movement
impatient
with non-
political ideas.

Viereck's influence on what became known as the postwar conservative intellectual movement would be limited. One thinker whose intellectual emphasis was similar to Viereck's but who was accorded great respect and exercised a considerable influence was Russell Kirk (1918–94). Kirk, like Viereck, was an admirer of Irving Babbitt. It says much about the movement that, though it honored Kirk's name, it proved largely unresponsive to the prominent

² Frank S. Meyer in *National Review*, August 11, 1956. Reprinted in Meyer, *The Conservative Mainstream* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969), 67–70.

part of his work that most resembled Viereck's, namely, an emphasis on moral-spiritual and cultural issues as central to a humane conservatism.

It may be too early to assess the contribution of post-war American intellectual conservatism. It enjoyed some obvious success.³ By the 1980s the word "liberalism" had lost its luster while the word "conservatism" had gained appeal. Yet the conservative movement had a weakness that would soon prove debilitating, an impatience with ideas that seemed to have no clear and direct application to practical politics or economics. In recent decades, the rise of so-called neoconservatism—which is essentially a special, ideologically intense form of modern American liberalism—has intensified a preoccupation with public policy and elections, but from the very start the potential for transforming American moral and cultural life was hampered by ideological-political partisanship. Judging the work of Peter Viereck by narrowly political standards was an early symptom of this failing.

The non-political sources of creative traditionalism

Although Viereck has had much to say about practical politics, the main inspiration of his conservatism is non-political. He calls himself a "value-conserving classical humanist." In the early 1950s he wrote: "The proper start for a new American conservatism, aiming not at success but at truth, not at activism but at long-range education, is in the world of literature, the arts and sciences, intellectual history, the universities, the humanities." A conservatism that begins by being directly political and economic, activist rather than contemplative, "will at best fail and transform nothing at all."⁴ Yet since human life is an organic whole, truly cre-

³ A huge and growing literature analyzes and evaluates aspects of American intellectual conservatism. Among the earliest books of this kind, written closer to the time of Viereck's greatest influence, are George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Noel O'Sullivan, *Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976); Ronald Lora, *Conservative Minds in America* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971); and, in Swedish, Claes G. Ryn and Bertil Häggman, *Nykonserveratism i USA* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1971), the first comprehensive study of American intellectual conservatism to be published anywhere.

⁴ Peter Viereck, *The Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals* (Rev. and exp. ed.; New York: Capricorn Books, 1965; first published in 1953), 6, 248. (Hereinafter cited as *Shame and Glory*.)

ative contemplative acts, far removed from issues of public policy, are bound to have effects sooner or later in the realm of practice. "There is no intellectual gesture, no matter how intimate, which is not by implication a moral and political act." Here as in other respects Viereck agrees with the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952).⁵

Genuine conservatism stresses moral-spiritual life.

The central goal of a genuine modern conservatism, Viereck argues, is to rekindle in Western man, now threatened by the stereotypes of hedonistic and arid utilitarian mass culture, a sense of man's higher, moral-spiritual nature. Arguing passionately for the existence of universal moral values, Viereck also recognizes that the Western tradition in ethics is a "Christian-Hebraic-Roman-Hellenic amalgam, with inner contradictions, sometimes reconciled but sometimes not."⁶ Viereck believes that the popular mind is correct in associating conservatism with religion and repeatedly notes Western man's profound indebtedness to Christianity, but he also wants it understood that religion is "a house with many mansions, finding room not only for literal but for symbolic interpretations of church dogma."⁷

Following Babbitt, Viereck wants to expose the pseudo-spiritual primitivism of those who, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, would base morality on a sentimental belief in the natural goodness of man. The true conservative senses deeply man's limitations and frailties and potential for evil. Civilization is threatened by the superficial optimism that characterizes both the Rousseauistic humanitarian and his frequent close ally, the rationalistic materialist. Viereck rejects as dangerously shallow the modern view that men can be made better and happier by remaking the socio-economic exterior. The crux of human well-being is the individual's struggle with self. Political reform can at times aid the higher purposes of society, but only if it is based on an adequate understanding of man's moral predicament.

A recovery of a sense of moral direction will not come about through some merely conventional application of old principles to the present: "The conservative conserves discriminately, the reac-

⁵ Peter Viereck, *Dream and Responsibility* (Washington, D.C.: The University Press of Washington, D.C., 1953), 43. Cf. Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000; first published in Italian in 1938).

