Indoctrination for Pariahdom: Liminality in the Fiction of Paul West

DAVID W. MADDEN

Over the span of his long and prodigious career, Paul West has produced a body of fiction that is as varied as it is demanding. He has never been content to rest comfortably in any current fashion nor to adjust his works to fit the tastes of some imagined audience. All of that is to say that West is something of a literary iconoclast, a writer who consistently follows his own lights and goes his own way.

For the most part readers and critics willingly have journeyed with him through his various experiments and fresh literary excursions; however, often there also has been a note of discord, especially from critics who feel his imagination is too amply stocked and too willingly displayed. In reviewing *Bela Lugosi's White Christmas*, for example, Geoffrey Woolf complained that the novel's hero is

> a victim of West's relentless appetite for novelty. Putting his chip always on the outlandish incident, he divides and subdivides Alley's character into bric-a-brac of what the burlesque comics call "bits" . . . It's his determination to make his work inaccessible that first puzzles, and finally infuriates. . . . There are times, and this is one, when literary revolution seems a less noble risk than literary government. (Woolf 4–5)

In discussing *The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests*, a novel about Hopi Indians, a reviewer, himself a Hopi, was especially offended by what he regarded as the liberties taken with Hopi life and culture. He accuses West of numerous "transgression[s] of Hopi life," and complains that "whatever strength that kind of story may have, it is a quintessentially European or 'Western' strength, not a Hopi strength" (Lomawaima 12, 15). The most pointed attack came in reaction to *Colonel Mint*, when Patricia Meyer Spacks argued that the work "purport[s] to offer social commentary" but is undone by "the detectable relish with which

sadism is elaborated. The author's control is tenuous; one learns nothing" (Spacks 502, 503).

Unquestionably, the complaints of each of these critics has some merit. West does indeed take considerable liberties with his plots, characters, and fictional structures; and in doing so, he creates narrative challenges that may appear daunting. It is also fair to say that his vision is Western, though not exclusively or parochially so. West also looks closely at the horrors people willingly inflict on one another, and to some readers that point of view may appear cavalier or even sadistic. However, as he explains,

> . . . this isn't sadism, this isn't gloating. I have to dump my mind in this kind of thing, and the reader's mind, to persuade at least 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's 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 had all the license of stars. (Madden 168)

The point is not whether West's fictions are morally acceptable or reprehensible nor whether his novels are willfully inaccessible. The reactions of those and other critics reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of some consistent themes that inform and unite most of his novels. In nearly every book, the protagonist is an alienated figure, someone who sometimes is, and other times is not, an integral part of his or her community, but someone who longs for inclusion or recognition of some kind. Most are existential searchers, creatures longing for a world that is more humane, more tolerant, more open to the vagaries of chance and difference. They live in a condition of "protest against [the] too rigorous categorization of creation" (McLaughlin 763). Their search is not only for a place in a largely inhospitable world but for a cohesive or satisfying sense of self, an identity that they would choose freely rather than accept through the insistence or coercion of others.

Because of their outsider status, their resolute sense of individuality and independence, and their reluctance to concede to the demands of others, these characters often appear bizarre, unreal, or unbelievable. Rather than simply dismiss them, as those critics have done, readers would do better to view them in mythic terms by seeing their adventures and dilemmas as archetypical situations that often are displayed more nakedly in primitive societies. The research on tribal rites of passage conducted by anthropologist Victor Turner bears directly on the characters and predicaments portrayed in West's novels. Those searching protagonists are best understood as people undergoing rites of passage and moving into a liminal state where they often appear to languish.[1]

As Arnold van Gennep pointed out, a typical rite of passage consists of three discrete phases—separation, margin or *limen*, and aggregation. The middle phase, the liminal one, particularly interested Turner in formal rites of passage among African tribes; in those he found a paradigm for the experiences of so-

called civilized societies. In many tribes, initiates for induction into a new social position are removed from society and their customary social positions and distinctions of family, wealth, age, and rank are suspended. The inductees are often deprived of sleep, food, and clothing and forced to contemplate issues other than the mundane or predictable. They are in every sense shorn of their quotidian life and collectively forced to enter into a foreign mode of existence, a stateless condition of indeterminacy.

Turner describes that new state as one involving not only privation but also systematic humiliation in which initiates are essentially stripped of their personalities and identities and driven to arrive at a new sense of self. Typical of most liminal states is a quality of atemporality. "We are presented, in such rites," as Turner explains, "with a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly (in symbol if not always in language), some recognition of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties" (*Ritual* 96). One result of the condition of being "betwixt and between" is the erasure of the initiate's predilections, preconceptions, in the broadest sense, his self. Turner again clarifies the case:

> The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status. The ordeals and humiliations, often of a grossly physiological character, to which neophytes are submitted represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges. (*Ritual* 103)

Although West's fictions deal with contemporary, urban society and characters, he has always examined the darker, more hidden recesses of human psychology and behavior. He has long been fascinated by the eruption of the primitive in seemingly civilized, balanced figures. That is especially evident in *Caliban's Filibuster*, where the main character, Cal, is likened to Shakespeare's man-beast in *The Tempest*.

Cal, a screenwriter in the employ of a crass producer, Sammy Zeuss, is forced to turn out commercial drivel instead of the great fiction he feels is his destiny. While traveling from California to Japan with Zeuss and an actor-friend, Murray McAndrew, Cal spins a series of three scenarios for films that will never be made.

Cal, like one of Turner's initiates, finds himself in a liminal condition: He is removed from his usual environment, placed in an artificial setting separated largely from other people and from his quotidian existence, and deprived of the props that support his feeble existence. Although it may not appear obvious, he, too, suffers from a ritualized humiliation and yearns to arrive at a newly defined sense of self.

As the plane journeys west, he moves further into the recesses of his brain. The novel even presents a conversation he has with a part of his brain that constantly

objects to his rationalizations and mental creations. Cal, of course, is locked in himself, but what he seeks is a limitless freedom, a release from the personal, professional, and artistic strictures that bind him. Each of his three scenarios represents an increasingly desperate attempt to escape restriction. The third scenario is particularly revealing. In it, a fictional projection of himself named Malkari sets off on an ocean voyage to the South Seas in search of a remedy for his divided sense of self. He is abandoned on a desert island, where he is adopted by the Clan Abi (an anagram of Caliban), local inhabitants of the island. They quickly subject him to a horribly painful initiation into their tribe, from which he emerges as seer and leader. Cal clearly would like to repair his own fractured sense of self and emerge as the successful novelist he imagines himself to be, but like Malkari, who dies accidentally when he sets sail in a whale's carcass, Cal fails to commit any of his precious scenarios to paper and loses them once the plane lands.

