

The Paul West Experience: Liberating the Microcosms

by Ed Desautels

I remember the puckish Derbyshire voluptuary of the word ever enthroned in the seat of honor at our seminar table, how his calm resonant wisdom and heavy-lidded vitality belied the little boy, still there within in him, scanning the Eckington horizon for a murky Luftwaffe formation of Dorniers or Heinkels and, hot on their tails, the RAF DeHavilland Mosquitoes who, inverting their pesky handle, put a resolute 20mm swatting to the Hun. On warm days, he welcomed us in tattered red gym shorts, perhaps a slapdash nod to his brief teenage jock career as the Eck cricketer infamous for bowling deadly beamers. To this he added untucked dress shirt (Oxford of course) and a well-worn pair of brown loafers--no socks. When the weather turned a bit cooler, velour sweat pants replaced the shorts. Looking back, I now wonder if he'd come to us so hastily dressed because only moments removed the writing desk where, he claimed, he liked to work nude. Hair raked over dome in a raucous, kinky tarp, it sparked more than once in the Allen Way Building--*that* bristling was the energy animating this iconoclast so on the outs with the English Department he made only rare forays onto campus and so sent word to us fictioneers to meet at the Allen Way, his home away from Ithaca home, in the fifth-floor conference room just down the hall from his apartment and adjacent to the laundry. To fortify our efforts, he always donated two bags of Pepperidge Farms cookies, Milanos the constant paired with an ever-changing mate.

Paul West--the first person I'd known to have calloused elbows, the accretion of years propped on writing or seminar table, plunged in letters dubbed florid or purple or masturbatory

or, heaven forbid, Your-oh-pee-in; or, at work on novels that exploded into their own universe and made the familiar seem new--*new*, as he himself admonished, not a mere *gimmick*.

Paul West, whose narrators and protagonists have included

- a midget wrestler fond of crotch-level pranks and worried about a friend given over to saving lost souls
- a plasterer fond of model airplanes whose limited tools for coping with a brutal world cannot forestall a murderous impulse and, in a sequel, a night of mayhem involving a backhoe and a graveyard
- an astronaut who claims to have seen an angel only to suffer the kind of seemingly farfetched “enhanced interrogation techniques” at the hands of his own government we were only to learn were all too real years later in places like Abu Gharaib and Guantanamo Bay
- the homeless Parisian, terrorized in youth by the Nazi massacre of his village, who responds to the atrocity by flashing a live rat, or sometimes a suitable prosthetic one, from beneath his overcoat, “Columbo style,” at unsuspecting passersby or aghast patrons of the sidewalk cafés
- Count von Stauffenberg, the leader of the plot to blow up Hitler at Wolf’s Lair, whose narrative continues even after his execution in the courtyard of the Bendlerblock
- the unnamed creator of a Hitler forgery rendered in the style of Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard
- the Native American Vietnam veteran--and veteran of the lowest rung of the L.A. pornography industry--returned to the reservation to learn from his dying uncle-father how to be himself by taking on the uncle-father’s sacred vocation as kachina doll carver

- the amnesiac aliens sent on a long-term reconnaissance mission to Earth and who do so as pilots of a high-altitude spy plane

The list goes on and you can't help but marvel at the mind on display in these works. I first encountered it nearly 25 years ago when, rattling around the greasy alleyway flanking the belles lettres, I crashed in a bit beer woozy through a disused side door in zips, boots, jacket, chains, and an erratic psychobilly pompadour held together with NuNile pomade and Aqua Net spray (it's true!). Though I hadn't yet the words to say it quite so, I was my own walkin', talkin' expressionist monstrosity, distorting and exaggerating myself in the service of what I believed to be a more authentic marker of the human condition. Or *something*--whatever it was we punk rock types were after, lobbing our vane grenades of disgust into the pillboxes of so much disappointment. So predisposed, I'd already waded into fragrant puddles iridescent with the drippings of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Alain Robbe-Grillet, William Burroughs, and the rest, all of whom inspired my first frightful attempts and who served me well when I made Paul's acquaintance in one of the last undergraduate writing seminars he presided over at Penn State. Paul raised an eyebrow at my aforementioned list when polling the class on what we'd been reading. Camus alone would have placed me in eccentric contrast to a rogues gallery offered up by the others, a list that included the likes of Judith Krantz, Mario Puzo, Jacqueline Suzanne, and even *Sidney Sheldon!*

I like to think my tastes and my eccentric presence gave me an in with Paul, but if he had misgivings about the others he didn't let on. Indeed, he flexed and heaved with humor and high spirit in one more crack at dragging yet another platoon of philistine undergraduates out of the

sucking quicksand of twaddle and pap. Our sessions were lively if sometimes misunderstood, and Paul was relentless in driving home his messages about style and the pleasure to be had in striving beyond the generic. And though his teaching methods veered deliciously away from the lecture and toward the conversation, perhaps sensing there's more to be learned through thoughtful digressions than in a prepared agenda, he occasionally offered direct advice on matters of craft. He even handed out a two-page numbered list with the simple heading "Fiction" that presented what he considered reasonable advice for aspiring writers. One of my favorites, number nine:

Contrast all the way; without it, nothing has definition or resonance. Even if you don't always state a contrast, think of one, and its impress will often show up. For example, while describing a polar bear, think of a black tadpole, then you'll report the bear with extra perceptiveness. While describing someone weeping, conjure up someone who'd laugh in the same situation.

