Paul West: a self-portrait (see p. 300)

Paul West: An Introduction

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EARLY IN HIS COLLECTION of essays *For a New Novel,* which Paul West has admired for years, Alain Robbe-Grillet writes, "For the function of art is never to illustrate a truth—or even an interrogation—known in advance, but to bring into the world certain interrogations (and also, perhaps, in time, certain answers) not yet known as such to themselves."[1] Throughout his writing career West has dedicated himself to the proposition that literature is not only important but, in its most accomplished forms, a mode of perception that must remain free and completely unfettered. Each of his novels can be seen as an artistic exploration, an attempt to push against the boundaries of narrative convention and expand the possibilities of fiction making.

It was this desire for expanded artistic opportunities which led in part to his relocation to Canada in 1957 (and later to America in 1962) from his native England, and which he once described in this way: "I feel more comfortable in America where, trite as it may sound, the increasingly far-out things I'm now writing win a readier, less hidebound response."[2] Even as a young poet in the early 1950s, he felt poems "ought to electrify and change us" (Wakeman, 1531).

More important than simple geographical relocation is the distinct, highly individual sensibility West brings to his fiction. His first memoir, *I, Said the Sparrow,* is both a loving portrait of a home and family he left and a harrowing glimpse into a childhood bounded by images of death. His mother's people were the butchers in the small Derbyshire village of Eckington, and at a young age West saw slaughtering firsthand. The village was also important for a parade of eccentrics who strolled through his life, and at least one novel, *Alley Jaggers,* is drawn loosely from the events in a local plasterer's life.

Also at an early age West intuited that there was a good deal more to life than lay within the boundaries of Eckington:

> I have always suffered from a severe case of the sense of wonder. I am amazed to be here, to be alive, able to think about my thinking. Isness, that's what staggers me. . . . All I have to do is look out at the back yard and I know that evidence is backed up: we are in a universe, a galaxy, a solar system, absolutely pumped cramful of marvels, and to be alive in such a context is a blessed membership.[3]

This feeling of cosmic inclusion, of being part of some infinite pageantry,

informs everything he writes, and each of his novels insists in its individual way that life, whatever its form or however benighted it may seem, offers some splendor.

At Oxford, where West earned his B.A., he developed the habit of reading beyond the approved academic canon to sample European, especially French, and American fiction. There he found a sense of urgency, a sense of life and style taken to extremes, a sense of visionary possibilities that the polite, conventional novels admired in academia lacked. In *Bela Lugosi's White Christmas,* the psychiatrist Dr. Withington keeps a journal of his discussions with Alley Jaggers and at one point writes, "To him, if it hasn't been thought before, it's priceless."[4] For West, in life but especially in art, if something hasn't been done before, all the more reason to recommend it, and in his reading, as many of the reprinted reviews in *Sheer Fiction* demonstrate, the same principle of originality dominates.

Among the many influential writers, a few took particularly firm hold of his imagination. Hemingway, Faulkner, and Proust were early fascinations, but discovering Sartre in his late teens was especially startling. Here, he felt, was a writer who understood his desire to escape the claustrophobia of his village world. Notions such as individual responsibility and the making and remaking of the self have had lasting personal and aesthetic implications for West. For instance in *Existentialism and Humanism,* Sartre draws an analogy between human mutability and art by remarking, "As everyone knows, there are no aesthetic values *a priori*";[5] no statement could come closer to West's reigning aesthetic. Art, especially the novel, is less a collection of givens than a constantly changing, evolving form of expression. All of West's prose asserts this idea repeatedly.

Furthermore, the idea that individuals are fundamentally isolated or alienated has also had important implications in West's works. Perhaps no other theme repeats itself as persistently; in fiction after fiction, West examines the plights of isolated people who come to an unsheltered sense of themselves. Frequently, like many twentieth-century writers, West pits an individual against some communal or mass system, but what separates his novels from others is the diversity of these oppositions and the determination and inventiveness with which his protagonists struggle. Sartre could easily be speaking for many of West's heroes when writing, "Man is all the time outside of himself . . . it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist" (Sartre, 55).

