Thomas G. McGuire

A Conversation with Paul West

Born in an English mining village on February 23, 1930, Paul West has become one of the most original and critically acclaimed figures in American letters. In his own words, he grew up in "the presence of myth." His mother was a concert pianist manqué and his father a one-eyed veteran of the Great War. West earned degrees from both Oxford and Columbia. Following his education, he served three years as a staff officer at the Royal Air Force's Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU), Jurby, Isle of Man. Since the late fifties, he has resided primarily in the United States. In addition to writing, West has taught at several universities, including Brown, Cornell, and Penn State. He currently lives in Ithaca, New York, and Palm Beach, Florida.

Paul West's prose has earned him a reputation as "possibly our finest stylist in English" (Vance Bourjaily, *Chicago Tribune*). For his work, he has garnered numerous awards including Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, the Aga Khan Fiction Prize, the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Hazlett Memorial Prize for Excellence in the Arts. In 1996, the government of France created him Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters.

In all, West has published seventeen works of fiction. Among his most highly acclaimed novels are *The Tent of Orange Mist* (1996 National Book Critics Circle

Award Finalist), *Love's Mansion* (1993 Lannan Prize for Fiction), *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg, Rat Man of Paris, The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests*, and *Terrestrials.*

West has won equal praise as a critic, memoirist and poet. His ten works of nonfiction include the best-selling *Words For A Deaf Daughter, Sheer Fiction, vols 1-3, Byron and the Spoiler's Art, The Snow Leopard*, and a lyrical portrait of his mother, *My Mother's Music.*

This interview is largely the result of a six-month correspondence. It began formally with a letter I sent to Paul West in the summer of 1997. More accurately, however, this interview originated in a contemporary fiction course I took from Dr. David Madden. As part of that course, I read West's compelling portrait of Claus von Stauffenberg, the would-be Hitler assassin. Reading West's depiction of the military in that novel provoked several long discussions with Professor Madden about war, corrupt authority, and my own allegiances as an Air Force officer. That experience with *Stauffenberg* sent me on an odyssey through most of West's canon. As I read more of his work, I was experiencing my own *anagnorisis*—a series of recognitions which greatly challenged and unsettled the view I had of myself as an Air Force officer and denizen of the universe. So I kept reading. Almost twenty-five plus books later, I was left with scores of questions about West's works and the protean sensibility behind them. Thanks to a letter of introduction from Professor Madden, West graciously agreed to the time-consuming task of a correspondence interview.

The remainder of the interview derives from conversations with West during his visit to the United States Air Force Academy on October 29, 1998. During his stay, he enthusiastically addressed a wide range of topics, discussing among other things his debt to Faulkner and his late-night habit of watching The History Channel. West

also covered other subjects, laughing about his inability to get through a book by a recent recipient of the National Book Award as well as his father's alleged fragging of officers in World War I (West stridently maintains his father's innocence: "My father got a bum rap; he was just unlucky to be around a few officers who happened to get themselves killed on patrol with him"). Discussing works in progress, the indefatigable West mentioned a three-thousand page sequel to *Terrestrials* ("A book that will split the paperback spine . . . I wanted to see my publisher faint") and his upcoming novel about Doc Holliday which includes a correspondence between the gunslinger and a cousin cloistered in a convent.

At one point, I asked West if he'd rather see the Academy's Cadet Chapel or a local site sacred to indigenous peoples of the area. He humbly confided, "Architecture's one of my weaker suits." It's hard to imagine West having a weak suit; his novels, which have dealt with subjects as diverse as astronomy, Jack the Ripper, war, history, biology, Milton, and aviation, reveal the mind of a perspicacious polymath. Ten minutes later, I found myself discussing the process whereby the oxidation of high levels of ferrous compounds produced Garden of the God's red rock formations. Equally at home discussing literature or geology, West became visibly enthused as he expounded on Hopi myths and Southwestern natural history. This was the classic West I'd felt speaking to me so many times through his novels—infused with the daimon of a sublime moment and place. At that moment, he proved himself an embodiment of his description of Herman Hesse in *Sheer Fiction II*: "[one] who celebrates mind as a diverse and undulating form of magic, is amazed to be alive at all, to have a universe to look at and puzzle over."

I would like to thank my colleague, Jim Meredith, who contributed a few questions for this interview.

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Interviewer: You have said, "I hadn't realized how much war my stuff gets into." Is your frequent focus on war intentional?

West: I don't set out, always, to write a novel about something; I'm more like the Frenchman Julien Gracq, who works away and sees where the metaphors take him. In this way, stuff hitherto hidden from your formal, Apollonian gaze comes into view, or rather into use. As I've said before, I'm not always in control of what comes through; I write in a highly controlled trance. No wonder, then, that war and other traumas keep on coming out. We're not exactly sequestered from war in our daily lives anyway. Humans are a warlike bunch. I was a mere child in the period of WWII: 1939-45, but I could read at four and I devoured all the war magazines, pictorial things in black and white. Over my shoulder, my father the semi-blinded veteran peered at the same stuff and reminisced about his war days. We stuck pins and flags into maps, and he recited to me again and again his autobiography, which was almost entirely that of a soldier, a machine gunner who, after three years, was blown up by a shell. My father was one of those reported missing or dead, and then he reappeared. Having a war hero as a father brainwashes you a good deal and it also liberates part of your own martial imagination. Let me just add that, from being a tot, I grew up in the presence of myth; my father, the soldier, was mythic, and so was my pianist mother, who appeared on stages for money.

