

Rooms in College · *Paul West*

1

UNTIL THERE ARE BINOCULARS FOR TIME, dazzling us into awe with lens-mirrors and elastic tenses, I recoup as best I may the England of mid-December 1946, when peace was new and everything still scarce. Everybody one met was a survivor, but by then we took the reprieve for granted, and I, at any rate, resumed an old meteorological pastime, lamenting how December marked the phantasmal grand opening of a purgatory called the common cold, that seemed as much the snobbish dismissal of winter as it did the usual across-the-board infection. An aerobic Luftwaffe of viruses blitzed us no less than the Heinkels and buzz bombs of the late war, and had to be likewise endured. Life went on; how could it not? But one was ruefully aware, through some seasonal anomaly of nouns, of what had again become our island's hinterland: the North Sea, which in chirpier times vanished, a negligible marine prairie with no effect on anything at all until the next national cantata, December through March, of buccal blurts, cliff-hanging cumulative sneezes, and the choked susurrus of air in its nasal maze. Down red-raw septums coursed the mile-long fluid runners of *Coryza's* sled, until even hyperbolists caught cold and took to drink.

Against this backdrop, or foreground drool, a ritual began that only observant malingerers at rail stations or on trains could spot. I mean an Anglo-Oxbridge approximation to the running of bulls (in which, before the feria, young men of Pamplona, or wherever aficionados gather, dash through the streets only a few yards ahead of fated beasts). English youths in their middle teens, in green or brown sports jackets and unpressed gray flannels, boarded trains that would ferry them to Oxford and Cambridge, where, accommodated in the college of their choice and looked after by venerable servants as if already among the elect, they would sit scholarship examinations whose appalling demands belied the open-mindedness of the examiners. Knowledge counted for something, I was told before each of my own peregrinations by steam from the Victoria Station, Sheffield, to the juvenile *concours* of that year, but it was imperative to display—what were those enviable attributes hypothetically unfurled before me like pavilion-

awnings from the field of the cloth of gold?—flair, originality, style, panache, and class. These, or any one of them, singled one out from the common ruck, or so the rumor went. Not knowing very much (and, in the first of the two Cambridge examinations I took, obliged to perform in both English and French), I myself needed as much flair et cetera as could have wafted the Sun King Louis XIV and his court to Alpha Centauri, or some equally silly place, in the exact time of one *levée*.

Dazzle them, said my mentors at school on the eve of my departures, none of them I think intending to evoke Diaghilev's *Etonne-moi!*, addressed to Jean Cocteau, of neither of whom neither they (I suppose) nor I (certainly) had heard. Yet one bell rang. I knew Rousseau's *The Reveries Of A Solitary Walker* almost by heart, and saw that one of his notions—that of at least being different—I must not only take to heart but, during my candidate week, enact with choreographic zeal. It was like being obliged, within the confines of those much-climbed-over ancient college walls, to soar beyond the human race, yet without going too high. If one achieved excessive solar apogee, he would seem better suited to a rest clinic in the provinces than to a court near Cam or an Oxford quad; or, at worst, a teacher-training college where half-wits hard-earned massive sheepskins to mount on their walls. The main thing, however, was to fly.

2

I see that in reliving these initiations I have already filched images of tauromachy from the half-objectified terrors of being sixteen, and interlarded them with images of pomp, insensate splendor, and maniacal record-breaking. Besides the fear there was the intoxication: one was both bull and matador, obliged to charge nobly and not be a bore to the examiners (who looked one over afterwards, in between intensive bouts of script-reading), yet also to execute risky passes with demented elegance. The cleverest boys, I presumed, would win by staging the unthinkable illusion of being their own executioners, holding bolt-still for the most reflexive thrust of all. But no: we were young bulls only, and the delusion of each's being his own matador came from precocity overtaxed. Dry-nerved rehearsals were just that. Our swords and capes were imaginary. Our teachers were the picadors and the college dons were the matadors (an Hispanic irony I missed at the time).