But I fear we may have cracked him that semester—not halfway through Paul suffered the kind of broken heart that lands you in the ICU. I was heartbroken in another way—after all, I'd just found salvation in a voice that said, "Take pleasure in your writing," when, only the semester before I'd suffered through an intro fiction course taught by a puritanical nabob who'd admonished us to hold suspect *anything* we found pleasurable at the writing table—even as he made blatant, though appallingly dour, passes at the male aspirants. A substitute carried on admirably in Paul's absence, but he couldn't hope to fill those brown loafers. At semester's end,

however, I was amazed and touched to discover that Paul had read and marked our final manuscripts from his convalescent's bed. Among the comments on mine, a fathers-and-sons story I myself had considered perhaps a bit too timid, Paul had penned, as if astonished, "You can write." For better or worse, those three words sealed my fate.

I spent the next three years scuffling around in Philadelphia's punky rocky subculture, working in turn as manager of a 50s-themed nightclub, bartender at the Kennel, one of Philly's most notorious punk rock venues, and as a projectionist in the Sam-Eric movie theater chain. In between hangovers, or even sometimes while working one up, I crouched over a cheap electric Underwood typewriter or a spiral bound notebook writing up my experiences into fragments of what would become my novel *Flicker in the Porthole Glass*. I also did a lot of reading, not the least of which was the work of that mysterious novelist whose presence had been both powerful and all too fleeting back at Penn State. Piecing together his bio in the Philadelphia Public Library, I was stunned--though I probably shouldn't have been--to learn that Paul was an inductee to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a winner of the Prix Médicis and the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction, a Literary Lion of the New York Public Library system, a winner of the Aga Khan Prize, and so on. "Ah! So that explains it!" I thought, finally working out the downright palpable emanations I'd felt when seated in his classroom. Then I resolved to make my way back to Penn State.

And I did, happily accepted into the MFA program there for fiction writing and soon enrolled in one of Paul's comparative literature seminars and, of course, his fiction writing seminars. "You've come back!" he said, to my mind looking genuinely pleased, recognizing my re-entry.

So began three years of intense immersion, taking on Paul's challenges offered in the works of Thomas Bernhard, Maurice Blanchot, Janet Frame, Jean Genet, Giorgio Manganelli, Italo Calvino, Thomas Mann, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Virginia Wolfe, Max Frisch, and even the novels of Samuel Becket—the list went on, Paul's hit parade of fiction that soared miles above the staid mediocrities of NPR prattle. To these he'd recommended American exemplars like John Hawkes, William Gass, Djuna Barnes. We devoured all with fork, knife, and spoon. And, of course, we relished the fiction writing seminars in which Paul played the ringleader of our smarty pants circus, sometimes cajoling us through the flaming hoop, sometimes cowing us with whip and chair, sometimes trumpeting our outlandish feats with outsized megaphone.

Moments from those days, often apart from the matter at hand, are burned into my memory. Like the afternoon he opened our session by saying, "I found myself at a loss this weekend, when, at one of these mandatory university dinners I was seated at table with Bryce Jordan [then president of Penn State]." Paul continued: "Things got off to a bad start when he opened the conversation by asking what *church* I attended. I hadn't the heart to tell him I was what they used to call a *heathen*, so I feigned hardness of hearing and replied that, yes indeed, the improvements to Beaver Stadium seemed to be moving along quite impressively."

Or like the time when, after our halftime restroom-and-cookie break, he asked us, holding up a photograph of Italian novelist Giorgio Manganelli, "What do you think?"

"Looks like he's reaching for another cannoli," I said.

Paul reared back, shaking with laughter, features contorted into a fearsome grimace of pure delight. We'd never seen him laugh with so much abandon, and I flushed at the idea that I'd made the literary lion shake his mane a bit and lose it.

Or the time, on my way to visit a friend in the neighborhood south of campus, I chanced upon PW approaching from the other direction along the Allen Street sidewalk. A warm spring day, he'd suited up in full PW regalia: red shorts? Check. Oxford shirt? Check. Loafers, no socks? Also check. On this day, however, he added a preposterous white sailor cap. I had my opening. As we closed, I waved and asked, "Taking the yacht out this afternoon?"

"Indeed!" he said, puffing into a cheerful seafaring mien. And we continued along our way, the most natural exchange conceivable behind us.

Or the time, stepping off the elevator onto the fifth floor of the Allen Way Building en route to the weekly seminar, I found myself following PW, several steps behind and thoroughly unnoticed. As he walked, sheaf of marked-up student manuscripts in left arm, he conducted an orchestra of the mind with his right, more than likely reworking a sentence to fit the ideal rhythm he had in mind.

