

# THE NEW YORKER

PERSONAL HISTORY

## PARALLEL PLAY

*A lifetime of restless isolation explained.*

by Tim Page

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**M**y second-grade teacher never liked me much, and one assignment I turned in annoyed her so extravagantly that the red pencil



with which she scrawled “See me!” broke through the lined paper. Our class had been asked to write about a recent field trip, and, as was so often the case in those days, I had noticed the wrong things:

Well, we went to Boston, Massachusetts through the town of Warrenville, Connecticut on Route 44A. It was very pretty and there was a church that reminded me of pictures of Russia from our book that is published by Time-Life. We arrived in Boston at 9:17. At 11 we went on a big tour of Boston on Gray Line 43, made by the Superior Bus Company like School Bus Six, which goes down Hunting Lodge Road where Maria lives and then on to Separatist Road and then to South Eagleville before it comes to our school. We saw lots of good things like the Boston Massacre site. The tour ended at 1:05. Before I knew it we were going home. We went through Warrenville again but it was too dark to see much. A few days later it was Easter. We got a cuckoo clock.

It is an unconventional but hardly unobservant report. In truth, I didn’t care one bit about Boston on that spring day in 1963. Instead, I wanted to learn about Warrenville, a village a few miles northeast of the town of Mansfield, Connecticut, where we were then living. I had memorized the map of Mansfield, and knew all the school-bus routes by heart—a litany I would sing out to anybody I could corner. But Warrenville was in the town of Ashford, for which I had no guide, and I remember the blissful sense of resolution I felt when I certified that Route 44A crossed Route 89 in the town center, for I had long hypothesized that they might meet there. Of such joys and pains was my childhood composed.

I received a grade of “Unsatisfactory” in Social Development from the Mansfield Public Schools that year. I did not work to the best of my ability, did not show neatness and care in assignments, did not cooperate with the group, and did not exercise self-control. About the only positive assessment was that I worked well independently. Of course: then as now, it was all that I could do.

In the years since the phrase became a cliché, I have received any number of compliments for my supposed ability to “think outside the box.” Actually, it has been a struggle for me to perceive just what these “boxes” were—why they were there, why other people regarded them as important, where their borderlines might be, how to live safely within and without them. My efforts have been only partly successful: after fifty-two years, I am left with the melancholy sensation that my life has been spent in a perpetual state of parallel play, alongside, but distinctly apart from, the rest of humanity.

From early childhood, my memory was so acute and my wit so bleak that I was described as a genius—by my parents, by our neighbors, and even, on occasion, by the same teachers who gave me failing marks. I wrapped myself in this mantle, of course, as a poetic justification for behavior that might otherwise have been judged unhinged, and I did my best to believe in it. But the explanation made no sense. A genius at *what*? Were other “geniuses” so oblivious that they couldn’t easily tell right from left and idly wet their pants into adolescence? What accounted for my rages and frustrations, for the imperious contempt I showed to people who were in a position to do me harm? Although I delighted in younger children, whom I could instruct and gently dominate, and I was thrilled when I ran across an adult willing to discuss my pet subjects, I could establish no connection with most of my classmates. My pervasive childhood memory is an excruciating awareness of my own strangeness.

Despite their roseate talk, my parents and my school put a good deal of effort into finding out precisely what was wrong with me. It was obvious that I was not “normal,” especially by the straitened standards of the early nineteen-sixties. I have sometimes wondered whether the I.Q. scores with which I was credited were nudged upward by my father, who was both a professional educator with a keen interest in gifted children and the person who administered my most triumphant examinations. Whatever the case, while my younger brother and sister soared through school, academically and socially, I was consistently at or near the bottom of the class, and decidedly out of control—half asleep or aggressively assertive—much of the time.

And so, between the ages of seven and fifteen, I was given glucose-tolerance tests, anti-seizure medications, electroencephalograms, and an occasional Mogadon to shut me down at night. I suffered through a summer of Bible camp; exercise regimens were begun and abandoned; and the school even brought in a psychiatrist to grill me once a week. Somehow, every June, I was promoted to the next grade, having accomplished little to deserve it. Meanwhile, the more kindly homeroom teachers, knowing that I would be tormented on the playground, permitted me to spend recess periods indoors, where I memorized vast portions of the 1961 edition of the World Book Encyclopedia.

