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The Face(s) of War in Paul West's Fiction

> Your face, my thane, is a book where men
> May read strange matters.
> —Duncan in *Macbeth*

Nearly four decades after the publication of his first novel, Paul West shows no sign of toning down his distinctive brand of prose. Far from "licking the minimum" (an epithet he hurls at the "self-righteous ordinariness" of minimalist writers), West still revels in producing "[purple] prose that draws attention to itself by being revved up, ample, intense, incandescent or flamboyant" (*Sheer Fiction* 49). Regarding this aspect of West's writing, Sven Birkerts remarks, "Reading his novels we remember that style wedded to imagination is a nitroglycerin compound." In a recent short piece entitled "Down In Flames," West once again demonstrates the explosiveness of his writing. In his description of a Luftwaffe pilot's face burned beyond recognition, a grossly disfigured nose becomes "merely the vomer camouflaged with suet bric-a-brac." In a similar Westian incantation, the German's singed skin, "once a delicatesse of glowing samite" now hangs "in folds like something from the disembowled carcass of a cow, an unevenly spread-out doyley" ("Down in Flames" 166). Precisely this kind of linguistic reverie and protean imagination has earned West universal praise as one of our finest living stylists.

Yet "Down In Flames" reveals another aspect of West's immense talent which has received considerably less attention than his stylistic virtuosity. *Leutnant* Steinhof's flambéed physiognomy reminds us that much of West's writing puts a face on war. In nearly half of his seventeen novels, West has intelligently explored the effects of armed conflict on individual human lives. In settings ranging from Flanders Fields to the killing fields of Laos and from Nanking to Plötzensee Prison, West consistently demonstrates an abiding concern with the role of war in the human condition.

Like several other characters in West's novels, Steinhof's face tells its own tale of war. In battle, the once dapper officer has "become more of what was not he" (166). With uncanny economy, West reflects a wartime metamorphosis in a visage that looks more akin to lesser life forms . . . "shrimps, damsons . . . snakeskin shed." The former ladies' man has indeed been "missed in action" (166). In West's hands, such faces become potent metaphors for examining war's ability to shape human experience and irrevocably change identity. As such, Steinhof's depiction stands as just one of many disfigured faces of war that rise up from the pages of West's fiction to interrogate and haunt us.

To understand the wider significance of Steinhof's position in relation to West's many faces of war, it is helpful to consider the epic novel *The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests* (1988). Set partially during the Vietnam War, this novel explores the experience of a young Hopi who leaves the mesas of Arizona to enlist in the army. Shortly after arriving in Vietnam, Oswald Beautiful Badger Going Over the Hill becomes a blindly efficient killer. One experience, though, dramatically changes his outlook on the war. Peering through a night observation device, Oswald recognizes in the enemy something which had eluded him in daylight; he sees

"faces capable of friendship" (*The Place in Flowers* 266). This discovery gives him pause as he realizes:

> The face was the dignity. It was where the mercuriality of being was. And it was never merely a matter of faces that smiled, scowled, looked happy or proud; it was much more complex than that, with untold and interminable shadings that sometimes registered an emotion, an attitude, lasting only a few seconds, and then gone forever. That combination, say, of irate relief shading over into exhilarated willingness, tinctured this time with slyness or naivete, was rare in the history of that face. There might be close repeats, but they would never be exactly the same as this particular one. (333)

For West, the face often serves as the locus of human uniqueness and essential being. West frequently uses this trope as a vehicle for exploring the psychological, social, and moral consequences of war in terms of individual lives.

