

The Immensity of the Here and Now

a novel of 9.11 by Paul West



“[P]rofound, disturbing, and a compelling inner study of picking up the pieces
in the wake of personal devastation.”

—Midwest Book Review

“Risky, raucous, filled with moments of audacious beauty, *Immensity* proves that West,
our foremost word wizard, won’t play it safe, unlike so many American artists.”

—Bill Marx, WBUR radio (Boston NPR)

“An atomizing rumination on the emotional shock waves of 9.11.”

—Donna Seaman, *Booklist Magazine*

“Paul West’s lyrical meditation on destruction and grief stands as a high water mark.”

—Christopher Furst, *The Bookpress*

“It takes a writer like Paul West to explore the deep psychic lacerations occasioned by 9.11.”

—David W. Madden, *Understanding Paul West*

“A towering, astonishing creation.”

—Irving Malin, *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon*

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Editor's Choice

Time Switched,

by James H. Meredith

In Paul West's 23rd novel *The Immensity of the Here and Now*, the United States is at war. Marketed as a novel about 9.11, this work of fiction is also about the long-term relationship of two old friends, Shrop and Quent, and their difficult struggle to explain their individual existences and psychic traumas. Individual trauma and psychological wounding in a hostile, numbingly stupid world has generally surfaced as the basis of West's existential wars, and it is the individual effort to articulate the internalized trauma of violence that has, for West, defined heroic action. Ordinary life in this writer's fiction can be a lonely, solipsistic endeavor, but now add the burden of witnessing the WTC conflagration and smoldering aftermath and that endeavor becomes burdensome indeed. Because of the 9.11 trauma, Shrop has lost the memory of his own past, the philosophical thread that he, like the rest of us, spend a lifetime constructing. Quent, a therapist friend, attempting to assist Shrop recover his memory, is, as well, damaged by violence, having been separated from his legs in Vietnam as a fighter pilot. Quent initially appears to have recovered from the trauma of amputation, but like Shrop, 9.11 eventually contributes to his own unhinging too. 9.11 represents a pivotal event in the lives of these two imagined men, as it does for all sentient persons actually living in contemporary America.

Because he himself is a survivor (of the Blitz during World War II), West seems to have reacted particularly to the WTC catastrophe. How could he not react differently than other writers, particularly those who have not had the experience of bombs or planes crashing down on their heads for little other reason than accidental presence? In a word, the events of 9.11 are a type of evil West has witnessed before. Perhaps for this reason, he appears at liberty and at ease in employing his imagination about the 9.11 experience. In one passage, Shrop ruminates on the experiences of those who died in the burning and collapse of the twin towers:

They roast, they jump, they land with a gravity-thick thud that has no forgiveness in it unless they have launched

into snow. . . . Like everyone else, he has never before thought of such events and the peculiar privileges attending them: a cry heard, a cry lost, whether of friend or foe, the entire recitation incredibly wasted on a world of noise. What, he wonders, would have been his own contribution on 9.11, if not death so quick it was voiceless? Would he have burned or jumped? He thinks he would have burned, raising a colossal squeal until oblivion set in. Now it is all headstones shattered and shredded amid their coating of poisonous white ash. (70-71)

This material in this new novel, though startling and imaginative, is uncomfortable stuff, but then again, West has been consistently and disconcertingly unsparing in his fiction. Consider *The Tents of Orange Mists*, West's ferocious and fiercely imaginative account about the Japanese rape of Nanking, or *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, in which West deciphers the brutality of the Nazi regime. At the root of such honesty and imagination must rest the fear that humans easily mislay memories of atrocity. West is not about to let us sanitize history as the result of some misguided sense of propriety. Nor is he about to add to a literature that shirks its duty. He has not bought into the notion of literature as mere commodity. According to West, then, the civilized world needs to be reminded that evil lurks, that fiction writers are obligated to persistently imagine that evil. 9.11 is but one example.