Caught in a twilight realm of self-doubt, self-loathing, and contempt for his friends, Cal exists in an interstitial world between the primitive and civilized. Intellectually he possesses the capabilities of a modern man, but emotionally he is arrested and stunted. That is his liminal state, one that oppresses him yet holds possibilities for transition and even transcendence that he may only dimly recognize. At least consciously, he admits his dividedness, ". . . my principle problem, as any decent laboratory can prove, being the overgrowth of my old cortex (the beastly bit), the underdevelopment of the cortex called neo" (*Caliban* 222). However, as West reveals in a brief interview appended to the narrative, ". . . the whole thing is a word game. . . . It's really the ancient brain of Caliban, which is probably not easily reformed or civilized, doing its best to stave off self recognition . . ." (228). Speaking further of the mind's relation to the primitive, West says:

> I think equally we have the notion of the mind, the omnicompetent, all-knowing mind. And, too, we have the notion of atavism—of living among the primitive, and going back to a sort of magical state-of-mind. I think a lot of writing now is related to superstition. Ritual. Magic. Incantation. Totem. Juju. . . . We are interested in more human mental possibilities now. . . . It all has to do with a quite relaxed determination to avail oneself of all kinds of mental opportunities. It seems to me that the opportunities are countless. Marvelous. (230-31)

Strapped with a brain that is part civilized and part atavistic, Cal would appear doomed to conflict and ill will. However, initiation rites, as both van Gennep and Turner point out, culminate in a third phase—aggregation. Initiates return to the tribe, presumably as new people, who though they may return to their old positions in society, are now ready to assume new responses to the life around them. As Turner explains:

> Liminality is thus a period of structural impoverishment and symbolic enrichment. It is essentially a period of returning to first principles and taking stock of the cultural inventory. To be outside a particularized social posi-

> tion, to cease to have a specific perspective, is in a sense to become (at least potentially) aware of all positions and arrangements and to have a total perspective. . . . [Sacred myths and instruction during this period] re-create or transform those to whom they are shown or told and alter the capacity of the initiand's being so that he becomes capable of performing the tasks of the new status ahead of him. It is not simply a cognitive restructuring that takes place, nor is it solely a ritual legitimization of the initiand's new social status; rather the rites, myths, and symbols are felt to have something akin to a salvific power. . . . ("Myth" 576–77)

Ideally, then, the initiate returns to society changed—invigorated and altered substantially by his experience. Through much of the novel Cal appears not to have changed, but to have moved more thoroughly into his own self-absorption.

However, once in Japan, Cal abandons his reveries and is flabbergasted to learn that McAndrew is a far more complex man than Cal had ever expected. For years McAndrew has kept secret a Japanese daughter who is married to a major film producer; the two are guardians of a victim of the Hiroshima bombing. Overwhelmed by the emotionally and ethically rich life of his colleague, in contrast to his own self-centeredness, Cal suddenly understands the implications of *mono no aware* (a phrase a geisha taught him)—the "awareness of the pathos of things." Although there is no indication that he is a reformed person or one devoted to the needs of others, Cal has at least momentarily emerged from his prison of the self and recognized a wider world and obligations that far exceed personal self-satisfaction. His liminal phase has actually, though minimally, sent him back to the world with a difference.

Similarly, West's most popular novel, *Rat Man of Paris*, develops the notion of a modern primitive who must acknowledge a world outside himself. Etienne Poulsifer is a victim of the Nazi regime, a man whose parents were murdered in the destruction of his childhood village and who becomes an orphan to all that would appear normal and ordinary. Veteran of numerous menial and disgusting jobs and a dweller on the periphery of society, he parades through the Paris streets exposing rats from beneath his coat to unsuspecting passers-by. When Rat Man learns that an ex-Nazi is being deported from South America to stand trial for war crimes, he believes it is the commander who engineered the destruction of his village and pledges to bring the man to justice.

As in a number of West's books, the specter of the war forms the novel's central preoccupation; it is the defining event of Rat Man's life, literally determining who he is and who he may become. Like many others on the Paris streets, he is a *mutilé de guerre*, a psychological victim of unrelenting horrors, and his actions reflect those experiences. To the world, of course, he appears to be a hopelessly addled fool; however, the novel plumbs the hidden recesses of this seemingly insane figure. Although to all appearances Rat Man is a complete failure, he is the quintessential West hero—a figure who lives most profoundly by his imagination and one on whom the miraculousness of creation is not lost.

For his part, Rat Man cannot imagine an alternative to his existence; as he sees it, "I'm not wild or mad or backward, I think. I just, as they say, find myself temporarily at a loss" (19). He is, as the narrator describes him in an especially trenchant phrase, "a connoisseur of life's neglected corners" (45), one involved in "distant vibrations" (76). Those distant vibrations afford him a sensitivity unique in his world. To him the world is a phenomenon of inexhaustible wonder, and he is astounded that people "go about their daily chores quite unsurprised at being alive. Or at least by remaining for so long in a state very different from dead" (11). A poor man's Henry David Thoreau, he has reduced his life to "essentials"—rats, a hovel, an old toy doll house, a fox fur, and the streets of Paris. However, that minimalist existence is altered dramatically after meeting and marrying an elementary school teacher: Sharli Bandol.

That feeling of being at a loss, of being separated from the mainstream of life, and of living a kind of death-in-life are all similar to liminal states in tribal rituals. Surrounding many of those rituals are images of death; initiates in a liminal state are regarded as figures no longer a part of the world of ordinary experience and not yet part of a spiritual world. They have no fixed position or place, and as Turner explains:

> In so far as a neophyte is structurally "dead," he or she may be treated, for a long or short period, as a corpse is customarily treated in his or her society. . . . The metaphor of dissolution is often applied to neophytes; they are allowed to go filthy and identified with the earth, the generalized matter into which every specific individual is rendered down. Particular form here becomes general matter; often their very names are taken from them and each is called solely by the generic term for "neophyte" or "initiand." (This useful neologism is employed by many modern anthropologists). (*Forest* 96)

Thus the protagonist's name, Etienne, is lost to the cognomen Rat Man, and throughout the novel he is depicted as a man living in a hovel or on the streets in disheveled and soiled clothes. The close association with animals abounds in liminal situations, a point stressed repeatedly with Rat Man.

