

Reading Green
An Essay on Paul Green's Communicator
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Book I

"My luck was found by a last filling out of my diary's part but my approach to this marking of radiant blanks in my past will not account for an introduction; nor will this short paragraph claim its doors, or appoint locations for such." Paul Green begins *The Communicator* by warning us that this attempt at rewriting a diary, or writing between the lines, will not provide the necessary markers for a reader who is accustomed to being comfortably led through a narrative. No instead, he promises that we will encounter and engage a divine squalor of so so many words (none of them containing the letter "e"), and we will thereby interact with language and art in its hopeless struggle and ultimate inability to bind the physical and spiritual. To communicate, the narrator laments, is as if encountering a block of wood which we must pass through without knowing where and what we are.

Throughout this text, there is an ongoing confusion due to reference. Without an "e" in English, there is no "he", she," "her," "the," or even a past tense. We are in the indefinite present world of the "it" and the "a". As the reader continues, she becomes more and more displaced from meaning making as we normally know it. Removing the "e" is to say yes to a-o-u-i, yes to the indefinite, yes to a kind of evenness or sameness and yes to the blending of words without the conventional markers that help create an illusional hinge to material reality. My reading of this text--written in a column beside Green's-- is a history of my struggle to do just that, to give up, accept the horror of this grappling, and let there be sound.

Behind or within these words, escape is impossible. "My world is walls, only--and yours." The narrator can go inward or outward. This is the voice of someone hopelessly trying to solidify, through the art of language, the connections between a utilitarian "I" and the soul. What he will do and who he speaks to is unknown, however, and uncertain. Whatever is, is also not. For the moment, what is certain is a "drowning soul". And yet, the narrator is sure that the reader thinks of him as a wall to his or her "day's plans". What is hidden in this prose or behind this block of wood? We are passing the reality of death back and forth, decorating and disguising it. Reality as we see it is only a copy, made over and over; the original is in the decaying matter of the universe.

Nonetheless, anything can start something new. The catalyst, however, requires a moment of standing still, an element of fixing, and of course contained within this catalyst is the opposite or a mirror image, even though we long to have and escape it. Perhaps one should just make use of all these beginnings and risks. He admits he is going too far again, and I am sure now that this prose has been composed as a riddle, asking the question: Who am I? Who am I without an "e"? Who am I without "narrative"? He hopes the material body will remain rock hard, and he'll find the contents of the sky within his

body. Despite the dirty and raw mess involved with living, he as well as we, ought to be able to learn something about art and composition from this song of a drop of blood as it falls from its wound.

Book II

The reader might discover in the shadows that we are in fact living in a pot (remember I tell myself, this is a shadow consideration) and this pot-stomach-coffin-pit-jar is composed of dualities. Inside the desire-worm devours everything including language and privacy. (Remember I tell myself, this is all a shadow). The narrator's truth is the crack in the pot; it allows him to look out the window, to grow, and expand. It is an error in a system for the purpose of art, and all systems can grow only with defects. Language is one big cutthroat mumble that becomes a death wail. While trying to birth, one gives birth to death, the ship's sail only a rag in a mouth now, blocking any possibility of communication. "Is a body just a rag of old cloth, a black or unlit sail that I drop as a sign, or for communications of dying?" The riddles grow: Who and what am I? What is a body for?

"I want your hand to nip out a snag in my shirt." Is he talking, I wonder, to me the reader or to you, the person who invited this work or to you, anyone who engages in an act of communication? This other, lover, mother could make a little tidy act, a correction in all the chaos from our accumulated attempts to intervene and make order. In this interior monologue, the narrator unsuccessfully tries to find something particular that would mark him as distinct from the readers. "This" can be an "old contortion" or a "blowing thing". What is anything and how do these swarming words signify anything? "Or did I not say, up in my graphs, that a cow was part of a crow--or crows, a crowd of which into all fly?" He wishes sound could be significant and controllable, and that this effort would work to make it material, but instead one goes galloping down the divine, divisive and distracting chain of signification. The words bang "on wood and glass", blood becomes paint, the canvas goes bad and the body decays. This blood, I think, is dropping from wounds in his higher thinking. If he tries to use or hold the blood, it will destroy the work. Instead, the narrator suggests, enjoy the fruits of capitalism: sign and pretend all is well.