Samuel Beckett is another significant influence, but his fictions, much more than his celebrated plays, have worked most forcefully on West. In West's view, Beckett is *the* twentieth-century writer par excellence, acting as a perfect bridge between the otherwise dissimilar ideas of Sartre and De Quincey (whose influence Christopher Schreiner examines in one of this issue's essays). For West, Beckett puts the lie to the idea that the novelist is not necessarily a thinker, for Beckett's is a sophisticated, finely tuned

intellect. As such Beckett makes extreme demands on an audience, and this demanding feature West applauds and incorporates into his own practice as a novelist. Neither writes fiction for the passive or timid.

More importantly though, Beckett provides the heartening example (as West says in our interview) that "fiction can evolve, can mutate, can become different things at different times. It's not fixed for all time ever, by anyone." West furthermore responds to Beckett's wordplay, his intoxication with language both for itself and for what it can suggest and communicate. West also sees Beckett as a writer distinctly within a tradition of wit and humor, one who can write comically yet seriously about subjects which may initially appear unendurable but which in his hands are transformed into brilliant, new modes of perception.

West has also devoted much attention in both his fiction and nonfiction to the role and function of the imagination in experience. As West asserts, the imagination's primary obligation is to serve itself, not ideology, dogma, or convention of any kind. The imagination, when fully deployed, becomes a faculty of extreme, sensitive awareness which thrives on originality and inexhaustibility.

Following De Quincey, West has long argued that the imagination and its products are not divorced from or any less "real" than the world itself. The commonplace distinction between the actual and the imagined is erroneous in West's view, for as he says:

> Imagination . . . is an alembic in limbo: it invents, and what it invents has to be added to the sum of Creation—even though nothing imagination invents is wholly its own. . . . I think that only plasticity of a free-ranging imagination can do justice to late-twentieth-century man who, as incomplete as man ever was, keeps on arming himself with increasing amounts of data which, as ever, mean nothing at all. (Wakeman, 1532)

As a product of the imagination, the novel assumes many of these same properties, and in the broadest sense it is the mind on show; for West a fundamental measure of a fiction's quality is how interesting the mind it reveals is. It is, in fact, this quality of extravagant imagining that West finds so attractive about Latin American fiction: "Perhaps the answer lies in something peculiar to the Latin American imagination itself; unobliged to European and North American models, to logic, to what's verifiable, and perhaps the only continental imagination *capable of inventing* the weird things it finds on hand."[6]

Noting the vagueness of the novel's definitions, West insists on its infinite malleability and "disponsibility," André Gide's term for the novel being at its own disposal. As West sees it, it is less important for the novel to represent the world than to *re-present* it in new, often startling ways in order to assert its "ancient privilege: to 'transport' the reader . . . from this place to one completely other" (*Sheer Fiction,* 79). As one would expect, West has

no great patience with the dominant role accorded realism in modern fiction; from his perspective "art *is* illusion, and what's needed is an art that temporarily blots out the real" (*Sheer Fiction,* 51).

In his most influential essay, "In Defense of Purple Prose," West articulates the kind of writing he most admires, a prose that is almost drunk on its own words and its ability to rival the inventiveness of creation itself. Such writing finds the smallest things inexhaustible and often reveals an attitude of "appalled fascination" (*Sheer Fiction,* 55). His explicit targets are minimalist fictions, ones in which the denatured and vapid pass for understatement and terseness. Instead of "self-righteous ordinariness," he argues for a "prose that draws attention to itself by being revved up, ample, intense, incandescent or flamboyant," and that as such adds to the abundance of creation (*Sheer Fiction,* 49).