Given his uniqueness and the world's apathy, Rat Man appoints himself humankind's spiritual guardian, one of West's many frustrated creators, an artist whose medium is most obscure. His routine with the rats expresses a combination of aesthetics and ethical mission. As the narrator reveals, "the gesture was what mattered"; this is Rat Man's "art," and "as he sees it, he is molesting no one at all . . . he thinks of himself as tweaking the race. Helping it evolve" (5). In spite of his mission and his own sense of the abundance of his existence, a gnawing desire exists, undefined but nonetheless compelling, which his art only partially satisfies. Before Boche (his name for the anonymous Nazi) arrives, Rat Man knows he needs a cause, "not the cause of himself, but something outside of him that will magnify him just in time" (24). Rejoicing in his twilight world, Rat Man still wants to make a difference, and Boche becomes a convenient excuse for that difference.

One of the most important results of a liminal condition is the initiate's exposure to sacred mysteries. Turner says, "Their secular powerlessness may . . . be compensated by a sacred power, the power of the weak derived on the one hand from resurgent nature and on the other from the reception of sacred knowledge. . . . In this no-place and no-time that resists classification, the major classifications and categories of the culture emerge within the integuments of myth, symbol, and ritual" (*Dramas* 259). Rat Man's mission becomes nearly messianic, and he develops elaborate and exacting rituals to awaken his audiences from their quotidian slumber. In the process, though, he becomes society's sacrificial animal, to the point that like a debased Christ he views himself as a willing martyr and is shot through the mouth by an unknown assailant for his troubles.

At this point he retreats further from contact with others and grudgingly awaits the birth of a child he initially resents. Once the child arrives, he gradually comes to accept it and in the final chapter imagines what he would do in the event of a future cataclysm—strip up the floorboards and hide baby Charles beneath them. That, of course, is a recapitulation of his own salvation when his village was overrun. Immediately before the child's birth, Rat Man worries about "another boy become[ing] cannon fodder. . . . He does not know how to save anyone at all. All he has ever seen is things not working as they should" (170).

By this point, however, he has learned how to save someone, if only imaginatively. He has also given up competing with the child for his wife's affection, and he realizes that the baby has not separated them. But more important than either of those implications is the fact that Rat Man now accepts his paternity, and in so doing, his responsibility for someone outside himself. He has rewon his dignity and given himself a purpose, if only a defiance of the forces that have bludgeoned him.

By imaginatively sparing the baby as he himself was spared, Rat Man emerges from his despondency with a belief in life itself. As dreadful as his experiences have been, he remains committed to the idea that existence itself matters, and he trembles at the thought of his child living through his experiences. No longer yearning to be famous or celebrated, he simply wants to nourish and promote life. Thus his last action, "fist held aloft, the thumb upright" (180), stands as a gesture of rebellion and victory.[2] The monsters may well come again and they may devour him this time, but life and the future will prevail in the figure of his son, thanks to his intervention.

What Rat Man achieves is a condition common to most liminal experiences. Turner has detailed the phenomenon of *communitas*, a state in which initiates experience a remarkably generous sense of empathy and acceptance of their fellow sufferers. Stripped of status and all individuality, initiates have only one another and see each other as extensions of themselves. As Turner explains:

> communitas emerges where social structure is not. . . . For communitas has an existential quality; it involves the whole man in his relation to other whole men . . . . Communitas has also an aspect of potentiality. . . . Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of

> structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or "holy," possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency. (*Ritual* 126, 127, 128)

In deciding to spare his son, if only in his mind, Rat Man has escaped his prison of the self, but he goes much further than Cal does. Rat Man not only has a new awareness of life outside himself, but he yearns to protect and be an active participant in that life.

The ideal result of ritual liminality in tribal societies is the emergence of the initiate with a greater practical and mystical knowledge and higher sense of calling and purpose. Turner states:

> The arcane knowledge or *gnosis* obtained in the liminal period is felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte, impressing him, as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state. It is not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being. His apparent passivity is revealed as an absorption of powers which will become active after his social status has been redefined in the aggregation rites. (*Forest* 102)

The *gnosis* or knowledge that Rat Man has acquired is quite simply a heightened appreciation of life itself. He recognizes not only his own importance, a significance of which he has never been convinced before, but more important the significance of the lives of others.

Rat Man has organized his life around his pain and suffering, drawing it to himself as a perverse form of comfort and consolation. However, after the shooting and the birth of his son, that suffering quietly lifts. At a crucial moment in the novel, he ponders the fate of the German returned for a war crimes trial and identifies the Boche as Klaus Barbie. In naming the man he suddenly achieves an important freedom.

As the narrator tells us, "He no longer cares to know the correct identity of the man who razed his boyhood village. Barbie will do, as just about any old age will serve to lead you up to death. No risk of disappointment there. He says the name aloud. I knew it all along. It doesn't hurt, it can't, it won't" (164–65). Boche, ironically and indeed unexpectedly, has given Rat Man back to himself; he is reborn, instead of being "never born but assembled bit by bit in a garden shed" (29). He is free to live now, not simply exist or recapitulate the past, but to engage himself in the present and even plan for some version of the future.

A very different novel of West's but one that also ends on a muted note of hopefulness is *The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests.* The work examines the lives of a pair of Hopi Indians living on the rocky mesas of Arizona; in them West discovers a people who have largely shunned the mechanized life of the twentieth century in favor of tribal traditions that afford them an intimate involvement in the rhythms of nature.

The novel begins in Los Angeles with the death of an actress during the filming of a pornographic movie. A young Hopi actor, Oswald Beautiful Badger Going Over the Hill, is threatened about revealing the incident. In fear he flees to the Arizona mesas to become apprentice to and caretaker of his aging uncle, George the Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests, a blind kachina doll carver. The two men ruminate on their pasts, reliving emotionally charged moments and pondering the directions their lives have taken. After George's death, Oswald enlists in the army and is sent to Vietnam where he eventually transforms himself into a perfectly mechanized killer. After his tour of duty, he returns home and becomes a recluse in George's shack. He reads books about his tribe and astrology and ponders private mysteries and a personal sense of failure.