"So far my story was of nothing but a ridiculous plot." Which story, I wonder. The narrative of this telling, o difficult to recognize even though there is a narrative in every language act? I also make a new narrative here as I read and retell. The problem, he says, with the story and plot is there is no answer. It is like asking a tub what and why it exists. He doesn't want to cause any fuss; his books will soon be disposed of even though he didn't want that; and "you", the reader, the listener, the communicator shun and run; then he calls "you" back. He has written books on the imagination of saints and knows the reader or other writer is someone in the position of throwing away all of his things. After all, we narrowly and continually define ourselves in relation to the others in our lives. Looking at this linguistically and philosophically, one could say the others give us "self." "Do not stop your own copious studying," the narrator instructs. (Am I this other, I wonder, as I copiously write notes in the right hand margin?) In the conclusion of Book II, there is a gap between these drawings/writing and reality, a fault, a distortion. Art is in trouble and this problem does not originate with us.

Book III

Perhaps this monologue is a diary of a person who is going mad. The absence of the letter "e" dislodges the logic of the language even though Green maintains conventional syntax. Time passes and the narrator is unable to figure out the exactness of passing. Of course without the past tense, how can one measure the present? He mentions having working on "this" book for 30 or so days, designing and calculating The book or diary that is now the topic of conversation may or may not be either The Communicator or the diary to which Green responds. Whatever book--it was Socratic and so inspired by an evil spirit, the narrator tells us, historical and so inaccurate; unsubstantiated; typical and total; petty; it is wrong thinking because it tries too hard to be respectable and logical. It is as if the he is rereading a serious journal and scoffing at it and its fumbling manner of seeking pleasure, truth and wealth. The book is nothing less than a patch, and even then, a worn-out one. Then he comes to an understanding--truth is more in this squalor without an "e" than it is in a recording of daily plots and emotions, the reductions of narrative and its "counting room for words." This is a treatise against journalizing. "I might gag on it." A bag of tricks. Intermittently, it seems possible that a solution could be found in the writing, but the riddle instead grows larger and larger. "Still, what was my story?" Perhaps, he suggests, this story and journal are intentionally fictional; many people, things and events appear and disappear. Some meaning seems possible, but then it flies off into the sky. He tries to displace his devilish spirit or the "you", metaphorically giving it a material sense--a bat, owl with claws, but not me, my body, that shadow or imitation. As always, there is this problem with reference--this large indefinite "it" becomes death, or a daemon spirit, or any other object, or this book, or this quest. The aboutness of this text is the indefinite. He wants to finish the book and set it aside, but wonders if he has already gone too far from dirt or sainthood. "You and I" together on a hill with a poppy in his hand--we don't want to point to that. And what is that? All is gone and we seem to think we can continue with a worn out language of familiar terms. The narrator is someone who signs, not a "host", not an embodiment, and the "you", the other, is the same as his hands and feet, material and stained. He could release the "you" if he wanted to and leave, but he doesn't.

Book 4

What are the events recorded in the diary for which Paul Green is writing in the blanks? These events are probably not significant; they could, I think, be joyous or tragic and still result in this painful squalor. He claims all the above was not art-thought because it was too gutsy and honest, too engaged in the real. Suddenly a character knocks at the door--a black man, a metaphor, an allegory, walking death. A bleeding man comes into his house. Perhaps the narrator has shot him. All we know is that he has been wounded, and somehow the narrator is guilty for not helping him. This man wants death and death comes right in and embraces him. Again I wonder if "this" man is the black man, death, or have I been tricked again by reference. The man was chasing him with a gun and he runs to avoid death. Now he remembers the man aiming at him and a moon. As always, there is money involved. And the narrator plans to run away, but can't, and then he aims

with a gun, catching sight of the "moons". He fires into a mirror, the illusion of it all. The narrator wants to find a body for him--he does--and it follows him. At first, he was chasing and firing at a shadow and then the real thing. Blood everywhere. And where am I, the reader? Perhaps I am on the outside now, watching, very comfortable with my own telling and retelling.

