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Warrior for the word

Camille Paglia slams bloggers and trendy academics for degrading language -- and calls for a passionate revival of the great artistic tradition of the West.

By Kerry Lauerman



April 7, 2005 | [Camille Paglia's](#) first major work since "Sexual Personae," the 1990 bestseller that cracked a bullwhip over the heads of dogmatic feminists and a p.c. academe and turned its author into our favorite provocateur, appears, at first glance, to be a surprisingly demure offering. "[Break, Blow, Burn: Camille Paglia Reads 43 of the World's Best Poems](#)," in fact, was almost titled something as modest as "Readings"; she says she didn't want anything to overshadow the poems (from Shakespeare to Plath) that she chose to honor.

But, true to Paglia's form, there's an incendiary call to arms inside "Break, Blow, Burn" (a phrase taken from John Donne's "Holy Sonnet XIV"). Her celebration of these poems -- each reprinted and electrically interpreted -- is paired with a blistering critique of what she sees as the cultural and academic forces that have conspired to undermine our enjoyment of poetry, lessening its importance in the process. She demands reform and believes it will be up to graduate students and poets themselves to lead the way. "In an era ruled by materialism and unstable geopolitics, art must be restored to the center of public education," she writes.

We caught up with Paglia, a founding Salon contributor, as she commenced her book tour. Our talk covered a range of topics, from lazy college elites, poets who didn't make her cut (sorry, Ginsberg, Bishop, Eliot, Ashbery) to raising a son while refusing to act like Rosie O'Donnell.

This is your first big book since "Sexual Personae."

Well, there was my 1998 book on Alfred Hitchcock's film "The Birds." And I did always write original

material within my two essay collections. But writing requires time, and I do give it time. This one took an exorbitant amount of time, to the extent that, as you know, I had to resign as a columnist from Salon to work on "Break, Blow, Burn." The problem really wasn't the time required to write the column. It was the amount of filtering I had to do of other people's columns to keep the Salon column fresh.

And you had to absorb a lot of it. I mean, a week like this -- Terri Schiavo, the pope -- would have been tough.

Yes, exactly. And of course I was always in competition with the other big-name columnists -- who would shamelessly rob from me. You know, it's like I would be in Salon on Thursday, and something from it would show up in Maureen Dowd's weekend column, and so on. But I had to make sure that when people went to it that it didn't just seem to be a rehash of someone else's column. And that's the problem now, of course. I'm a professor of media studies as well as humanities, and I'm an evangelist of popular culture, but when there's only media, then there's going to be a slow debasement of language, and that's what I think we're fighting.

The blogs, for example, are becoming so self-referential. If people want to be better writers, they can't just read the blogs! You've got to look at something that's outside this rushing world of evanescent words. Nowhere in blog pages does anyone pay attention to the individual word -- things are moving too fast. Someone like Emily Dickinson was working with the dictionary and looking at the etymology of the word, so that you have all this tremendous stuff going on within a *single* word!

My publisher forwarded this [amusing thing](#) from Gawker.com the other day -- it was reporting on the review of my book in the New York Times Book Review. It really was quite revealing. It was written by a young woman who said she was a recent graduate of Yale. And she said that as she was reading that long, three-page review by Clive James, her eyes glazed over because it was about poetry. And I thought, Oh, my God -- if this isn't a testament to what's gone wrong in the Ivy League!

Here you have a smart young aspiring writer who's saying that somehow she has not been educated in a way that allows her to appreciate poetry. She's never been shown that you can become a better prose writer through reading poetry. I certainly derived my skills as a prose writer from my scrutiny of poetry and of the individual word. But schools don't do things like that anymore -- tracking words down to their roots. It's *hopelessly* old-fashioned. But that's the whole basis of the power of English as a literary language.

I say in my introduction that I'm in love with English -- it's a phenomenal instrument. People who like my work recognize that I have many styles as a writer -- the high academic style, the newspaper style, the conversational style. My sense of English comes from the fact that I was born into an Italian immigrant family which was still discovering America.