Although the novel shifts between the experiences of the older George and the young Oswald, it is the latter who is particularly pertinent to this discussion. Oswald has unwittingly submitted himself to a private rite of passage when he returns and works with Uncle George. Twice in the novel, he pulls away from the larger world—from Los Angeles and later from Vietnam—to sequester himself in the isolated world of the Hopi. In his second return home, he lives something of a hermit's existence, reading and quietly awaiting what will become a startling reemergence into the world.

Oswald is either reviled or regarded with suspicion by most of his fellow villagers. He achieves close emotional bonds only with George and later with the retarded Bert and Anna. In his case, *communitas* literally comes only with those whom society has neglected and tossed aside. They alone appreciate Oswald's stories and intuit his hidden nature:

> ". . . he maybe the kindest of folks when you run across him. . . . He always look like he going to tell you something real soft and gentle. . . . He seen something, though, long before his uncle did. He have it on his mind the whole time, he not able to smile quite that open smile of his early, since then he sort of fussy spoken, look behind him a lot, he have no idea how often he doing some of these things. . . he one of the smartest heads of corn on this mesa . . . ." (256)

Perhaps more than any of West's other protagonists, Oswald yearns to unite himself with the outside world.

In his travels and his search for *communitas*, Oswald recapitulates the Hopi myth of creation. The novel is divided into four books, entitled "worlds," and the Hopi believe that currently humans live in the fourth of a series of universes that extend through time and mark an individual's Road of Life.

In Hopi mythology the first world, Tokpela (meaning Endless Space), was created when Taiowa, the Creator, made Sotuqnangu, who in turn fashioned nine kingdoms out of the vacuum of space. The first of those was a perfect place inhabited by people who were charged with respecting the Creator at all times. They lived in harmony, viewing humans of all races, animals, and earth as a sin-

gle entity. Eventually, however, they recognized differences among one another, grew apart, and forgot their primary mission. Selecting a devout few, Sotuqnangu destroyed the first world by fire and created a second world, Tokpa (Dark Midnight), which the survivors then inhabited. People were separated from animals and once again fell from grace when commercial competition occupied their energies. Again a few were spared when Sotuqnangu destroyed that kingdom by freezing.

The third world, Kuskurza (no modern meaning), is marked by a rapid growth in population and the construction of large cities and countries. People created flying machines to attack one another, and once more a few were spared from the vast flood that destroyed everything. Eventually those few sailed eastward until they found a high, chosen spot to make their home. This fourth world, Tuwaqachi (World Complete), is neither as beautiful nor accommodating as the previous three, but it provides enough for humankind. People dispersed and were warned that if they failed again they would lose this kingdom as well.

In West's "First World" (the novel is divided into four sections entitled "First World," "Second World," "Third World," and "Fourth World"), Oswald fitfully pursues an acting career in Palookaville (his name for Los Angeles). Although by no means a perfect place, Los Angeles is exciting in its meretricious allure and pleasures. Like the mythological inhabitants of the original first world, Oswald loses himself in the production of exploitative trash, and when he participates in Trudy Blue's accidental death, he must escape or be destroyed. He emerges into his Second World, life back on the mesa with Uncle George.

The largest section of the novel details Oswald and George's relationship, their uneasiness with each other, their speculations on the unresolved mystery of Bessie's (George's wife) drowning, and their individual senses of self and community. Commercialism is indeed a theme, but Hartman H. Lomawaima is quite wrong in suggesting that George is "driven by an American market" to which he has capitulated (2). Although some outsiders appreciate his work, George remains true to his eccentric muse, though his brother, Emory, living off the mesa in Keams Canyon, makes Mickey Mouse kachinas for the tourist trade.

The divisiveness and warfare of the ancient third world is duplicated for Oswald by his experiences in the jungles of Vietnam. Here he is again an outsider, one who feels sympathy and fellowship with the enemy but who must take up arms to save his face and life. Never driven by animus or a desire for revenge, Oswald nevertheless loses his soul in his private orgy of killing, and Nuncle Gee, his own perverse kachina, is more a testament to personal and moral failure than a product of vicious blood lust.

Also like his ancestors, Oswald travels east over vast waters to arrive again on the high cliffs of his home. Barren as his surroundings may seem, they provide enough for him, as he lives in quiet seclusion pondering his patrimony, limited talents, and the splendors of the cosmos. His humanity is restored through his guardianship of the retarded Bert and Anna, most likely Bessie's accidental mur-

derers. Like his father, Oswald excels at his own eccentric art—storytelling—though neither his mother nor fellow villagers adequately appreciate his talents. The novel ends with Oswald discovering a place for himself among his people and the rhythms of an ancient way of life.

Because he is recapitulating mythic events, Oswald lives in mythic time as well, though he wrestles constantly with his temporal limitations. He is literally obsessed with time, wondering how much longer George will live and what his own future holds. Much of his view of time issues from his confused sense of self, and though, like George, he would prefer to escape time, his motive is quite different. George, of course, seeks the timeless state of artistic perfection, whereas Oswald simply wants to stave off time and remove himself from the dilemma of being a no one with no direction. Instead of having little future, Oswald has too much, and the present offers only a "so doomed-feeling" (391).

Life on the mesa has its own timeless quality, and the Hopi live by an "acute otherworldliness" (302). Oswald would like to share in that condition, thus his shifts in profession and, by extension, self, from nephew to actor, carver, soldier, and storyteller. At times he achieves moments of transport—when sharpshooting or storytelling, but always he returns to the vacuous condition of being a lost soul without direction. When he cannot simply arrive at a point of quiescence, he tries to will it:

> It helped, he absently decided, if you thought of space in terms of time, and vice versa. Denature the whole damned thing until it no longer reaches you. Then he decided to learn about forgetting, reasoning in his erratic way that what the mind omits the body does away with. . . . In some such way, he was hoping to neutralize his life with congenial ritual, being where he did not want to be, which in the most refined sense meant also wanting to be anybody at all. (253–54)

When the spirit of his departed uncle presents Oswald with the star kachinas, magical entities that shine only for him and that he must keep private, he finds himself living "on the edge of the invisible riviera of the visible world" (427), introduced "to a time span vaster than anything he'd known, against which all that is human is colossally trivial" (430–31). Soon the responsibility is too great, and he returns to mortal time after revealing the kachinas to Bert and Anna.