In Oswald's case, his ability to put a face on the enemy moves him to stop killing temporarily. By viewing handsome Vietnamese faces, Oswald "had picked up some abiding principle which, if even half attended to, meant that no one would ever kill anyone at all except in reasonless rage. Yet they did, all the time, conned into undervaluing the other's face" (266). Here West acknowledges that the efficacy of any war effort requires a dehumanization of the Other. In other words, West suggests a virtual *defacement* of the enemy's human uniqueness and individual value must occur. West shares this insight with several other gifted thinkers. Nearly twenty centuries ago Tacitus expressed a variation on this theme

when he wrote, "It is human nature to hate those we have injured." More recently, scholars such as Tom Nairn have cogently demonstrated the association between the near pathological hatred of the Other and group or state-sponsored killing (14). The uniqueness of West's exploration of this point lies in his dramatization of the consequences of this dynamic. Upon discovering this con game, Oswald is temporarily unable to kill, but soon he is relieved of night observation duty. As he unsuccessfully struggles to regain a vision of the faceless enemy, he resumes his role as a dutiful and efficient killer. In Oswald's case, the effects of this are devastating. By the end of his tour, he realizes, "We were the blurred . . . the generation put away to dry. We have *no faces*, fewer names" (*The Place in Flowers* 364, emphasis added). In West's treatment of other wars, the consequences are typically the same. Through faces such as Oswald's and Steinhof's, West reminds us that war always alters and often destroys individual lives by shaping and effacing identities.

Part of the explanation for West's fascination with the many guises of war lies in his first-hand knowledge of another generation of faces erased by war and put away to dry—his father's. As a boy, West gazed up at the broken visage of Albert West, a one-eyed WWI veteran who frequently reminisced about his war days. In hour-long sessions of near total recall, the elder West fueled his son's martial imagination by repeatedly reciting his autobiography, which according to West, was almost entirely that of a soldier. At sixteen, Albert had lied about his age and enlisted, only to go into the "terror that was Belgium, 1914" ("Field Day" 24). Surviving physically intact for over three years, Albert mowed down the advancing enemy by the "thousands" with his Vicker's machine gun. When a shell finally left him half-blind, Albert was officially "missed in action." Prior to his in-

jury, however, Albert's war experience exacted a devastating emotional toll from which he never fully recovered. Like the fictional Oswald, Albert, "felt he was already dying out, like a chant . . . he felt removed from history" (*The Place in Flowers* 215). Ultimately, the war stripped away part of Albert so that "something of him remained buried there without so much as a poppy to grace it" ("Field Day" 27).

The Great War had removed Albert West from the mainstream of history and normal human intercourse, and thus West becomes his spokesman:

> It was as if he lived a lifetime's allotment of hell before he reached twenty, as if his life were some grand quotation learned by heart, booming at the outset only to dwindle into mere lettering: Let there be light, the great first use of the subjunctive, otherwise known as the mood of subordination, and it was into that mood that he disappeared as he reached forty. ("Field Day" 27)

West recalls his father "wanted to be heard from in this world, and not just while leaning against the bar with a pint in hand. He had much to say about war, the army, the class system, poverty . . . " (McGuire 143). With his father muted by war, West attempts to "do duty for him as best [he] can" through his writing. On one level then, West's war narratives give his father the voice he never had. At another level, however, these works serve as West's attempt to understand his father, "to go after him, who is missing, into the valleys of the Meuse and Sambre, where he did his freshman year in human behavior" ("Field Day" 28). Like his father before him, West schools us in the darker side of human nature as he

guides us through the rings of hell trod by his father's generation.

In accounts of his father's war experience such as *Love's Mansion* (a loving fictionalized account of his parents' relationship which includes Albert's wartime experiences) and a moving tribute to the martial memory of his father, "Field Day for A Boy Soldier" (1979), West puts an appallingly gruesome face on war in his attempt to understand the causes and extent of what exactly his father lost in the Great War. In this pursuit, West develops one of the general trademarks of his fiction, a deep concern with the interface between barbaric and civilized behavior. As he tracks Albert into "horrors that make [his] teeth ache and narrow [his] throat" (26), West unleashes some of the atrocity and mayhem that occasionally runs riot in his work. For example, he recalls a tale of atrocity his father once related in which German soldiers "had done a bayonet-Caeserean on a woman six months pregnant, after which they beheaded her husband and stuffed his head into her emptied womb" (31). Through accounts such as this, we learn with West why a significant part of his father had been "missed in action."