Genius can be the most dehumanizing of words, I think. So when I think of Paul, I like to dwell on these episodes--they remind me just how engagingly human this particular genius is. But when forced to a strictly professional contemplation of what Paul West has given me as a writer, I come back again and again to the notion of freedom: freedom to loose fiction from preconceived notions cooked up by the new puritans of anonymous prose; freedom from the idea that prose is nothing more than a faceless servant to an idea or something else deferred and not an art form capable of being practiced and celebrated in its own right; freedom to ignore the dullards who claim to know exactly what the novel is for, who valorize "realism" above all but only if realism means a linear, plot-driven clockworks ticking off a pale external verisimilitude

for the conveyance of gossip; freedom to write up that personal emanation called style, to scandalize and horrify editors of limited range, such as the one who once accosted PW and drawled, “I don’t like any style more complicated than walking up to someone and saying, ‘Hi’”; freedom to write up the prose equivalent of my long-gone erratic psychobilly pompadour.

Interestingly, for a writer loath to linger more than a moment or two on matters of theory, Paul worked up a theory of his own, oft repeated, to support this revolution of freedom against the tyranny of minimalizing editors--and even professors employed by MFA programs; the tyranny that would yoke writers to a contemporary equivalent of Soviet tractor fiction, the tyranny, as Paul once put of “the Gestapo of the plain prose party.” He lays it out in his essay “Linguistic Islands: An Abandoned Project.” Picking up on Beckett’s quip that “The mortal microcosm cannot forgive the relative immortality of the macrocosm,” Paul writes

... if the microcosm is in any way intended to be a model of the macrocosm, it is always obliged to be up-to-date about it, which presumably includes all the microcosms that have been added to the macrocosm in the last few minutes.

Obviously this is impossible. The microcosm is always out of date. The macrocosm’s microcosm is always obsolete if intended in any way to be up to date. On the other hand, it may just be possible that the microcosms of microcosmic people are intended not to mimic the macrocosm at all, but to spite it, to ridicule it, and so forth, which may enable the novelist, or manufacturer of microcosms, to get away with something.

Got that? Any attempt at so-called verisimilitude is predestined to failure. It’s not in the

nature of an ever-changing universe (or multiverse) to be modeled. The model will always be wrong because, if nothing else, the addition of the model has itself changed what it purports to stand in for. But what the novel, what fiction can do is demonstrate the mind at play in the multiverse, or the mind coming to grips with it, or rejecting it, or distorting it, or what have you. *This*, ladies and gentlemen, is realism. And the ways in which this happens are infinite and in no way confined to the bleak H-Block cells the editors and MFA profs consign fiction to. And let's face it, even in H-Block the prisoners rebelled with a fecal art painted on the very walls of their cells! And to those who would still argue this is nothing more than a retreat into fantasy, Paul, in his essay "Backlash against the Novel" has this to say:

Something else, not new, has resurged to afflict fiction and its practitioners: the canard that fictioneers can't face the world and therefore duck away into dreamland, into the far-fetched, so called. The point here is that, no matter how far the fetch, it comes from the same world as everything else and is not the least evasive.

Paul also gave us a frank reality check: if the number of intelligent readers is fifteen thousand today, he said, rejoice. Tomorrow it will be ten. All any writer need do is look at the studies seeking to determine the percentage of various populations reading prose fiction of *any* kind, let alone fiction one might describe as experimental or exotic, and that writer can't help but shiver in despair. Indeed, I once shared a cramped office with an acerbic little functionary whose role in the company was at best vague. One day I let slip that the thing I do out of love is write fiction. At this he sniffed and told me, "I don't read novels. I read only for information." The

idea that a novel or short story could contain “information” of any sort was anathema to him.

Sadly, I fear that of those who still read, even those who might be described as intelligent, there are more like my digital office mate than not. So, for the sake of argument, let’s say you do as Paul once advised and pen potboilers under an assumed name to earn some dough, buy some time, to work on the real deal. Even if you pushed all the right *NYT* best-sellers list buttons, even if you limited yourself to what Paul might call the immigrant prose currently so much in favor, you *still* would be guaranteed neither publisher nor audience. The consequence of this leads us once again to freedom: in an era in which fiction reading is in serious decline, in an era of dum dum editors, why *not* go your own way? What have you got to lose? Why *not* push the evolution of the form? Why kowtow to the Gestapo of the plane prose party when the party can do nothing to save you? Why hammer yourself into the prescribed shape only to have your work rejected, or published and ignored, or published and thoroughly undistinguished from much else lining the shelves and filling the bins at the soon-to-be-shuttered Barnes & Noble? Why not, as Paul urges, free up your microcosm, take up the cause of the individual in this relentlessly anonymizing world, and work your style, for as Paul notes

...style, your own anyway, is symptomatically timeless, like the idea of a rocker slowly tilting back and forth on a hotel verandah facing Lake Ostego. Style is the indelible trace. Style is where you take upon yourself your own future without having to count. Style is your ID as well as the armature of defiance. Style is the snowshoe print of the impenitent individualist of whom, of all the writers that have written, only a few matter because their tone, their cadence, their demeanor are not standard.