With the appearance of the Soyal Kachina, which inaugurates the winter solstice ceremony, Oswald discovers a way of living with a paradox: Through his appropriation of religious ritual, he finds a means of stopping time yet also of placing himself in a historical lineage dating back centuries. At that moment Oswald has reached the liminal condition of time-out-of-time, and by becoming the Mastop Kachina, he transforms himself into "something familiar from a hundred years ago, from before they [he and his fellow villagers] were born" (487). As West has commented, "The Hopi sense of time is incredibly universe-ridden. . . . Oswald has nowhere to go; essentially time swallows him, provided he puts

on the garb of Mastop. As long as he is willing to make that concession to local mysticism, he can disappear from time into a universe as old as Hopi myth . . ." (Madden 163–64).

Although West has no abiding religious beliefs, he has admitted that this novel has definite religious overtones: "It's a religious book in a wide sense, not sectarian though. I really saw something in what they [the Hopi] were doing" (Madden 162). Each of the main characters defines his own relationship with Hopi religious beliefs. George, for all his flinty individuality, is obsessed with religion and, in the largest sense, the phenomenon of faith. He believes, for instance, in two worlds—one pretend and one not. In that way he reminds us of Mircea Eliade's definition of the religious person as one who "always believes that there is an absolute reality, *the sacred*, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real" (Eliade 202). As Oswald describes it, "The more I heard him, the more I knew that the things I lived among were not the real world at all, but things put there instead of it. There was always something behind what was there. Nothing was quite itself. . . . So you always looked for what was behind what you saw, and you also looked behind what was behind what you saw, and so on forever" (122).

Oswald tells George that he abandoned religious belief in grade school and that the "real gods are over in California, and even if you pray to them, they serve you up on a platter, they call you asshole to your face and pretend to fire you" (109). Early in the novel Oswald is presented as Eliade's profane man, one who refuses "transcendence, accepts the relativity of 'reality,' and may even come to doubt the meaning of existence" (Eliade 202–03). Yet as he journeys further into himself and into the depravity of a desacralized world, "he just knew someone was keeping tabs on him, for better or worse . . ." (259), and as the chapters narrated by Sotuqnangu reveal, the god is indeed watching over the young man.

After his war experience and his encounter with George's spirit and the "suitcase stars," Oswald gradually develops his own religious yearnings. His adventures in each world can be seen as successive rites of passage that bring him both to himself and to the heart of ancestral beliefs. He is awakened intuitively by the winter solstice ritual; and his impersonation of the Mastop Kachina, which Lomawaima regards as base sacrilege, is actually a desperate man's attempt to link himself with a tradition and forces that exceed him. The choice of the Mastop Kachina is hardly accidental; it is the spirit that follows the arrival of Soyal and represents the male power of human fertility. Because that figure runs about the village feigning copulation with the women, his actions are especially shocking to outsiders. In becoming Mastop, Oswald seeks to revivify himself and move beyond his mortal condition to become "[s]omething better and bigger than me . . ." (489). As Eliade observes, "One becomes truly a man only by conforming to the teaching of the myths, that is, by imitating the gods" (100). Becoming Mastop is the most dramatic evidence of the profundity of Oswald's liminal experience. Turner explains:

> Whatever the mode of representation, the body is regarded as a sort of symbolic template for the communication of *gnosis*, mystical knowledge about the nature of things and how they came to be what they are. The cosmos may in some cases be regarded as a vast human body; in other belief systems, visible parts of the body may be taken to portray invisible faculties such as reason, passion, wisdom and so on; in others again, the different parts of the social order are arrayed in terms of a human anatomical paradigm. (*Forest* 107)

Furthermore, Oswald and George's religious dilemmas have important implications for the treatment of time in the novel. Both characters are eventually released from chronological into sacred time, moving on from a world of contingencies to a realm of immutable existence. In the largest sense, sacred time offers believers the opportunity to reverse life, to return, through religious rites and festivals, to the primordial, mythic period when gods inhabited the cosmos and created humanity. That is the condition of time-out-of-time, and it offers the religious person the possibility of intimate contact with the gods. The nostalgia for origins, which both men exhibit in their wanderings into the past, can be seen as a form of religious nostalgia, a desire to return to essences.

In Hopi culture, the festival of the winter solstice is a fertility celebration, an exaltation of the seasons' return to a period of life and renewal. As such, it is also a re-creation of the world and life itself through the emergence of a new year. Instead of time simply spinning out forever, it repeats itself for the religious person, offering the opportunity of renewal. The believer "*wants to be other* than he finds himself on the 'natural' level and undertakes to *make himself* in accordance with the ideal image revealed to him by myths" (Eliade 187). Thus Oswald as Mastop "does not want to profane the local arcana but to latch on to them for his own purposes . . ." (462).

The various chapters narrated by the god Sotuqnangu imaginatively suggest the degree to which these men have succeeded in escaping profane time to reach the divine. Although West takes license with his depiction of the god, there is precedent in Hopi lore for some of the god's attributes in this novel. On the one hand, he is the great creator, fashioning the various universes out of endless space, setting his creation in order, and making Spider Woman, who in turn creates human beings. Such a grand, powerful figure "is considered to be the heart of the sky, creator of the world, the omniscient yet remote sky deity to whom one prays in times of distress and sickness" (Geertz and Lomatuway'ma 64, n. 8). Certainly that conception is in keeping with the figure George implores in his agitation and illness.

On the other hand, Hopi legends reveal another side of his character, a god concerned with his creation who occasionally takes sides in human conflicts to aid the wronged and punish evil-doers. Such is the case in the tale of "The White Corn-ear Maiden and the Sorcerers" when the god descends from the skies to protect an avenging brother and chastise a group of sorcerers by dismembering

and then haphazardly reassembling them (Voth 126–31). In still another tale, "The Destruction of Palátkwapi," he descends to earth and dispenses the knowledge, rituals, and weapons of war, and his characteristic symbols are thunder and lightning (Voth 48–63). In the latter embodiment, he is the spirit hovering above Vietnam, overseeing Oswald's degradation, protecting him against formidable odds, and generally assessing his emotional and psychological conditions.