At a lower level of intoxication, well below the *felo-de-se* masochism of seeming too brilliant to live, there was the near felony of perhaps winning a scholarship for committing crimes which, in a more prosaic ordeal, would get one failed. With nothing to lose (at worst an august farewell) and everything to gain (a potential intellectual knighthood conferred), I felt like a gambler, more Dostoevskian than Vegas-ian, not even sure that what I was planking down on the light or the dark blue was valid currency at all, but giddily conscious of tempting the fates without getting into debt. The whole test was a lottery, even the winner uncertain of being allocated to the college of his preference, since many colleges examined jointly and then competed among themselves, over the port and walnuts, for the cream.

A solider student than I would have worried about being unable to march his data past the reviewing stand, whereas I, exhorted to twist the questions to my needs, had a field day throughout that initial baptism-of-fire week, sidestepping and weaving, importing irrelevance like ersatz gold leaf, discarding the examination papers themselves, boldly setting and answering (or begging!) questions of my own. My strategy, I now see, was to drive the examiners out of their minds into mine. Look! my scribbled voluntaries cried, *I am here. This is what I do. Choose me, not them (or me among the few).* After thirty-five writing hours, two interviews, and a return train journey from Cambridge with my swollen suitcase in the tourniquet of my bathrobe's cord, I began the wait. An award would bring a telegram followed a week later by a one-line listing, precious as lutetium, of my name among others in the better-class newspapers. In the event I received a letter, in which the Master of the college explained that I could not even be admitted as a "commoner," which was Oxbridgese (a hang-over from days of bone-deep grace and favor) for entrance unfunded. I had not even been allowed in.

Too tired to think in terms of catastrophe, I leniently heard out my elders, who said it had all been practice; I had not been expected to "pull up any trees," except by some eleventh-hour egregious act of God. Next year I would go again, trying for both universities, but only in English: no more French, which upset me (I preferred its literature to ours, and still do). Back to my books I went, a chastened performing animal, sacrificing Rousseau to Wordsworth, Rabelais to Swift, my innermost mind haunted by that heady sample of the promised land, Sidney Sussex College, where Oliver Cromwell had been. I yearned dismally for the flyblown quiet of its

coal-dusty rooms (even a candidate had “rooms” and not just a room), the atmospheric seethe of the fire in the grate, the kettle that boiled thereon like an hydraulic ally, the rind-stiff marmalade on the dead toast in the dining hall, the tamed lawns in the courts, the continual bells, the river-sweet fog. It had all gone up in some kind of smoke, or down, like a severed head, into the enormous picnic basket into which one laid one’s script when one’s best had been done, or the proctor said stop.

3

One could, I discovered, form a crush on a place, on a college’s official polychrome scarf, its plumbing, its amber evening lamps. That I had been born for (though not into) all this, I had no doubt, and that I had, like the gauche prince of legend, been shut out, I could not believe. A god had failed, and also a boy. Imagine my puerile agonizings as, in the spring and summer that followed, I ran into fellow competitors who, as the jargon ran, were “going up” that fall, or worse, the elect preparing for their second or third year “in residence.” I longed to go up, with all that phrase’s hint of aerial promotion, and to be in residence would be enclosure in a commodious trance. Furtively, at soccer or cricket matches, I perused the foreheads of the chosen few, eventually deciding that the typical winner’s brow was low, concave, and signed with three undulant creases, whereas my own, impassive mirrors proved, was high, bulged slightly, and bore no lines at all. In a desperate effort to make the mind conform, I incised three magical cicatrices above my eyes with the round end of a nail file, admiring the look of distracted maturity I thought they conferred, until the skin regained its natural tension and I became an also-ran again.

Slogging away at my books in my third-story bedroom, at a table to whose over-varnished top my elbows stuck fast, I ran the gamut of affronted aspiration, certain I would glide in automatically next time provided, say, I wore an olive-green shirt, or looked paler than Banquo’s ghost. A more pragmatic magic, however, set me poring over paperbound volumes of past examination papers (though I shrank from looking in the back at those in whose presence I had betrayed myself last year). Within those ferrocyanide blue covers lay the keys of a genteel kingdom, perhaps in the compulsory translation from Latin (*how* could Tacitus’s “*temptat clausa,*” bald brace in a museum tongue, mean all of “he tried to open all the

closed doors”? Was this to be my own motto, malefically secreted among the stuff of my undoing?). Or was it in the three-hour general essay paper (“Discuss logic” or “‘The unexamined life is not worth having.’ Consider.”)? Who was I to opine on logic, expert that I was in muddle, especially after grappling with Bertrand Russell’s *The Problems of Philosophy*, in which all chairs became unreal *fascii* of qualities? As for the unexamined life, I knew only, from recent bitter ordeals, that it might actually be unmitigated joy (no more three-hour essays) and that, in a less shallow sense, although the unexamined life might not be worth having, the examined one might not be worth living.

