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The American Dream & The Grotesque — The Novels of Nathanael West —

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It is by no means original with me to use the word “grotesque” in arguing the novels of Nathanael West. Critics after critics have repeatedly commented on his works with the use of that handy critical idiom; William Van O'Connor, in particular, in *The Grotesque: An American Genre* lists him among the authentic American authors who have a proclivity to depict things macabre and grotesque.¹⁾ Yet, one hardly needs critics' help to feel the grotesque quality of West's fiction which can be ascribed to his singular characters placed in the uniquely “peculiar half-world.”²⁾ In his novels characterization is so abstract that people often appear to be almost lifeless, and the anonymity of characters as it is typical in the case of the protagonist in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the conspicuous use of geometrical metaphors in character representation, and the economy of naming such as the repetitive use of Betty, a mediocre name, are combined to intensify the flatness of the characters and the allegorical flavor of West's fiction. Furthermore, many of the characters move from apathy to excitement without the usual transition and some of them even behave “like a badly made automaton.” (146) Hence the Bergsonian laughter predominant all through the four novels. We should also point out the obtrusive presence of scatological expressions and perverted sex. Indeed, no one would hesitate to call his novels grotesque.

What, then, does his grotesque fiction signify? What can we make of his use of such grotesque images? Of course, it is easy to acknowledge the novels to be West's version of “The Waste Land” and say that he is warning us of the possible death of the self-suffocating modern civilization in general. Some articles and books have been written from that viewpoint, among which is Victor Comerchero's typical assertion to regard the author as “The Ironic Prophet” of the Spenglerian decline of the West.³⁾ Our concern here, however, is not to consider such a large topic of more

general nature but to discuss a kind of American quality of Nathanael West. In other words, I intend to clarify the novelist's awareness of the problems indigenous to American culture which is expressed on the symbolical plane. I am, of course, aware of an immediate objection that things like culture, American or otherwise, demand more deliberate and scrupulous treatment. But, can one entirely deny the assumption that West's fiction, if considered as a whole, justifies some rough scheme in cultural context? Nobody could deny, for instance, that *Miss Lonelyhearts* has Puritanism as its important motif, that *A Cool Million* is both a parody of American success stories and a raillery at Jeffersonian and Populistic mentality, and that *The Day of the Locust*, a novel of the grotesques in Hollywood, the land of promise, the dream factory, must be closely linked with the American dream of success. The author's interesting biographical data as a Jewish American adds to the necessity of reading his novels in social or even sociological terms. Above all else, isn't it rather too hasty to ignore his American quality simply because he appears to be so un-American a writer with a typically European surrealistic bent in the Augustan age of American proletarian writers? I would rather emphasize his coolness to stay away from the literary bandwagon at his time and find out his critical comment on the contradictions often said to be inherent in American culture.

In *Miss Lonelyhearts* grotesque impression is made prominent by the extremely idealistic attitudes of the principal characters. The namesake, a newspaper reporter of the advice-to-the-lovelorn column, is presented at the outset as the son of a Baptist minister. "A beard would become him, would accent his Old-Testament look. But even without a beard no one could fail to recognize the New England puritan," (213) writes West, thus reminding us of the protagonist's kinship with the first Puritans who had pledged to establish the kingdom of God on the new continent. From there goes the story, as he confronts numerous cases of misery showing themselves in the letters sent to him and thinks it his duty to save humanity as "a priest of our time."⁴) But we should not overlook the fact that his apparently sublime behaviors are urged by "an almost insane sensitiveness to order." (221) He is irritated by groups of people on the

street “forming neither stars nor squares,”(222) and thinking “Everything had to form a pattern,” grows angry at a bird which happens to fly across the skyline he composed “by balancing one building against another.” (221) His ideal is expressed by the memory of his childhood when children danced harmoniously to music, “Square replacing oblong and being replaced by circle.”(227) Such images of harmony, geometrical and very artificial, are used as devices symbolically suggestive of the protagonist’s yearning for the world of simple order, free from misery, chaos, and any such mundane agonies – to put it simply, what we call reality. To be sure, Miss Lonelyhearts is not unaware of this point. He thinks: “Man has a tropism for order. Keys in one pocket, change in another. Mandolins are tuned GDAE. The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against nature . . . the battle of the centuries.” And yet, even though he knows, “Every order has within it the germ of destruction. All order is doomed,” his inflexible, excessively idealistic world view goads him to think that “the battle is worthwhile.”(244-5)

