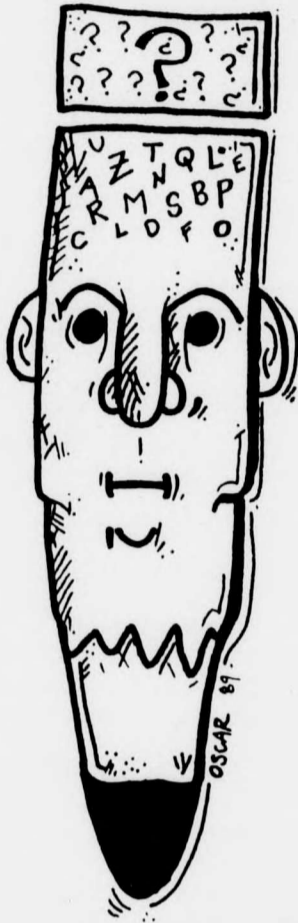


the writer's block



by Ira Nayman

We seem to be entering an age of symbols. The recent release of African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela from a South African jail promises radical changes in that country's apartheid system of government. Before that, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall represented nothing less than the unification of Europe and an end to the Cold War between East and West.

As a writer, I have a healthy respect for the power of symbols. I use them quite often in my stories. On a more fundamental level, they are all I use, words being symbols for objects, actions, abstractions, etc. But, there is something unsettling about the current rush to embrace these and other symbols.

These two symbols, like most, have developed their power over time. Mandela, for instance, spent 27 years in prison as part of his struggle against the separation of races practised by the South African government. As the days turned into years, his plight and, by extension, that of all blacks in that country, grew ever more poignant, becoming,

increasingly, a more dramatic statement for reform.

The Berlin Wall was, of course, a legacy of World War II. Over the years, it became a tangible, physical manifestation of the division between the two halves of Germany, between the superpowers, between capitalism and communism. The longer it stayed up, the harder it became to believe that it would ever come down, making the fact that it is down all the more impressive.

Of what importance is this history to a generation which, as the cliché has it, has no sense of history? How can people judge Mandela's release without some knowledge of the Boers who created, and propagate, apartheid? How important can the deconstruction of the Berlin Wall be to people who don't know why it was erected in the first place?

I suspect many people are mistaking the symbol for the reality. Mandela's release does not mean apartheid is about to end; in fact, reform in South Africa continues to move at a glacial pace. Taking down the Wall does not mean we can expect George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev to walk arm-in-arm into the sunset; the two systems they lead are still fun-

damentally opposed. To be sure, these symbols give reason to be optimistic; but, we must also recognize that a lot of hard work and serious compromise still lies ahead.

Moreover, a society fascinated by symbols can be prone to their manipulation. In an address to the nation last year, George Bush held up a bag full of a white, powdery substance which he said was cocaine which had been confiscated mere blocks from the White House. The symbolism was clear: if pushers were to be found so close to such a sacred democratic institution, they must have permeated the very fabric of American society.

It didn't take the press long to find that the pusher had been lured by the police to the park where he was arrested specifically so that the President could make his symbolic point. This was farce of the lowest order: the pusher didn't know where the park was, had to have a map drawn for him by the police sting operator and, quite naturally, complained that the sale was going down in such an out of the way place.

The ineptness of Bush's manipulation shouldn't blind us to the immorality of what he was doing.

Of course, most politicians manipulate symbols during elections and have been for years. But, the purpose of this sort of manipulation has gone beyond getting elected to setting the national political agenda.

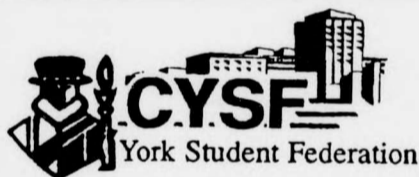
Canadians have no reason to be smug. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney has been telling us that Meech Lake is a symbol of national unity; meanwhile, the Tories' bullying tactics and misrepresentations about the original patriation of the Constitution are contributing greatly to tearing the country apart.

When symbols start to dominate the political discourse, reality suffers.

There is an obvious solution: be informed. Unfortunately, newspaper readership is declining while more people are claiming television as their primary source of news (over 60 per cent, last I heard). Television is a relatively poor communicator of information (the words in a typical half hour news broadcast would only fill one broadsheet page). Not surprisingly, aside from emotions, television communicates one other thing very well: symbols.

And, people wonder why I'm not optimistic.

Ira Nayman is a York student with vast experience as a writer. Ira has written numerous newspaper columns as well as dabbling with CBC television and radio.



February

1
2:00-4:00 p.m.
Presidential
Debate
CLH-I

March

28
11:30 am, B.O.G.
Candidates speeches at
Glendon College
cafeteria.
•Student Centre Corp.
speeches, CLH-1 2-3pm


VOTING LOCATIONS

At your College or at the
East Bear Pit in Central Square.

DATES AND TIMES

Tuesday, March 6, 1990 and
Wednesday, March 7, 1990,
10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

To vote on
March 6 and 7,
remember to
bring this,

 UNIVERSITY OF YORK UNIVERSITY	SESSIONAL VALIDATION CARD
Valid Until: MAY 1990	
Name: YORK STUDENT	
Student No.: 890123456	
Status: UNDERGRAD	
College:	
Signature: <i>York Student</i>	

... You can't vote without it!

Tuesday, March 6, 1990

YOUR VOTE COUNTS!
1990 CYSF GENERAL ELECTIONS

Wednesday, March 7, 1990