In nightmares I kept meeting pimply geniuses with narrow, sunken, striated brows, who jubilantly remarked on the easiness of the translation from Chinese, the “piece of cake” that the literary history paper had been (mad minutiae pincerred from a continuum rolling from Homer to Haldor Laxness), and the trivial stimulus of even the hardest essay topic (“Discuss any teleology implicit, or seemingly so, in the categorical imperative”). The only consolation, idle gossip of school cloakrooms, was that these examinations were stiffer than the universities’ own final degree papers; graduates (Oh what Prometheans!) had repeatedly said so, and the dons (brain-pharaohs) concurred. Almost broken on the wheel when young, the winners breezed through the ensuing three years as if playing snap. Into the bargain, if bargain there would ever be, I came from a secondary school, which sounded downright second class (although it only denoted post-primary), not a grammar school (where they syntactically and strategically meant business), and still less a public school, meaning private, which as often as not had closed scholarships available to its own boys only. Besides, *we* had girls on our premises, which surely proved the school’s essential lack of high seriousness. I envisioned a hypothetical secondary scholarship, available only to our school, and then dreamed up the deaths—by traffic, pneumonia, and brainstorm—of my immediate rivals, at length accepting my award with the pharisaical smile of a fireball coming home to roost.

Studying previous papers, those libretti of past inquisitions, I marvelled at the arcane trophies to be had. As well as Open scholarships, which explained themselves, there were the aforementioned Closed ones, restricted to Etonians, descendants of King Canute, or anyone born west of a line drawn from Berwick-on-Tweed to Land’s End, but also indiscreet or painterly-sounding *exhibitions*, wholly enigmatic *sizarships* with faint con-

notations of glue or paste, and bisected things called *demyships* for which one perhaps received only a half-stipend. Lowest of all were commonerships, at which I now set my cap. Of such illustrious colleges as Cambridge's King's, which may have been only for male royalty, and Trinity, only for the devout or those who thought in threes, or Oxford's Magdalen (what if one whorishly mispronounced it during interview?), and Balliol, which was full of invincibly brilliant Scotsmen who thought all night in calculus, I had no hopes. In fact, I was addressing my endeavors to St. Catherine's and Selwyn Colleges, Cambridge, combined, and St. Edmund Hall, Oxford. Amazing as it now seems, not every college offered an examination in English Literature, almost as if, compared with the intricate preliminaries of Medicine, Literae Humaniores, or what Cambridge forbiddingly termed Moral Sciences, it weren't a serious subject at all. Anyone worth his salt knew it backward, *hein?*, and would not persist with anything so ephemeral; but for secondary schoolboys it might just do, like them having come so recently into being, an upstart lit for an upstart lot.

So I forgot Oliver Cromwell's college and, to equip myself with a unique, local angle, began to study the poems of Edith Sitwell, in whose family's village I was born. Not daring to present myself for interview at the portals of haunted Renishaw Hall, I schooled myself in village gossip, amassing gaudy, antagonistic yarns of Edith's ring-encrusted hands, her habit of sleeping in a coffin in ornate robes, her basilisk's eye, her Plantagenet nose like a molten string bean, the iron mask she had been forced to wear as a child. Opening the local flower show on St. Peter's cricket ground, where I had often flung red leather balls at clay-brown stumps, she looked like some hopelessly etiolated macaw, not of this aviary at all but rented for a fee to be paid in mutant orchids. Fervently I worked out close analyses of her most sensuous poems, evolving bogus theories (if indeed the expression itself is not tautologous) of verbal enamel and the annular baroque, identifying at a class-conscious distance with her exotic aloofness, and even going so far afield as to rehearse little monologues on Sacheverell Sitwell's poems, Osbert's slapdash use of the dash. A contribution to knowledge it was not, but it *was* viaticum and exam fodder in one. After a few months immersed in *Façade* and *Gold Coast Customs*, our man from Renishaw was ready for the Goliath brains of next December's inquisitors. This time, although the two examinations almost overlapped, there would be no sixteen papers in six days (which had meant three papers