The overwhelming abundance of the universe constantly asserts itself in West's thinking and writing, for it reveals in all its diversity and amplitude the magicality of the real. Thus the universe's stars, atoms, planets, even viruses become not only working tropes in but models for his fiction, as the title *The Universe, and Other Fictions* suggests. Very much like Vladimir Nabokov, West sees the universe as full of variance, arbitrariness, and contingency. Although these represent longstanding convictions, West began in the early 1970s to study seriously the stars and galaxies. Such investigations led to his receiving a summer stipend for science studies from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1975, a friendship with the astronomer Carl Sagan, and a visit in 1980 to the Jet Propulsion Lab in California to witness *Voyager One*'s rendezvous with Jupiter.

West began his writing career by publishing poetry in a variety of journals throughout the 1950s. His first volume of verse, *The Spellbound Horses* (1959), appeared in Canada and was followed by *The Snow Leopard* (1964), which was published in both England and the United States. The latter is the more important collection, revealing various themes and concerns that would be more fully developed later in his fiction.

During this period West was also extraordinarily busy as a reviewer and literary critic. Besides publishing well over three hundred reviews in a variety of newspapers and periodicals, most frequently in the *New York Times Book Review* and the *Washington Post Book World,* West appeared in numerous scholarly journals. His scholarly studies include *The Growth of the Novel* (1959), *The Modern Novel* (1963), *Robert Penn Warren* (1964), and *The Wine of Absurdity* (1966); however, *Byron and the Spoiler's Art* (1960) and *Sheer Fiction* (1987) are clearly the most influential. Byron has been a lifelong interest, and in his study West views the poet in decidedly twentieth-century terms, stressing, for instance, his existential affinities. *Sheer Fiction,* on the other hand, collects some of the best of West's articles and reviews, including "In Defense of Purple Prose."

In 1963 he published *I, Said the Sparrow,* the first of three autobiographical memoirs, this one not only reminiscing about his native village of Eckington but also meditating on the vagaries of memory and what he describes as "time-sliding," the shifting perspectives that all experiences hold for the attentive observer. *Words for a Deaf Daughter* (1969), a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and his second memoir, recounts poignantly and affectionately the discovery of his daughter Amanda's deafness and brain damage. The product of considerable scientific research, *Words for a Deaf Daughter* stands as a paean to the beauty of a much-loved child and to the wonder of all things living.

Out of My Depths: A Swimmer in the Universe (1983) is a wry account of the author's learning to swim in middle age. However, more than a simple recitation of false starts and eventual triumph (West is now an extraordinarily avid swimmer), the book is another free-floating meditation on the *Titanic,* his youth, Barnard's Star, and the etymology of favorite words, but most importantly the book offers eloquent witness to the splendor of creation.

West's fiction has developed steadily through thirteen novels and two collections of short pieces, spanning the quasi-realism of *A Quality of Mercy* and the Alley Jaggers trilogy, the bold experimentation of his novels in the 1970s, to the historical and later fictions of the 1980s and '90s. While all of his novels offer challenges and delights, the latter group is particularly distinguished, representing the full flowering of West's prodigious talents. Each is a verbal tour de force that pushes language and perception to profoundly imaginative lengths.

His first novel, *A Quality of Mercy* (1961), which he has frequently repudiated, offers, in spite of its various defects, curious glimpses of techniques and concerns that would occupy his later fictions. In examining the stunted lives of the Smeaton family—Merula, her brother Camden, and her daughter Brenda—West centers the tale on the characters' isolation from one another and their inability to enter successfully a larger world outside them. Perhaps the novel's most striking feature is its style, an alternating pastiche of Hemingway's terseness and Faulkner's verbal extravagance.

Tenement of Clay (1965), however, appears to be the product of an entirely different talent. The prose here is confident, assured, and daring, while the theme of individual isolation reappears. Inspired by an incident reported in the New York papers, West chose as his protagonist Papa Nick, a once-successful businessman who has transformed his brownstone into a private flophouse for a comical assortment of social failures. Nick adopts a mute giant named Lacland, a twentieth-century Kaspar Hauser, who appears to have come from nowhere, trailing no history or family, and who ultimately challenges some of Nick's most treasured preconceptions.