Some of West's critics have seen an element of spectator sport in West's violent images and have rebuked him for "the delectable relish with which sadism is elaborated [in his novels]" (Spacks 504). Such criticism seems unwarranted. West's depictions of violence are never gratuitous. On the contrary, West consistently attempts to understand "the psychology behind the pathos" (Birkerts, "London Psycho" 40). Additionally, West's aesthetic demands an openness to the totality of human experience, barbarism included. In "The Girls and Ghouls of Memory," West describes the function of the grotesque in his art:

> All very well for the Aristotles, Horaces, and Doctor Johnsons to inveigh with suety worthiness against freakish phantasmata: there is another view, less exclusive and more historical, which remembers how beauty is the cutting edge of terror . . . that much of our gratitude goes to those great creative invalids whose madness—in print, stone, paint, music, dance—forestalls and partly precludes our own. (361)

Thus, West's aesthetic lends credence to the assertion of Wallace Stevens' speaker in "Sunday Morning" that "Death is the mother of beauty." For West, this conviction does not stem from some glib fascination with the macabre, but from a need to confront reality head-on. On this point, West remarks, "*Deinosis*, Greek for presenting things at their worst, is probably not cathartic, but it chops the illusions down" (McGuire 140)

Concerning his willingness to write about the darker elements in human nature, West remarks, "Even as a child, and ever since, I found it hard to believe the appalling things people do to one another. So I have to rub my nose in it lest my natural optimism shield me from the truth" (McGuire 140). Remarkably as he confronts the heinous, a terrible beauty always seems to be born in West's writing. In this respect, West shares an affinity with Seamus Heaney, whose graceful poetry likewise contains shockingly violent imagery. Justifying his own use of violence, Heaney says, "I think the greatest poetry gazes upon [violence] as a factor in human experience, recognizes it as deplorable, but then somehow must outface the deplorable or at least gaze levelly at the deplorable and put it in its place, place it in the scheme" (Heaney qtd. in Montenegro 187). This assessment of the role of violence in contemporary art applies equally well

to West's fiction. By revealing the most appalling aspects of war's ghastly face, West consistently succeeds in outfacing man's inhumanity to man by proving that beauty is indeed the cutting edge of terror.

In the foreword to the widely praised war narrative *The Very Rich Hours of Count Von Stauffenberg* (1980), West recounts the genesis of one of the most memorable faces in his canon—Hitler's would-be assassin, Claus von Stauffenberg. As West explains,

> Stauffenberg began with an image, and I didn't know whose, but it was actually an image from a war magazine. The thing began haunting me. My father was half-blinded in the war, and he wore an eye patch sometimes; but it wasn't my father. Finally I ran it down in a very systematic way, then went and researched it and figured out who it was. . . . I thought, "It's the man who tried to kill Hitler." (*The Very Rich Hours* ix)

In this meticulously researched account of the Count's failed coup, Stauffenberg speaks from the grave following his execution as he reveals the moral journey which resulted in the attempt on Hitler's life. Through this voice, West explores numerous war-related themes such as the long-term psychological torment inflicted by war and the baneful consequences of corrupt political and military authority, but once again the emphasis returns to the issue of how the business of war and killing shapes individual identity.

Significantly, the changing configuration of Stauffenberg's face becomes a vehicle for exploring that process. Early in the novel, an ill-defined sense of self and feelings of inconsequentiality plague Stauffenberg. This crisis of identity surfaces early when Stauffenberg asks

his brother to describe his face: "I truly wanted to see myself through other's eyes. Not to chasten myself or because I didn't even have a rough idea, but to remedy the feeling that I had no special face at all: only something out of an almanac, a snippet from a coat of arms" (41). Subsequently, the novel traces Stauffenberg's attempt to forge an authentic identity through his self-appointed role as Hitler's nemesis. Unfortunately, like Hamlet whom he resembles in many respects, Stauffenberg possesses a disposition better suited to the contemplative life than an existence consumed by the need for the deliberate act of violence he believes necessary for redeeming his nation. As he increasingly agonizes over Nazism's brutal tactics and atrocities, Stauffenberg scrupulously wrestles with the moral implications of his act. In large part, the appeal of this novel lies in West's delicate balancing of the moral complexities facing Stauffenberg.