I read where you said you tried to make yourself as invisible as possible for this book. To most of your readers, the idea of rendering yourself invisible sounds like quite a feat.

I felt it was important that I submerge myself because in the four-year period from "Sexual Personae" to "Vamps & Tramps" in the early '90s I had as much publicity as any person could ever want. You have to remember, my first book wasn't published until I was 43, and that book had been rejected by seven publishers and five agents. I came on the scene without any publicity. But when "Sexual Personae" started to get publicity, which was almost a year later after it was published, it started to get viciously attacked. And I counterattacked!

And so there was a period there -- when I had three bestselling paperback books from Vintage in a row -- that represented a whole uprising by a very repressed wing of feminism. When my work was criticized, people went: "Oh, she's antifeminist! She's a neocon." For heaven's sakes -- I had just voted for Jesse Jackson in the 1988 primary! An insurgency was going on -- a major conflict with smug and self-satisfied and exploitative feminist leaders. We were just coming out of the era ruled by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, and

so I was in battle for years. But that was it -- after 1994, I went back to my usual private ways. People say, "She's everywhere!" But I'm not -- it just seems that way because of the Web and the many documentaries I've been interviewed for.

When you were doing this book, it's clear you felt you needed to ratchet back that persona.

Yes, because it's irrelevant to this book. The people who were really reading me seriously would recognize the real me -- I'm a classroom teacher, and I've never changed my lifestyle. People nagged me: "Oh, you should quit that job." Are you kidding? This is my vocation! And I never let media into my classroom, ever. And because I never let any reporters into my classes (and they were demanding it), that professional life has remained invisible. Some people think I must be some sort of a flibbertigibbet, running around the world in front of cameras. But if film crews want to interview me, they must come to Philadelphia and meet me after my classes are over for the day. That's my life, and it will continue to be my life.

Though you have had one major personal development in your life while writing this book -- I've heard you've become a mother of a young boy. There's advice of your own that I wonder if you've heeded: "Every man must define his identity against his mother. If he does not, he just falls back into her and is swallowed up."

My partner of 12 years, Alison Maddex, gave birth to a baby boy in November 2002 -- Lucien Harry Maddex. I am Lucien's adoptive parent -- but certainly NOT his mother! Alison is Lucien's one and only mother. That "Heather Has Two Mommies" business gives me the creeps! -- and it can only confuse a kid.

I'm completely against that two fathers, two mothers stuff. I think it's gay activism gone horribly awry -- people making political points without regard for a child's realistic social and developmental needs.

I kept Lucien's birth completely out of the public eye because I absolutely detest the circus that Rosie O'Donnell made of her children. Kids should not be subjected to the glare of the spotlight. However, now that I'm back in public after the five years of writing this book, it's perfectly legitimate information.

Going back to "Sexual Personae" for a minute, and that battle with the feminist establishment. What's happening with that now, would you say?

It's over. It's completely over. I won that war! -- or rather, the wing of feminism that I led into the light won the war. Madonna made it possible. In New York magazine's cover story on me in 1991, it was reported that a Yale faculty member had marched with her graduate student in New Haven to return "Sexual Personae" because it was "ideologically unacceptable." A Yale faculty member would return a 700-page Yale Press book by a woman author on the basis of its not passing some p.c. litmus test -- that shows you what was going on!

But things have changed -- at least in the media. The media has moved on, the media has realized that the pro-sex side has won, and it has seen all the anti-porn maniacs as what they are -- fanatical Puritans. When it did a profile on me in 1992, "60 Minutes" sent a woman producer and a camera to the 92nd Street Y when Gloria Steinem was appearing on a panel. The producer stood up at the end and asked a question about me. And they caught Gloria Steinem saying something like, "We don't give a *damn* what she thinks!" -- at which the audience loudly applauded. They caught her and her entire Manhattan elite in action. But then Steinem learned, once she'd been burned, so that a year later she was saying things about me like, "She has a right to express whatever she feels."

