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## NATHANAEEL WEST AND THE MYSTERY OF FEELING

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But "men" are undoubtedly, to a greater or less extent, machines. And there are those amongst us who are revolted by this reflection, and there are those who are not.

—Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art*

Surely even within the vision of the human body as a machine, it is not a machine the way the *machine* is a machine?

—Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*

It is the peculiar fate of literary modernism to be vulnerable to the incompatible charges of both decadent libertinism and rearguard conservatism. For cultural conservatives the early decades of the last century mark the beginning of the end—the licensing of moral and sexual transgression and the onset of a pernicious relativism—while critics on the left have disparaged the modernist emphasis on formal experiment as an elitist effort to distance high art from the popular. Despite obvious differences, both charges share a distrust of modernism's well-known rejection of an aesthetics based in readerly engagement and sympathy, a rejection that is read, often too easily, as a sign of amorality. Yet for better or worse modernism both chronicled and fostered a significant shift in the way that people know and feel. As early as 1971 Lionel Trilling discerned this shift when he characterized the condition of modernity, if not modernism *per se*, as the demise of the value of "sincerity," which he defined as "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2). Quoting Oscar Wilde's

dictum that "all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling", Trilling saw in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the rise of a sensibility that recognizes "that the direct conscious confrontation of experience and the direct public expression of it do not necessarily yield the truth and indeed that they are likely to pervert it" (119).

Yet Trilling's insight into this crucial dimension of modernism was lost to critics amid the successive tides of structuralist and poststructuralist theory, which carried modernist studies into first linguistic and then historicist channels. Only recently has the modernist concern with feeling been reinvestigated, most significantly by Michael Bell. Bell notes that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud bequeathed to modernist literature an "underlying legacy of hermeneutic suspicion" ("Metaphysics" 11).<sup>1</sup> In the late-nineteenth century, class, power, and sexuality came to be seen as objects demanding interpretation, considerably less transparent than common sense might take them to be, and theoretical concepts such as false consciousness, *ressentiment*, and repression allowed even the most sincerely felt emotion to be recognized as self-deception or ideological mirage. With modernism, in other words, comes the suspicion that "genuine feeling" may not be so genuine. What results from this suspicion are many of the familiar characteristics of modernist literature and art: the adoption of poetic *personae* that allow the poet, as Eliot famously said, to extinguish his own personality; Brechtian drama with its goal of fostering critical estrangement; and the rejection of mimesis that Jose Ortega y Gasset endorsed in order to hasten what he called "the dehumanization of art" (18).

Another important development, however, less emphasized by critics, was the rediscovery of satire as a literary mode.<sup>2</sup> While critical opinion generally holds that the golden age of satire is long past (Levin 199–200), the satiric mode became in many respects central to the modernist project.<sup>3</sup> Whether in Nietzsche's comment on *Don Quixote*: "To see others suffer does one good. To make others suffer even more" (67); or Marinetti's grandiose credo: "Art . . . can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice" (51); or Pound's cranky complaint, "I prefer satire, which is due to emotion, to any sham of emotion" (13), an important strain of modernism viewed the stringency and even cruelty of satire as a means of escaping from what were seen as the inauthentic and oppressive identifications enacted by feeling. Often the name given to such varieties of feeling was "sentimentality," and the modernist effort to escape the sentimental was—as I hope to show—more than an elitist disdain on the part of a misogynistic, fascistic male modernism that withdrew into its library and refused to talk about its feelings.<sup>4</sup> Rather, satire reemerged as a powerful mode of fiction precisely when inherited conventions for the representation of suffering became discredited.

Wyndham Lewis offered an extreme but by no means unrepresentative formulation of this idea in his 1934 treatise, *Men Without Art*, in which he identifies satire with art itself. The goal of satire, Lewis claims, is "to bring human life more into contempt each day" (226); and although this satiric degradation of the human may repulse some readers, it brings delight to the true artist: "This *matière* which composes itself into what you regard I daresay as abortions, is delightful to us, *for itself*" (228–29). With this delight comes a recognition of the human being's affinity with the mechanical: "'[M]en' are undoubtedly, to a greater or less extent, machines. And there are those amongst us who are revolted by this reflection, and there are those who are not" (116). Indeed Lewis aspired to elicit a "perfect laughter" that would be "inhuman" (112). It is now something of a commonplace to note that in the twentieth century, the mechanization of the human seemed to be accelerating as a consequence of changes in technology and capitalist production; but if the era of modernism was one in which the proximity of man and machine seemed to pose a greater threat than ever before, then satire, which presents the human as mechanical, emerged as a mode all-too-suitable for modernity.

Nathanael West offers a useful case to examine the relation of satire to modernism, both because he is commonly regarded as both a modernist and a satirist, and more crucially because he explicitly thematizes the problem of feeling throughout his writing. By "the problem of feeling" I mean the phenomenon in which the mere experience of particular feelings, particularly in response to scenes or representations of suffering, becomes itself the source of conflict; in West, this phenomenon occurs doubly, both within the text (that is, a character's conflict) and in the reader's reception.<sup>5</sup> Although West's fiction subjects sentimental expressions of feeling to intense satiric scrutiny, it is no less searching in its scrutiny of satire itself, and of the ironic or joking postures, often identified with modernist aesthetics, that dismiss feeling. In short, the artistic quests of virtually all West's protagonists can be seen as efforts to resolve the tension between the claims of satire and sentiment. West's fiction at once manifests and resists a satiric impulse, and the push and pull of this ambivalence constitutes the central dynamic of his fiction. Such a struggle, we might venture, can even be seen as characteristic of modernity itself. As John Gilson put it in West's first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*: "I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laugh is 'bitter,' I must laugh at the laugh. The ritual of feeling demands burlesque" (25–26).

What follows is a three-part exploration of the mystery of feeling in West's writing. The first section looks at West's extra-fictional writings and his fate among his critics and finds within them both an

underlying tension between self-definition and political commitment. The second section argues that this tension fundamentally structures West's last novel, *The Day of the Locust*, while the final section builds on these conclusions to reveal how sentiment reemerges in the novel in the form of the grotesque, a reemergence that paradoxically affirms the importance of feeling that satire negates.