Then, what is the outcome of his somewhat monomaniac attempt to sweep off misery and unhappiness and bring out order which, to him, is a sure sign of God’s grace? One day, he makes fun of a lonely old man he meets, feeling thus:

Miss Lonelyhearts felt as he had felt years before, when he had accidentally stepped on a small frog. Its spilled guts had filled him with pity, but when its suffering had become real to his senses, his pity had turned to rage and he had beaten it frantically until it was dead.(229)

Very ironical! It is nothing but the protagonist’s fastidious idealism that finally yields sadistic violence to the people he is to save. Towards the end of the story, moreover, he turns into a grotesque “rock” comfortably calm yet entirely lacking in the ability to feel. This surrealistic twist of the story, which reminds us of Melville’s “Bartleby,” can be construed as the author’s negative response to the idealist’s reckless endeavor to reorganize the real physical world.

Here we should turn our attention to the other major characters around Miss Lonelyhearts, that is, Shrike the feature editor and Betty the protagonist’s girl friend. The former is a man of antipodal character when

placed with the protagonist. Jeering at Miss Lonelyhearts' Christ complex is his "particular joke"(213) and he takes neither too cheerful nor too gloomy a view of life but accepts reality as it is. He remarks, "Under the skin of man is a wondrous jungle where veins like lush tropical growths hang along overripe organs and weed-like entrails writhe in squirming tangles of red and yellow. In this jungle, flitting from rock-grey lungs to golden intestines, from liver to lights and back to liver again, lives a bird called the soul," and further continues: "I say unto you, better a live bird in the jungle of the body than two stuffed birds on the library table."(218) It may not be a gross mistake if we assume that the protagonist might possibly choose the "two stuffed birds on the library table" rather than "a live bird called the soul in the jungle of the body," and that Shrike's stance, for that matter, though cynical indeed, is perhaps closer to the realities of life.

But, more noteworthy is the fact that in the second chapter he is called "the dead pan."(216) True the phrase primarily means the blank face when he talks to Miss Lonelyhearts, yet it also implies the famous god of woods, fields, and flocks in Greek mythology. We should be reminded that even the above-quoted Shrike's manifesto abounds in the images which suggest wilderness and nature, and that Shrike, as if to prove his covert relationship with the Greek god, is presented to us as sexually licentious; in one particular scene ("Miss Lonelyhearts and Mrs Shrike") he makes his appearance with the lower half of his body completely naked, the exact Pan image! Therefore, we must admit the persuasiveness of Robert Andreach's assumption that the novel's unifying principle is the Pan-Christ antagonism "that pits the virile, sexual, natural paganism against the effeminate, ascetic, materialistic Christianity."⁵) The words "materialistic Christianity" seem to me to be of supreme importance, for, if reconsidered in the American context, Andreach's Pan-Christ antagonism is to be paraphrased into the oft-mentioned conflict between the wilderness and civilization. As was already said, the protagonist's overmastering obsession for Christ and his "almost insane sensitiveness to order" suggest the Puritan mentality which was the backbone of the founding of the Republic; "ordering" was one of the key terms in the Mayflower compact;

founding out of the wilderness a “City upon a Hill” was the very ideal for the first Puritans. American history further shows that the concept of man dominating and exploiting nature led to the “Manifest Destiny,” one of the motivating doctrines of America’s westward expansion. Then, the vicissitudes of Miss Lonelyhearts – from the role of “the priest of our time” to the object of Shrike’s joking, to the transformation into an emotionless “rock,” and, finally, to the sudden accidental death – might be taken to reveal the inherent contradictions of America’s unyielding commitment to the Manifest Destiny. After all, as the protagonist himself realizes, any artificial attempt at ordering nature which “has a tropism for disorder, entropy” must be doomed from the beginning.