on four), but, in either place, a civilized new-style trivium of Authors, Periods, and General, to be followed by an interview, at which one stood a fair chance of being incompletely exhausted. Oxford came first, then I had to go, via Bletchley Junction, where Franz Kafka was reputed to have lived in the signal box, to Cambridge, a tricky cross-country trip: from the patrician matrix of prime ministers to the sagest old clinic of the mid-century.

4

St. Edmund Hall was a tiny place just off Oxford's thunderous High Street, where University College and others were subsiding an inch each year owing to the vibration from traffic and, some decades hence, would disappear from view into a Dark Ages compost that no doubt included the bonemeal of Oxford's eponymous ox. The formulas of arrival did not vary markedly from those of what Oxford men referred to, with jocular hauteur, as "the other place"; yet it was a serious jocularly, and what Oxford respected in its less fruity sibling was a medieval childhood held in common. Arriving at the porter's lodge, one was put into the custody of a "scout," who, presumably knowing his way through the Mohicans and Comanches of the academy, conducted one to yet another set of temporary rooms, whose absent tenant had his embossed calling card set in a little brass frame let into the oak, as the outer door was called. To be private here, for whatever purpose, one locked it, and this was known as sporting the oak. Needless to say, I sported mine as soon as I could and took out my last-minute notes.

Furtive, voluptuous comparisons, however, strayed through my concentration. After all, I would be off to Cambridge in a couple of days. Cambridge gowns were voluminous, those of Oxford mere rectangles with ribbons. At the former, one was catered for by a "bedder," an appellation whose venereal-maternal overtones reinforced themselves in the fact that some bedders were female. Oxford had no female scouts, however, and I detected, I thought, generalizing wildly on too narrow a base, a magistral teak in the scout, that bedders lacked; a minatory politeness which proved who really ran that ancient seat of learning, whatever its Hebdomadal Council thought.

My bedroom overlooked the college cemetery, an oblong trap of headstones and curbs all at conflicting angles, as if scrambled by a minor earthquake. I thought of Paul Nash's wartime painting, *Totes Meer*, in which fragments of airplanes canted up from the bowels of a lugubrious marsh as if trying to recombine themselves into a Frankenstein flying machine: a Junkerschmitt 17, say, or a Focke-Dornier 109, which as the last trump sounded would bombard us all over again, this time with tons of methane-heavy magma. St. Edmunds's graveyard threatened like resurgence, its composite outcome a giant Latin-booming head on a sketchy trunk, come to repel boarders from the uncouth north. I shivered for all three days; the tiny Hall stood over an icy meer, I guessed, and the little electric fire in my sitting room warmed only the peeling frame. Yet the magic of Old Oxford prevailed: one came here precisely to be cold, for cold made the mind adept. The only hot water of the day arrived in a tin jug with the scout at seven A.M. and poured from a kettle at teatime. "Gently with the gas, sir, and the power," he said, as if advising how to handle two beloved artefacts. "The *austerity*, you know." Certainly no south wind frolicked in his voice. It was 1947, a year of feral, embattling winter such as I never saw until, a decade later, I discovered January in Montreal. The little kitchen reeked of grease, gas, and mouse dirt, but it was Cathay to me. Some of the headstones I perused were of the fourteeneth century. I had taken a train right into history, a train that did not stop and had no terminus; no matter how many times you changed, it bore you on, then dropped you off while other passengers went gratefully ahead.