A brown carton in my basement contains most of the surviving documents of my childhood, and they present a pretty fair portrait of my pre-teen obsessions. There are meandering and implausible stories, none with happy endings; intricately detailed street maps of makebelieve cities on which I worked silently for hours; and countless crayon drawings of grinning girls with shoulder-length hair and U-shaped smiles, their stick figures fleshed out only by exaggerated biceps. Other children collected coins or baseball cards; I tore obituaries of Sophie Tucker and David O. Selznick from the Hartford *Courant* and pasted them sloppily into a scrapbook.

In my darker moods, I think that the rest of my life can be encapsulated in a single sentence: I grew up and grew into other preoccupations, some of which have served me well. I became a music critic and culture writer, first for the *SoHo News*, and then for the *Times, Newsday*, and the *Washington Post*. In the middle of all this, I became enamored of the American author Dawn Powell, whose life and works I absorbed in much the same manner I had the World Book, and I spent five years editing her novels, short stories, plays, diaries, and letters and writing her first biography. I look back on these projects with a certain mystified satisfaction; I’m glad they were done, but it is as though they had been

accomplished by somebody else, for the particular furies and fevers that impelled them have long since evaporated.

In the fall of 2000, in the course of what had become a protracted effort to identify—and, if possible, alleviate—my lifelong unease, I was told that I had Asperger's syndrome. I had never heard of the condition, which had been recognized by the American Psychiatric Association only six years earlier. Nevertheless, the diagnosis was one of those rare clinical confirmations which are met mostly with relief. Here, finally, was an objective explanation for some of my strengths and weaknesses, the simultaneous capacity for unbroken work and all-encompassing recall, linked inextricably to a driven, uncomfortable personality. And I learned that there were others like me—people who yearned for steady routines, repeated patterns, and a few cherished subjects, the driftwood that keeps us afloat.

The syndrome was identified, in 1944, by Hans Asperger, a Viennese pediatrician, who wrote, "For success in science or art, a dash of autism is essential." Yet Oliver Sacks makes a clear distinction between full-fledged autism and Asperger's syndrome. In *The New Yorker* some years ago, Sacks wrote that "people with Asperger's syndrome can tell us of their experiences, their inner feelings and states, whereas those with classical autism cannot. With classical autism there is no 'window,' and we can only infer. With Asperger's syndrome there is self-consciousness and at least some power to introspect and report."

In his 1998 book "Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals," Tony Attwood observed, "The person with Asperger's syndrome has no distinguishing physical features but is primarily viewed by other people as different because of their unusual quality of social behavior and conversation skills. For example, a woman with Asperger's Syndrome described how as a child she saw people moving into the house up the street, ran up to one of the new kids and, instead of the conventional greeting and request of 'Hi, you want to play?,' proclaimed, 'Nine times nine is equal to 81.'"

David Mamet, in his recent book "Bambi vs. Godzilla," discerned redeeming qualities in the condition. Considering filmmakers past and present, he stated that "it is not impossible that Asperger's syndrome helped make the movies. The symptoms of this developmental disorder include early precocity, a great ability to maintain masses of information, a lack of ability to mix with groups in age-appropriate ways, ignorance of or indifference to social norms, high intelligence, and difficulty with transitions, married to a preternatural ability to concentrate on the minutia of the task at hand."

The Asperger's spectrum ranges from people barely more abstracted than a stereotypical "absent-minded professor" to the full-blown, albeit highly functioning, autistic. Symptoms of Asperger's have been attributed ex post facto to successful figures, but these are the fortunate ones—persons able to invent outlets for their ever-welling monomanias. Many are not so lucky, and some end up institutionalized or homeless. (In the late nineteen-seventies, I saw a ragged, haunted man who spent urgent hours dodging the New York transit police to trace the dates and lineage of the Hapsburg nobility on the walls of subway stations.) For some—record collectors with every catalogue number at hand, theatre buffs with first-night casts memorized, children who draw precise architectural blueprints of nineteenth-century silk mills—a cluster of facts can be both luminous and lyric, something around which to construct a life.