Stylistically the novel is far less derivative than its predecessor and, in

fact, points almost prophetically to the directions his later fictions would take. West experiments with two first-person narrators: Papa Nick, whose point of view dominates most of the narrative, and Pee Wee Lazarus, a dwarf wrestler, whose two brief chapters frame Nick's account. Each speaks in a distinct, highly individual voice, with Lazarus given to numerous verbal assaults. Invective, spite, and recrimination dominate his version of things, and his attitude toward Nick, who has sheltered and supported him, is particularly malignant. Nick is a figure dominated by lassitude and confusion, and his narrative frequently gives way to hallucinations that eventually threaten his purchase on the world.

With *Alley Jaggers* (1966), the first book in a trilogy, West moved in still another direction. For the first time he returned to the England of his youth and in the town of Shalethorpe created a version of his own Eckington. Once again the feeling of claustrophobia dominates as the eponymous protagonist struggles to inject some meaning into his drab, quotidian existence. In many ways a creature of pure whimsy, Alley, like other West heroes, is given to extravagant mental sorties, and the massive glider he lovingly constructs in his attic becomes a fitting metaphor for his dreams of flight and freedom. Eventually this most angry of England's many angry young men, as Ivor Irwin points out in his essay, is brought to heel after an inadvertent murder.

As is the case with *Tenement of Clay,* the protagonist finds language his only escape, but for Alley it also acts as a salve for the wound of life itself. He loves the extravagant names of racehorses and intones these constantly to himself, like a personal mantra. He also delights in crafting his own daft song lyrics and limericks which usually feature him as hero or victor. Unlike its predecessors, though, *Alley Jaggers* is an uneasy experiment with literary realism, whose possibilities West explored even more fully in *I'm Expecting to Live Quite Soon* (1969), the second in the trilogy.

With Alley now incarcerated in a hospital for the criminally insane, attention shifts to his wife Dot, a harridan in the first novel here transformed into an intensely sympathetic figure, who, like her husband, finds her life slipping away into insignificance. West goes to even greater lengths to locate the protagonist in a specific environment, and the novel teems with rich details that particularize this place. Although she has an active mental life, Dot's character is revealed primarily through description and dialogue, and the wild psychic flights of *Alley Jaggers* are largely curtailed. As West has observed, her voice, more than anything else, kept asserting itself in his mind until he could give it a forum.

However, with *Caliban's Filibuster* (1970) West's fiction takes perhaps its most dramatic turn, as he moves decisively away from realism to some of the most extreme metafiction in the contemporary novel. In an unusual interview following the narrative proper, West emphasizes the hallucinatory quality of the narrative ("which I guess is what fiction is"[7]) and the often

pure gratuitousness of subject and incident. While the novel is one long mental foray of the protagonist—scriptwriter and novelist manqué—West does provide some structural underpinning.

As Cal flies from California to Japan, he crosses the international date line, and the novel charts the disappearance of time as he makes his journey. The story also moves through the color spectrum, with various sections given over to primary colors such as blue, yellow, and red, which form intricate image patterns throughout. Set against such careful narrative structuring are Cal's wildly surreal, private fictions that revolve around conditions of entrapment and repression. As he will in nearly all his fictions, West demands readers to abandon logic and rationality to see the world in new, often alarming ways.

The notion of altered modes of perception is a constant in West's fiction, and in all his writings he returns to this idea persistently. In our interview, for instance, he shared a favorite anecdote about Vladimir Nabokov (which also appears in *Portable People*). Nabokov would hide behind trees on the Cornell University campus and pop out, asking surprised students if they knew what kind of tree it was, if they knew anything about the intricate world that surrounded them. As West has explained, his view of the artist is "as a cosmic gangster who usurps the divine role and creates possibilities unrecognized in real creation" (*Sheer Fiction,* 82).