In an otherwise favorable review, Thomas R. Edwards takes exception with an important scene that deals with that very communicative dilemma. After returning from the war and holing up in George's old hut, Oswald one night abruptly awakens to find a note written in his own hand that he does not recall composing. Puzzling over the mystery, he is visited by the spirit of Uncle George, who is accompanied by four figures, each of whom bears the name of a star (Barnard, Kapteyn, 61 Cygni, and Groombridge). George informs Oswald that Sotuqnangu has granted him the freedom of this visit and presents his nephew with a suitcase containing four kachinas made of stars. As the narrator, Sotuqnangu, concludes, "But tonight he has gained an insight of sorts, an intimation not so much holy as overwhelming, its main say-so having to do with the human imagination's need to make something because nothing else can. It is Uncle George's credo" (424). Edwards is dissatisfied that the "sci-fi suitcase stars seem rather shabby terms for so solemn a mystery. . . . [They] seem not to be balanced by anything, which makes it hard to respond to their meaning as Mr. West wants us to" (Edwards 7). Indeed, on the surface, the scene appears more like the product of a popular entertainment than of serious fiction, but it has actually been adumbrated throughout the world.

One should first keep in mind that the Hopi have an openness to nature and the cosmos that by modern standards is extraordinary, and the kachina figures and ceremonies provide ample evidence of this spirit of receptivity.[3] In spite of his blindness, George insists that there is more to life than can be seen, and as he tells Oswald, "'We are already part of where we are going to go. . . . To die is to wake up. . . . I have never understood why the Anglos divide things up so much. We live among kachinas all the time. That's enough. . . . All that is here is there'" (95).

The scene is important for expanding the notion of divinity that the work addresses. As George at one point thinks, "With us [the Hopi], the gods come down, we do not go up to them" (73). In this case the gods have granted a visit, and as Eliade notes, the cosmos is often regarded by believers as *the* supreme creation of the gods and for the "religious man [it] 'lives' and 'speaks'" (Eliade 165). Thus to be visited by representatives of the stars themselves is to be invited into the very realm of the gods. The moment is epiphanical, an experience that cannot be explained by rationality or logic but that must simply be taken as it is.

Oswald still doubts and vainly attempts to explain what has taken place, and the novel suggests that this may be a product of his fevered mind. After all, the only humans who see the stars are Bert and Anna, people incapable of giving witness to anyone but the reader; Oswald is certainly given to flights of fancy and

visions that may have little empirical verification. The point, however, is that the visit means *something* to him, that it fires his imagination and opens him further for the series of awakenings he later experiences.

The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests is a difficult, challenging book, and it demands that the reader become, as West suggests, an "[a]ccomplice . . . willing to work hard. . . . No worthwhile book is going to go through them like a laxative" (Madden 160). As Edwards explains, the novel "records a continuous conflict between Paul West's restless, inquisitive imagination and his will to impose on it the controls and ironies of expressive form" (Edwards 7). Here West has found a way of bridging the gulf between the individual and the illimitable, between this world and the stars, between different temporal periods, between silence and volubility, and between the sacred and the profane. The measure of his accomplishment can be found in his ability to maintain those delicate balances throughout the work without simplifying or trivializing the dichotomies.

In a pair of novels, one recent and one forthcoming, West explores the dimensions of liminality in still fresher ways. In *Sporting with Amaryllis*, he again chooses an artist as his liminal hero, but in this case the hero actually learns something vital from his experience that he can carry with him after his period of initiation. The novella is another of West's historical fictions, drawn from an incident in the youth of British poet John Milton.

At age seventeen and a student at Cambridge University, Milton was "rusticated," a university practice that sent students whose academic performance was below par home for a period of contemplation that ideally would result in a renewed sense of purpose. The term *rustication* suggests that a student would leave the world of intellectual and cultural sophistication for a more provincial experience, but Milton went home to London where his wandering eye began to notice the charms of young women.

In West's hands the young Milton is not simply interested in women, but actively lusting after them, following some about the city and imagining all manner of dalliances with them. When following and observing do not titillate enough, Milton takes to fondling women in crowds on the street. More than a simple lecher, he is another of West's psychologically complex characters who yearns for a life other than his own.

Young Milton is convinced he is not normal and worries that his devotion to books and language have divorced him from life itself. In fact, his most active mental moments are spent pondering words, examining their etymology, trying desperately to find the thing in the word itself. He regards himself, therefore, as a voyeur, someone watching life, for whom words become the ultimate reality. When a street prostitute propositions him, he declines, chagrined that he is "jinxed by purity" (8).

Like other West heroes—Count von Stauffenberg in *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, Walter Sickert in *The Women of Whitechapel and Jack the Ripper*, Wight Deulius in *Gala*, and a host of others—Milton is an ill-formed

figure, someone searching for an identity that he feels is fragmented. Milton, as any reader knows, was deeply immersed in the classics, fully conversant with Greek and Roman mythology and literature. West depicts his Milton as a young man who constantly uses this background as a touchstone for his experience; in a key scene early in the novel, Milton ponders the figure of Pelops, whose father Tantalus killed and cooked him and then served him to the gods. Demeter inadvertently ate part of his shoulder before the gods restored Pelops to life—with an ivory shoulder to replace the portion eaten. Just as Pelops is a man of disparate parts, put together by others, so Milton feels himself a fragmented creature, assembled by others, not cohesive. Although he lusts for women, he feels that a "zone of prosthetic ivory lay between his [legs]," and that he is unfit for the experiences of the flesh (13).

Like West's other identity searchers, Milton constantly questions who he is and who he can become. Faced with the temptations of the world, he fears he is "neither boy nor youth nor man," and he cannot find a way to balance the demands of the material and intellectual worlds (29). He feels destined for greatness but also bereft of a sense of self. Instead, he feels he is a homunculus dwarfed by a Titanic conception of himself. "I am not who I am, he told himself, I am the ghost of my superior: the crystalline John, whose true nature may only be guessed at" (57). However, his unexpected encounter with one woman puts an end to these questions and provides him with a sense of identity and destiny.

On a jaunt through town, he meets a woman who seems vaguely familiar yet enigmatic. Her features are eastern and to his mind utterly exotic—brown skin, thick eyebrows, full lips, flaring nose; she reminds him of Apollonius Rhodius's Medea. Entranced, he follows her to her room where he witnesses her copulating with a deformed sailor.