### The Terrible Sincere Struggle

In the last decade literary criticism has claimed Nathanael West for an explicitly political strain of experimental literature that descends from a Continental "avant-garde."<sup>6</sup> This avant-garde, political West has been contrasted to the "modernist," humanist West who dominated the criticism of the postwar years.<sup>7</sup> The earlier, humanist interpretation had viewed the suffering of West's angst-ridden, sexually frustrated, Dostoevskian heroes, and their withdrawal into private worlds of dream, delusion, or art, as symptomatic of a vaguely existentialist human condition, offering readers a "metaphysical sense of the helplessness of man trapped in an unstable universe" (Schultz 151).<sup>8</sup> But recent readers have sought to relate West's work to consumerism, professionalization, and popular culture (Barnard; Harper; Roberts; Strychacz; Veitch); West's novels, the argument runs, derive political force from their attention to mass culture, the depiction of which offers a critique of a world permeated by simulacrum and commodity-fetishism.<sup>9</sup> Such readings have valuably resituated West's work within its historical context, paying particular attention to the powerful ideological crosscurrents of 1930s America.

Yet even those readers who aim to recover a political West do not deny that his is a peculiar case. His own beliefs, for one, make him highly susceptible to a critical tug-of-war. Though his politics were unequivocally progressive, and in the later 1930s he attended meetings of communist organizations (Martin 344–53), he had, by the spring of 1939, rejected the mode of the prominent leftist writers of the day. He voiced the same complaint in letters to F. Scott Fitzgerald and Edmund Wilson:

Somehow or other I seem to have slipped in between all the "schools." My books meet no needs except my own, their circulation is practically private and I'm lucky to be published. And yet I only have a desire to remedy all that *before* sitting down to write, once begun I do it my way. I forget the broad sweep, the big canvas, the shot-gun adjectives, the important people, the significant ideas, the lessons to be taught, the epic Thomas Wolfe, the realistic

James Farrell—and go on making what one critic called "private and unfunny jokes." (791–92; 793)<sup>10</sup>

West describes himself as divided—sympathetic to the cause but unable to produce, even to accept, its literature. He recognizes the importance of "the significant ideas" and "the lessons to be taught," yet cannot incorporate these ideas and lessons into his writing. He wrote to Malcolm Cowley: "I'm a comic writer and it seems impossible for me to handle any of the 'big things' without seeming to laugh or at least smile" (794). Indeed, his comic mode as he describes it seems to *demand* the exclusion of politics. He described to Cowley a failed attempt to include such concerns in *The Day of the Locust*: "I tried to describe a meeting of the Anti-Nazi League, but it didn't fit and I had to substitute a whorehouse and a dirty film. The terrible sincere struggle of the League came out comic when I touched it and even libelous" (795). A Midas of irony, everything he touches turns into a joke.

West's letters, in short, articulate a rift between his ethical-political ambitions ("the terrible sincere struggle") and the aesthetic constraints of his sensibility ("private and unfunny jokes") that has been reproduced in the critical debate over the meaning of his work. Of course, if one accepts the theoretical assumption that satire is a normative and moralistic mode,<sup>11</sup> then reconciling the struggle and the jokes is easy: comic ridicule (technique) is put into the service of social criticism (content). But many critics have noted that such satire's moral impulse can mask, even license, more primitive energies—that satire, by delighting in the representation and ridicule of vice and folly, unleashes the very moral entropy it purports to decry. Thus although West at times can be seen as excoriating vice, the anarchic energies set free by his satire exceed the aims of moral correction. The problem is not so much that West himself claimed to have "no particular message for a troubled world (except possibly 'beware!)" (794). It is, rather, that the novels themselves are fraught with contradictory impulses. West employs the same satiric method in treating causes with which he claims sympathy as in treating ideologies he rejects.

For example, in *A Cool Million*, the most overtly political of West's novels, the simple-minded hero, Lemuel Pitkin, witnesses a didactic communist "playlet" that shows an old grandmother defrauded of her life savings by ruthless capitalists (223). But it is nearly impossible to read West's presentation of this play as an indictment of capitalism. We might laugh at the clichéd symbolism with which the salesman entices the grandmother to surrender her savings, but the play itself relies on a symbolism no less inert. From the "old white-haired grandmother knitting near the fire" in "a typical American home," to the

"sleek, young salesman" with the "rich melodic voice" (224), to the "idle breeze [that] plays mischievously with the rags draping the four corpses" (225), the entire drama is written to highlight its own predictability; it treats the reader as if she were as mentally under-equipped as Lem himself. While it is true that Lem, much to our surprise and delight, is profoundly upset by the play, this sensitivity is less a sign of his ethics than of his stunning idiocy. Rather than engaging our sympathy for the grandmother's plight, the comedy disengages us. The delight the novel takes in its depiction of the Marxist morality play suggests a sensibility that must put aside ethical and political concerns for the sake of comic indulgence.

An even more tangled treatment of Marxist theory occurs in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, where the editor Willie Shrike distributes to partygoers letters that the advice columnist Miss Lonelyhearts has received.<sup>12</sup> The ever-ironic Shrike proclaims:

This one is a jim-dandy. A young boy wants a violin. It looks simple; all you have to do is get the kid one. But then you discover that he has dictated the letter to his little sister. He is paralyzed and can't even feed himself. He has a toy violin and hugs it to his chest, imitating the sound of playing with his mouth. How pathetic! However, one can learn much from this parable. Label the boy Labor, the violin Capital, and so on. (119)

What first appears as an economic problem, satisfying a consumer's wish for a commodity, becomes instead an example of brute, irremediable suffering. The boy desires not the violin, but the ability to play one, and his inability to reproduce the beauty of music renders his suffering all the more acute. But with a single sentence, "How pathetic!" Shrike at once sums up and dismisses the emotional appeal of the boy's longing. Instead he reads the story as a "parable" of capitalism—a reading that, in its attempt to recover a political meaning, comes across as an empty rhetorical exercise. As the "and so on" suggests, the Marxist metanarrative appears as a predictable cliché. The very gesture of interpretation, indeed, is here literally no more than a parlor game, in which a case of suffering is "a jim-dandy" only because it offers a significant interpretive challenge.