West turned in his next novel, *Colonel Mint* (1972), to a rather straightforward, though nonetheless disturbing, tale of an astronaut who sees an angel and refuses to recant what he has witnessed. The dominant theme of the novel is the freedom of the individual pitted against the demands of conformity, here a conformity to political and military dogma. In many ways Mint is an overgrown naif, somewhat like Alley Jaggers, who fails to realize the consequences of insisting on his view of things.

The sections devoted to the military's deprogramming efforts continue in the surreal vein established in *Caliban's Filibuster* and drew sharp criticism from some reviewers, in particular Patricia Meyer Spacks, who objected to the "detectable relish with which sadism is elaborated in the novel."[8] On the other hand, Diane Johnson comes closer to the mark when she concludes: "The most affirmative thing about this book, as about West's other books, is his faith in the novel as an art form, as a dignified production of the human mind, capable of rendering, in its infinite variety, social comment, philosophic statement, comedy, pain, all of which West can do—impressively."[9]

In *Bela Lugosi's White Christmas* (1972), West returns to the incarcerated Alley Jaggers, who has been reading voraciously for two years and whose mind is a riot of disparate influences which he draws together in his own inimitable way. To the existential theme of the isolated individual seeking a genuine sense of self, West adds some of R. D. Laing's speculations about the relative sanity of the insane in relation to a crazed version

of normality. Alley finds a moment of freedom, but it brings only pain, and in the end he is left only with his thoughts which he will now no longer share with his "uncles," the psychiatrists examining him.

This novel is in many ways more surreal than *Caliban's Filibuster* because it lacks any structural system outside of Alley's tortured consciousness. In this most self-conscious of his fictions, West addresses his readers directly in a pair of footnotes, and in one particularly bizarre scene, where a character turns himself into a walking collage of quotes from various sources, one of the quoted passages is taken from *Alley Jaggers* and comes complete with its own footnote of bibliographic citation. The extremes to which he takes his metafictional impulse suggest that West sought an unequivocal conclusion for the otherwise realist saga of his home.

His next novel, *Gala* (1976), which he has described as his favorite novel, is a fictional sequel to *Words for a Deaf Daughter.* In the book's preface, he explains, "What I have done is to stage in fiction a desideratum that didn't happen. *Gala* is thus the scenario of a wish-fulfillment; the wish abides, and the book partly fulfills it on the level of imagination."[10] Here the turn inward to the protagonist's mind is once more pronounced, though in this case the mind is that of a writer who wants to leave some verbal record of cherished moments with a brain-damaged child.

Once again West's metafictional manipulations produce a highly self-conscious fiction. Not surprisingly the protagonist, Wight Deulius, is a writer who labors not only to provide a lasting memory of his child but to offer verbal witness to their private festival. Continually Deulius interrupts the narrative to ponder a word choice or a word's etymology or to debate with himself the appropriateness of a particular verb tense. Here the limits of language define the limits of self, and in the most surprising scene an imagined persona of the daughter lectures her father on the putative limits of her psyche.

West's next novel, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* (1980), is the product of an initially vague personal vision (West saw and drew watercolors of a man with an eye-patch he knew but could not identify) and copious, painstaking research. During this period he wrote numerous reviews of books on the Third Reich and found in Stauffenberg, Hitler's would-be assassin, not only an echo of his own father (who had also lost an eye in World War I) but also an unlikely modern hero.

In many ways this was a novel that had been brewing throughout most of his life. In *I, Said the Sparrow,* West recalls the deprivation and destruction wrought by World War II, and Papa Nick's dreams in *Tenement of Clay* are filled with images of fighting in Italy and other military campaigns. Even some of the poems in *The Snow Leopard* revolve around warfare. In researching Stauffenberg West faced directly the fictionality of much history, and as he commented in our interview, "history is really fiction, and . . . the most reliable names in history actually lie and embellish . . . my

feeling was, hey, I'm the fiction writer. Leave me alone. Leave me something to do."

