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# The Westian World of Fiction, or "The Immensity of the Here and Now"

When asked to give an introduction to Paul West, I thought back to the first time I encountered his work. I would like to tell you that I was this perceptive, discerning reader who had his finger on the pulse of contemporary American fiction and could make illuminating observations about any and all writers, West included.

The truth is far less glamorous. As it turned out a friend of mine had given my name to an editor who was putting together a reference work on contemporary novels, and that person contacted me to do an entry. He provided a list of names and titles, one of which was Paul West and the novels *Caliban's Filibuster* and *Rat Man of Paris*. The name "West" sounded familiar (perhaps because, as a Californian, I have always thought of myself as a Westerner, hence an affinity); nevertheless, I wasn't sure why I recognized *this* name, but a title like *Rat Man of Paris* was simply too intriguing to pass up.

I read the novel, loved it—to this day I continue to recommend it to people who ask me where they should begin their reading of West—wrote my essay, and returned to my teaching. Within a few weeks, the editor contacted me again to say he was disappointed with the entry done on *Caliban's Filibuster* and asked me to take on that assignment. I did, and quickly realized this was a writer I would be reading more, and teach-

ing. The same editor again contacted me a month or so later to write a bio-critical piece on West, and as I prepared my remarks, I realized there was personal information I could find nowhere except from the author himself.

I found his address at Penn State, sent a letter, and was shocked to receive not only a detailed reply—instead of the "stay the hell out of my life" that I expected—but an extremely cordial, delightfully encouraging response. To someone he did not know in the least, he wrote:You're bang-on about how my euphoria has faded vis-à-vis experimentalism in the USA [this in 1987] [...]. We're undergoing a prosaic backlash ostensibly based in morality, but really on laziness. Too many of the students we should have failed have gone on to write minim[alist] fiction or become literary editors [...]. If you have other questions, please fire away. I applaud your altruism. There isn't enough of that commodity around. (letter to Madden 2 April 1987)

When I later visited him in Ithaca, New York, to conduct an interview, I saw further what an incredibly cordial man West is. Each day, after we finished our lengthy discussion (and those talks would last hours and hours into the night), West would introduce me to the things he most enjoyed: a favorite Italian restaurant, the pool in his backyard which he could not keep adequately heated to his tropical specifications, the liquor store where Nabokov bought his booze, his cricket tapes—a game he played avidly as a boy and to which he remains a devoted fan—and a screening of Ken Russell's crazed 1986 film, *Gothic*.

At this point I was not only impressed that West was a writer possessed of a voice unlike any other in contemporary letters but that he was a ***human*** being with a fascinating range of interests, someone whose curiosity could be aroused by the most unpredictable and fluky of stimuli. Any reader who reviews West's canon will quickly see that same irrepressible curiosity at work throughout. Anyone who can write about the Hopi nation in one novel and the mysteries surrounding the Ripper murders three years later is a writer on whom nothing is lost.

The perfect showcase for this boundless spirit of investigation can be found in the sadly out-of-print *Portable People*, West's paean to all those personalities that have fascinated, intrigued, repulsed, or confounded him. Where else could one find Samuel Pepys, the husband;



favorite composers Frederick Delius and Sir Edward Elgar; good friend Carl Sagan, the astronomer; a collection of assorted Nazis, the lurid and pathetic; Moby Dick, telling his own tale in a mere four paragraphs; artist Rudolf Schwarzkogler, a "sonneteer of meat" as West so labels him; and Mizushima, the character from *The Burmese Harp* who undertakes his own private memoriam honoring friends and colleagues. It is a collection of obsessives and grotesques, but deeply, beautifully human portraits as well. In them West sees the richness of life itself, the infinite varieties of behavior and self-expression, and the effect of these tales is extremely powerful. Shortly after finishing this collection, West assembled other lives he had excluded for one reason or another and laughed that his second grouping would be entitled "*Insupportable* People"; more's the pity that that book has not yet seen the light of day.

At one point in *Rat Man of Paris,* West's all-seeing narrator describes the protagonist, Poussif, as a "connoisseur of life's neglected corners" (45), a phrase among so many of his that I find radiant and compelling. West has spoken often of the  and delights of a free-ranging imagination and a capacity for wonder at the smallest and often neglected phenomena. In one of his earliest statements about his fiction, he declared, "What matters to me most of all is to write, and live, without preconceptions, which is something any handicapped child [...] can teach us. Elasticity, diversity, openness, these are the things that matter to me most" (*Contemporary Novelists* 1972, 1334) Or as he says later in his incomparably purplish way in "In Defense of Purple Prose" (an essay, by the way, which should be compulsory reading for anyone beginning work on West):

> 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, & then turning them into something else: a word, a daub, a sonata. The impulse here is to make everything larger than life, almost to overrespond [...]. (47-48)

Overrespond is indeed West's reaction in every book, whether it is a novel, collection of essays, memoir, or short fiction. West is, in short, a maximalist, a writer who trains his wandering eye on anything and everything and

then magnifies and expands his subjects until readers wonder how in the world they had never seen the same phenomena in just such a way. It all seems so thoroughly inevitable in West's hands.