Hitler's grab for *Lebensraum* soon provides Stauffenberg the unique face he desires. An Allied strafing mission in the Tunisian desert robs the Count not only of an eye, but of his very sense of idenity. Like Steinhof, Oswald, and Albert West, Stauffenberg emerges from battle "a mere echo" of his former self. Following the injury, Stauffenberg calls himself, "a living relic from the fiery furnance" and wonders whether his essential being had "been burned away" (80). With the effacement of his old identity, the Count constructs a new sense of himself based on his mission to destroy Hitler.

While West has no qualms about depicting brutality at its worse (in typical fashion *Stauffenberg* includes disturbingly graphic descriptions of vivisected "criminals" at Plötzensee among other horrors), he consistently seems to cast a cold eye on violence by raising the possibility of its futility. Although the Count temporarily springs back to life by developing a new sense of pur-

pose based on bloody thoughts, this spectral narrator echoes Joyce's portrait of the bellicose Celt in *Ulysses* by referring to his former living self as a one-eyed monster, "an off-center Cyclops" (135). At several junctures, Stauffenberg seriously questions whether his myopic hatred for Hitler, whom he demonizes and calls "the foul brown pus of a cancer run riot" (51), actually robbed him of his essential humanity.

Even in death, Stauffenberg's conscience torments him as he considers his (and by extension his nation's) complicity in Nazi atrocities through willful ignorance and inaction:

> I knew, and yet I did not know: . . . a brisk stroll [by Plötzensee Prison] . . . could have opened my eyes for ever and ever. I stayed away, though, in almost superstitious obliviousness, at the same time wondering with the innermost part of me why any political system under the sun should create so many corpses in one of its suburbs. There was never that much crime in any city, any nation; there were never that many eyes to take for an eye, never that many teeth. The only wholesale criminals were those sponsoring the Plötzensee bloodbath on the gently sloping floor, and they seemed invulnerable to any legal process. We shied away from the truth as if it were a sewer, taking light lunches at semi-suave restaurants with officers from the Reserve Army HQ in Bendlerstrasse. We kept our imaginations sweet, hoping rather wanly that the courage of our friends, the dead, would give us strength, whereas the zeal of the butchers should have seared our hearts. (68)

Despite these pangs of conscience, however, the Count ultimately questions the wisdom and utility of his violent act as the last third of the novel recounts the bloodbath that follows in the wake of the failed coup. Based on this psychological portrait alone, *The Very Rich Hours of Count Von Stauffenberg* stands as a major achievement in contemporary fiction, but the further issues of complicity and moral responsibility raised by West commend this novel as an important contribution to our understanding of war.

West creates yet another memorable character haunted by the Second World War in *Rat Man of Paris* (1986), one of his most vivid portraits of the long-term psychological devastation wrought by conflict. This novel's protagonist, Etienne Poulsifer, alias Rat Man, is the victim of a Nazi rampage which leaves his parents dead and the majority of his neighbors burned-alive in the village church. As repeated flashbacks of this atrocity play back in grisly fashion through Poulsifer's memory, West once again employs faces to emphasize the devastating effects war wreaks on identity. Poulsifer, whose names means "to bear a pulse," survives the conflict, but just barely. In many ways, like Steinhof and Albert West, Rat Man has been "missed in action." Leading a life that occasionally resembles a death-in-life existence, Poulsifer bears a "used-looking face" which "includes several expressions, either neuter or numb" (*Rat Man* 13). In short, Rat Man has been anesthetized by the Nazi reign of terror. In this regard he says, "Too much horror at an early age . . . and you can never respond to it again" (38). As a result, he is condemned to a seemingly absurd existence. "Putting in a life sentence for what was done to him and his," Poulsifer wanders the streets of Paris, "always ducking to get out of the line of fire" (36).