Death goes so slowly. He tries to grasp it with a portrait, which in itself is fleeting, blurred and contaminated. And this, the narrator explains, is "its truth". There is a murder necessary to watch the whole fixed illusion come apart. He once thought he could hold life, with a gun, but of course he is shot down. He too is a shadow. "I know art is part of that." What?--"A cry" or the "whole murder"? When he revives, he and his body are sitting upon rubbish; a man walks away and so he hits him with a rock and kills him although he didn't want to. Over and over, this uncontrollable violence, decay and this riddling "it," which may be at this moment, the art of narration; despite its drawbacks, the narrator admits that the fiction (the narrative in book four) has helped him regain a sense of well-being, compensating for "the lack." He imagines other possibilities--writing only about ghosts as an "indication of a spiritual oasis." What is this all about? "My writing is about a man who was, or is still dying." The problem is that he is driven toward the exact opposite --he can't write of the dying man so he throws his gun into a marsh and gives up the whole act of conjuring character and plot. We are left witnessing traces of blood without the melodramatic story.

I find myself constantly in search of the markers of time, place and person--where am I? What is going on? Even though the narrative is an illusion--give me a man, a gun, a window, a mirror and a body, and I find myself engaged, curious, present.

Book 5

The narrator locks up all of these murders and occasions in his books, all these murders and occasions. "Thus, for you" he tells us his "most practical ways of killing":

A dark bird dragging mud from its tail. A worm that I am also duplicating.

A hand, with various mutilations to it, particularly across its palm. A tooth.

A thumb. A phallus so small that I cannot fit it in a man.

A man comes to terms with his body's inadequacy, deterioration and ultimate death; he struggles throughout with language and art as a way of holding--fragments, laughter, home, natural world, mirrors and windows (it is always helpful to have some illusions). He is dying. Does he wail too much? As it all collapses, he acknowledges the murder involved in the will to live. But he could lie to himself and try to sum it all up under the categories of facts and truths. Again the narrator reminds us that this work is not a story. What is it?

It is a formation of limnings thought of or caught within an imp's praxis, so by implication is impious . . . My original horror lurks about a porch, its door shut, a light shining through its chinks. . . . It is two words long, it is four words and it is also six words--it has had to support my imagination. In my account it is a ghost, although I could also want it as if stiff and sucking to a mirror. It is a man, too. It is part of his total that my shards fall from. If you could look upward, you might want to watch owls, clouds,

stars and rain-drops forming. by morning, if such light was balancing, you could claim to watch two-fourths of all still tumbling down.

I have always been horrible at solving riddles, and I am sure this agonizing riddle is unsolvable and lurking everywhere. What is it? Art? Writing? Being? Death? Even if you could look upward instead of down into the degeneration, you would have to watch what is creative come apart. He wonders if even attempting to tell a story such as this might be harmful. Better to start than finish. He knocks on the "wood that my ghost grows into." And we discover that there is no passing through the wood with or without the letter "e". But to knock on wood is a sign of good luck. It is he instead of death that is now knocking. He adds language, the more words, the less story. He tries to answer the riddle again in the beautiful last lines of this book:

You should not want to know who I am, but I was always in front of you, or looking in at your window. I was part of its night, so was black, caught up with magic and raging. If it was an act, what is it I should want complaining of? I am, if you want an abrupt simplification, just sitting and waiting for it all to burn out. I want, now, to lay down. I am soft and hard. I am wood. I am in wood. I am a star.

One letter is removed and the language seems to explode. My reading is confused, jumbled, detoured and incorrect, and yet I am awestruck by this heap of glittering words and sentences--here all is life, death, energy, destruction. These are the marker's in Paul Green's Communicator.

Barbara Henning, February 1999

*Green, Paul. The Communicator. Warwickshire, England: Prest Roots Press, 1998