Interviewer: Much of your writing deals with war's aftermath—especially the psychological and physical scars left over from war. From a creative standpoint, do you

find it more interesting to portray *mutilés de guerre* rather than individuals engaged in combat?

West: Probably. I never fought in a war, but I saw war's aftermath in many human lives. If war is a natural human state, then I am staggered by how much we have achieved in spite of it. I heard at first hand a large amount about air combat and had some experience in ground maneuvers (as taught by the RAF Regiment, whose main job was to defend airfields). I knew how to do all that, but I never did it for real. *Love's Mansion* and *The Place in Flowers*, I seem to recall, show quite a bit of actual combat, though. From a creative standpoint, everything appeals to me, but as I say, I'm not that calculating. I go with what sways me.

Interviewer: I make the point about *mutilés de guerre* because several of your most memorable characters are haunted by memories of war. Stauffenberg and Poulsifer, who are haunted in very different ways, come to mind. Are you haunted by war?

West: Maybe, although I haven't worked at being so. It's there in the grain, I suppose, not surprising if you look at what the world was doing to itself during my childhood. It came with the suit, fanned on by my father's reminiscences no doubt. Perhaps it seemed natural to be in the midst of war, preposterously so; and I have often heard ex-warriors claim that they never felt so alive as during hostilities, as if war perfectly consummated the testosterone drive of the male. Women feel quite differently. I spend quite a bit of my adult time being astounded by what my mind broods about, a bit like Macbeth's. What's contemporary gets into your work, as the Powder Treason got into that very drama, especially in the play on the word "equivocate," which, says the *NED*, really

came into vogue around then—1605-6. It was the word over which Father Garnet tripped when being interrogated, as a Jesuit might.

Interviewer: You've stated elsewhere your father considered war an "essential" human activity. What did he mean by "essential"?

West: I don't think he was thinking about "essence" in the Santayana sense, the irreducible definitive, the sort of stuff *I* might get into. Rather, he meant that human energy, of the bad sort, every now and then boils over. And you get war, atrocity, mayhem. I don't think he ever advanced from that sort of historical observation to inducing from it that, without war, humans wouldn't be complete, as if somehow there were some Platonic ideal of the hundred-per-cent human. Seems to me, however, that if war breaks out enough, you end up saying the human is the creature who repeatedly makes war; from that to definition is no distance at all. He wasn't ready for the Baconian induction, but I suspect he smelled it in the wind of 1914-18.

Interviewer: Do you agree with his assessment of war?

West: Clearly his observation was accurate; but we must add that the human is the entity that paints, composes, makes sentences—a complex, daunting mix.

Interviewer: Your emphasis on the primacy of language and purple prose notwithstanding, I find a deep moral vein running through your writing. Do you feel a moral obligation or need to write about war and violence?

West: Call it moral if you want. I prefer epistemological. So many people, organs, institutions busily try to protect

readers from what life is like. One women's magazine devoted to the notion of white won't print certain words (boxer, beer, for example). One glossy magazine, whose name seems to imply a menstrual ocean, sent out my Ripper novel to someone they hoped would savage it. He turned in a rave they refused to print as my novel, they claimed, was anti-woman. Alas, for that opinion, COSMO recommended the novel as wholly feminist. The literary world is full of these wimps, who want to shield their unsuspecting readers from the horrors that abide. Myself, I like to remind readers of what in the round the world is like. Myself, I am a relatively peaceable ex-jock who grew into an esthete and intellectual, but I did train RAF officers for three years. I like to think that a novelist can reveal a cross-section of life, can center a novel not just on family and suburban matters, but on history, biology, astronomy, even politics. I can see the force of some exquisite extrusion from the mess, but only if it's a figure against the mess's ground. The synecdoche novel, in which a hiccup does duty for atrocity, is hardly worth typing out. So there is a moral emphasis in that I think the novelist is obliged to know things and to reflect that knowledge in the prose. That's why I say epistemological. Most novelists don't know anything of the world they inhabit, but only the equally restricted novels of their friends. Without a wide and highly developed sense of the world, what kind of a novelist can you be? It's not essential to know gunplay or the music of Schnittke at first hand, or chocolate-making or the techniques of the hangman, but it helps to maintain the illusion that you know whereof you speak. The postmodern generation of American novelists, if it exists at all, spends its time delightedly licking its own froth and maybe it's cruder stuff than froth. You can do your worldview almost entirely in symbols, as Faulkner did (he was schooled in the French Symbolists), but you need to draw the symbols from the known. And the quality of

your known rapidly establishes you as an ignoramus or a diligent observer.

Interviewer: One of your more faint-hearted critics complained of "the delectable relish with which sadism is elaborated" in *Colonel Mint.* Your subsequent works haven't backed down any in this regard. Why do you describe atrocities, mutilations, and the like in such graphic detail?

West: The only answer I can muster to such vacant dribble is that 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. The wimps can moan, but the truth is often hard to take. The honest man is always taken for a nasty man and the soothsayer for a sadist. *Deinosis*, Greek for presenting things at their worst, is probably not cathartic, but it chops the illusions down. I spend much more of my prose on natural beauty and human esthetic triumph than I do on horrors. I just go on doing the thing I do, not the same as what's fashionable. First, the minimalists created an art form to match their laziness, then the post-moderns so-called developed the habit of licking the minimum.

Interviewer: In *Terrestrials* you take a humorous jab at such literary laziness and the habit of licking the minimum: "Vaguely, Clegg knew he wanted to read again, something obviously Hemingwayan, about horses tromping through deep snow, all done in simple words that horses understood." Do you care to comment?

West: Every now and then you want to lash out at the lazy writers, or the self-righteous minimalists, who get away with it because critics have no standards any more.