Regarding mankind's remarkable capacity to deal

with atrocity, West remarks, "If war is a natural human state, then I am staggered by how much we have achieved in spite of it" (McGuire 137). In West's hands, Poulsifer becomes a slightly ironic case in point of this observation. While he serves as a consummate victim among West's many casualties of war, Rat Man also exemplifies a recurring theme in West's war narratives—the resilient power of the human imagination and love to salve, at least partially, the wounds of war. Traumatized as he is, this *mutilé de guerre* struggles to forge genuine meaning out of his existence by roaming Parisian boulevards and flashing a dead rat from beneath his overcoat at passersby and café patrons. Beyond this somewhat tragi-comic behavior, though, Poulsifer displays an uncanny capacity for wonderment over the fact he is alive at all. This insight allows him to be a "connoissuer of life's neglected corners" (45). Finally, Rat Man discovers another means of outfacing his violent past when he falls in love with Sharli, who brings a "cheerful, sensitive face" (14) into his life.

In *Rat Man of Paris*, West once again employs the face trope as he revisits the issue of dehumanizing the Other in order to make killing possible. Rat Man's healing process goes awry after he reads a daily paper and spies the face of an ex-Nazi, deported to France to stand trial for war crimes. Poulsifer becomes convinced the ex-Nazi's visage with its "bulbous septum, . . . shiftily querulous, [and] two folds of flesh under the jaw" (85) belongs to the commander who orchestrated the leveling of his village. He repeatedly suffers nightmares featuring the wildly spinning, disembodied heads of his massacred parents and friends which are replaced in turn by the vision of the ex-Nazi. The remainder of the novel depicts Rat Man's various plans to avenge his parents' deaths by plotting the ex-Nazi's assassination. Subsequently, Rat Man's face strangely begins to resemble the

ex-Nazi's. Thus, like his precursor Stauffenberg, Rat Man's obsession with revenge and his decision to resort to violence not only give him a heightened purpose in life, but also adversely alter his identity. As the novel climaxes, Rat Man's desire for revenge clouds his ability to return Sharli's love. Fortunately, he is saved the dehumanizing act of committing murder when someone else guns down the ex-Nazi.

In perhaps the most disturbing of his war fictions, *The Tent of Orange Mist* (1995), West gives us the plum-blossom-fresh face of sixteen-year-old Scald Ibis. In this novel, West employs the historical backdrop of the rape of Nanking in which Japanese troops massacred an estimated 300,000 Chinese and raped and mutilated at least 80,000 women during the winter of 1937-38 (Chang 4-6). Here West returns to his interest in the collision between barbarism and refinement by means of exploring the relationship between art and the brutality of war. The novel observes this theme primarily through diametrically opposed perspectives, that of Scald Ibis, the daughter of an eminent Chinese scholar, and Colonel Hayashi, a Japanese officer who is the "epitome of culture," but who nonetheless rapes pubescent girls and savors human feces. While the slaughter and starvation of civilians continues unabated in Nanking's rubbled streets, West also examines the insidious character of corrupt military authority as Colonel Hayashi and his coprophagous officer cronies transform Scald Ibis into a geisha and her family's home into a brothel.

Amidst this ghastly setting, West returns to several of his favorite thematic concerns. Again he demonstrates his abiding concern with the immediate and long-term damage war inflicts on individual lives, particularly the lives of war's youngest and most innocent victims. Significantly, Scald Ibis and Albert West are sixteen-year-olds when war robs them of their innocence, but as West

well knows any given war never really ends until its last survivor is dead. At the onset of her ordeal Scald Ibis precociously realizes this truth when she thinks, "So much damage done so fast changes your life forever, even forty or fifty years away, so deep does the horror strike" (*Tent* 21).

With her nation and family destroyed, Scald Ibis attempts to mitigate the damage done to her through the palliatives of imagination and art. Prior to the conflict, the minds of Scald Ibis and her family are "steeped in the arts, in sunlit quadrangles, and hushed museums" (22). For Scald, war remains an interesting cultural artifact the horror of which can be glossed over with beauty. After all, she

> had seen war in history books, but usually counterpointed by exquisite reproductions of art. Neither was noisy or painful, and she had developed the habit of aligning war and art as compatible pages in the book of life. When she closed her book, both stayed put, shrunken to a page's thinness, humbled into black and white. (31)

Even after Nanking falls to the Japanese and the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, blinders of refinement obscure Scald and her family's view of reality. West writes,