⁶ *Shame and Glory*, 46.

⁷ *Revisited*, 45.

tionary indiscriminately.”⁸ A crucial role will be played by the creative free spirit who manages to link past and present by means of a synthesis that transcends both. Sound traditionalism leads to what Viereck calls “inner liberty,” a type of autonomy born of reverence for universal values.

*“Inner liberty”
expresses
man’s highest
humanity.*

Viereck’s term for the properly free imagination in literature and especially poetry is “lyricism.” He refers to it as an “unleashing function,” meaning that it invites the individual to enter imaginatively into new possibilities of experience. In his aesthetics Viereck retains the classical notion of human normality, but, like Babbitt and Croce, he expands and deepens it by stressing the creative role of the artist. “Fusing the universal and the particular into the single creative act, the unadjusted imagination concretizes the spiritual, spiritualizes the concrete.”⁹ By “unadjusted” Viereck means not bohemian rebelliousness but unwillingness to submit to stale convention. Here as elsewhere the influence on him of Friedrich Nietzsche is palpable.

According to Viereck, the imagination thrives in a climate of aesthetic form, the special order distinctive to all truly artistic creation. But it is form, not formalism, that is the context of aesthetic liberty. Commenting on an aesthetic doctrine still fashionable in the 1950s, he writes: “On the need for rigor of form, there is no quarrel . . . with New Critic formalists. The quarrel begins only at the point where the rigor becomes mortis.”¹⁰ Viereck called his penultimate poetry book *Strict Wildness*.

Like Babbitt, Viereck rejects moralistic art, but, again like Babbitt, he also rejects the fashion of separating aesthetic sensibility and moral substance. The two must be joined if art is to express our highest humanity. He writes, “You will find the beautiful only when you seek more than the beautiful.”¹¹

Aristocracy, plutocracy and democracy

Viereck’s emphasis on freedom in the aesthetic and moral life corresponds in his political thought to a deep concern for individual liberty, which he sees as a protection for and means to “in-

⁸ Ibid., 32

⁹ Peter Viereck, *The Unadjusted Man* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973; reprint of the 1956 original), 279, 332.

¹⁰ Ibid., 285.

¹¹ *Dream and Responsibility*, 22.

ner liberty." Viereck's cultural hero, whom he calls the Unadjusted Man, is not a romantic misfit or malcontent. The Unadjusted Man is trying to adjust to humanity's highest moral, artistic, and intellectual traditions, which may require considerable independence in relation to currently dominant norms, perhaps even drastic separation from the present mainstream. "The meaningful moral choice is not between conforming and nonconforming but between conforming to the ephemeral, stereotyped values of the moment and conforming to the ancient, lasting archetypal values shared by all creative cultures."¹² If this be liberalism, it is of a kind integral to any genuine conservatism. Without creative adjustment to new circumstances, nothing can be conserved. Conservatism in the sense of routinized, mechanical repetition of what has been inherited is not even reactionary; it lacks all dynamism.

*Unadjusted
Man is
aristocrat for
all times.*

The aristocrat for all times, the Unadjusted Man, stands for the conservative principles *par excellence*: "proportion and measure; self-expression through self-restraint; preservation through reform; humanism and classical balance; a fruitful nostalgia for the permanent beneath the flux; and a fruitful obsession for unbroken historic continuity."¹³ In times past hereditary nobility may have embodied many of these qualities, but in modern society they must be fostered in a natural aristocracy of will and talent.

Political aristocrats feel that they have a special bond with the non-privileged. Viereck argues that Metternich saw the grab for power by the rising middle class as a threat to social harmony. The liberty for which capitalists were fighting was too often just a means for substituting a narrow economic oligarchy for a more responsible traditional aristocracy.

In the 1950s Viereck bemoaned the fact that the United States did not have a genuinely conservative political party. Both parties had some potential in this respect, but he viewed the Old-Guard Republicans, to use one of his favorite phrases, as largely Manchester liberals with a predominantly commercial mentality. "A conservative sympathizes with aristocracy, never plutocracy. . . . Aristocracy serves; plutocracy grasps." The Republican Old Guard had "more nouveau-riche cash than *noblesse oblige*." As for the Democrats, the descendants of the New Deal were really

¹² Peter Viereck, "Inner Liberty" (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 1957), 21. Much of the text of this pamphlet appears also in *Unadjusted Man*.

¹³ *Revisited*, 32.

Social Democrats.¹⁴ The United States needed a real political aristocracy with “patrician virtues.”