Anyone who can type his name gets regarded as a genius, largely I suppose because the American novel has become so provincial, so chauvinistic, the esthetic equivalent of American football, a minority sport compared to the global sport called soccer. You have to travel to recognize how little American football is played world-wide.

Interviewer: Getting back to your comments on violence and why you write about it, I'd like to discuss your treatment of violence and revenge in *Rat Man of Paris*. There seems to be a certain allegorical significance attached to that novel's depiction of violence and Poulsifer's bizarre code of vengeance (a code which eludes Sharli because she dedicates her life to loving Poulifer, not his obsession). Is there a message here for postwar Europe and the rest of us at the end of this bloodiest of centuries.

West: You talk of allegory, and who am I to gainsay you? After all, *Poulsifer* means *bearing a pulse*! Poulsifer is an unreconstructed victim, I suppose, unable to jump the last few miles to a stance of utter selfless maturity. Many have quizzed me about the thumb-up at the end. Well, sometimes in Ancient Rome the thumb-up meant kill him. It's meant to be ambivalent, but I should also say that I often surrender to the creative whim of the moment and let in something I wouldn't mess with a week later. And let it stand. I tend to be impromptu and whimsical, and by and large I don't think allegorically, although I do slide in some bits of carefully worked allegory, as with his name. I am not of the cast of mind that constructs *Piers Plowman*, for instance, or *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I tend to use a logic of symbols, which is what Eliot said Saint-John Perse did.

Interviewer: Since you write about war and atrocities with some regularity, I'm curious if you read much war literature?

West: Maybe a couple of books a year. This year, out of sheer interest, I have *Hitler and Geli*, (which contains one wonderful misprint—Hitler, the coprophile, looking in the wardrobe for his "night shit") and a book about German spies shot in the Tower of London, mostly for ineffectual, bungled spying amounting to no more than patriotic gawping. It's clear the authorities liked the ritual of the executions by guardsmen performed upon some poor slob tied to a chair like Ciano.

Interviewer: What is your opinion of war literature in general?

West: 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. It's powerful stuff for the stylist, though.

Interviewer: Do you have a special fondness for any particular war novel?

West: Barbusse, *Le Feu* (*Storm of Steel* in translation?). I haven't read it for a long time, so I now think I prefer Gracq's *Le Balcon en forêt*. *The Gulag Archipelago* I also like.

Interviewer: In a recent letter, you told me the frequent appearance of war in your writing is "no doubt" a legacy from your father; could you talk about your father's World War I experience in terms of its effects on your imaginative development?

West: As I recall my father and the years in which he went over and over his war with me, I begin to realize that he got solace and sustenance from itemizing the ghastly things he saw, as if being part of this vast, atrocious human commotion somehow ennobled and aggrandised him. Not Superman, but certainly a teenager grown to warrior status. They were his great years, and he felt about them perhaps as I did about my years of playing professional cricket (though as an unpaid amateur). Nothing that followed in his life came up to the Great War, which "made a man of him" and turned him into a perpetual rememberer, egged on by his fascinated son. My father was a thwarted historian, but he never wrote a word down; he left that to me.

Interviewer: Indeed, the final paragraph of "Field Day for a Boy Soldier" suggests you wrote that piece out of a sense of obligation to your father. There you write, "I do duty for him as best I can." Could you discuss what this line means to you and how "doing duty for him" has influenced your writing career?

West: He 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, and he never forgot that, having won a scholarship to the local grammar school, he never went because his parents could not afford the school uniform. That was the blow that made a volunteer soldier of him. When his son won a scholarship to Oxford, he had a terrible sense of vindication and revenge and he thought justice had finally been done, although he could never understand why I got so much money (as he saw it) for doing so little in academe, though he laughed at what he considered the swindle. "Just born at the wrong time," he'd say bitterly, and he was right. Doing duty for him? Yes, I've

had my say about and for him now. There's nothing left to say, except that, like my mother (*My Mother's Music*, 1996) he's an indelible, potent image, the gentlest man I ever knew. Yet he killed thousands of Germans, a nation he rather respected whereas the French and Belgians (his allies) pleased him less. The Germans, he'd say, "were more like us."

Interviewer: As someone who experienced the wrath of Hitler's Luftwaffe during the Blitz, how do you feel about the German people now?

West: Not friendly; I still hold it against them, to have bombed my boyhood nightly for two years and more.

Interviewer: What inspired you to write "Field Day for a Boy Soldier"?

West: All the years in which I shrank from writing it. Once written and published, it became a seam I mined again and again. There can be many versions of these war stories about my father; some of them appear in *Love's Mansion*, in which some are quite new. I had always wanted to celebrate the image of my father, whose pension for a lost eye was less than mine for a smashed ankle (he a sergeant and I an officer). This irritated him. Once, to keep my pension, I went for a medical exam in the nearest city, entered a room full of armless, legless, eyeless men, all waiting to re-guarantee their pensions, and never went back. I remember the gaze of some of them as they wondered what on earth was wrong with me that I should be getting a pension.

Interviewer: How long had you been thinking about "Field Day" before you wrote it?

West: Many years, maybe twenty, making notes all the time and quizzing my mother. Both my parents had colossal memories, most of all about their youngest days.

Interviewer: I'd like to discuss the role memory plays in your creative life. Considering the bulk and detail of your memoirs, your memory must be colossal as well.