We are informally referred to as "Aspies," and if we are not very, very good at something we tend to do it very poorly. Little in life comes naturally—except for our random, inexplicable, and often uncontrollable gifts—and, even more than most children, we assemble our personalities unevenly, piece by piece, almost robotically, from models we admire. (I remember the deliberate decision to appropriate one teacher's mischievous grin and darting eyes, which I found so charming that I thought they might work for me, too.)

So preoccupied are we with our inner imperatives that the outer world may overwhelm and confuse. What anguished pity I used to feel for piñatas at birthday parties, those papier-mâché donkeys with their amiable smiles about to be shattered by little brutes with bats. On at least one occasion, I begged for a stay of execution and eventually had to be taken home, weeping, convinced that I had just witnessed the braining of a new and sympathetic acquaintance.

Caring for inanimate objects came easily. Learning to make genuine connections with people—much as I desperately wanted them—was a bewildering process. I felt like an alien, always about to be exposed. Or, to adapt another hoary but useful analogy, not only did I not see the forest for the trees; I was so intensely distracted that I missed the trees for the species of lichen on their bark.

My first and most powerful obsession was music—the same records played again and again while I watched them spin, astonished at their evocation of aural worlds that I not only instinctively understood even as a toddler but in which I actually felt comfortable. I was both terrified of and tantalized by death (which was absolutely real to me from earliest childhood), and by the way recordings restored Enrico Caruso and Nellie Melba to life for a few minutes, ghostly visitors who had returned to sing for me at 78 r.p.m., through a hiss of shellac and antiquity.

When I was ten, I became fascinated by silent films, the visual complement to my old records. I spent hours at the library of the University of Connecticut, a few minutes' walk from home, researching the lives of actors and actresses on microfilm, and recall the genuine sense of mourning that came over me when I saw Barbara La Marr's sad, youthful face on an obituary page from 1926. Not surprisingly, "Sunset Boulevard" was my favorite "talkie" (I actually called them that—in 1965!), and I'd regularly set the alarm and wake in the middle of the night to watch Chester Conklin or Louise Dresser take on minor roles in some B movie that the Worcester, Massachusetts, UHF station put on when nobody else was watching.

"I despise the Beatles and their ilk," this remarkably Blimpish young man proclaimed in a school paper shortly after the first Ed Sullivan show, when other boys my age were growing their hair long and learning to play the guitar. My favorite pop musician then was the Scottish comedian Harry Lauder, a star in vaudeville and music halls at the beginning of the last century, who told obscure jokes in brogue and sang through exaggerated hiccups in a state of pretend intoxication. The depth of my admiration for Lauder now baffles me as much as the steady diet of horehound drops I adopted as snack food, or my insistence, much of one autumn, that I wear a rabbit's foot in each buttonhole of my shirt, which I kept tightly fastened up to the neck. But nobody could have persuaded me to abandon these quirks, and any attempt to do so would have been taken as a physical threat and reduced me to hysteria.

A friend published a sweet autobiography entitled "Thank You, Everyone," in which she expressed gratitude to everybody who had influenced her, ranging from Woody Allen to my sister Betsy. If I were to create a similar book, I would call it "Sorry, Everyone," and apologize for my youthful cluelessness: To the girl in seventh grade with the protruding jawbone (it never occurred to me that she would not share my enthusiasm for her unusually simian features). To the boy who came over to my house in the middle of my Caruso phase and endured a precious weekend afternoon comparing recordings of "Celeste Aida." To the perplexed young women from early adolescence who might have become lovers had I understood that their sudden friendship and proximity had any sort of physical impetus. Instead, I chattered on about this and that, rarely making eye contact, and soon they vanished, in search of more game and grounded potential partners. Sorry, everyone. I didn't understand.