Still, I was systematically excluded and ostracized. When Vanity Fair did a cultural-icons issue a little later, they asked to photograph Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and me together -- like the different generations. But Steinem refused to pose with me! So Vanity Fair had an inspired solution -- it simply commissioned a full-page caricature. What great revenge -- there were the three of us, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and me, posing amicably together in cartoon form!

The point is, this hostility to dissent had been going on for decades in feminism. If they were doing that repressive stuff to *me* with a bestselling book, what were they doing to ordinary women just trying to open their mouths? So it's great that my side has won so resoundingly. However, the universities are still in the hands of the feminist ideologues. Nothing has changed at the major universities, nothing. The same professors are there, but they're really mad now because they know they've lost! So over the last decade, they've spent a lot of time trying to be me!

They made contracts with trade presses. They wrote Op-Ed pieces. Before me, only poli-sci or history professors would write Op-Ed pieces. You just didn't do that if you were in humanities. In the early '90s, some Harvard woman snob actually said to a reporter about me: "Oh, we don't consider anyone serious who writes articles for the newspaper." That's where things were back then. They all tried to write books directed toward a general audience, and none really succeeded until Stephen Greenblatt's [book on Shakespeare](#) -- which as far as I'm concerned is ultimately a product of my pressure on the profession in the early '90s, when I called for literary critics to address the general audience.

As someone who teaches Shakespeare, however, I don't think it's a very good book, even though the New Yorker and the New York Times laid down flat in front of it. Greenblatt's Shakespeare isn't one I recognize from my own study of the plays, and the connections posited between the life and the art aren't particularly sophisticated. The TLS [Times Literary Supplement] reviewer wrote that Greenblatt is "innocent of English history," which of course is just a devastating thing to say about the leader of new historicism whose specialty is Renaissance England and who is head of the Norton Shakespeare editions. But too many books coming out of the Ivy League tend toward the trendy and shallow -- even though the New York media eats them up.

They do get great press. Why?

It's media sycophancy toward the brand-name schools. Because a lot of reporters in the mainstream media went to those schools and want their children to go to those schools, they don't want to disrupt their brand-name value. The alternative press has been completely, cowardly negligent, including the Nation. The leftist press has been out to lunch on this for 25 years -- it's outrageous that this matter hasn't been vigorously pursued. Because these academics mouth leftist sentiments -- even though their lifestyles are ones of ostentatious materialism -- the alternative press has been afraid to appear to take the side of the conservatives who have justifiably been berating the politicization of the campus since the '80s.

Come on, let's look at reality. What important, essential works have come out of American humanities departments in the last 30 or 40 years? The important book just isn't there. Where is the great American scholar that poststructuralism has produced? When Harold Bloom goes, he's the last of the line. These people aren't great scholars -- they have no deep erudition. They just do gimmicky manipulations of other people's research. The people at the top with the power positions and the huge salaries are flashes in the pan -- their work isn't going to last.

Like who, precisely? Henry Louis Gates is frequently mentioned as among the new public intellectual...

Gates is a pivotal figure, a very shrewd handler of people. He knew how to work college administrations to guilt-trip them for their exclusion of African-American studies and thereby to win a huge investment of money for the expansion of faculty and facilities. He put African-American programs on the map. But as a group they still do not have a high reputation because so many of them are rife with ideology. Beyond that, the problem is there are too few African-American scholars to go around -- everyone wants them. There are simply not enough who have entered the profession. Thus many schools have had to reach further and further down and hire people who are really marginal in scholarly terms.

Look at the [Ward Churchill case](#), this guy who was the chairman of the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of Colorado at Boulder and who didn't even have a Ph.D. He had absolutely no scholarly training in

anthropology or in anything in ethnic studies -- his M.A. was in communications. He had no business being rocketed to a tenured position literally overnight in the early '90s, when he had just been teaching adjunct courses as a staffer there. All of a sudden, he was earning \$94,000 a year. There's something deeply corrupt in American academe that was rewarding, in this case, not the color of your skin but a claimed Indian heritage that Churchill can't prove -- and that one American Indian group long ago called fraudulent.