West: I never thought so and I spend hours bemoaning my memory's apparent disappearance, by which I mean the voluntary memory, the one you try to make obey you, serve you, get the work done. The other one, the involuntary, keeps pumping through, often when you least expect it, as Proust remarked. I try not to count on either, but live in a receptive trance that will accommodate what Beckett calls the mess. I do find that, with one thing remembered, spurted forth by the good old involuntary, other things follow, dragged into the light by sheer motion in there. That's exciting. *My Mother's Music*, an almost devout biography of my mother, would have been impossible to write without the supple and wavelike accidental collusions of my involuntary memory.

Interviewer: How are imagination and memory related?

West: The involuntary memory recreates what was there, mostly; the imagination creates what is not, was not, present to the senses. They interfere with each other, profoundly in my case, because they are both facets of what Coleridge called the esemplastic power that fuses and melds things, making them one. Sometimes my imagination supplies me with a false memory I can't resist, perhaps helping out when the involuntary memory resists. Sometimes, a memory comes that I don't recognise as a memory and think comes right from imagination.

Intimates sometimes correct me, using what they remember, but they mostly give me up as a bad job, indulging myself in order to write—something they don't do, my sister in particular. My mother never did, happy to think I had at last found a stand-in for the piano I always resisted learning to play. I found an art, even one predicated on false memory and pseudo-imaginings! And she was relieved.

Interviewer: I'd like to discuss some of your memories of your life in the Royal Air Force in the mid-fifties. How did that experience shape your opinion of officers and the military?

West: Excellent question! When I'd been at the RAF OCTU about a year, Vince Gough the Adjutant showed me the wide group portrait that hung in his office: maybe a hundred fresh-faced lads, many with DFC ribbons on their chests. It was like a vision of the future, and I hero-worshipped these guys, who among other things had won the Battle of Britain, an epic that rouses me still. "Well, they're all dead but me," he said. "All of them. I've checked." Stunning stuff. I was only a young guy myself, but these guys, much younger than I, had already bought the farm before even reaching twenty. You can guess how I felt about the few of them who'd survived, belatedly becoming officers or actually on the staff already. I was a boy Socrates among giants. I (whose eye muscles are lazy) flew with them as often as I could, once with Freddy Knapper over the North Sea catching a wave with the Anson's wingtip; we reeled about but didn't plough in, which was just as well. Some of these guys were reckless flyers. I just felt honored to be with them, whether they killed us or not. It was an extraordinary atmosphere in that Officer Cadet Training Unit, with heroes training the sergeant heroes and the scholar-

ship boys (some of whom, like me, had already been to an American university) making life difficult for them by insisting on good English, good speech. What a farce.

Interviewer: The use of "epic" and "hero-worshipped" casts your description in almost Homeric terms. I can understand your reaction at the time, but I'm especially intrigued by the Battle of Britain's persistent hold on your imagination. Can you describe and explain your fascination with the battle a half century after the fact?

West: It seemed, seems, the quintessential modern air battle, infused with the poetry of the Spitfire's elliptical wings (consider the aerodynamics of those) and Mitchell's race against cancer (I think) to complete the design based on yet another romantic epic, the Schneider Trophy racers. How sad to see R. J. Mitchell omitted from the *Britannica* and some aviation reference works. The movie *Spitfire*, often confused with a Katharine Hepburn melodrama, should not be his only memorial, even in the hands of David Niven and Leslie Howard. The American cut is *twenty-seven* minutes shorter than the British one.

To see these serenely conceived planes defeating the pragmatic Luftwaffe, even though based on elegant sailplanes, was inspiring. Anyone who wonders about this should watch Leslie Howard (a Czech playing a veddy Bwittish Bwit) and the Laurence Olivier Battle of Britain film. I can never forget the day when no Germans came over, so many had been shot down. The eeriness of that close-shave victory has never left me. If you were near London, you listened, for nothing. If you were in the north, as I, you glued yourself to the radio for the day's score—it might have been cricket. And there had been no game. It was as if the war was over, but of course only a phoney lull. Eric Plumtree (see *Portable*

People) of our village was in that fray. I felt as if *Henry V* had been revamped for modern knights and mercenaries.

Interviewer: Rupert Clegg, one of your aviators in *Terrestrials,* shares your enthusiasm for the Battle of Britain. Clegg's own vicarious participation in this myth somehow liberates him. Is there any similarity between Clegg's musings about that battle and your own?

West: Yes, good for Clegg. Surely I fed some of my feelings into him. They remain intense because my father and I studied the battle like two militant scholars, and he would report to me the scores and deaths of the day, almost as if we were running a squadron of our own. To some extent, I think, I saw a war conducted by amateurs against lethal professionals, and won by them in the Battle of Britain. After all, the cricket I played was as an amateur, who, unpaid, did it for fun and expenses. Some part of my thinking came out of that old English tradition, still not lost. The England cricket team were never so happy as when captained by an Oxford Blue with a double first in History.

Interviewer: Can you describe some of your other experiences during the Blitz—what you saw, heard, felt?

West: My father would escort me outside as soon as we heard the unsynchronized engines of Nazi bombers, six out of seven nights. Each of us would have a brisket sandwich to munch on while looking up into the brilliant patchwork of the searchlights, our mouths no doubt open for shrapnel. Perhaps I was being blooded. My father was always contemptuous of the bombers, and his constant brave self; myself, I found the brisket slices slithering about between the breads as I tried to chew while craning my neck. How reckless we were, as my mother

said. One night, when we were all together at the kitchen table, a bomb screeched down and we all without a word ducked underneath. "Well," my mother said, "if we have to go, we'll go together." Those who have taken on the Brits always underestimated the folly of the Churchills (brilliant stylist as one may have been), but also the sheer obtuseness of the breed, unhabituated to losing.

