
Project

MFS

> But "men" are undoubtedly, to a greater of less extent, machines. And there are those amongst us who are revolted by this refection, 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 signifcant 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 defned as "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2). Quoting Oscar Wilde's

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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).[1] 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

Wyndham Lewis offered an extreme but by no means unrepresentative formulation of this idea in his 1934 treatise, *Men Without Art,* in which he identifes 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 affnity with the mechanical: "'[M]en' are undoubtedly, to a greater or less extent, machines. And there are those amongst

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.

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."[6] This avant-garde, political West has been contrasted to the "modernist," humanist West who dominated the criticism of the postwar years.[7] 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).[8] 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.[9] 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)[10]

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,[11]

"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.[12] 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 ap-

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

Miss Lonelyhearts might think to offer his suffering readers. Like the Rortian ironist, Shrike is skeptical of all "fnal vocabularies," of all "set[s] of words which [people] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives" (Wn7tgr1heir

(319–20). Like Miss Lonelyhearts facing the blank page, Tod can fnd no Rortian fnal vocabulary, no "argument" or "values," whether moral, aesthetic, or economic, to justify his desire to keep Faye from prostitution. And when he fnally fnds 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 fnds 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 frm 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 fgures 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

For so many of West's characters, both in *Locust* and elsewhere,

> 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.[16] 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*

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, ap-

dence from the minds that inhabit them. The eight-year-old Adore

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 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

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. Jenning. 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. Jenning'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 fngers" 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 frst fight 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 reaffrm, through the revulsion it elicits, Tod's human, even sympathetic, relation to Faye.

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 specifc 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 fgures, 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 fction based on a reader's as well as a character's emotional reactions runs the

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); Huyssen (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

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.

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