If Miss Lonelyhearts stands on the side of civilization, then Betty is clearly a child of “nature.” In the “pastoral interlude”⁶⁾ in chapter nine she begins to assume a significant role, enticing the wearied Miss Lonelyhearts to take holidays in the idyllic Connecticut countryside. Even before that, she is the person who visits the bedridden protagonist and tries to “redeem him with a pastoral vision”⁷⁾:

She told him about her childhood on a farm and of her love of animals, about country sounds and country smells and of how fresh and clean everything in the country is. She said that he ought to live there and that if he did, he would find that all his troubles were city troubles.(246)

Indeed, all troubles must be city troubles to Betty, who is an active promoter of an idea of coping with troubles by retreating to the country which, Leo Marx asserts, is deeply planted in American culture.⁸⁾ In this sense, she is the embodiment of the American pastoral ideal.

But, again, her “nature” is not the real nature. The gap between her ideal world and the real one seems even wider than might be surmised. Think, for instance, about a small but symbolical episode on the Connecticut farm. In a seemingly pastoral setting just before sunset, they sat together near the pond to enjoy after-dinner repose, when two deer and a fawn came down to the water on the opposite side of the pond. Then, surprisingly, it was Betty who “accidentally made a noise and the deer floundered back into the woods.” (252) The episode functions as a

reminder of Betty's artificiality which is also indicated by her downright hatred of a human smell. Besides, even in the Edenic countryside which should be innocent of shadows of civilization, there was a stove that "looked like a locomotive and was almost as large." (251) Despite her exaltation of being embraced in the bosom of nature, "it was very sad under the trees . . . there was nothing but death -- rotten leaves, grey and white fungi, and over everything a funeral hush." (253) Her ideal is too abstract and far-fetched to be any part of the physical world which involves man as its integral part. Also worth mentioning is that she has constant preoccupation with order just like Miss Lonelyhearts himself. The author writes: "She had often made him [=Miss L.] feel that when she straightened his tie, she straightened much more. And he had once thought that if her world were larger, were *the* world, she might order it as finally as the objects on her dressing table." (222) The "objects on her dressing table" conjure up Shrike's cynical metaphor "two stuffed birds on the library table," and her antipathy to Shrike, the personified god of wild nature, is aptly shown by the fact that she leaves her sickly lover, immediately after Shrike appears, without even saying goodbye. After all, "Her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily." (222)

Thus, it may be only too logical to conclude that the vital point of this story is to disclose the simple-minded, excessive idealism as it is fictionalized in Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty, the incarnate Manifest Destiny and the pastoral ideal, by placing them before Shrike, the strong-minded proponent of chaotic reality. Viewed in this light, the story's ending looms singularly suggestive. Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty agree to marry and plan for their future, but before their dream ever comes into being, he is killed in her presence in an accidental gun explosion. Implied in this catastrophe is Nathanael West's all-out critical verdict on the optimistic marriage of the Manifest Destiny and the pastoral ideal or, in David Noble's now famous phrase, "the paradox of the progressive thought" -- "the Manifest Destiny of the American Empire" in the midst of "the innocence of the Garden."⁹)

The virtually same thing can be said of *A Cool Million* which, because

of its relative scarcity of symbolism, all the more typically projects the author's position as an outspoken critic on American culture. Problems of this novel, particularly those pertaining to the ex-President Nathan Whipple, have already been deftly discussed by brilliant critics, so that only one thing seems to merit mentioning here.¹⁰⁾