Indeed, despite (or because of) their indifference to the boy's pain, Shrike's verbal pyrotechnics—he speaks like a "circus barker" (118) and fills his sentences with incidental rhymes and rhetorical ornaments—afford the reader of *Miss Lonelyhearts* considerable pleasure. They constitute a kind of rhetorical play that Ronald Paulson has seen as central to the comic impulse: "the recovery of a transgressive category (imagination, ridicule) by turning it into an

aesthetic object—that is taking it out of a moral discourse. . . and into an aesthetics of pleasurable response" (xii). Shrike reduces Marxist theory to a smug metaphor-making (or literary criticism) in which imposing a critical vocabulary affords aesthetic pleasure but remains a theoretical construction sundered from experience. If his previous novels are any indication, then, West had no choice but to eliminate the meeting of the anti-Nazi League from *The Day of the Locust*. Had he left it in, it never would have withstood his own satiric powers.

This conflict between on the one hand, the private, ironic, and aesthetic, and, on the other, the public, sincere, and ethical-political, constitutes not merely a matter for debate among West's critics, nor merely an obstacle in West's extra-novelistic search for artistic principles, but the basic conflict of both his most widely read works, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. For the two novels are in many ways versions of the same story. In both, the hero confronts the problem of widespread human suffering: Miss Lonelyhearts is psychically overwhelmed by the pain he apprehends in the letters of his predominantly working-class readers, which make up an endless stream of tales of poverty, rape, disease, disfigurement, and unsatisfied longing, while in *Locust*, Tod Hackett is haunted by the "starers," the anonymous unfulfilled Midwesterners who "had come to California to die" (242). These heroes both experience their own spiritual and sexual longing, an inner emptiness that had by West's day already become an emblem of the modern hero. The suffering of West's protagonists is thus related to, amplified by, and perhaps even produced from the suffering of those around them: Shrike observes that the advice columnist is himself one of the letter-writers (98), and Tod "wonder[s] if he himself [doesn't] suffer from the ingrained, morbid apathy he liked to draw in others" (336). In both novels, finally, the fulfillment of the characters' ethical-political ambitions curiously resides in aesthetic solutions. Like West himself, both Miss Lonelyhearts by writing his columns and Tod Hackett by painting his canvases seek expressive forms adequate to the task of representing or relieving the pain of the masses.

This division also parallels the split between what Richard Rorty has called "private irony" and "liberal hope" (73). Private irony, according to Rorty, is the work of breaking free from ideological constraints to symbolically forge one's identity, while liberal hope describes the ambition to create a social order in which pain and cruelty are reduced; one aspires to maximize personal freedom, the other to minimize public suffering. In *Lonelyhearts*, the advocate of private irony is Shrike; in a famous passage, he rewrites "The Vanity of Human Wishes" in order to verbally demolish every set of ideals (pastoral retreat, tropical paradise, hedonism, art, religion) that



Miss Lonelyhearts might think to offer his suffering readers. Like the Rortian ironist, Shrike is skeptical of all "final vocabularies," of all "set[s] of words which [people] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives" (Rorty 73). Like the ironist too, he has come to the "realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed" (73); he destroys Miss Lonelyhearts's beliefs by ironically redescribing them. Or, to recall Paulson's term, he *aestheticizes* them: by moving the question of suffering from a moral to an aesthetic register, he allows us to take pleasure in the verbal presentation of an otherwise painful situation. Miss Lonelyhearts, won over by Shrike's masterful performances, has therefore become an ironist as well, skeptical of all final vocabularies. Hence the novel begins with a case of writers' block, the writer "still working on his leader" (59), deprived of words. But whereas Shrike seems confident in his ironism, Lonelyhearts longs for something pre- or extra-rhetorical; in Rorty's terms, he wishes to be a "metaphysician" again (74). Yet a columnist, like a novelist, can only work with words, and so Lonelyhearts blames Shrike for "teaching him to handle his one escape, Christ, with a thick glove of words" (95), for revealing that any effort to use religious belief to comfort his suffering readers must be mediated by a dead rhetoric.<sup>13</sup>

Does this mean that West believed suffering could be ameliorated if only we could still take seriously the "final vocabularies" that the Shrikes of the world render untenable? Such a view would again square with the idea of satire as a conservative mode that calls for an end to practices that destabilize communal values, a reading in which the ironic Shrike becomes the target of the author's scorn. But it is a mistake to read *Miss Lonelyhearts* as a lament for a bygone world of stable beliefs. Miss Lonelyhearts may think, "If only he could believe in Christ . . . then everything would be simple and the letters extremely easy to answer" (88), but his final religious experience must ultimately be taken as parodic: it leads him to misconstrue the intention of the cripple Doyle, who arrives at the apartment of the delusional columnist not to receive healing but to kill him. The novel is as uncomfortable with the hero's sentimental (and mad) relapse into religiosity as with Shrike's belligerent assertion of irony. This stalemate suggests a deep fault line within West's sensibility and his conception of his role as an artist. It is a more extensive tracing of this fissure that I undertake in turning to *The Day of the Locust*.

### **The Sun is a Joke**

*The Day of the Locust* differs from *Miss Lonelyhearts* in that, unlike his predecessor, Tod Hackett has relinquished the goal of reliev-

ing the suffering of the masses, and seeks instead only to represent it. If for Miss Lonelyhearts the failure to produce a successful public rhetoric becomes a private crisis in which he can neither alleviate nor forget the suffering he faces, Tod conversely begins by seeking a private, painterly rhetoric that becomes entwined with his concern for a suffering public. Approaching the problem from the other side, Tod ends up with the same dilemma: what demands to make of his art. When he contemplates his *magnum opus*, then, he is caught between two views of his function as a painter: "He told himself that . . . he was an artist, not a prophet. His work would not be judged by the accuracy with which it foretold a future event but by its merit as painting. Nevertheless, he refused to give up the role of Jeremiah" (308). To see the painting as prophecy is to see it as political, an insight into the destructive energies of the mob, a warning about the decline of civilization. (Such a view has become the enduring popular conception of West, a herald of the apocalyptic violence to which his novel's title alludes and which his novel's conclusion enacts.) To judge the work on "its merit as painting," on the other hand, rejects the importance of its political insight for presumably formal concerns. One internal voice rejects the prophetic role, while another clings to it. And although the prophetic role is already a curtailment of the more ambitious role of savior that Miss Lonelyhearts assumes, in the internal debate over the function of Tod's art we see the same clash between public, ethical imperatives and private, aesthetic ones that structured West's earlier novel.