Interviewer: In your literary autobiography you demonstrate the meticulous attention to sensory detail you possessed at a young age—the exotic scents of air-raid shelters, the visual and olfactory sensations of sitting in a captured Messerschmitt 109 cockpit. Do you recall other details of the war with equal intensity? Do any particular odors evoke the war for you?

West: Smells: the burned burnished coppery surface of a machine gun round picked up as soon as it landed spent. Fired downwards from, oh, eight thousand feet. I remember sticky soot, smoke with concrete dust in it, the almost perfumed rubbery aroma of a gas mask's inside. My sense of smell has always been too acute; I smell things others don't. For some reason I associate gunpowder with boot polish, maybe because each morning, with fresh-shined shoes, I rode my bike to school northward, where the sun was rising—a city on fire again, the stench of extra demolition drifting slowly toward me as I rode.

Interviewer: I'd like to switch to your treatment of war in some of your novels. What kind of historical research did you do to prepare for *The Tent of Orange Mist* and how long did this research take?

West: About two years' gently reading books about Nanking, that war, China, Japan. I also studied calligra-

phy (and later on my French translator got China and Japan "hands" at the Sorbonne to check my use of languages). So my Chinese and Japanese is correct; my fault alone if not. I've just been sent what seems the definitive history of the Nanking atrocity (*The Rape of Nanking* by Iris Chang); if I'd had this book to read, I'd have had a year's research less. The book makes me shudder, whereas my novel does not. I wrote about the collision between refinement and barbarism, and the reviewers who picked up on this theme were the French, who wrote superbly about it.

Interviewer: Did you read other works of fiction while writing *The Tent of Orange Mist?*

West: No, but, writing or not, I am always re-reading Proust, on whom I published an essay in *GQ*, and Faulkner, about whom I have just written a long commissioned essay for *Conjunctions*. I think at some point I re-read Gracq's *Le Balcon en forêt*, a war novel, but that's about it. Long ago, I used to keep something by Thomas Mann by me, usually *Doktor Faustus*, to jump-start my engine in case of need, but I no longer do.

Interviewer: Would you have changed anything in *The Tent of Orange Mist* if you had read *The Rape of Nanking* prior to finishing the novel?

West: I doubt it; as I said, my writing comes about in some sort of trance, and very little gets fed into it after the first few bouts of research. It's all at the right temperature, so to speak, to be malleable. Maybe a few epigraphs might have come out of the book. Some of the things I imagine seem to me more horrific than what's in the history book. But I'm an expressionist, which an historian isn't supposed to be. In other words, if I

wanted to, I could say those hanged at Plötzensee were hanged with piano wire (they weren't); an historian such as Trevor-Roper should get it right, but so few of them can resist vengeful embellishment. I wonder why. Do they have a fiercer sense of indignation than novelists do?

Interviewer: I've found some of our better writers are reformed historians—William Trevor, for example. But as I recall you're not terribly fond of his literary taste. Didn't you take him to task on his selections for *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*?

West: Yes, he excluded Beckett from that book of Irish short stories, which is like excluding Descartes from the history of philosophy. It isn't on. That particular historian needs more reforming.

Interviewer: Colonel Hayashi, yet another of your insidious officers, does duty for barbarism in *The Tent of Orange Mist*. Forgive my ignorance of Japanese military figures, but did any historical personage(s) inspire your creation of this beast?

West: Not really, but, reading books on the Japanese after finishing my novel (now there's a switch for you!), I found autobiographical accounts that made me feel clairvoyant. They confessed to having done much the things I'd imagined. So, perhaps, there is a structuralism of evil, with humans not very imaginative and tending to repeat themselves when abandoning themselves to acts of atrocity: bayoneting babies, nailing people to doors, and so on. What makes you sick has made you sick before.

Interviewer: The point of view in *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* is truly a work of art. Do you see

perspective as the paramount aspect of a work of fiction? Or is it just another tool for the novelist to manipulate?

West: Point of view in the novel had better be a work of art or the novel in question will be slovenly. Perspective is probably not otherwise available since good art can, in the right hands, provide original point of view in a few words—i.e. phrasemaking, as in Pound's civilization—"an old bitch gone in the teeth." To see things tapering back to the point of origin, from behind someone's eager eyes, is just the thing to produce in me, anyway, what a reviewer has just called (being complimentary) "delirious eloquence." I like that. Point of view or perspective is never just another tool; it's the grammar of time.

Interviewer: Why did you choose Count Von Stauffenberg not only as the subject of your novel, but as the dominant perspective as well?

West: Because I associated him with my one-eyed father. I knew about blinded war heroes, or so I thought. Stauff also struck me as an almost good Nazi, although, to be sure, he rather reveled in the Polish invasion, until a certain point. He was a man of parts turned man of fragments. Spoiled but zealous, I mean spoiled in both senses: pampered and ruined. A quasi-Hamlet. He also knew English. It was odd to have a German thinking in German, writing in English, narrating his own death twice. I got some hate mail from Germany, saying get your mitts off our war heroes, and some from Americans, saying why glorify a Nazi? I have no friends, either, among German publishers, most of whom I'd gladly concentrate behind barbed wire to be fed a diet of Swift and Proust.

Interviewer: Although the Count is a sympathetic German officer, he still is a member of an army that perpetuated and enforced Nazi atrocities. Is there something in the character of the Count that makes him an everyman–a representative man who is perpetually duped or put on the spot by the politician? You go to great lengths to demonstrate the aristocratic nobility of the man, and the aristocratic naiveté as well.