Awed, and with chattering teeth, my mind intoning a round based on the title *Aula Sancti Edmundi*, I ran into Vice Principal Kelly, a forbiddingly tall aquiline-faced theologian whose handshake descended diagonally from a black-clad altar six feet high. It was like shaking hands with St. Patrick himself, except that this saturnine young cleric spoke in impetuous diphthongs about having just played squash, of which I had never heard, even though I played it later on and became almost proficient. I had never met such jovial fellows in my life, not even those who rented out donkeys at the seaside or massacred rabbits in the Sitwell woods, and could only conclude that these sublime luminaries—*Fellows* indeed—who ran colleges were forever either ill-suppressing convulsions of mirth at the awkward antics of examinees, or were incessantly tuned in to some acerb transubstantial farce. One inadvertently looked around for the master of the revels, in the

dreadful iron-clanging, earthenware-cisterned lavatories, in the staircase tunnels that led from quad to quad (or court to court), even in the examination room itself, where, let it be said at once, the scouts of St. Edmund continually stoked up and fussed over a fire that had no right to be indoors: a Dickensian conflagration that made me long for the moment when the doors opened and someone said, "Gentlemen, you may begin." You literally warmed to your task as, outside in the cold, young men still in residence even during the vacation coughed and joked on their way across the quad in bulky red-and-yellow scarves.

This time round, my state of mind had shifted through a degree or two of arc: the intoxication was still there, but less determined to show off, to kick over the Gradgrind traces, than with brimming mind to sit and write about the things that delighted me in my heart of hearts. Not an examination as such, this was an invitation to enchant further those already converted: a swelled-headed reading of the circumstances, I'm sure, but one that precluded tyro's nerves and found me, I recall, smiling complacently at the foolscap as each examination began. The Fellows of the Colleges wanted to know what I knew and could do, I told myself, and not what I didn't or couldn't. That civilized openness drew me out into a phalanx of rippling, ill-juxtaposed sentences in which I somehow conveyed my unique stance on the Sitwells, my modified astonishment at Plato's famous divided line, and preposterous as I now find it when I think of the mainly literary context, my hot-blooded air-mindedness, all the way from Daedalus to Sir Frank Whittle's jet engine. A youth of fragments who might not grow into a man of parts, I acquitted myself with a confidence I had been obliged to invent. And then, along with several other candidates, I entrained for Cambridge, an old hand on that battlefield, I reckoned, vaingloriously reassuring myself that, if all else failed, I was the only one of the group who had played cricket for his County's Boys. Surely Derbyshire sporting prowess would win the day should the lowdown on the Sitwells fail. I dashed a few lines home on letterhead I was not entitled to, in an envelope enhanced with St. Edmund's arms.

Weird as it felt, I was beginning to know my way round colleges. Such familiarity would never be allowed to go to waste. Again, porridge (on which even Himmler's SS breakfasted), beans and bacon, marmalade and metallic-tasting tea, began our day. Burned, flour-costive soup and vile beef curry, followed by jam tart, were the lunch. Pip-squeak ironists, we

protested our conviction that England had *won* the war, not lost it, so why the front-line rations? One boy fished out a cherry-wood pipe and lit it, biliously intense. We all darted out for postcards and little handbooks to the colleges. A London candidate actually purchased the college's tie, which our Oxford contingent thought a bit thick, though just as sure of ourselves as he. We invested shillings in gifts at one remove, those of the tourist rather than the rightful occupant: mugs ablaze with shields and unglossed Latin, calendars of punts on the river and daffodils on the banks, frangible spoons with runcible lozenges of heraldry soldered in misalignment to their tops.

It rained each day. There were, of course, no daffodils. We poled no punts. The college was eerily still, a bell jar for wood smoke and the reek of boiling greens. I bought a big map of Cambridge and eyed the jet black plan view thereon of Oliver Cromwell's college, but stayed away. I felt a gathering sense of being in the midst of what the Greeks called *kairos*, seasonal time as distinct from mere chronicity. A thousand perceptions added up to fifteen sentences an hour, penned oblivious of clock or question. I wrote what I had come there to write, engraving the tablets before me with an horrendous mixture of gossip, purloined epigrams (just one of my own that began, "The annals of anguish belie themselves"), and quotations learned by heart and fist and squeezed through the cheesecloth of critics whose true vocation, I later saw, should have been horology.