As a modern artist seeking to reconcile these imperatives, Tod renounces the naturalistic mode in which he was trained:<sup>14</sup> "He would never again do a fat red barn, old stone wall, or sturdy Nantucket fisherman. From the moment he had seen them [the staring masses], he had known that, despite his race, training, and heritage, neither Winslow Homer nor Thomas [*sic*] Ryder could be his masters and he turned to Goya and Daumier" (242). The old, fat, sturdy subjects of Tod's earlier art, with their weight and solidity, signify permanence, tradition, and Yankee pastoral values. But the stability of barns and stone walls is of little use to the artist of the modern metropolis, and Tod turns instead to Goya and Daumier—artists who offer an alternative model of satirical cartooning.

Tod's aesthetic search is hardly restricted to those moments when he thinks about his painting. When he tries to persuade the aspiring starlet Faye Greener not to resort to prostitution to raise money for her father's funeral, he is literally at a loss for words: "He had to say something. She wouldn't understand the aesthetic argument and with what values could he back up the moral one? The economic one didn't make sense either. Whoring certainly paid"

(319–20). Like Miss Lonelyhearts facing the blank page, Tod can find no Rortian final vocabulary, no "argument" or "values," whether moral, aesthetic, or economic, to justify his desire to keep Faye from prostitution. And when he finally finds speech, his words are laughable: "Suddenly he began to talk. He found an argument. Disease would destroy her beauty. He shouted at her like a Y.M.C.A. lecturer on sex hygiene" (320). Tod himself cannot believe in this language, borrowed *en masse* from an outworn discursive system, and the narratorial voice slides into ridicule.

Thus, much as Tod's desire to do aesthetic justice to the starers drives him toward the satiric cartoons of Goya and Daumier, so the rhetorical poverty he faces in his exchange with Faye attracts him to the screenwriter Claude Estee's ironic way of sneering at the world: "Tod liked to hear him talk. He was master of an involved comic rhetoric that permitted him to express his moral indignation and still keep his reputation for worldliness and wit" (255). This description of an "involved comic rhetoric" seems to suggest a model for both Tod and West himself—a satiric mode that offers the promise of combining the two classical strains of satire, Juvenalian outrage and Horatian urbanity. If Shrike's imitators in *Miss Lonelyhearts* are "machines for making jokes" (75), then Claude is a machine for making metaphors. When Tod declines to attend a brothel because he finds them "depressing . . . like vending machines" (255), Claude elaborates on the "lead" Tod feeds him: "Love is like a vending machine, eh? Not bad. You insert a coin and press home the lever. There's some mechanical activity inside the bowels of the device. You receive a small sweet, frown at yourself in the dirty mirror, adjust your hat, take a firm grip on your umbrella and walk away, trying to look as though nothing had happened" (255–6). Claude revels in the construction of the rhetorical trope (which once again figures the human as mechanical); he responds not to Tod's expressed emotion but to the inventiveness of the simile. Much like Shrike, who regards the letters Miss Lonelyhearts receives as mere springboards for rhetorical acrobatics, Claude transforms a call for sympathy into an amusing verbal artifact.

But before we take Claude's "involved comic rhetoric" as the author's aesthetic prescription, we should note that worldliness and wit themselves come under attack in *Locust*, just as the satirist Shrike is himself satirized in *Lonelyhearts*. West mocks the fashion-following style of the sophisticates Tod meets at a party at Claude's house. Like the party-goers whom Shrike entertains with the letters in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, these celebrants take a certain moral indifference as essential to their code of sophistication. One woman, Joan Schwartzen, speaks in "a loud, stagey whisper" (253) and feigns

delight at the artistic pretensions of her hosts. When Tod meets her, she is discussing tennis:

"How silly, batting an inoffensive ball across something that ought to be used to catch fish on account of millions are starving for a bite of herring."

"Joan's a female tennis champ," Alice explained. (252)

Delighting in the silliness of her pretended radicalism, Joan preemptively mocks any critique of her bourgeois values. Tod and West may tell us that Claude can combine witty worldliness with moral indignation, but for Joan one comes precisely at the expense of the other. Tod, like West, is too thoroughly modern, too worldly himself, to accept any simple appeal to earnest sentiment, yet he is suspicious enough of his own ironic temperament to show "worldliness" at its worst.

One might surmise that in West's novels (as elsewhere) there are good ironists and bad ones, and that Joan is simply a less original and less successful wit than Claude. But even Claude is implicated in the culture of artifice and pretense that pervades Tod's universe; he lives in "an exact reproduction of the old Dupuy mansion near Biloxi, Mississippi" and "teeter[s] back and forth on his heels like a Civil War colonel and [makes] believe he [has] a large belly" (252). Faye too adopts worldliness as a pose; after her father's death she and a friend adopt a gangsterish slang which "[makes] them feel worldly and realistic, and so more able to cope with serious things" (317). Faye's father, the aging vaudevillean Harry Greener, "clown[s] continuously" because joking has become "his sole method of defense": "Most people, he had discovered, won't go out of their way to punish a clown" (261). The joking persona becomes a mask one never takes off. Even the dwarf Abe Kusich seems trapped in his combative role: "Abe's pugnacity was often a joke" (248).