At the very beginning of this novel, Lemuel Pitkin, the young protagonist, leaves his home town in Vermont to start on a long journey to a big city, but he does so for the simple reason that the journey must bring him enough fortune to get back their ancestral home in mortgage. In describing the home, the author is emphatic on its antiquity: "Having been built about the time of General Stark's campaign against the British, its lines reflected the character of his army, in whose ranks several Pitkins had marched," and "An antique collector, had one chanced to pass it by, would have been greatly interested in its architecture." (279) Judging from these quotations, isn't it the author's veiled message that Lemuel's journey is a symbolical journey to retrieve the irrevocable past? If so, he may well be cast in his lot with the ex-President Whipple who cries, "All hail Old Glory!" (282) or "Back to the principles of Andy Jackson and Abe Lincoln!" (319) What he is to see, however, when he comes at long last to New York, is his old home already dispossessed, transferred intact, and now neatly displayed in the window of an antique shop. The ironical outcome must be the token of the anachronistic aspect of the protagonist's idealistic journey to the past, who is presented, inconsistently enough, "as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities," a typical exemplar of the American Adam "poised at the start of a new history."¹¹⁾ Toward the close of the story, Lemuel is assassinated and Whipple comes to exercise his authority as a head of a fascist party. The fact, with which West is probably alluding to the actual political milieu of America at the turn of the century, eloquently expresses the dangerousness of too hasty execution of ideals and the inevitable price of moral absolutism.

Grotesqueness, which is more or less characteristic of West's fiction from his maiden work *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* onward, seems to be at its apex in his swan song *The Day of the Locust*. The novel, with all its scenes of death, apathy, and insanity, is indeed a grotesque one where

American idealism can no longer find any way out of its cul-de-sac. There, "the pastoral interlude" has no room ever just to slip in. For example, Homer Simpson, one of the principal characters, comes for a rest to California, "the land of sunshine and oranges." (145) The house he can rent is a very queer house, part "Irish," part "Spanish," with bedrooms furnished in still another style the agent calls "New England." Almost everything in the house is manufactured by machines, although it is skillfully made to appear handmade. Indeed, "It was the last house in the canyon and the hills rose directly behind the garage. They were covered with lupins, Canterbury bells, poppies, and several varieties of large yellow daisy. There were also some scrub pines, Joshua and eucalyptus trees." But the passage which immediately follows suggests that this seemingly pleasant place does not give any comfort and joy to the man but only intensifies his loneliness and isolation from nature. West writes: "The agent told him that he would see doves and plumed quail, but during all the time he lived there, he saw only a few large black velvet spiders and a lizard. He grew very fond of the lizard." (33)

Homer deserves our attention only because in his mode of life are particularized those of a great mass of people who come to California with the hopes of realizing their impossible dreams of success. No wonder Tod Hackett, a point-of-view character, finds in him "an exact model for the kind of person who comes to California to die." (32) Curiously he is presented at the outset as a quite apathetic figure and whether he is happy or not it is hard to say. "Probably," says the author, "he was neither, just as a plant is neither." (44) This reminds us of Miss Lonelyhearts' metamorphosis into a "rock," but the difference is not so small as to be lightly dismissed. In *Miss Lonelyhearts* inhuman transformation comes only at the end after the protagonist's whole series of sufferings, while in this novel impersonal feature of Homer is given as an a priori fact. Besides, self-repression is almost too much for him, which fact is symbolized by his peculiar hands that "seemed to have a life and a will of their own," (42) and, when plunged into the basin full of cold water, "lay quietly in the bottom like a pair of strange aquatic animals." (36)

For a man like Homer who is totally devoid of dreams, it is only natural

to feel attraction to Faye, a would-be Hollywood actress, who still cherishes her dream of success. But, how can we explain the fact that she is often qualified by the words like “artificial” or “mannerism” and likened to such commonplace paraphernalia as a spoon? In fact, “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 pieces of reinforced concrete.” (140) Similarly, it is “her completeness, her egg-like self-sufficiency” (64) that makes Tod want to crush her. In all probability, her strength and fragility, for that matter, must be based on “the ability to limit experience arbitrarily,” just like the robust heroine in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Her world is a sterile world of artificial dreams, quite apart from the one in which man is obliged to live.