A defender of American constitutionalism, Viereck insists on a distinction between what he calls direct and indirect democracy. The former serves the popular wish of the moment; in the latter responsible representatives help articulate a more lasting will of the people. “Direct democracy is immediate and hot-headed, indirect democracy calmed and canalized.”¹⁵ The best friend of the people in the United States’ founding period was John Adams rather than such self-proclaimed champions of the people as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine.

Viereck has a deep suspicion of populist mass movements. He interprets McCarthyism as largely a movement of “status-resentment.”¹⁶ “McCarthyism is the revenge of the noses that for twenty years of fancy parties were pressed against the outside window-pane.”¹⁷ The British-looking Dean Acheson was an ideal target. He was “schooled successively in Groton, Yale, Harvard Law, Wall Street—a quadruple provocation to the out-group majority!”¹⁸ “It was only when an unrich Catholic South Boston became allied, via the new American right, with newly-rich Protestant Texans (excluded from the *chicté* of Wall Street) and with flag-waving Chicago isolationists that the old American seaboard aristocracy was seriously threatened in its domination of both governmental and intellectual opinion and its special old-school-tie preserve, the Foreign Service.”

*McCarthyism
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“status-
resentment.”*

Perceptive as are many of Viereck’s comments about American populism, they show a paradoxical bias. Viereck normally traces serious social problems to a society’s elites. In the early 1950s he bemoans “anti-anticommunism” and communist infiltration of American social and political institutions, and, as already indicated, he makes other very strong criticisms of the general direction of American society. Yet rather than criticizing the American East Coast establishment for its failure to deal adequately with

¹⁴ *Shame and Glory*, 252, 254.

¹⁵ *Unadjusted Man*, 131. Viereck here builds upon Babbitt, especially his *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979; first published in 1924).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁷ *Shame and Glory*, 517.

¹⁸ *Unadjusted Man*, 168, 171.

these problems, he disparages the resentment of common people who might appear to have legitimate complaints and from whom the same subtlety and sophistication could not reasonably be expected. Viereck does not, at least not explicitly and pointedly, charge the WASP elite with a failure of leadership. In this particular context he does not follow in the footsteps of Irving Babbitt, who, starting at the turn of the century, warned of the worsening moral-spiritual decline of America's old ruling class and the likely political consequences. Viereck seems in his discussion of populism and related subjects to be excusing and even idealizing the old American establishment. Was he perhaps reluctant to undermine it further at a time when it was already being strongly challenged by an aspiring new ruling class?

A style of his own

*History sheds
light on
human
condition.*

Viereck is indistinguishably a thinker and an historian. He is much concerned when dealing with particular historical subjects to ascertain and analyze relevant facts, but he does not have a truncated, positivistic notion of what is relevant historical evidence. The main reason for his interest in the past is that, when properly studied, history sheds light on the human condition. Having a supple and penetrating mind buttressed by powerful intuition, Viereck is able to discern connections that are hidden from more plodding gatherers of empirical evidence. He does not attempt the conceptual precision and the slow, systematic, step-by-step argumentation that are characteristic of philosophy. He is nevertheless capable of the kind of large and penetrating insight without which philosophy would lose its sense of direction and proportion.

Much of Viereck's writing in book form does not develop a single well-defined thesis, but consists of already published articles that have been arranged topically. He also deals with many different subjects, some of which may appear unrelated. Yet all of his writings emanate from a single organizing outlook and support each other in some way. Only a superficial reader would mistake Viereck's apparently whimsical selection of topics or his witty and often essayistic manner for lack of coherence, seriousness or depth.

Viereck's distinctive, very personal prose style has drawn some criticism, most of which has been overly formalistic and pedan-

tic.¹⁹ For the most part, his free and lively, sometimes quirky, use of language—in some ways similar to Carlyle’s or Nietzsche’s—makes for a crisp, colorful, and frequently brilliant expressiveness. Through an unexpected turn of phrase, a witty epigrammatic formulation, a neologism or striking image, Viereck sometimes manages to convey what would have taken others pages or chapters. Sometimes even statements of his that are philosophically inadequate or careless make intuitive sense and communicate important meaning. His prose, too, often has a poetic quality.

A squandered heritage?

In spite of Viereck’s objections, what became known as American intellectual conservatism took its direction in the mid 1950s and forward from his intellectual rivals rather than from him. He was deprived of an influence that he would have richly deserved and that would have countered the deep-seated but facile belief among so many self-described conservatives that politics and economics are the key to shaping the future and should be given primacy.