In responding so grandly, he has investigated those corners of experience we might otherwise prefer to ignore, the capacity of human beings for selfishness, cruelty, and barbarism. Baffled critics have occasionally complained that he possesses a relish for the uncomfortable, but as West has said:

> [...] this isn't sadism, this isn't gloating. I have to dump my mind in this kind of thing, and the reader's mind, at least to persuade me that this kind of thing actually goes on. I don't believe how badly human beings behave to human beings. It's easy to forget because it is so unpalatable and loathsome. Nothing to do with sadism. I see it as a kind of incessant reminder [...] we should not be treating one another as if we all had the license of stars. ("Paul West: An Interview by Bradford Morrow")[1]

West looks all of it squarely in the eye—the good, the bad, the ugly—it is a courageous stance, especially in an era where fiction as a comforting diversion remains so popular. To put it simply, West doesn't do comfort.

Often when people—friends and colleagues—ask me what I like so much about West's work, I have a set response, which I don't intend to be glib, and that is that his books force me to see with new eyes. Of course, I am speaking of the range of his interests, the variety of his subjects, the sheer galvanic energy of his prose, but to narrow it down to one specific example, I would have to point to his insistence on our citizenship in the universe. When I asked him once if he saw himself as a British or American novelist, he said, "Neither," which leaves one wondering where his allegiances, if allegiances they are, lie. Instead, the more I read West the more I see his fascination with the cosmic, in all sense of that word.

From the 1970s on, look in any of his books, regardless the genre, and you'll find him commenting on the stars, the universe, the grand cosmic

1. "Paul West: An Interview by Bradford Morrow." *Conjunctions* 12, n° 2 (Fall, 1988): 141-171.



design that surrounds us all, but, as he cautions, this fascination is hardly sentimental:

> The universe is a hostile place, and stars are not gentle entities. Some planets are not gentle [...]. I think there's an equal measure of revulsion and delight. It's magnificent, but it has no brain. It has no intellect. It's matter. It's violent, destructive matter [...]. I don't think there's any program-creating, presiding intellect watching over it. It wouldn't make sense to me that it was like that, which I guess is to say that it's not there to cater to human beings, and that's probably a stupid point of view. The universe is not cut to the human scale. It's not there to please human beings. It's its own project. I got into all this thinking about the absurd because there's nothing absurd about the universe. The only absurd thing in the universe is the human being, who wants the universe not to seem "absurd," and absurd means in defiance of human desire. (*Interview*, 163)

As terrifying as the cosmic prospect may be, West and his characters often find reassurance in its innate sense of egalitarianism—what it does to one it will do to all. He often comments in his essays on the micro and macrocosmic, well the universe seems about as macro as anything can get.

Another favorite passage of mine from a West novel occurs in *The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests*—a novel as maximal as any he has written- when the sickly George counsels his nephew/son Oswald on the simple splendors of existence:

> It's enough to have a life, to be alive. Being alive is a *worthwhile thing in and of itself*. There is nothing else, Nephew. And it doesn't matter how poor a life it is, it's better than what is often offered as the only alternative, which isn't an alternative at all. It is just going to the dump. Don't you go fretting about the quality of your life, you just make sure it has *the quality of life itself*. The rest will take care of itself; good or bad. (159)

What a gorgeous passage and how quintessentially West. Life matters, his books tell us over and over again. Even the life of poor Alley Jaggers, the subject of his only trilogy, a seemingly nondescript, working-class guy

glide anonymously through the world, has some [illegible] childhood. The same can be said of the prostitutes in *The [illegible] of Whitechapel and Jack the Ripper*; they are not simply ghastly [illegible]; their lives matter, and the novel insists we consider the value of these lives that were so cavalierly and brutally terminated.

While he may write in a distinctly postmodern fashion and foreground the text as prominently as any metafictionist I can think of, West is also a *humanist*, today a largely discredited term. Just as George tells Oswald, West tells his readers in every book: life matters, human beings matter. That lesson, so fundamental as to be overlooked for other more seemingly compelling concerns, is one we would do well to remember and be reminded of repeatedly. His newest novel, *The Immensity of the Here and Now*, which examines the deep psychic wounds of 9/11 on one character, virtually screams this lesson on every page.

West is a writer for this or any other time.