West: His idealism, his sneaking regard for socialism. If he hadn't linked up with two socialists, Leber and Reichwein, whom the Gestapo were watching, his plot might have succeeded. He loved the arts, philosophy, knew Stefan Georg, was a fine horseman: enough to work with. Oh that the so-called heroes of contemporary American fiction had such ballast. I think Stauffenberg was one of those gifted men who, swaddled in hubris and hauteur, had a tremendous capacity for both self-delusion and belated humility. An odd, but not unknown mix.

Interviewer: Is there something for the modern military man to learn here?

West: His concern was always for his people, his men—something drummed into us at the OCTU, and worth cherishing. You always put them first.

Interviewer: As a novelist, can you explain what it is in the human condition that makes us capable of creating such a monster as Hitler?

West: We need Gothic figments; abstractions such as The Devil affect us little. Hitler conveniently personifies, makes concrete, an almost unimaginable extreme.

Interviewer: To single out just Hitler really is to distort the historical situation of Nazi Germany into a Romantic illusion—to magnify Hitler into a giant figure when actually he was part of a team. Who was worse in the Nazi regime, Hitler or the henchmen who created the massive bureaucratic killing machine?

West: The Hitlers always have retinues. Actually, his was enormous, not even counting the ambivalent Wehrmacht generals. Eichman, Heydrich, Kaltenbrunner, Himmler, Goebbels, Goering—what a crew. It's not every historical uproar that gives sadistic wannabes a chance of boundless power. Every wolverine in the nation seems to have heeded the call to arms, or to Zyklon-B, and this is something my alien narrator in *Terrestrials* (and its sequel) thinks hard about, bewildered by the recurrence of savagery Hitler is merely the cheerleader, the Diderot of it all. Why, he even found the twisted composer Pfitzner *too much of a Nazi* for him!

Interviewer: Does Hitler personify the worst of humanity? Is he more horrific than the "darkness visible" of Milton's *Paradise Lost?*

West: Conceiveably, although *Hitler and Geli* reveals something pervertedly pathetic in his sex life. He is more accessible than Satan (where is *Satan and Geli*?), and this makes him both as indestructible as a myth is and wide open for fictional treatment, whereas Satan seems neither—the concept's easily lost amid the bark of metaphors and there's no private life to go on (Satan's dog, stamp collection, funny diet). I like this question because it rouses the novelist in me to point out that, just as Rilke said all things are ripe for poetry, so are all things ripe for fiction.

Interviewer: Can you imagine anyone worse than Hitler or is he truly beyond the imagination?

West: Of course I can imagine worse than Hitler–Roa Bastos has, for example *(I the Supreme*), but I think Hitler gets the popular vote outside Latin America. Stalin, vide Gulag, was just as bad, in his original way. It's all a matter of distribution and emphasis, but the idea of the complete satanist seems ever out of reach, always eluding us, never complete.

Interviewer: There is a striking similarity between the sorrow of the women in this novel and the women's cries of suffering in Shakespeare's *Richard III.* Did that play influence this novel in anyway?

West: No, I haven't read or seen it in 20 years. Much as I admire it.

Interviewer: *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* seems to exonerate the common people as a whole. Were they any different than us? Recent scholarship about the Holocaust implicates a vast majority of the German people.

West: Recent scholarship substantiates my view that the Germans knew and eagerly took part, as did Poles (see *Shoah*).

Interviewer: Was Hitler expressing an insane obsession of a whole nation?

West: I think it's fair to say Hitler, after Dryden, was "in the van of circumstance," "seiz[ed] the arrow's barb before the tense strong quiver[ed]" (*Absalom and Achitophel).* He emerges as the consummate epitome of a national

malaise. Everyone knew the Jews were running the newspapers and nobody liked the fact.

Interviewer: Was he an aberration or a tragic paradigm?

West: He was an aberration only to us, who presumably are sane.

Interviewer: Are we capable of such massive atrocity?

West: Only in rages, I think, like Aussie soldiers crucifying Japanese on the beaches of New Guinea with a bayonet through each hand and foot. I think the "Allied" Weltanschauung is woollier, more sentimental, less endowed with Heideggerian streamlining filched from an imaginary 5th-Century Greece. Best answer I have is what I'm writing now, a huge panorama novel in which Admiral Canaris figures as a part-imaginary figure, both twerpy doglover and masterspy, together with—maybe—Pfitzner the composer.

Interviewer: Could our culture potentially fall to a fascist takeover?

West: Only if there are enough crazies. No doubt the culture is corrupt, rotten, run by a self-serving clique, but it's already got what it wants: a country of billionaires run by millionaires, the rest of the population besotted with a so-called American dream. Look how the airwaves belong to the merchandisers of everything.

Interviewer: Getting back to your use of terms such as "epic" and "hero worshipped" to describe the Battle of Britain, I can't help but note the epic, even mythical qualities of your latest work, *Terrestrials*. What are you up to in that novel with your references to knights, the

Holy Grail, and two of the greatest military struggles in English history (the Battle of Britain and Agincourt via allusions to *Henry V*)?

West: I often marvel at the blithe, sardonic way in which the Irish use the sacred cows of British history for rhetorical purposes, almost like Elizabethans pillaging what they called the matter of Greece and Rome. I am thinking of the Michael Collins movie, in which Collins fantasizes a wedding at which Winston Churchill and Lloyd George are bridesmaids. I like to be that opportunistic with heroic, epic matter, exulting in ready-mades to which I am not obliged to assume correct, traditional attitudes. I can embed spikes into the face of a smoothing iron if I want to, yet without losing the iron's old connotations. So I tend to produce a garbled epic, in which old absolutes now serve a less dignified purpose. I tend to find feet of clay in everything but without quite losing the heroic aura.