The novel explores in new ways the characteristic theme of an individual, out of a conviction of personal responsibility, standing up against enormous forces of rigidity and conformity. As in earlier fictions, West blends personal dream with temporal dislocations and curious shifts in point of view. *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* stands as the product of a fully developed talent and is a major work in contemporary fiction.

Continuing to trace the effects of World War II, next on the life of an otherwise forgotten survivor, West published *Rat Man of Paris* in 1986, his most commercially successful novel to date. Where *Stauffenberg* is a broad, sweeping tale, moving between centuries, continents, and even life and death (Stauffenberg actually narrates the tale from the grave), *Rat Man of Paris* is a compressed, tightly constructed book.

The focus rests on a psychological *mutilé de guerre,* Etienne Poulsifer, survivor of a French village destroyed by the Nazis, who has dedicated his life to "tweaking the race" by "flashing" rats from beneath his coat to passersby on the Paris streets. After he has launched a private campaign to punish a captured Klaus Barbie, and is shot for his efforts, Rat Man is forced to retreat within himself to find some marginal solace for the pain of his existence. Like all West's heroes who oppose the status quo, Rat Man must pay heavily with coin of the spirit, though he manages a rather muted victory that other heroes are often denied.

Central to this and many of West's other fictions are the ways in which the creative imagination confronts and makes sense of the world about it. In Rat Man's ruminations and eccentric assaults on the world, West reveals a mind struggling to cope with the randomness and chaos of the world. More than anyone else, Poulsifer keeps his mind engaged and active and remains "a connoisseur of life's neglected corners."[11]

The Universe, and Other Fictions (1988) is the first collection of West's short fiction, and in the condensed form of the short story, he often explores the possibilities and limits of metafiction. As he has explained elsewhere:

> It seems to me that what novelists, fiction people, haven't done is inspected man in his complete environment. It has been a mostly social, societal investigation. It will be all to the good when the novel bleeds over into a whole range of fields—cybernetics, anthropology, possibly psychiatry. (*Caliban's Filibuster,* 232)

Consequently, in this collection West imagines what passes through Atlas's mind as he supports a world oblivious to his efforts; retells *Moby-Dick* as a minimalist fiction from the point of view of an amiable leviathan; conjures up an erotically charged sun that wants to leave its solar system to chase an amorous star; and invades one of Shakespeare's brain cells during the last moments of the Bard's life.

In this collection, the universe, in all its various manifestations, matches or exceeds the human capacity to imagine it. Like Manfred Vibber, the hero of "Those Pearls His Eyes" who must cope with a cosmic vision which provides a terrifying "insight into the heart of things," the reader is afforded a magnified vision into worlds unnoticed or often taken for granted. As West describes "In Defense of Purple Prose":

> It is the world written *up,* intensified and made pleasurably palpable, not only to suggest the impetuous abundance of Creation, but also to add to it by showing—showing off—the expansive power of the mind itself, its unique knack for making itself at home among trees, dawns, viruses, and then turning them into something else: a word, a daub, a sonata. (*Sheer Fiction,* 47)

With *The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests* (1988), West transformed a personal fascination with Hopi culture into one of his most daring fictions. In the figure of George The Place In Flowers Where Pollen Rests, a blind carver of kachina dolls, West shapes his narrative around an artist who insists upon his own individuality in the face of cultural and commercial demands. His nephew/son, Oswald Beautiful Badger Going Over The Hill, becomes an unwitting initiate to George's craft and view of the world.

The novel conveys a powerful sense of epic breadth, and once again West's manipulations of point of view add depth and texture to this bildungsroman. George, Oswald, Fermina (Oswald's mother), other relatives, and most unexpectedly, Sotuqnangu, a Hopi god with whom George continually quarrels—all present the tale, and infinite tales within the tale, like layers of an onion.