The whole American academic system -- which Europeans can't quite understand -- is shot through with this p.c. stuff that administrations are promoting. It's a marketing tool. "We are for affirmative action, we're for diversity, we give a rainbow education." And so there's been a slow decline in respect for genuine scholarship. Gates' department hasn't yet produced as much high-level work as it should have, but I'm confident that it *will* because it is grooming the next generation of young scholars. They will presumably fan out into the profession, and then we will see the true fruits of what Gates achieved.

Cornel West, an early Gates' recruit at Harvard who has now left, is someone mentioned with you as an academic interested in engaging in popular culture.

Well, Cornel West is definitely a major American public intellectual. He and I are certainly parallel phenomena. We emerged strongly in the '90s. We have a wide range of interests from popular culture to traditional scholarship and philosophy. We are entertaining presences on the lecture circuit; we are performers -- on TV as well. I myself have questions about Cornel West's work.

His rap album?

No, the rap album doesn't bother me in the slightest -- I like the idea. But I've sometimes noticed what I feel is too big a gap between the writing of his major books and writing I see him doing elsewhere. I sometimes wonder how much editing has been done of his best work -- even before it got to the publisher. I've occasionally seen in articles by him a kind of hasty, careless, demagogic, nearly ungrammatical use of language and a pretentious, jumbled jargon that I find peculiar compared to the lean, finely honed writing of his most acclaimed work.

My work is never edited in that sense. My excellent editor will make a suggestion or a request here and there, but there is never wholesale rewriting or reorganization of my prose or alteration of my voice. What you're getting from me is entirely my work.

Another thing that I object to, and the media seems to really ignore, is how many books by prominent academics have been supported by graduate assistants and research assistants, often paid for by the university itself. They're the ones doing all the book-running: checking quotes, accumulating examples, assembling the footnotes and bibliography.

As a scholar, I can see it in people's work from major universities. I can tell who are the professors who actually did the reading and gathered the quotes, as opposed to people who are so busy running this or that and exercising academic power that they have to have examples and evidence supplied to them. And what gets me is when a reviewer says in awe, "This is a very erudite person -- there are so many pages of footnotes!" I want to laugh! Well, pages and pages of footnotes in the back of a general interest humanities book usually indicates weakness. You don't need all that if your scholarship is solid. And the idea that the trendy professors of the elite schools have actually *read* all those books is usually false. Not only haven't they read them, they haven't even gone to the library to get them.

I have no research or clerical assistance whatever. I teach at a small college where I must do every single thing myself. But that is what, I believe, that sympathetic readers are sensing: quality control.

West, of course, left after an infamous blowup with [Harvard University president Lawrence] Summers. What have you thought of the controversy up there?

What many observers felt about the Cornel West incident was that Cornel West was so used to being pampered, idolized and coddled that to have any aspect of his academic performance questioned came as a mortal blow. It's pretty obvious that Lawrence Summers has very few people skills and that he is not suited to be the president of a major university. You have to bring groups together; you can't be a person who divides groups from each other. But I am sympathetic to Summers' desire to insert some reality into the knee-jerk, monolithic, Jurassic Park liberalism that passes for political thinking at that university. Talk about diversity -- there's hardly a conservative or dissident voice at that place. It's bad for the faculty, it's bad for the students, it makes a travesty of Harvard's claims of education -- which students are bankrupting their families to pay for.

I think that affirmative action in the way it has been applied *does* need to be questioned, but not in this ham-handed way. The issue that Summers is broaching in the most recent incident, whether there are genetic sex differences, is an enormously important one for academe to address. But for 30 years, the social-constructionist dogma has become entrenched in humanities departments from coast to coast. That's why, when "Sexual Personae" came on the scene, people went ballistic. They weren't used to hearing anything about nature. And they were saying, "Oh, she's an essentialist. She's using the no-no word 'nature.'" But I said that sex is the "intricate intersection of nature and culture," so it's a combination of the two.