Interviewer: With *Terrestrials*, have you written an epic for the end of the twentieth century or is that novel merely a parody of the epic tradition?

West: No, no parody, but perhaps a realistic affirmation of what all lives are like, even the most exemplary, heroic ones. While we are busily carving out epic existentialist roles for ourselves, nature is busily using disease to make an art work of her own out of us. I've said this elsewhere, less bluntly, in *A Stroke of Genius* ; I mean nature, big N if you wish, uses us as raw material to produce some highly expressionistic and upsetting shapes. If history is our raw material, we are nature's. So there's what I sometimes call historical trauma and ontological trauma; you might just escape the first, but never the second.

Carving up history may be some kind of metaphysical-physical backlash.

Interviewer: Can epic still nourish us somehow?

West: Yes, provided the epic isn't too high-falutin, too Wagnerian. If the chaps in it have feet of clay, high blood pressure, bad sinuses, rotten teeth, split heels, we might believe in them. A French critic came to see me, the son of the Lindon who first published Beckett actually, and he expressed chagrin that I appeared to favor heroes or celebs over the common man. He came from *La Libération*, so you can see his socialism was offended. I think he got it wrong. I try to depict the human commonality in heroes and followers alike. What is Man? That's the question they ask at the high-toned seminar in Malraux's *The Walnut-Trees of Altenburg* (I did my Columbia thesis on Malraux and Pater). Well, that's *my* question. Man's the creature who asks that question.

Interviewer: *Terrestrials* also seems to be greatly concerned with myth and myth-making. Earlier you mentioned you grew up in the presence of myth. Could you explain your conception of myth?

West: Myth is public and rather general; the novelist's job is to personalize myth until he/she has almost restored myth to the novel of manners, which is far from impossible. You cannot dent a myth, but you can ruin a novel with only a few dents. So you have to populate your novel according to several differing standards which mix in the texture. Rat Man is mythic, i.e. is generalized history, but he's also a bit Balzacian. I don't see why the historical novelist can't have it both ways. All. Aristotle couldn't define myth although he sensed what it was. I think it's authorized fiction.

Interviewer: I'm curious about your chamber pot/Holy Grail motif which runs through several of your novels. In *Love's Mansion* Hilly knows that those who collect enough chamber pots will probably find the Holy Grail. I'm curious, are these chamber pots full?

West: No, I don't think they're full, but if they are they're full of fool's gold.

Interviewer: What's the line from Yeats' Crazy Jane: "Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement"? Doesn't salvation, at least in some cases, require us to wallow in excrement?

West: It doesn't matter. I tend to look on that trope in a dry-goods, mercantile way; the chamber pots are pristine from the store, clinky and shining, odor-free and minus thumbprints. I get your point, though, it's Pico della Mirandola's isn't it, with feet in the mud, head in the clouds? I agree with him, and you, merely on grounds of accurate depiction: such is the human lot. I don't think there's any inevitable reward for being so. If there is a salvation, which I doubt, surely it may come untrammeled, clean as a whistle, to the undeserving with clean hands and clean feet, while the honorable mud-sloggers get nothing. I doubt if I believe in a just afterlife. *Love's Mansion* does indeed come from Yeats, but the epigraph is diagnostic, not prophetic. Speaking arithmetically, he who collects enough chamber pots MAY find the grail, just like the guy playing the roulette wheel: if he makes enough bets . . .

Interviewer: In *Terrestrials* Clegg has a maxim which provides a variation on Hilly's theme: "He who collects enough chamber pots will not eventually find the holy grail but will have a lot of chamber pots to choose from."

On the other hand, Booth believes, "seekers after the holy grail surfeit themselves with sameness." Apart from chamber pots, is there still a grail for someone such as Clegg to find?

West: It follows. He who hath many irons in the fire may end up with mucho molten iron. You never know. I think all grails are imaginary, available through deployment of a blue guitar. I think religion a triumph of the imagination, solving its own problem, like Clegg with Aqua Regia. Like Boethius visited by Lady Philosophy. The world is still absurd although the cult of the absurd has waned. The same problems remain, to be remedied by either private or public imagination. Or, as Queneau says, in an absurd world you live absurdly, in which case you might get by without any imagination at all.

Interviewer: Is Clegg a late twentieth-century descendant of Cervantes' knights-errant?

West: He's a ricochet, certainly. The epigraph to *The Place In Flowers* is from Cervantes, but it might just as well belong in *Terrestrials*. The notion of the pair haunted me a long time, so I finally did something about it. If they are B and C, who is A?

Interviewer: You got me. I'll have to think about it. Let's switch to the backbone of the epic tradition, heroism. I find Clegg and Booth an odd couple of heroes. In some ways their mundane existence after their military careers seems more heroic to me. What are you saying about heroism in *Terrestrials*?

West: Very odd indeed. There is a mundane, mediocre form of heroism you might call stoicism, available to all, practiced by many. Stoics, putting up with bad stuff, see

their performance writ large in heroes. It's all a matter of scale, isn't it? In *The Dambusters*, amid all the mistakes made with aircraft (a Wellington becomes a Mosquito and then a Whitley), this epic movie undergoes a sea change, with the hero's black dog reduced to a merely decorative role. In the original version, the dog gets killed outside the base main gate just before the dam-busting mission in Lancasters takes off. Bad luck? Superstition? A portent? Whoever made the cut wanted heroism clean-cut, no trimmings from witchcraft. I don't know which would be more "like real life": dog live, dog dead. Either, I suspect. But the streamlined version denudes the hero of one of his trappings. At the end he goes off to "write some letters," knowing full well he's going to get a Victoria Cross for his night's work, unlike the fifty-six dead. Is he going to write all those letters now, or just make a start? The same hand that excised the dog's death embarks our hero on this massive epistolary chore while his hands are still shaking and, despite bacon and egg in the almost empty mess, what he needs most is sleep. There's an interesting book to be done about the streamlining of heroes in movies that, consistently, muddle Whitleys with Wellingtons and Mosquitoes. You can see the generalising tendency at work, discernible only if you have some specialised knowledge of the depicted ethos, but nonetheless there. Heroism is calculus, I think; realism is arithmetic. If so, what is algebra? Maybe symbolism needs to be put into the equation somewhere.