As in other West novels, identity, the infinite capacity of language, and the transforming powers of the imagination form the thematic center of the novel. George and Oswald, both outsiders to their culture, although in different ways, ultimately remake themselves and find a place in their heritage through their creative and imaginative artistry. These are men who achieve a reverence for creation and being a part of it, and George's credo—"Imagine something different"—becomes for each a way of life. As West sees the Hopi, "They are very remarkable people. . . . They have an ecumenical, holistic sense of everything they do. Nothing's trivial. Everything is consequential. Everything is universal. I found that reassuring."

With *Lord Byron's Doctor* (1989) West returns to one of his favorite authors, and as in his other historical fictions, he uncovers a figure or a corner of experience largely forgotten or overlooked. In this case it is John Polidori, a medical prodigy who accompanied Byron on his 1816 European journeys and who had been commissioned by the poet's publisher to keep a journal of his experiences. The original journal was never published, but in West's hands, a revisionist version finally sees the light of day.

West again fashions an historical novel rich in verifiable incident and

fictional extrapolation. Polidori emerges as a vain, immature figure, a young man overwhelmed by the distinguished company he keeps who struggles to assert his own individuality. In an attempt to outdo the poet, Polidori takes up an unsuccessful literary career and later has an affair with Claire Claremont, Byron's mistress and mother of his child, Allegra. In creating his version of each of the novel's characters—Polidori, Byron, Shelley, Mary Shelley, Claire Claremont—West was driven by the desire to recapture what their lives and personalities, quite apart from their historical personae, might have been. As he explained in our interview:

> A human being leaves, really, a very paltry record behind, no matter how much he/she has written when you compare that with all the thinking that went on nonstop every day of that person's life. Nathalie Sarraute calls it sub-conversation . . . the sub-conversation isn't available; therefore, the fiction writer has to do it.

Particularly striking is the portrait of Claremont, whom most scholars have regarded as an emotionally unstable annoyance in the poet's turbulent life; however, here she is transformed into a sensitive, intelligent creature who has as much insight as the poet himself. In a curious way Dot in *I'm Expecting to Live Quite Soon* can be seen as a rehearsal for Claremont, as she in turn anticipates the slaughtered prostitutes in *The Women of Whitechapel,* West's newest novel. For each of these women West sought a distinctive, identifiable voice that would allow her to emerge from the shadows that enveloped each of their lives or reputations.

West returned to short fiction, what he has described as "short shorts," in *Portable People* (1990), a collection of portraits drawn from all walks of life. Here West seizes on an incident, an anecdote, in some cases even a photograph, and in an abbreviated space suggests something revealing about a whole personality. Alternating between first- and third-person narrators, the collection even features characters developed in other fictions. Thus, Polidori, Jack the Ripper, and Stauffenberg reappear, as well as Ober-Gruppenführer Rolf Stundt, a private practical joke West played on readers in *Stauffenberg,* who is revealed here to have "hid in a big reference library in Louvain, where those who found me incorporated me into the collection . . . slowly sealing me up in books."

As West has pointed out in interviews, he has long been fascinated with visual arts, and many of his books have begun from paintings or collages—*Caliban's Filibuster* from the color spectrum, *Gala* from drawings and watercolors of the solar system, *Stauffenberg* from illustrations in medieval books of hours and from his own elliptical paintings, and *Rat Man of Paris* from an intricate series of collages he crafted. In *Portable People* he gives play to this side of his imagination by including sketches by Joseph Servello of his subjects on facing pages to the portraits, each of which illustrates or provokes the literary vignette.

Composers, musicians, astronomers, writers, politicians, aviators—it

seems no one escapes West's scrutiny, and in each case his emphasis is upon finding a voice that will tellingly reveal that personality. Thus his Churchill talks about what a "Narzi" would do, Oklahoma composer Roy Harris notes, "Well, iffen I was a cornball, I got to Cornell anyway," or the Nixon of the Watergate tapes, here visiting China, likes "to think a country keeps its rear end tight, all apucker." This is literature as verbal ventriloquism and the product of an incurably curious mind.