But you have people who are getting enormous salaries for being gender-studies experts who have never studied biology or endocrinology, who know nothing about hormones. They're ignoramuses. Where the hell are they getting off saying that we're born blank slates and become male or female only through society's pressures -- what is this crap that they're teaching? But it's absolutely routine.

To open this debate is crucial, since there are very few dissident voices discussing this issue in the humanities. But Summers seems to be a dope. I applaud him for raising the subject -- the question of biology and its relation to gender. But I have to condemn him for his unscholarly approach to this matter and the sloppy way he handled it.

I wanted to know if there was a particular poet you were really excited to put in this anthology, who you felt never got the right amount of critical attention. Throughout the book, you mention how poststructuralist theory has managed to diminish essential poetry.

Well, yes, the Roethke poems. I can't remember the last time I heard his name mentioned anywhere. "Cuttings" and "Root Cellar" are about *dirt*! They're about the body and the body's responses. That's what has been totally excluded from poststructuralism, because poststructuralism sees the body as a passive victim to the forces of power "inscribing" their agenda on us. Poststructuralism is stupidly oblivious to the relationship between the body and nature -- our bodies are subsets of nature, not society. It should be rather obvious, but no. The body-centered approach, the speech-centered approach, to poetry was from the '60s, my era. It was partly coming from the Beats. For some reason it has been dissipated. I thought it would be a revolution in American culture.

The primary reason was drugs; the people most impacted by this radical view of life were destroyed by drugs. The solid academic poets just churned along, drinking alcohol, but everyone else was brain-dead. So it thrilled me to see Roethke depicted in the wonderful illustration accompanying my review in New York Times Book Review. Then when Matt Drudge put the picture up on the Drudge Report, I thought, "Hooray! This is Roethke's first appearance on a major news Web site!" My college teacher Milton Kessler was a graduate student of Roethke's at the University of Washington. I feel a particular thrill about that, because I believe in lineage, you see. This wonderful lineage -- it goes from Roethke to Kessler to me -- and from me to the young people who will read "Break, Blow, Burn." You never know who's going to be inspired.

It's like the movie "The Turning Point" when the old teacher says to the aging ballerina played by Anne Bancroft, "You are passé. You must be a teacher now. I learned from the great so-and-so in Russia. I passed it on to you, and now you must pass it on to her!" -- the ditsy young dancer who has to be waved away from the

pastries. I just love that idea of lineage and transmission from generation to generation -- and those connections are precisely what I think have been broken in the domination of French theory in the last 30 years.

Right, because even though this book might not be as immediately, obviously contentious as "Sexual Personae," it's a shot across the bow of the academy.

Oh, yes, and I'm also trying to inspire an insurgency movement of embattled teachers everywhere. I want to say to the adjuncts who are working so hard, going from school to school, without benefits: Your love of literature and art and your teaching students who are not going to be big-shot Manhattan executives but who are just going about their workaday lives -- you belong to a real American cultural movement, and here's a manifesto for you. The way you approach things directly and honestly, that too is a theory! All these people who claim to be so superior to you because they "do" theory -- they're fakes. And they've destroyed the prestige of humanities departments.

You are trying to pass this on to the adjuncts, the grad students. But you've also mentioned that the poets should do this themselves. How can they do that in a culture where the poetry that does exist comes out through pop music, hip-hop. How do the poets assert themselves?

Well, first of all, they better stop talking just to each other in those small groups of the like-minded. I used to like John Ashbery, for example, but he got addicted to critical adulation. Too many people want academic idolization. They want the prizes. I want the poets and all artists to address the general audience again: Stop addressing the like-minded true believers, cut out the partisan politics, stop thinking that the only people you can speak to are those who agree with you already. Writers and artists need to start addressing those who don't agree with them.

That's certainly what I do. I've won a very wide audience in that way. I listen to or monitor a huge range of opinion, including on talk radio, which I love. I want to understand how most people think! That's why I can communicate with large numbers of people. What's the secret? The secret is I cannot stand the coterie mentality, whether it's in downtown Manhattan or in Cambridge, Massachusetts, or in L.A. I cannot stand the cool in-group -- "We are the special people, we are the best people, everyone else is just rubes and hayseeds." Get over that! People who claim they're leftists and who have contempt for ordinary people and how they vote. I voted for Kerry and Clinton, but I don't look down on people who voted for Bush. I try to understand it.