It was hard for me to be touched. I froze when I was hugged by anybody who was not a relative, and I made love like the Tin Man until I was well into adulthood. Like many children before and since, I recoiled when fundamental facts about the reproduction of the species were explained to me (there was, typically for the time and the place, no suggestion that new pleasures might be involved, and the physical act, examined through an anxious, pre-sexual eye, sounded bizarre). Shortly after this enlightenment, my parents threw a party, attended by their closest friends. I watched their athletic, fortyish bodies, properly clothed, in mortified amazement, and then took a recount of their children. Oh, my God, I thought. They did *that* three times!

Anything related to the human body seemed to me bad news. In the fourth grade, when my affliction was most intense, I would be herded out to play kickball during our physical-education classes. Teams were chosen, and I was embedded among the strongest kids, to provide some chance of even battle. In memory, it is forever bases loaded with two outs when my turn at the plate comes, and I am as well suited as a giraffe to meet the big red ball that rolls toward me with frightening speed.

Still, for a moment the same people who generally disdained or bullied me became my friends, cheering me on to hitherto unsuspected athletic glory: "You can do it, Tim!" If I could make the ball lose its gravity, as my best pal, Annie, did so effortlessly with those balletic *whomps* from her long legs, I might redeem myself. Our gym teacher, Miss B.—scowling, beefy, and, after four decades, the only person in the world I just might swerve to hit on a deserted road—had no such illusions and waited for the inevitable, with her festering contempt and ready whistle. Grinning stupidly, shirttail out and flapping, underwear pulled halfway up my back, I would lope toward the ball, which would eventually collide with my ankle or heel and then bounce off into the woods or into the waiting arms of the catcher. My chance was up, and I was a freak once more.

"So?" I wanted to scream. "There are things that I *know*; things that I can *do*."

Can you name the duet from *La Bohème* that Antonio Scotti and Geraldine Farrar recorded in Camden, New Jersey, on October 6, 1909? What was the New York address of D. W. Griffith's first studio? How many books by *David Graham Phillips* have you read? Who was *Adelaide Crapsey*? I learned to play the entire Chopin Prelude in E Minor in a single night!" And then tears, of course, and the taunts redoubled.

The class work, hardly less humiliating, was at least more private. If I wasn't deeply interested in a subject, I couldn't concentrate on it at all—those dreadful algebra classes, those Bunsen burners, the mystifying and now deservedly extinct slide rule! Late in each semester, when it became obvious to me that I had no idea what I was supposed to have

learned, I'd attend some makeup classes and try desperately to pay attention. As the teacher rattled on, I would grind my teeth, twirl the tops of my socks around my index finger—once I poked myself repeatedly through my pocket with a pin—anything to keep my mind engaged. But it was impossible: a leaf would fall outside the open window, or I'd notice the pattern of the veins on a girl's hand, or a shout from the playground would trigger a set of irresistible associations that carried me back to another day.

And then the dream was ruptured by the sound of a bell; the class was irrevocably over, and I knew no more about quadratic equations or beryllium than I did an hour before. Failure was now assured, and the countdown began to the Dies Irae, when my report card would land me in trouble again, for my father was incredulous that a boy who blithely recited the names and dates of the United States' Presidents and their wives couldn't manage to pass elementary math and science. I grew enormously fond of my father in later life, but he terrified me then. He lived until 2005, long enough to recognize, through my diagnosis, some of the problems that had vexed him throughout his own career and, better yet, to know and delight in my three children, to whom he showed a serene gentleness.

My grades, always disastrous, only worsened as I grew older and more was expected of me. Nevertheless, by the age of twelve I was able to storm through idiosyncratic renditions of most of the easier Chopin pieces and of the simpler passages in his larger works. That was also the year that I finished my first novel—fifty pages of it, filled with a narrative invention that I've never been able to recapture. The manuscript was lost long ago, but I do recall that I killed off my central character, a cat, by having him eat “badly prepared fish.” I am still in possession of a school report on “Making a Living in the Amazon,” which we had been required to work on for a week. My contribution read, in its entirety, “In the dense, rainy, rain forest, it is hard to make a living. One way is fishing in the river that is from a mile wide to a 100 miles wide. Brazil nut collecting is another way. You can gather manioc. You are very limited as to what to do for a living in the Amazon rain forest.”