West's most recent novel, *The Women of Whitechapel* (1991), represents another return—to England in the last decades of the nineteenth century and to historical fiction, in this case, to hypothesize on the Jack the Ripper murders. In scope it is similar to *The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests,* and its subject examines West's characteristic concern with individuality overwhelmed by the demands of official or popular conformity.

The primary, though not exclusive, focus of attention rests on Walter Sickert, the Impressionist painter who had been chosen by Princess Alexandra to introduce her backward son, Prince Eddy, into the ways of the world. In choosing an artist as his protagonist, West once again examines the phenomenon of the creative consciousness, what and how it makes what it does. Eddy becomes unlikely raw material from which Sickert can craft his own version of society, introducing him to a shopgirl whom he secretly marries in a Roman Catholic ceremony (!) and with whom he sires a daughter.

Like any creator, however, Sickert must live with the consequences of his creations, and in this world that amounts to a repulsive alliance with William Withey Gull, the royal physician chosen to remove any blemish from the royal visage. Together they and a malignant coachman travel the streets of Whitechapel, luring carefully chosen prostitutes into their carriage for disembowelment.

Once again West's practice of copious research reveals not only a detailed knowledge of the intricacies of the case but a scrupulous, if not withering, view of Victorian society. The five prostitutes who had the temerity to attempt a royal blackmail become heroines, as much as victims, in this Ripper story. West commented on his depiction of them in our interview by saying:

> It says a great deal about the status or nonstatus of women at that time. There weren't five hundred men being killed [in 1887-88 in London]. Women were of a lower order. Nobody cared what happened to them.... I thought it was interesting to look at them as the lowest of the low, sort of fighting back against the massive establishment and getting nowhere and being wiped out.

Also, as in his other novels, highly distinct voices command the reader's attention—Gull's perverse rumblings, Sickert's by turns dilettantish meanderings and later angst-ridden ruminations, and the prostitutes' Cockney, mixed in some cases with various ethnic dialects. Particularly

impressive is Mary Kelly, the Irish instigator of the blackmail attempt, who brings not only outrage at her impoverishment but characteristic Irish defiance to her dealings with the aristocracy. These women, who often appeared only as criminal statistics, are given identities and sensibilities that have, paradoxically, their own bleak splendor. That West can achieve this without recourse to melodrama is one of the book's many achievements.

Looking only at his book-length publications, one quickly sees that Paul West is one of contemporary letters' most prolific writers. He is at home in almost any genre—poetry, literary criticism, drama, memoir—but it is as a writer of fiction that his talents are most vividly evident. Richard Howard, in writing the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award citation in 1985, summarizes West's achievements best:

> Paul West's speculative prose besieges the barriers of genre, but in his many novels, so variously resonant, it is evident he has attained to a rare unanimity: relish of fiction itself as a *made thing,* joyously revealing the maker's hand and eye, framing often fearful solitudes.

NOTES

1 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 14.
2 John Wakeman, ed., *World Authors, 1950–1970* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1975), 1532. Further citations noted parenthetically.
3 Bradford Morrow, "Paul West: An Interview," *Conjunctions* 12 (Fall 1988): 155.
4 Paul West, *Bela Lugosi's White Christmas* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 9.
5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism,* trans. Philip Mairet (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), 49. Further citations noted parenthetically.
6 Paul West, "Augusto Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme,*" *Sheer Fiction* (New Paltz, NY: McPherson & Co., 1987), 128. Further citations noted parenthetically.
7 Paul West, *Caliban's Filibuster* (New York: Paris Review Editions, 1971), 224.
8 Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Fiction Chronicle," *Hudson Review* 25.3 (Autumn 1972): 504.
9 Diane Johnson, "The Tomorrow We Should Fear Today," *Chicago Tribune Book World,* 28 May 1972, p. 3.
10 Paul West, *Gala* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), vii.
11 Paul West, *Rat Man of Paris* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 45.