The most recent poem in your book is the last one, Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock." Is there anyone more current who you look at and say, "There's a poet"?

No.

But hasn't there been a true revival of the spoken word since then? In rap and hip-hop...

Rap is not transferring well to the page -- though if I ever write a book on song lyrics, rap would certainly be in it. To get into this book, the lyrics had to transfer well. I invented this course at my school for musicians to develop their lyrics. I often would be disappointed when I would transfer lyrics from my favorite songs onto the page. My criterion for this book was that there has to be a kind of shapeliness to what a poem looks like on the page; there has to be a kind of visual that the reader gets. None of the arts are separate for me: They all feed each other. Visual arts, literary arts and music -- they're all mixed together for me. I think we've kind of lost that sense that there's a pleasure at looking at something on the page. For a poem to survive the cut in my book, it had to be pleasing every time I returned to it. Every time I went back to it, I had to see a visual vitality, I had to be drawn into it visually -- not just in terms of the content.

The controversial thing in the book is that many of the contemporary choices are completely unknown. I did not anticipate that when I started doing the book. The most famous poets of our time were listed in the original

proposal for the book given the publisher, but when I actually gathered the material, I did not find the strong poems I was looking for.

Is there anyone you're surprised did not make the cut?

A whole series. Poets I heard reading in college who I thought would naturally be here -- A.R. Ammons, W.D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, John Ashbery, James Merrill -- just name after name. I couldn't get Ginsberg in, unfortunately; what I would have had to do was excerpt "Howl," and I just didn't think it was going to work. Auden -- I found virtually nothing that would work, and it astonished me. I didn't find an Auden poem that I felt I could endorse for the general reader and say, This poem will repay your constant rereading. Example after example -- Marianne Moore, Gwendolyn Brooks, Denise Levertov. I was looking for sports poems, animal poems, war poems, antiwar poems. I was bitterly disappointed.

At the end of the introduction, you write: "I am uncertain about whether the West's chaotic personalism can prevail against the totalizing creeds that menace it. Hence it is critical that we reinforce the spiritual values of Western art, however we define them." It has a markedly a different note than "Sexual Personae," which is largely celebratory and optimistic about Western culture.

But no, actually. "Sexual Personae" is about decadence! -- the beautiful decadence of Western civilization. There I say I am a decadent, and I celebrate it, but I don't know how long the West is going to last. If our popular culture is equivalent to Hellenistic culture during the Roman republic and empire, I have no idea if we are going to last 50 years or 500 years. But there is no doubt that there is an end to every civilization, whether it's from some climatological disaster or invasion or something else. I mean, last December's tsunami showed everyone that my vision in "Sexual Personae" of nature was right -- that we just huddle here on the thin, brittle skin of the globe. Civilizations rise and fall. I'm saying it's time for us to reassess our conceptions of the West. In all its failings, the West has produced a great art tradition.

So I'm saying to the left: Stop bad-mouthing your own civilization; get over it, you little twerps. I'm saying to the religious far right: If we are defending Western civilization, as you claimed in the incursion into Iraq, then you'd better realize it's much more than Judeo-Christianity and the Bible. You'd better get real and accept that we have a Greco-Roman tradition of literature and art that started in 700 BC. And yes, some of it deals, quite frankly, with sex and the body; you must deal with it and allow students to deal with it, because that is part of the brilliant strength of our arts. I'm demanding that conservatives support the arts and that liberals stop being so snobby about art and quit celebrating art that is simply cheap sacrilege of other people's beliefs.

Artists have got to get back to studying art history and doing emotionally engaged art. Get over that tired postmodern cynical irony and hip posing, which is such an affliction in the downtown urban elite. We need an artistic and cultural revival. Back to basics!

About the writer

[Kerry Lauerman](#) is Salon's New York editorial director.

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