In the 1970s and 1980s so-called neoconservatism gained prominence. Its leading intellectuals included Sidney Hook, Irving Kristol, and Norman Podhoretz. In its predominant intellectual trend neoconservatism has been an ideologically fervent form of American progressive liberalism, appearing somewhat conservative mostly because of the continuing leftward drift of America’s intellectual center of gravity. Because of Viereck’s partly liberal leanings in politics and his practice of seeking common ground with influential people to his left, he might have been expected to praise and seek the approval of the neoconservatives. But, unlike most of them, he was deeply suspicious of Enlightenment culture and modern progressivism. He admired old Western traditions, emphasized moral and cultural questions, and did not want business and finance to set the tone in society. Any agreement with the neoconservatives could be only limited and tenuous. He certainly could not accept their fondness for ideological abstractions and their belief that the entire world should be made

¹⁹ One commentator on Viereck’s style of prose writing who seems too bound by conventional standards is Marie Hénault. See her book *Peter Viereck* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969). Though the book deals with Viereck’s prose writings, it is primarily about his poetry. The book is insightful in part and useful as a source of biographical and bibliographical material.

to conform to a single model, what they call “democracy.” Irving Kristol, a self-described neoconservative who is often called the “godfather” of the movement, typifies the neoconservative habit of regarding America as an “idea” or a “project” rather than as a historically evolved, culturally distinctive country. The America with which he identifies, Kristol writes, is “ideological, like the Soviet Union of yesteryear.”²⁰ When the author of the present article published a book and other writings arguing that many neoconservatives resemble the French Jacobins, Viereck expressed his agreement.²¹

American conservatism hampered by intellectual weaknesses.

That American conservatism should today be widely equated with neoconservatism shows a marked lack of historical perspective and philosophical discernment. The movement has long exhibited intellectual deficiencies and predilections hard to reconcile with developing those of its potentialities that offered the most hope for a renewal of old Western and American traditions. The most original and fruitful ideas of its leading minds have yet to be fully and widely assimilated. All too often, conservatism has taken its cues from lesser lights, intellectual activists, journalists and media celebrities. The failure to understand and develop the moral-cultural approach to which Viereck is a leading contributor has been a glaring example of intellectual weakness.

Peter Viereck’s insistence that a genuine cultural renaissance must be prepared in the free and independent sphere of philosophy, ethics, literature, and art is a much-needed antidote to an increasingly philistine preoccupation with public policy, elections, and economics. The essential values of civilization, Viereck writes, “are transmitted more through the humanities than through that up-to-date journalism of the academic world, the courses in current politics, economics, and other uselessly ‘useful’ techniques.”²²

²⁰ Irving Kristol, “The Neoconservative Persuasion. What it was and what it is,” *Weekly Standard*, August 25, 2003.

²¹ The book in question is Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), which greatly extends the argument of Ryn’s small monograph *The New Jacobinism: Can Democracy Survive?* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1991). Viereck endorsed the author’s use of the term neo-Jacobin in both conversation and writing. In a handwritten note, scribbled in characteristic shorthand, he said about *America the Virtuous*: “Yr bk on neo-Jacobins is doing great good.” Peter Viereck to Claes Ryn, September 28, 2005.

²² *Shame and Glory*, 248.

His argument for the critical detachment and free creativity of the Unadjusted Man can still be a counterweight to ideological debasement of the mind and the imagination. The timeless higher responsibility of the intellectual-artistic life “moves beyond the propagandistic, the temporary, the overadjusted—beyond the corrupting successes of even the best of isms—and gropes toward the lasting aspect of things.”²³

The American postwar conservative intellectual movement had difficulty hearing and heeding such thinking. On the whole, the movement proved resistant to ideas that seemed to it too esoteric and too distant from practical politics. It had considerable difficulty finding its historical and philosophical bearings and achieving a sound sense of priorities. It was prone to formulaic, ideological stands and a journalistic preoccupation with the issues of the day. In recent decades it was increasingly pulled by neoconservatism and the concomitant lure of career and money into the progressive mainstream. It is a measure of the movement’s intellectual condition that it is largely unaware of its own transformation. Whatever the precise strengths and weaknesses of Peter Viereck, reexamining his work affords an excellent opportunity for critically assessing what is today called conservatism.

²³ *Unadjusted Man*, 332.