By way of comparison, here is the beginning of a twenty-five-hundred-word story that I wrote the same month, typing it on my father's gray oversized IBM electric in a single evening:

Nobody knew why the rain had not stopped. The weather report had said four in ten for light showers in the early morning. But here it was: 5 o'clock. And it was pouring.

There was nothing to stop Lady Lieg from leaving the library. She had all the equipment, a fold-up umbrella, galoshes, etcetera and so on. But there was this book on Alla Nazimova that just begged to be taken. How could she resist it?

How indeed? In no way am I making a case that I possessed any innate talent for fiction (although it took a certain prescience to hypothesize a biography of Nazimova some thirty years before Gavin Lambert's volume was published). But, amid the usual obfuscating data, there are flashes of verisimilitude and understanding, all of which was new to me. By then, I had discovered Maugham, and Hemingway, and Camus, and had begun to trace in literature some emotional pathways that would fulfill me infinitely more than the road map of a Connecticut town.

**O**ddly, the book that helped pull me into the human race was Emily Post's “Etiquette,” which I had picked up in a moment of early-teen hippie scorn, fully intending to mock what I was sure would be an “uncool” justification of bourgeois rules and regulations. Instead, the book offered clearly stated reasons for courtesy, gentility, and scrupulousness—reasons that I could respect, understand, and implement. It suggested ways to inaugurate conversations without launching into a lecture, reminded me of the importance of listening as well as speaking, and convinced me that manners, properly understood, existed to make other people feel comfortable, rather than (as I had suspected) to demonstrate the practitioner's social superiority. I revelled in Post's guidance and absorbed her lessons. And, typically, I took them too far: even today, I would never dream of addressing a teen-age busboy in a small-town diner as anything other than “sir.”

I found Emily Post among my mother's paperbacks, but most of the books I read came from the UConn library, where I was always made to feel at home, even in high rabbit's-foot regalia. Every room held treasures, but my favorite spot was the listening station at the Music Library, where, one blessed afternoon, I put on some bulbous headphones that made me look like Mickey Mouse and heard the prelude to “Das Rheingold” for the first time.

The word that year was “psychedelic,” and I had no idea what it meant, although I had gleaned that “Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band,” Peter Max posters, certain novels by Hermann Hesse, and the whole city of San Francisco were awash in this new and magical quality. And then Wagner's depiction of the River Rhine started to play and a flowering drone filled my head; time was suspended, and I was transformed.

Much has been made of Wagner's harmonic restlessness—of the way that a work such as “Tristan und Isolde” led inexorably to the so-called “atonality” of Arnold Schoenberg and his myriad disciples. But what astonished me in “Das Rheingold,” although I couldn't have stated it then, was the opposite quality: the opera's unprecedented harmonic stasis, the manner in which it explored the churning inner life of sustained chords, from the three amazing minutes of E-Flat Major that set the score in motion through the affirmation of the Gods, Valhalla, and the eternal D-Flat Major at the end.

This was music that one could dwell in, a sort of sonic weather. I loved its resistance to change, its protracted unfolding, its mantric sense of perpetual return. A large part of my career has been devoted to writing about music, and I date my first more or less mature criticism to the world premiere of another composition that shared some of these same qualities, Steve Reich's “Music For 18 Musicians,” which I heard in New York, at the Town Hall, in April of 1976.

I arrived back at my Third Avenue walkup, knowing that I'd never fall asleep, with an urgent need to react to the work. What I had heard struck me as so beautiful and unusual, so distinctly of its time but in such radical opposition to most “new music” of the seventies, that I wrote through the night, attempting to summarize my impressions. Five years later, I published a study of what by then had come to be known as minimalism, and it incorporated some of what I wrote that night:

Minerva-like, the music springs to life fully formed—from dead silence to fever pitch. . . . Imagine concentrating on a challenging modern painting that becomes just a little different every time you shift your attention from one detail to another. Or trying to impose a frame on a running river—making it a finite, enclosed work of art yet leaving its kinetic quality unswayed, leaving it flowing freely on all sides. It has been done. Steve Reich has framed the river.