Throughout the narrative she is an overwhelmingly mysterious figure. She does not appear to be a Londoner, nor for that matter even British; she has no identifiable history or past, and she refuses to reveal her age. For all her physicality and beauty, she often seems spectral, and Milton wonders if "she had been a phantom, that he knew, and he had brought her to life, made her into the apparition that made all other apparitions needless" (31). She interrogates him about his aspirations to be a major poet and then, through their own private bacchanalia, introduces him to the mysteries of sex; ultimately she disappears as quickly as she arrived. That experience of initiation is a liminal introduction to sex but more important to the mysteries of life that any poet must explore to produce art of any depth and significance. As the narrator explains, "Actually, she was domesticating him, in a perverse tradition of course, but nonetheless raising him from the level he had been at, readying him for the whirlpool, the plague" (58).

In tribal ceremonies, the location for a liminal experience is quite specific and usually austere. The place is a secluded, with sparse accommodations. Such is also the case in this novel. Milton visits the woman's room ("hovel was more the word"): The skins of animals hung dripping from the walls; there was no win-

dow, furniture, lamp, or even the most humble of amenities; filth and stench were omnipresent. Aside from brief intrusions by another figure, Milton and his mentor are secluded. A similar situation occurs later when Milton, the woman, and the attendant embark on a decrepit barge down the Thames. Milton, like other initiates, sees his condition as extreme, "Once degraded, always degraded. . . . Once schooled in a hovel by the demon muse, always in a hovel" (96).

That experience of degradation is entirely consistent with tribal initiation rites, although Milton questions what is taking place, "John asked himself if he was living inside an allegory devised to make him wiser . . ." (77). Indeed wisdom may be a primary effect of liminal seclusion. As Turner explains:

> During the liminal period, neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection. In it those ideas, sentiments, and facts that had been hitherto for the neophytes bound in configurations and accepted unthinkingly are, as it were, resolved into their constituents. (*Forest* 105)

Additionally, tribal initiations are often not only humiliating but also dangerous and painful. The woman warns Milton of the price for his experience: "'We love you to pay in blood what you are certain to receive'" (80).

Early in the novel, Milton argues about the workings of nature with his best friend, Chappel: "'Nature does not decay,' John said, 'but uses decay to resume itself'" (14). That is a perfectly abbreviated description of a liminal experience: an initiate is reduced to essences, only to emerge into a sense of personal fullness and plenitude. Traveling on the barge, Milton descends below decks and again is overwhelmed with the stench of decomposition; he discovers rows of corpses.

The woman demands that the young man look deeply into and then kiss those mouths and says, "'Think . . . about how the words you are going to use came forth from the mouths of these dead. . . . Any honor you have resides in these mouths'" (111). The point, she tells him, is that he must humble himself by seeing language as the product of all people, which the poet, in his privileged position, must use with care, discrimination, and awareness of its origins. The result is that "[a] lifetime had tunneled through him, almost annulling his youth, loading him with destiny and chores" (114). Milton must return to his former life, but it will be a return with a difference. Milton has learned and is destined for greatness, unlike Walter Sickert in *The Women of Whitechapel and Jack the Ripper*, who saw and experienced the extremes of life and death as one of a triumvirate of murderers but was hardly ennobled by his experience.

One of the two epigraphs introducing the novel is a quotation from *Lycidas*:

> Were it not better done as others use,
> To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
> Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair? (iii)

When Milton feels that he has discovered the identity of his mentor, he believes she is Amaryllis, his ideal version of a female. Her assistant, a mutant human and another Westian depiction of a Caliban, informs Milton that she is nothing less than the young man's muse. She is there not only to confirm and nurture his talent but also to prepare him for the rigors of a life of creation. In one of the novel's most compelling scenes, an aged Milton, "a virtual skeleton in a rocking chair," remembers devotedly his interlude with his muse. "Milton was looking with affection at his own death, still yearning to be of tender service to his long-gone Amaryllis: to massage her feet, to kiss her eyelids closed, to smooth out with a flat hand the black velvet of her stomach" (162).

In an as yet unpublished work, *The Chaos Attractor*,[4] West chooses another celebrity for his protagonist and charts his decline from public acclaim to personal despair. The story centers on the life of Shushi Gupta, an Indian cricket player who attains stardom during his playing career. Eventually that career ends, and he must adjust to a life of relative anonymity. As he begins to adjust to his new circumstances, he is beset by a humiliating illness (anal abscesses) that requires an operation he can finance only by bartering away one of his kidneys. After an unsuccessful procedure, Gupta leaves Calcutta for the primitive reaches of the Sunderband, where he earns a meager living as a fisherman in constant danger from tigers.

On the surface Gupta appears to be an exception to West's typical liminal heroes. His youth was not spent in seclusion and humiliation, but joyously playing ball before scores of adoring fans. At that stage in his life, he was secure in his identity, and nothing in his experience challenged his views of the world, others, or himself. Gupta, however, simply forestalls the liminal experience, and Turner clarifies that condition: "Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low" (*Ritual* 97). Thus nothing demands that a liminal experience should occur at a certain age; the requirement is only that the experience should represent a radical change in stature and usually should bring with it new conditions and enlightenment.

West's descriptions of cricket are perhaps the most lyrical and extended depictions of that game in literature. Gupta is a connoisseur of its languorousness and nuances. He plays in an almost idyllic, verdant garden, is a recipient of "a kind of mob altruism," and feels he is actually communing with the gods when he is playing at his best. In reviewing the course his life takes he feels that "this competitive career of mine was like going to heaven first and then coming down to earth" (26).

Yet as Gupta later understands, cricket was actually a highly personal preparation for his later trials. In fact, the game can be seen as a tightly controlled, limited version of a liminal experience. As Gupta reflects, "There was something subtractive about the ground, wiping out your previous existence, your family, your future, even. You came to give your all, to empty yourself out, and to sit

brooding in the shade of the pavilion waiting your turn to bat" (63–4). Furthermore, "After thirty, as the headlong euphoria wanes, you begin to realize why the game exists, and all those finicky little rules. It prepares you for not understanding the universe, the human state, the bad things that begin happening to you" (47). Thus the game has not been entirely ennobling or a mere diversion from life's trials, but a harbinger of the decline and despair that are inevitably human.