The very idea of the joke, in fact, associated throughout the novel with sophistication, implies a coarsening of the capacity to experience feeling that lies at the heart of the plight of the starers. In their own way what these transplanted Midwestern hicks suffer from is, paradoxically, an excess of worldliness: "Both [the newspapers and the movies] fed them on murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, wars. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates" (381). The starers themselves endure the same fate as West's heroes. The representations of horrors with which the mass media inundate them fail to satisfy their "palates." Like John Gilson laughing at the laugh, experience no longer produces feeling in them.<sup>15</sup>

For so many of West's characters, both in *Locust* and elsewhere, the joke, the laugh, or the "involved comic rhetoric" runs the risk of trapping its user in a jaded, ironic role, shutting off the capacity for experience. Moreover, it doesn't always work: the rhetorical play that Claude indulges in fails as a defense against pain when Tod tries it out:

[Faye's] invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love. If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper. You would do it with a scream. You couldn't expect to rise again. Your teeth would be driven into your skull like nails into a pine board and your back would be broken. You wouldn't even have time to sweat or close your eyes.

He managed to laugh at his language, but it wasn't a real laugh and nothing was destroyed by it. (251)

As Tod equates sex with a suicide leap, he begins to enjoy the excesses of his own linguistic conceit. The elaborate figure of speech spawns its own figures, as the vehicle becomes the tenor of secondary metaphor (teeth are nails, the skull a pine board). But the attempt to "aestheticize" his experience misfires; laughter fails to "destroy." If ever there was a "private and unfunny joke," this is it. Tod shares it with no one and it is too weak to destroy any authoritarian presence. Like Claude's elaboration of the love-as-vending-machine metaphor, or Shrike's elaboration of the boy-as-Labor metaphor, Tod's "joke" about sex-as-suicide-leap entails a writer's delight in the construction of analogies—only now presented as a non-cathartic internal reverie from which the writer awakes to discover his world unchanged.

### **The Refuse of Feeling**

Having displayed its suspicion of worldliness and wit, it is not surprising that *The Day of the Locust* periodically attempts to affirm the value of sentiment against irony, to transpose aesthetic categories back into ethical terms. Early on in the novel, Tod passes two houses with incongruous architectural styles, "a miniature Rhine castle with tarpaper turrets pierced for archers" and "a little highly colored shack with domes and minarets out of the Arabian Nights" (243). But although just a moment before Tod has considered destruction by dynamite as the only recourse against such ugliness, he responds differently here:

Both houses were comic, but he didn't laugh. Their desire to startle was so eager and guileless.

It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous. (243)

Instead of destroying or deriding, Tod finds pathos in the "guileless" sincerity of the houses.<sup>16</sup> The homeowners have money; their struggles are not material, but aesthetic or spiritual—a "need for beauty and romance" that recalls the paralyzed boy in *Miss Lonelyhearts* who simply wishes to play the violin. Of course these houses, in their eclectic appropriation of historical styles, have exemplified for critics the disfiguring of reality by simulacrum rife throughout West's fiction; as Alvin Kernan writes: "The particular horror of West's satiric world is that in their search for romance, the people who have come to California to die . . . create such a grotesquely phony and pitifully illusory world" (55). But the apprehension of the discordant forms that Kernan calls grotesque and that West calls monstrous inspires compassion in Tod. In the ugliness he recognizes an aspiration toward beauty.

In the same way, when Tod considers Faye's affected mannerisms, they do not repel him as they might in another woman: "Being with her was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play. From in front, the stupid lines and grotesque situations would have made him squirm with annoyance, but because he saw the perspiring stagehands and the wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper flowers, he accepted everything and was anxious for it to succeed" (292). In going "backstage," Tod recognizes the labor ("the perspiring stagehands") behind the performance and surrenders his critical stance for a sympathetic one. What would from an aesthetic standpoint appear "ridiculous" instead stirs compassion. Again a grotesque situation—here it is West's own word—no longer provokes ridicule because aesthetic terms are translated into ethical ones.

Although this oscillation between the claims of satire and feeling tends, as in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, to produce a frustrated stand-off, as the novel progresses Tod begins to apprehend a third option for his art: "He had lately begun to think not only of Goya and Daumier but also of certain Italian artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of Salvator Rosa, Francisco Guardi and Monsu Desiderio, the painters of Decay and Mystery" (325). Attending a meeting of one of California's many religious cults, Tod sees in the masses he will paint the exaggeration, decadence, and disorder typical of a grotesque aesthetic:<sup>17</sup>

As he watched these people writhe on the hard seats of their churches, he thought of how well Alessandro Magnasco would dramatize the contrast between their drained-out, feeble bodies and their wild, disordered minds. He would not satirize them as Hogarth or Daumier might, nor would he pity them. He would paint their fury with respect, appreciating its raw, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization. (337)

One night a man stands up and spews "a crazy jumble of dietary rules, economics, and Biblical threats" (337). In representing the scene, Tod rejects both satire and sentimentality, deciding neither "to satirize" nor "to pity" the cultists: "Tod didn't laugh at the man's rhetoric. He knew it was unimportant. What mattered were his messianic rage and the emotional response of his hearers. They sprang to their feet, shaking their fists and shouting" (338). The man's rhetoric may be laughable, but his emotion, and that of his audience, is not. Tod can now recognize a value in the "emotional response"—the mystery of feeling—that a "crazy jumble" of rhetoric can provoke. He finds in the emotion of the cultists a capacity to "destroy" that his private, ironic metaphor-making lacks.<sup>18</sup> And by acknowledging, rather than ridiculing, this emotional response, he moves away from John Gilson's impulse to "burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source." Mystery, rather, is precisely what he values in his new artistic masters. He recognizes feeling, not in the form of pity, but in the form of anger and terror. These aversive feelings offer an alternative to sentimental pity or satiric ridicule—a grotesque aesthetic that reinstates feeling as a guarantee of authenticity.<sup>19</sup>

But Tod's aesthetic ambitions are of course only realized in a description of a painting that no real reader ever actually sees; how, or whether, *West himself* realizes a grotesque aesthetic is a different question.<sup>20</sup> Rather than analyzing the oft-discussed riot and painting that close the novel, I want to conclude by addressing a different site of the grotesque in *Locust*, a motif long ago identified by Wolfgang Kayser in his seminal study of the mode. "Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque," Kayser writes, is that of "human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks" (183).<sup>21</sup> Throughout West's novel, human bodies are repeatedly described as robotic or puppet-like: Abe "look[s] like a ventriloquist's dummy" (354); Earle Shoop resembles "a mechanical drawing" (299); Homer Simpson is repeatedly compared to "a poorly made automaton" or a "badly made automaton" (267, 381); Harry Greener, when he experiences a seizure, acts like a "mechanical toy which had been overwound" (279). Even when such explicit comparisons are absent, bodies still behave with a strange indepen-

dence from the minds that inhabit them. The eight-year-old Adore Loomis performs a popular song, which he accompanies with "a little strut" and an "extremely suggestive" (335) bit of pantomime: "He seemed to know what the words meant, or at least his body and his voice seemed to know. When he came to the final chorus his buttocks writhed and his voice carried a top-heavy load of sexual pain" (336). It is not merely the boy's sexual precocity that unsettles the reader, but the suggestion that the body and the voice are somehow more knowing than the innocent Adore. The intelligence behind the writhing buttocks and agonized voice does not quite belong to the boy himself.