Today, I find myself wondering if I would have responded so profoundly to this starkly reiterative, rigidly patterned music had I not had Asperger's syndrome. This is not an aesthetic cop-out: I can make an intellectual case for minimalism, and I am hardly the only writer who has done so. But its initial appeal for me was purely visceral. As the Quakers might say, this music spoke to my condition. (I would later experience a similar, curiously mechanical limbic ecstasy upon a first encounter with “Last Year at Marienbad.”)

**I**t was never difficult for me to articulate my feelings about anything external. I've rarely run short of opinions, well founded or otherwise. But deeper emotions reduced me (and, to some extent, reduce me still) to aching silence, especially when I feared that I would be exposed, misunderstood, or ridiculed. I empathized with Rostand's Cyrano (a serious rival to Ferdinand the Bull in my private pantheon of literary heroes), who was too terrified to utter the crucial words to the woman he loved. I suffer little stage fright when it comes to public speaking or appearances on radio or television, but I continue to find unstructured participation in small social gatherings agonizing. It would be easier for me to improvise an epic poem at a sold-out Yankee Stadium than to approach an attractive stranger across the room and strike up a conversation.

Falling in love surprised me; I had never imagined sustained contentment, and certainly not in the company of another person. Yet here it was: even making the bed together in the morning, an act that had hitherto struck me as Sisyphean, took on meaning, as the prelude to another gloriously ordinary day, to be followed by tea, the newspapers, a couple hours of work, and then lunch in the neighborhood. While it lasted, everything was enhanced; I just wish this were the time and place to write that first happy ending.

The fact that my understanding of affection, comradeship, and human empathy has been hard-won rather than being wired in from the start does not make these feelings less genuine. I am still friends with most of the people I was friends with thirty years ago, and I worry about them daily (here I concur with Virgil Thomson, who once said that worry was one form of prayer that he found acceptable). My intimates, new and old, are permanent fixtures in my experience, and that some of them—too many—are no longer living has not diminished my devotion.

I've transcended Lauder and horehounds, and my passions range widely, if spottily, through any number of fields. Laughter, meditation, therapy, Valium, antidepressants, liberal helpings of wine and beer, loyal and patient friends, forgiving children, a congenial work situation that allows me to spend much of my time alone—all these have helped me to carry on. Overstimulation remains a positive horror, and I am most comfortable in dark or neutral clothing, under gray skies. I thrive on routines: I like to walk into the same restaurants, sit in the same seats, and order the same meals, and I took it personally when the PanAm Building started passing itself off as MetLife.

There is no cure for Asperger's syndrome, and there is even some question whether it should be considered an affliction or merely a “difference”—one of many human variants. The reporter Amy Harmon wrote in the *Times*

that some autistics view themselves as part of “an ad hoc human rights movement,” and view autism itself as “an integral part of their identities, much more like a skin than a shell, and not one they care to shed.” A group called Aspies for Freedom runs a Web site that celebrates what it calls “neurodiversity,” arguing that there are advantages as well as

disadvantages in an autistic condition.

I apply Romain Rolland's practical credo—"pessimism of the intelligence; optimism of the will"—to my aspirations, but I cannot pretend that Asperger's has not made much of my existence miserable and isolated (how *will*

I get to sleep tonight?). I hope that young Aspies, informed by recent literature on the subject, will find the world somewhat less challenging than I have.

By now, I am fairly used to myself, and my symptoms bloom publicly only on rare occasions. Waiting for the check after a Washington lunch in 2005, I realized that it was both the hundred and fortieth anniversary of Lincoln's assassination and exactly forty years since the murderers of the Clutter family ("In Cold Blood") were put to death in Kansas. I doubt that my companion was equally thrilled by this coincidence, especially when elaborated upon in such sudden, bursting detail in the middle of a lovely spring day, but at least I controlled the temptation to launch into a lengthy exculpation of Mrs. Surratt. I count that as progress. ♦

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