If, at any rate, her artificiality is barely maintained by “her egg-like self-sufficiency,” the only alternative left to all the other characters is violence. Throughout this novel, accordingly, the theme of violence is conspicuous, just as the author says, “In America violence is idiomatic.”¹²⁾ Even plant-like Homer who tries his last chance of regaining touches of humanity through association with Faye is finally turned into a half insane sadist by her betrayal. It is this violent climate of the novel that accounts for the unusually impressive scene of the bloody cock fight where a cock with the least hope of winning nevertheless bravely fights the champion cock and is finally used up and killed. We should remember that when the cock was killed, even Earle, the robot-like cowboy with “a two-dimensional face that a talented child might have drawn with a ruler and a compass,” “handled the dead cock gently and with respect.” (66, 120)

Violence with a touch of insanity added culminates in the last mob scene where only boredom holds unlimited dominion over all. What is revealed here may be the result of America’s westward expansion, the Manifest Destiny, when it comes to a dead end. In the midst of the mob Tod envisages the macabre scene in his visionary picture *The Burning of Los Angeles*:

They were marching behind his [=Tod’s] banner in a great united front of screwballs and screwboxes to purify the land. No longer bored, they sang and danced joyously in the red light of the flames.

After that the novel reaches the end with Tod, wounded, being carried in a police car, when suddenly he begins to laugh and imitates the siren as loud as possible. His mysterious laughter is indeed, in Baudelaire's words, "the laughter caused by the grotesque,"¹³⁾ and can be the most fitting vehicle for the nightmarish vision of the end of the American Dream. Thus, as shown in Miss Lonelyhearts' penetrating insight that "Every order has within it the germ of destruction," West's grotesque apocalypse is finally brought into full play.

Notes

I am greatly indebted to Professor Koji Oi for his books, lectures, and various pieces of personal advice. Naturally, possible faults and errors which wise readers may find in my paper do not concern him at all.

All the quotations are from *The Collected Works of Nathanael West* (Penguin Books, 1975). Page references to the novels will be given in parentheses following the quotation.

- 1) William Van O'Connor, *The Grotesque: An American Genre* (Carbondale, 1962).
- 2) Quoted in Richard B. Gehman, Introduction to *The Day of the Locust* (Bantam Book, 1975), p. ix.
- 3) Victor Comerchero, *Nathanael West: THE IRONIC PROPHET* (Seattle, 1964).
- 4) Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Miss L.," *NATHANAEL WEST: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jay Martin (Englewood Cliffs, 1971), p. 67.
- 5) Robert J. Andreach, "Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* Between the Dead Pan and the Unborn Christ," *MFS*, XII No.2 (1966), p. 251.
- 6) Victor Comerchero, p. 86.
- 7) Stanley Edgar Hyman, *Nathanael West* (Minneapolis, 1962), p. 17.
- 8) Leo Marx, "Pastoral Ideals and City Troubles," *The Quality of Man's Environment* (Washington, 1969), p. 121.
- 9) David W. Noble, *The Paradox of Progressive Thought* (Minneapolis, 1958), p. viii.
- 10) See, for instance, Koji Oi, *Amerika no Shinwa to Genjitsu (Myth and Reality in America)* (Tokyo, 1979), pp. 145-167.
- 11) R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago, 1955), p. 1.
- 12) "Some Notes on Violence," Jay Martin, p. 50.
- 13) "Le rire causé par le grotesque" Charles Pierre Baudelaire, "De l'Essence du Rire et généralement du comique dans les Arts plastiques," *Curiosité esthétique L'Art romantique* (Paris, 1962), p. 254.