Faye Greener's body exhibits the same kind of knowledge. As she chats with Claude, he and Faye's other admirers sit enraptured despite the inanity of her talk:

None of them really heard her. They were all too busy watching her smile, laugh, shiver, grow indignant, cross and uncross her legs, stick out her tongue, widen and narrow her eyes, toss her head so that her platinum hair splashed against the red plush of the chair back. The strange thing about her gestures and expressions was that they didn't really illustrate what she was saying. They were almost pure. It was as though her body recognized how foolish her words were and tried to excite her hearers into being uncritical. (357)

The extended recitation of her various gestures highlights the mechanistic nature of her movements. There is indeed something "strange" in the thought that her body might be operating on its own agenda; this is precisely the terrain Freud called "the uncanny." Throughout the novel, Faye retains this purely physical grace even though clichés spill from her mouth. When reciting banal storylines for movies, "her movements" possess "extraordinary color and mystery" (295). Later, in fact, Tod judges her body and mind to be wholly independent: "Raging at him, she was still beautiful. That was because her beauty was structural, like a tree's, not a quality of her mind or heart" (319).<sup>22</sup>

Of course this convergence of the human and mechanical can be understood as a variation on the phenomenon, so characteristic of theories of the postmodern, whereby experience seems to disappear into representation, and adopted or learned roles overwhelm any possibility of an authentic self. *Locust*, however, shows little postmodern comfort with such a loss of authenticity, but rather represents it as a fear—a fear that emerges in the reactions of characters to the prospect of a body reduced to automatism. For example, when Homer witnesses Harry's seizure: "He was terrified and wondered whether



to phone the police. But he did nothing." The uncanny effect of Harry's "purely muscular" (279) behavior is enhanced by the continuity of the seizure with his "normal" behavior, as he slips undetectably from his clownish sales pitch into his mechanistic spasm. Later in the same scene, Harry uses a stage laugh, itself a kind of muscular spasm, to frighten Faye: "He began again. This new laugh was not critical; it was horrible. When she was a child, he used to punish her with it. It was his masterpiece. There was a director who always called on him to give it when he was shooting a scene in an insane asylum or a haunted castle" (284). Harry's laugh is the chilling laugh of the madman, rendered all the more chilling because it has now been removed from the staged settings of popular entertainment, the "haunted castle" and the "insane asylum," and relocated at the heart of the family romance.

At a few crucial moments, moreover, *Locust* explicitly suggests that this reduction of the human to an automatic bodily mechanism implies a disappearance of the interiority so central to much of modernist aesthetics. In other words, by deliberately questioning its characters' capacity for feeling, the novel dramatizes the uncanny anxiety latent in the representation of its characters as mere bodies. For example, when Homer sits on his shabby patio, dumbly watching a lizard catch flies, the narrator struggles to characterize his condition: "Between the sun, the lizard and the house, he was fairly well occupied. But whether he was happy or not is hard to say. Probably he was neither, just as a plant is neither" (276). The narrator's doubt about Homer's capacity for feeling is particularly striking because the narrator has confidently assumed omniscience at other moments in the novel; he has told us when Homer experiences fear, excitement, and lust. But he remains peculiarly tentative about whether to call Homer happy. The narrator's problem is not whether he can know Homer's mind—such an interpretation would require that we assume a shift in narratorial perspective—but whether Homer's condition can be described by conventional categories. We are told that Homer possesses "emotions," but that there is something odd about them:

He felt even more stupid and washed out than usual. It was always like that. His emotions curved up in an enormous wave, surging and rearing, higher and higher, until it seemed as though the wave must carry everything before it. But the crash never came. Something always happened at the very top of the crest and the wave collapsed to run back like water down a drain, leaving, at most, only the refuse of feeling. (273)

Like the elusive "something wrong" (268) in Homer's appearance, the "something" that "always happen[s]" to Homer defies naming. Despite Homer's deep anguish, what he feels is the *absence* of feeling, or "at most, only the refuse of feeling."

Tod entertains the same fear when he observes Harry suffering from chest pains. Even the man's physical agony, he notes, has become an antic performance: "Tod began to wonder if it might not be true that actors suffer less than other people. He thought about this for a while, then decided that he was wrong. Feeling is of the heart and nerves and the crudeness of its expression has nothing to do with its intensity. Harry suffered as keenly as anyone, despite the theatricality of his groans and grimaces" (311). This problem is precisely the one Trilling discusses—"that the direct conscious confrontation of experience and the direct public expression of it do not necessarily yield the truth" (119). Tod's inability to find a correlation between experience and expression leads him to doubt the very existence of Harry's pain. Yet he steps back from this radical possibility and concludes that suffering retains a material, biological basis in "the heart and nerves" that is independent of the artfulness with which the sufferer communicates it. Just as the ugly houses in the foothills communicate a need for beauty and romance in spite of their outlandish architecture, so Harry's theatricality still (just) manages to convey his pain.