J.M. Coetzee, the 2003 Nobel Prize recipient for literature, recently wrote West into his novel *Elizabeth Costello*. In imagining West as a character in his book, Coetzee underscores the controversy writers can engender when they allow their imaginations to work with issues of violence and trauma. In Coetzee's novel, Elizabeth Costello is a writer who publicly takes a fictional Paul West to task for his depiction of Hitler's henchmen in *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*. David Lodge, in a review of Coetzee's novel in *The New York Review of Books*, comments that "there is a serious failure of tone in the fictional treatment of Hitler and his hangman, cranking up the horror when the known facts are horrific enough. Such subjects should certainly be handled with care—history and documentary probably being the best way—but Elizabeth surely goes too far in asserting that they should be sealed up and passed over in silence." If this literary tiff is any indication, some intellectuals seem to be saying, "Let the historian dig around in the mud; it's too ugly for novelist." If as yet I haven't been clear, let me say it directly: Paul West's fiction stunningly and perpetually deals with violence, trauma, the conditions and nature of evil. *The Immensity of the Here and Now* does not shy from exploring and decipher-

ing the vicious and randomly dangerous world that surrounds us.

My reading of *The Immensity of the Here and Now* reminded me of my first encounters with *The Sound and the Fury* and *Ulysses*. Like Faulkner and Joyce before him, West refuses to patronize by dumbing down his work. Long recognized as a literary high-wire artist, West brings us in this latest book one more inspiring performance. The density and compression of the writing is itself a stylistic objective correlative for the collapse and compacting of the Twin Towers. In *The Immensity of the Here and Now*, West's sentences seem welded to the page and to one another, a precise craftsmanship that makes of the book, in all senses, an object of weight and density. The reading of this novel becomes akin to peeling not an onion, but a brick, as if the atomic structure of the novel form itself has been changed. West is a writer who still believes in the transcendent power of literature and art, which is why I join many in considering him our most vital living writer. William Gass is right on the money when he states, "West is an extra-terrestrial, and while he flies over he sometimes looks down on us poor word-birds pecking at our corn."

When, some thirty years ago, I first read *The Sound and the Fury*, I encountered a concentration of time on a particular place that was a revolutionary experience for me as a reader. Time's alteration of Jefferson, Mississippi, happening before me in the fragmented and associative memories of the novel's many narrators, changed forever the manner in which I understood the imagined and actual place of my own Southern birth. Of course, such perceptions of time on place is a Proustian conceit that Faulkner re-made into a unique and formidable American one. West, likewise heretofore a Proustian disciple in his conception of time, seems to reverse the calculus in *The Immensity of the Here and Now* into the concentration of particular place on a particular time and the result felt as revolutionary to me as the first time I read Faulkner's book.

In the modern America, we've become accustomed to tall buildings sent crashing to the ground after they've grown financially obsolete; it took 9.11 for us to witness a similar destruction made different by its added deaths and its cruel and intended symbolism. The World Trade Center had no military or strategic function, but because it symbolized America's dominance in modernity, because it symbolized a particular time in human history and the place of international trade and the global economy, it also represented a virtual Tower of Babel for its destroyers. The destruction of the object, and the crash of the building's mass upon itself and its inhabitants changes a time and a place and our perception of them. As West so ingeniously perceives it, 9.11 is not just a day that will live in infamy, but an infamy that will exist at a particular place and on a particular day forever.

James H. Meredith is a lieutenant colonel and Professor of English at the United States Air Force Academy. He serves on the F. Scott Fitzgerald Society Board where, among other duties, he has helped organize several of their international conferences. He also serves as Board Secretary of the Ernest Hemingway Foundation and Society. Besides Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Jim has also published on various topics and authors, including Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Adams, Stephen Crane, Hemingway, the American Civil War, World War I and II, Andre Dubus, Paul West, and Joseph Heller. Jim has been an associate editor of **WLA** since its inception in 1989.