"Who," T.R. Henn, the Yeats expert, asked me at my interview, "was Tully?" I babbled parabolical guesswork, slouching towards Cambridge to be born. Tully—was—*Cicero!* Had I *read* any Cicero? With blinking frustration I had, puzzled by a vehicle that so much competed with its tenor; had not Cicero's head and right hand been put on public view on the *rostra* by Antonius? But this was sailing too near the wind; I reverted to my Yeatsian *moutons*, then dodged sideways into Edith Sitwell's *Gold Coast Customs*, a Byzantium of the aorta. . . . The kind and keen man cleared his throat but let me flow, and what happened after that I scarcely remember. A paralyzing ecstasy set in. St. Edmund's had telephoned St. Catherine's, as if through some interdenominational holy line. I had to choose, Henn said: if Cambridge, it would have to be Selwyn College because it was Selwyn's turn (some such rigmarole). To ecclesiastical, redbrick Selwyn I walked, choked with mystery, but in the end chose St. Edmund, perhaps because of that ancient graveyard, or lofty Kelly in his dog collar, or those vast fires they built you to write by.

The impossible had happened. Then the possible erupted. There would be a mandatory two-year delay. While I did my military service, returning veterans would complete their interrupted studies, and then I could take up my scholarship. There was no way round it; the rule held at both places, and, it was suggested, a couple of years in uniform made a boy into a man as well as into a maturer student. But, having tasted ambrosia, I wanted a steady diet of it; I wanted to become not a man but a student, and an immature one at that. So I made what was then a sickening decision, almost as bad as going military: I settled for a provincial university on another award I never even competed for, but which came like a free sample in the mail after I passed a routine exam. Not quite my own executioner, but feeling every inch my own pawnbroker, I one day took the train to Birmingham, and three years later kept my appointment with Oxford, not in St. Edmund's *aula* after all, but in the college, Lincoln, that unleashed John Wesley on the pagan world. Anticlimax it surely was, yet one loaded with procrastinated joys. It began one of the happiest times of my life, perhaps because, once installed, I did next to no work at all, having done it, as it were, before arrival, during a succession of radiant summers whose uninsistent fleecy clouds partnered in my mind the blackened margins of innumerable books, and print that swam and jiggled until I knew not page from sky. I had flown blind through books, had learned the clouds by heart, confusing knowledge with magic, as always. Not facts but the fingerprints on them were my obsession; or, indeed, the etching of the whole palm: whorls, forks, asterisks, semiquavers, and scalpel-sharp crescent moons; or even, after over-zealous chiromancers of the eighteenth century, the signatures or planets of our feet which, facing earth, receive the weakest light and dwell, according to one Fludd, in a microcosmic night. An additional source of delight was that I remained still unclaimed by the military; what on earth, I wondered, would I have been useful for in Korea?

5

How stably one goes home again, unerringly plants a love tap at first base. The eyrie room in which I studied looks out still at a golf course where, during winter floods, a friend of my mother's drowned while saving a sheep. My school books are there, like empty oxygen cylinders, dusted off by my mother the same day each week, in case I ever need them again, need

to start over. No, that room is a bit of a shrine for a mostly absent son. The gilt on the spine of the *Short History of English Literature* has wanned beyond bleach into invisibility; the cover of my pocket selection of French verse from Ronsard to Valéry has given its freindly cobalt blue back to the pouring afternoon sun; Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* falls apart if moved, into tiles of pages dangling from glue-faceted threads that set the teeth on edge; the damp-warped *Boy's Own Astronomy Handbook* still tells the truth, sidereally reliable although written before the Hiroshima bomb. I can still, thank goodness, lean my elbows on the sticky-topped table and peer again at the black-and-white photograph of the globular cluster M 13 in Hercules, scintillating eight inches and twenty-two thousand light years from my retinas. M 13's electric bull's-eye of spattered light, a boy's rune, awes again, anachronistically crinkling like silver paper in a match's flame. Yet it has a humdrum counterpart on our own planet: not the photograph in my old album, but one of those miraculous patterns traced by programmed worms. Fuzzy as the state of mind in which I competed for my sweet tomorrow, this pattern's winning caption says, after a number: cloud path generated by a gentle worm.