The novel's middle section is given over to extended descriptions of Gupta's physical maladies. Unquestionably, he is the most physically debased of any of West's heroes. After his operation, his sphincter is so damaged that he cannot control his excretory functions, and as a result his contact with the world diminishes precipitously. Many may find the gruesomeness of that section nauseating and gratuitous, but once again Turner sheds light on this aspect of the liminal experience. Often initiates are not only stripped of their clothing but caked with dirt, filth, and blood to augment their separation from the normal and to level them to a null state, ready for re-creation.

> From this standpoint, one would expect to find that transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography), and are at the very least "betwixt and between" all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification. In fact, in confirmation of Dr. [Mary] Douglas's hypothesis, liminal *personae* nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, "inoculated" against them, through having been themselves initiated into the same state. (Forest 97)

Although Gupta is in a state of torture and shame, he is also unfailingly philosophical and unself-pitying about his condition. He sees himself as a man going backwards, though through his monologue (he is a first-person narrator) he is determined to make sense of his torment and offer "a smile into the void" (16).

The consistent Westian dilemma of identity emerges at that point. Instead of being an athletic marvel and hero to countless unknown fans, he has "been subordinated to the role of he who makes a mess" (155–56). He is chagrined to wonder how "a life [can] degenerate so far, from blue-ribbon prowess to passive leaking" (92), yet he is also determined to make some sense of the disgrace that has been inexplicably heaped upon him. His partial conclusion, though he does not realize it at the time, is a quintessentially liminal one: "You had to live so long in order to learn how to live" (171).

Out of both shame and a desire for personal discovery, Gupta exiles himself to the Sunderband, an austere landscape of salty marshes bordered by dense jungles. He wills his anonymity, perhaps out of an intuitive realization that only after he has been annulled can he then become someone else. Thus he loses his old identity and through an accident gains a new one. Inhabitants of the region are constantly threatened by man-eating tigers, and at one point Gupta comes face-to-face with one of the beasts. Unarmed, all he can do is stare at the tiger, which

eventually wanders harmlessly away. He quickly gains the exalted reputation of a gifted person who can defeat a mortal enemy. "We [he and his friend Abé] were consequential men from now on, so perhaps there was some way of exploiting our new status" (251).

In the Sunderband Gupta walks about naked, and in a literal way reminds one of Shakespeare's description in *King Lear* of one reduced to essences as "naked unaccommodated man." Here he must live "a life denuded of man-made minutiae," in a region that makes one forget everything about himself (200). The Sunderband is so austere and threatening that it is the perfect spot for liminal separation and realignment. As Gupta explains, "You had to lower your estimate of yourself until you recognized how subordinate you were to millions of other creatures, some almost invisible" (256).

In its way, that change in location represents a passage into the condition of *communitas* that Turner sees as vital to the total liminal experience. Unlike other of West's heroes, Gupta has a strong sense that he is evolving into a unique position. "I could not resist the feeling that I was closing in upon something of incalculable worth: only a perception, perhaps, but one that changed all my thinking, free of taboo and shibboleth, rule and regime" (273). "[R]eady to join my atoms to all other atoms in a final fireworks display," Gupta reveals a remarkable receptivity to all of creation (274).

Such openness can be compared to Turner's notion of *communitas*, where social structure, rules, and conventions give way to a feeling of equality and equipoise. As Turner explains, "In closed or structured societies, it is the marginal or 'inferior' person or the 'outsider' who often comes to symbolize what David Hume has called 'the sentiment for humanity,' which in its turn relates to the model we have termed 'communitas'" (*Ritual* 111). Gupta's feelings of generous receptivity remind one of Rat Man's eventual acceptance of his once resented son. Both Gupta and Rat Man move beyond personal pain, humiliation, and resentment to a state of generous tolerance, and in effect have begun the journey of transformation implicit in any rite of passage.

With life reduced to its essences and the desire to open himself to any and all experience, Gupta arrives at an extreme solution. He digs a deep hole in the mud and buries himself up to the neck, awaiting whatever may befall him. "I was, you might say, installed, awaiting night's tiger, morning's tide, night's snake, morning's crocodile, or even Abé's bullet. . . . You made your overture proudly, but without conceit, knowing the game you played was private: your last innings, but not cricket" (303).

West's heroes are microcosmic projections, pure human potentiality, who through their liminal positions emerge into figures offering salvation to a world desperately in need of their intervention. There is often a note of pathos in West's works: The heroes are ignored, unrecognized, or annihilated; and the saving possibilities they offer may either be destroyed or be radically curtailed. Turner anticipates such a situation and frequently cautions that liminality guarantees

nothing. "It merely occasions the freedom to imagine alternatives; it does not compel one to exercise freedom or to imagine wisely and well" (Daly 76).

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
AT SACRAMENTO

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this discussion I have selected five novels that represent the diversity of West's career and offer them as representative selections but not the only examples of his treatment of the liminal archetype. For instance, *Colonel Mint*, his allegory of contemporary political indoctrination, could be seen as an example of what Turner called the liminoid experience, a technological extrapolation of the liminal paradigm. I have, however, limited this discussion exclusively to liminal experiences that suggest both the failure and success of an individual's communal integration.

2. West has voiced different feelings about this concluding gesture. In one interview he remarks that "[t]he book ends with his thinking that he has found a niche, but his niche is very trivial. . . . To him it looks epic, but to the reader, it may seem small." In another discussion he demurs at the suggestion that Rat Man achieves some limited triumph at the novel's end, "I'm not sure that Rat Man's holding up his thumb signifies any kind of triumph. It's conceivable that he means let it all come down, let it happen all over again. It may be a gesture of supreme apathy or stoicism perhaps" (Madden 170).

3. Mastop, for instance, is a figure dressed in and painted black, signifying the vastness of interstellar space; on his cheeks he bears white dots that are emblematic of the Pleiades and Dipper, indications that his home is in the stars.

4. At the conclusion of preparing my monograph on West's fiction and after having conducted an extensive interview with him, West sent me a typescript of *The Chaos Attractor.* I put the work aside to attend to other matters. When preparing this essay, I read it and realized how integral it would be to this study. West has moved on to other projects and to date the novel remains unpublished. All page references refer to the typescrpit pagination.

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