Interviewer: Since so many of your works contain such unsavory portraits of military figures, especially officers, I'm curious how your experiences with RAF officers shaped your attitude toward officers and the military in general?

West: One senior officer, a Wing Commander, light colonel, tried to get me court-martialed for insubordination, but it didn't work. Actually, the proposed court martial would charge me, as the base "Stationery Officer," responsible for all paper, with losing a bargeload of toilet paper in the North Sea. It never left Liverpool, as a matter of fact, as the inquiry found out!

Another got me into a court martial to defend a couple of sodomites caught in the act; I was told they had no chance, and it was true, though I must thank the Air Force for acquainting me with law, and military law too, especially that concerning prisoners of war, which knowledge I use in *Terrestrials*. Indeed, Booth and Clegg in that novel epitomize the heroic, decent airmen I idolized, and the book is my tribute to them and their kind, and my disdain for politicians is there what it has always been. There were some embittered, frustrated, dead-end officers in my vicinity, one of whom I had to tutor for his promotion exam (he thought Madagascar was off the coast of China).

Interviewer: So you've seen both sides of the officer coin. In *Terrestrials,* your brilliant comic portrayal of Clegg and Booth's interrogators, the "lisping courtiers," seems to be taken not only from literary types such as Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern but also from first-hand experience in a military environment. Did you encounter that type of sycophant at the RAF OCTU?

West: Of course, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern aren't too far away. Indeed, some enterprising woman only the other night, in Manhattan, spoke up after I read, saying she saw links between me and Stoppard. Yes, I did have first-hand experience in a military environment, as you say; but not of war, which remains a zone I absolutely have to imagine from documents. Sycophants? Mostly,

in most professions, I have encountered only two main types: bullies and sycophants—in the military, publishing, academe, sport. Oxford was full of tyrants and toadies, hearties and arties, all happy in their sleazy roles. Judging literary awards, as I sometimes have, you run into the same types. Alas.

Interviewer: You've told me the frequent appearance of war in your work is also a legacy of the WWII heroes you had to teach at the RAF OCTU. Could you talk about those characters?

West: Yankowicz broke his back baling out of a Spitfire. I remember him only, apart from Milewski, who took the sword of honor in my lot. Of course, parts of them have gone into composites, but once the composites are made I never recall where the pieces came from. Most were Poles, and a wild bunch they were, the terror of the local gals. The guys I spent my three years with, as an officer on the staff, rather than the three months as an officer cadet, all had DFCs, some with bar, DSO's and many foreign decorations. The CO had been a bomber pilot (Lancasters), Pete Wildy of the saffron mustache had flown Sunderland flying boats, and I often flew with him in the base's Anson (usually to London for lunch, this from the OCTU on the Isle of Man).

Interviewer: Have any of these gents, or parts of them, made it into your fiction in any way?

West: Almost certainly, Booth and Clegg, the heroes of *Terrestrials* and pilots extraordinary, recapture these men, sometimes in tiny details. During my three years I became privy to the pilot mentality, I suspect, learning also what these men were like on the ground—one or two of them raving sadists or humorless bureaucrats. The thing

I recall most vividly is the hatred of the sergeants and warrant officers being groomed for commissions for the young guys fresh from university, often with top-class degrees, the world their oyster. It was a class thing; after all, these guys would only become, if they passed, pilot officers; they were not going to get a degree.

Interviewer: Do you have other significant recollections of life in the RAF?

West: There's another aspect of Air Force life I haven't touched on. Although the staff officers respected us kids for our smarts (degrees and all), they really approved of us when such as I turned out to be useful athletes—bowled fast for the base team and damaged the opposition quite often. This pleased the hell out of them. I wasn't a wimp even though I was bookish. I think of this when I watch *The Dambusters* and note the emphasis, when they're picking the team to bomb the dams, on those who have proved themselves as athletes. My prowess as cricketer pleased my father too. I gave up fast bowling at thirty (too many injuries), but I always associate that activity with the way my heroes (my father included) regarded sport at its most demanding and painful. You were supposed to be tough, whatever happened to you—exactly my father's point of view. He got me ready in early childhood for life among the lions. This, no doubt, is where I get the more assertive, reckless side of my nature from. Sometimes, even in the literary world, you have to take people on and not yield an inch: do battle in other words. And I have done it, sometimes, I am told, with personal disregard. What my opponents never realized was that they were dealing with a well-schooled, initiated child.

Interviewer: With so much of the past getting into your novels, I'd like to close by asking where art and history intersect or do they? When does the novel (as an art form) become a better medium to represent history than history itself?

West: When the novelist has the style to make his imagined world supplant the "real" one. Art and history intersect all the time; the trick, I suppose, is to separate them, but how, if you have an eye, an ear, open? We are surrounded by hoax and swindle. It's all history, and cumulatively so. Carlyle has the answer, and it has to do with history done through expressionism—how you feel about it being just as important to you as what happened.