But Tod's doubt is as important as his conclusion. Indeed, he is not the only one to question the reality of Harry's pain. In a review of a vaudeville performance Harry had given years back, a critic wrote: "The pain that almost, not quite, thank God, crumples his stiff little figure would be unbearable if it were not obviously make-believe. It is gloriously funny" (263). Knowledge of the fictionality of Harry's suffering transforms the audience's potential pity and horror into laughter. But the performance goes right up to the edge of the "unbearable," the power of its comedy deriving precisely from the magnitude of the pain that it ultimately assures us is unreal. In other words, comic laughter, infused with sadism, depends on a point-of-view that confines the suffering to a fictional space. But since the reader has already been told that Harry's clowning is a deliberate attempt to hide real-life pain—"It was his sole method of defense" (261)—she cannot be as confident about the "obviously make-believe" nature of Harry's onstage pain as the reviewer. The inescapable *mediation* of feeling through expression, whether onstage or off, renders indeterminate the nature of Harry's suffering and creates our perception that his capacity for experience hovers uneasily—uncannily—between fiction and reality. For the reviewer Harry's aesthetic triumph causes make-believe pain to appear real, while for Tod Harry's aesthetic failure causes real-life

pain to appear artificial. In both cases however, an ethical judgment must be suspended so that aesthetic one can be rendered.

In this surrender of ethical standards of judgment for aesthetic ones lies the very dynamic of the satirical impulse—at least as formulated by Wyndham Lewis in his valorization of the mechanical and the inhuman. West—or that part of his sensibility that finds expression in Shrike and Claude Estee, his machines for making jokes—can reduce his characters to automata and reject the experiential appeal of suffering in favor of the pleasures of metaphor-making. But for West, unlike the brasher Lewis, this automatism brings an uncanny fear. The idea that the characters of *Locust* have no feelings to be pitied but only bodies to be laughed at reveals itself as a fear of the consequences of satire. Ironic aloofness collapses into uncanny dread when the author recoils at his own demonstration of the mechanistic nature of human life.

The novel contains one more crucial moment where it denies the capacity of its characters to suffer pain. In the scene just before the final riot, Tod speculates on what will become of Faye: "Tod wondered if she had gone with Miguel. He thought it more likely that she would go back to work for Mrs. Jennings. But either way she would come out all right. Nothing could hurt her. She was like a cork. No matter how rough the sea got, she would go dancing over the same waves that sank iron ships and tore away piers of reinforced concrete" (375). In assuring himself that "nothing could hurt" Faye, Tod is defending himself against the recurrent fear—also a fantasy—that Faye will become a prostitute. Once again, Tod lets his metaphorical imagination carry him away, seeking to deny not only Faye's pain but also his own, delighting in the conceit of Faye as an object impervious and insensate, but also gleaming and buoyant:

It was a very pretty cork, gilt with a glittering fragment of mirror set in its top. The sea in which it danced was beautiful, green in the trough of the waves and silver at their tips. But for all their moon-driven power, they could do no more than net the bright cork for a moment in a spume of intricate lace. Finally it was set down on a strange shore where a savage with pork-sausage fingers and a pimpled butt picked it up and hugged it to his sagging belly. Tod recognized the fortunate man; he was one of Mrs. Jennings's customers. (375–6)

The free-associative linguistic play, reveling in its own powers of invention, literally runs aground with one of the novel's most arresting images of the grotesque. As Tod's painterly progress culminates in a grotesque aesthetic, so his personal internal language similarly

comes to rest in imagery that evokes neither irony nor pity but rather a visceral revulsion. The primitivism of the "savage" returns us to an uncanny space ("a strange shore") that turns out to be the whorehouse, this novel's familiar and unfamiliar space of sexuality; the savage's extreme corporeality—his "pork-sausage fingers" and "pimpled butt" and "sagging belly"—remind both Tod and the reader of Faye's own corporeality, and render the prospect of her prostitution horrifying. Unlike Lewis, Tod indeed is revolted by the idea of regarding Faye as merely a body. As in his first flight of verbal fancy, when he imagined sex with Faye as a suicide leap, Tod's language again fails to destroy. The ethical claims of Faye's humanity remain. A grotesque image of the human body—meaty, pock-marked, excessive—serves to reaffirm, through the revulsion it elicits, Tod's human, even sympathetic, relation to Faye.

## Notes

1. In addition to "Metaphysics," both *Sentiment* and *Sentimentalism* engage the question of how novelists from the eighteenth to the twentieth century handle the representation and evocation of feeling.
2. For an important recent discussion of satire as a prevalent mode in late modernism, see T. Miller.
3. Two important distinctions complicate discussions of satire. First, satire can describe either a genre, with specific formal attributes, or a mode, which may rely on certain techniques and themes, but might occur in any variety of cultural forms from poems and novels to television shows and newspaper columns. Second, satire as a genre can describe both formal verse satire and prose or Menippean satire. While English-language verse satire has declined in prominence since the age of Pope and Swift, satire as a literary *mode* has become so widespread as to be almost taken for granted. On the distinction between genre and mode, see Guilhamet.
4. For a rehabilitation of the sentimental and an attack on the modernist disparagement of it, see Clark. Without denying the reactionary tendencies of many modernist figures, making an aesthetic case for the sentimental under the banner of populism does not necessarily lead to a more progressive politics than an "elitist" rejection of it. West's male heroes certainly exhibit aggressive and phobic attitudes toward female sexuality, such attitudes in themselves in no way invalidate his critique of the sentimental.
5. To some extent, constructing an interpretation of West's fiction based on a reader's as well as a character's emotional reactions runs the risk of presenting my own personal responses to texts as those of

an "ideal reader." Yet this risk is not as large as it might seem. Just as reference to the readings of other critics validate the responses of an individual reader, genre terms such as satire, grotesque, and uncanny (or comedy or tragedy) have long provided categories for literary works based in large part on exactly the grounds of a reader's emotional response.