> [they were] aware of war, but not believing in it, not even crediting the fug of smoke as Tang set fire to all houses outside the city walls, as if hoping to discourage an army that yearned for accommodation. Nor did the doomed family hear the sounds of heavy artillery. On they sleepwalked, certain of their invulnerability, being of a particular social

> status. War was excrescence, art was eternal; war was old, art was ever young. (23)

The piercing reality of her war experience, however, soon forces Scald Ibis to readjust her faith in art's capacity to outface violence. Depicting this process, West crafts an astonishingly sensitive and accurate psychological portrait of this sixteen-year-old girl's response to brutal and repeated violations. Tragically, Scald Ibis realizes that some things rent and ruined by war can never be made whole again:

> Back to violation her mind went, homing, shuddering. Life required its [the male organ] being forced upon women, so much so that those few who resisted it successfully were held to have betrayed life, turned their backs on it, never having been forced or broken. . . . Why were they not born violated in the first place, if the life force was so eager for it? Why give men the so-called *plaisir de rompre*, which she knew meant *jilt*, but in her private demonology *rompre* was literal, meaning *break*? So: she was broken, broken into, broken up, one of the numberless elect. (30)

For all his faith in the power of imagination, West waxes pragmatic by qualifying his assessment of art's ability to militate against the destructiveness of war. Regarding literature's limitations in this regard, West remarks, "War literature, especially about the holocaust, *may* teach us never to take war lightly. Maybe I am deluded, but possibly such works have no more effect against war than, say, Elgar's music or Matisse's exotica" (McGuire 142, emphasis added). West does not suggest

we should stop raging against atrocity, but given the influence of existentialist thought on his worldview, West seems to concede that we sometimes delude ourselves concerning our ability to change our lot in an indifferent universe :

> Our monsters will not save us, of course, but they tell us what in part we are, suffering on our behalf, turning night into day instead of the other way around. Adding enigmas, horrors, freaks, of our own making, to those inflicted upon us by the universe, we remedy nothing; but, in fighting back no matter how impotently, in rehearsing time and again the metaphysical protest, we deepen our sense of hubris. ("Girls and Ghouls" 362)

Given the powerful artistry of West's own metaphysical protests, it is doubtful that his war writings constitute hubris. As he sorts through the sump of history, West bluntly informs that we are a warlike bunch. After reading his novels, we are not likely to ever forget that crucial fact. If knowledge of the enemy is the key to victory, then the kind of knowledge West provides in his fiction may well prove essential to our survival. At the end of the day, West's war fiction may perhaps have no more effect on war than Matisse's exotica, but that is unlikely.

West's war literature is important for other reasons as well. In an age of standoff weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles, technology often precludes the necessity of hand-to-hand combat. As a group, we can consequently be more easily "conned into devaluing" our enemy's face. West's work to put a face on war is fundamental. Recalling the maimed visages of Steinhof, Stauffenberg and Albert West and the "punished faces"

of Oswald, Poulsifer, and Scald Ibis, we are not allowed to overlook the immense suffering and long-term psychological damage wrought by war, nor can we overestimate its cost in terms of individual lives. West's wartime wastelands, however, are not entirely geographies of despair. His war fiction is remarkable, too, for its celebration of human ability to outface war and violence through the palliatives of imagination and love. Ultimately, West reminds us that while we can be beastlier than beasts, we are as well "the entity that paints, composes, makes sentences—a complex, daunting mix" (McGuire 138). As with all his fiction, West's war narratives express this profound understanding of the complexity of human nature with, as Donna Seaman has put it, "delirious eloquence." ❑

Author's Note: In the interest of brevity, this survey of West's war fiction must necessarily focus on but a few of his narratives. Regretfully, I have excluded several important works from this discussion. Readers interested in further examining West's treatment of war and the military should see works such as *Terrestrials* (novel, 1997), *Colonel Mint* (novel, 1972), *Portable People* (biographical sketches, 1990), *I, Said the Sparrow* (memoir, 1963), and *The Snow Leopard* (poetry, 1964). For an insightful overview of West's canon and his treatment of war, see David Madden's *Understanding Paul West* (University of South Carolina Press, 1993), which along with Madden's lectures spawned many of the ideas for this article.

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