6. On the distinction between a "constructive," implicitly conservative Anglo-American "high modernism" and a more radical European "avant-garde," see Bürger (xv); Huysen (31, 163).
7. This distinction has been highlighted by Barnard and Veitch.
8. See also Aaron; Podhoretz.
9. Veitch writes: "Despite the claim of [mass] media to be dispensing nothing more than 'advice' or 'entertainment,' West took them as the loci for a persuasive ideological authority during the thirties and the sites upon which some of the decade's major issues were powerfully articulated" (xx). Barnard argues that for West the kitsch-objects of mass culture "register a struggle between the purely functional, profit-oriented intentions of the 'culture industry' and the utopian desires of ordinary people" (168). Harper concludes: "In West's novels . . . it is precisely in succumbing to the simultaneously offered and withdrawn promise of the culture industry that the masses establish their resistance" (53). And Strychacz maintains that "West negotiates in complex ways between satirizing a powerful mass culture and acknowledging an allegiance to its possibilities for formal innovation" (164).
10. The idea of a "private and unfunny joke" is something of an oxymoron, since jokes, according to our major theorists, are inherently social. "To understand laughter," writes Bergson, "above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one" (329). "[N]o one," concurs Freud, "can be content with having made a joke for himself alone" (*Jokes*, 175). If Freud is correct in suggesting laughter is the release of psychic energy consumed in inhibitory functions, then an unfunny joke would be one that fails to produce such a catharsis. Hence Bloom claims that in reading West, "our ego knows that it is defeated all the time, or at least is vulnerable to undeserved horror. West's humor has *no* liberating element whatsoever" ("Introduction," *Views* 4).
11. This is a widespread theoretical view, though one that has never been without its dissenters. On the conservative, moralistic nature of satire, see, among others, Meredith, Frye, Guilhamet, Levin; for a more ambivalent view, see Booth, Burke, Lewis, Seidel, Weisenburger.
12. Nieland, in his fine reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts* also addresses both the instability of affect and the intensely felt concern for a suffering public, and he shares my impression that West allows us to see how modernist anti-sentimentality has of late been too easily dismissed.

We differ, it seems to me, on the degree of authority we grant to Shrike's critical manner of clownish performance.

13. See Conroy's deconstructive reading, which sees the novel's problems as problems of language.
14. According to Martin (316), West added the discussion of Tod's artistic models late in his revision of the novel as an effort to give greater structure to the narrative of his artistic development. Weisenburger argues that the painting represents a step beyond normative, "generative" satire to a "degenerative" mode of satire "that develops, not from the logic of 'objects' or 'targets' that shapes his earlier satires, but from narratives of violence and degeneration" (45). See also Kernan, 59–60.
15. This phenomenon is prevalent throughout West's work. In *Balso Snell*, both John Gilson and Beagle Darwin reflect upon their own failure to experience emotion; West himself, in a 1934 application for a Guggenheim fellowship, referred to "[t]he impossibility of experiencing a genuine emotion" and to "[t]he necessity for laughing at everything, love, death, ambition, etc." (465).
16. Like Tod, Miss Lonelyhearts rejects mockery as a response to the aspirations of the masses: "He had learned not to laugh at the advertisements offering to teach writing, cartooning, engineering, to add inches to the biceps and to develop the bust" (83). Unlike the other newspaper writers who, "no matter what the motivating force, death, love or God, made jokes" (75), Miss Lonelyhearts no longer "considers [his] job a joke." If it is a joke, "he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator" (94).
17. Although West is regularly, almost reflexively, described as a writer of the grotesque, criticism has done little to explain the usefulness of the term to interpretation of his fiction. Theorists have followed John Ruskin in discerning a duality or ambivalence in the grotesque, which combines the ludicrous and the fearsome and, therefore, depending on its emphasis, can slide either into satire or caricature on the one side or the uncanny on the other. Moreover, the term, as Mary Russo observes, can describe both specific *content* and an aesthetic *mode* that produces a particular affect—an uneasy laughter that borders on fear or revulsion. Russo sees the latter use of the term as characteristic of the grotesque in modernity: "The shift of reference from discernible grotesque figures or style to the rather vague and mysterious adjectival category of 'experience' marks the modern turn toward a more active consideration of the grotesque as an interior event" (7). The most influential works on the grotesque are still Kayser and Bakhtin. Other useful works include Harpham; Russo; Steig; Thomson. Works on related topics include Fiedler; W. Miller; Nelson; Stallybrass and White; Todorov; White. On West as a writer in the grotesque tradition, see Edmunds; McElroy; Meindl.
18. Weisenburger's claim that this new set of artistic masters constitutes a move away from a specifically Enlightenment model of normative

satire toward a more regressive or degenerative model is compatible with my reading. While Tod's "respect" for the subjects he paints may entail a visual and emotional distance from them, his abandonment of (normative) satire leads him to a recognition of feeling, and a refusal to subject such feeling to humiliating Rortian "redescription."

19. The relationship of satire to the grotesque is a complicated one, and not only because both terms have shifted meaning considerably over time. Satire is often said to rely on grotesque figurations in its use of comic exaggeration that exposes corruption and provokes laughter. If satire rests on an ambivalence between its moral objectives and its anarchic energies, it can be seen to delight in the creation of its grotesque targets as much as it excoriates them. The grotesque is satire's target, but also its method. Steig describes the grotesque as a "managing" of uncanny material by a comic technique. In this sense, the grotesque becomes not only a *problem*, a sign of the disorder and decadence that the satirist decries, but also, as an aesthetic mode adequate to the phenomena it renders, a *solution*. See Frye 223; Steig; Thomson 41–47.
20. One important difference between *Lonelyhearts* and *Locust* is that because Miss Lonelyhearts works in the same medium (words) as his creator, West cannot create an idealized "artwork" for Miss Lonelyhearts as easily as he can for Tod. In *Locust*, the move from the verbal to (a verbal description of) the visual makes it easier for West to postulate an ideal rhetoric that escapes satiric redescription. While modernism's Paterian gestures toward the musical often suggest a move toward contentless abstraction, here West's gesture toward the painterly might, in contrast, suggest a greater materialism than a linguistic medium permit.
21. Freud, whose essay on the uncanny was a likely influence on Kayser's theorization of the grotesque, identifies the same phenomenon (226). For a fascinating effort at situating the grotesque traditions of twentieth-century European avant-gardes and of American popular culture—particularly the motifs of puppets, golems, automata, and robots—within a several-thousand-year narrative of repressed Neoplatonism in Western culture, see Nelson.
22. Indeed, the scene of the "whorehouse and dirty film" with which West replaced the account of the anti-Nazi league, shows the very same kind of mechanized humanity in the film that Tod and the others watch.

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