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THE HOLY FOOL IN THE NOVELS OF NATHANAEL WEST

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes to discuss the nature, role and fate of the Holy Fool in the novels of Nathanael West. The theme has a long history in religious thought and folk culture. It has a unique history in the work of Dostoevski, of whom West considered himself to be a profound disciple. West shares with Dostoevski a passionate need for belief and holiness, which is counterbalanced by an equally passionate heresy, disbelief and despair. Both are concerned with the impoverishment of the inner life of man, due to the impact of rationalism, industrialism and the breakdown of the orthodox religious belief and the consequent spiritual void which creates boredom and sterility, and leads to violence and self-destruction. Both see in the Holy Fool, who is simple-minded, unaware of "the ways of the world," and consequently doomed to continued pain and misfortune, the paradox of apparent worldly failure which is in the end the true success. The world's attitude to its fools and madmen indicates the degree of its (the world's) evil and corruption. Society is judged by its treatment of fools and madmen.

However, whereas Dostoevski, the passionate, Christian Slavophile, lived and wrote in nineteenth century Russia, Nathanael West (Nathan Weinstein), the passionate Jew in exile, lived and wrote in twentieth-century America. Dostoevski's fool, committed to a Messianic reality and oblivious to the immediate, factual one, holds out some promise of possible redemption. Man can listen to the teachings of Zossima (if he can dismiss the Grand Inquisitor), and the Myshkins and Alyoshas can bring Love and Redemption unto the world.

West, the American of the 1930's, the era of the Great Depression, has witnessed the triumph of industrial bureaucracy, the dislocation of personality, the dismemberment of an entire social order and man's consequent growing alienation and lostness. The tragic fate of man, which Dostoevski so profoundly foresaw, had already come true when West began his dialectical pilgrimage as a writer. West's society was not the "Crystal Palace" in the future, but the Wasteland in the present. West's fool does not "love the whole world with an all-embracing love." Nor does the world revere his sanctity and the divinity of his madness. At worst, he can be senselessly assassinated. At best, he can survive as a tragic, ambiguous figure. Whether he is an innocent "shlemiel," an absurd, unbelieved-in Christ, or a defiant dwarf, he must be misunderstood and tormented.

West, the Jew, to whom exile is a historical experience as well as a theological category, has an inclination towards holocaust, which predates by many centuries his American birth and adolescence. Like Kafka, another acculturated Jew, he could universalize his own states of awareness into a symbol of life in the Western world. As the alienated member of an exiled people, he is the paradigmatic modernist precisely because he is the paradigmatic Jew. It is by no means clear what sense is to be made of the Jewishness of a writer who neither uses the Jewish languages, nor describes a distinctively Jewish milieu. Suggestive ideas are not easily demonstrable. But still, some essentially Jewish qualities can be found in writers who have most scrupulously avoided all references to their ethnic background, or who openly divorced themselves from it (as West did). In his recorded conversations with Kafka, the Czech writer, Gustav Janouch asked him if he remembered the old Jewish quarter of Prague, largely destroyed before Kafka

could have known it; this, according to Janouch, is the reply he received:

In us it still lives--the dark corners, the secret alleys, shuttered windows, squalid courtyards, rowdy pubs, and sinister inns. We walk through the broad streets of the newly built town. But our steps and our glances are uncertain. Inside we tremble just as before in the ancient streets of our misery. Our heart knows nothing of the slum clearance which has been achieved. The unhealthy old Jewish town within us is far more real than the new hygienic town around us. With our eyes open we walk through a dream: ourselves only a ghost of a vanished age.¹

There are the ghastly images of Jewish collective memory which resound with the experience of rejection and exclusion for many generations. There is the negative awareness of Jewishness as a condition of being unwanted, ridiculed and despised. There is the radical ambiguity of where does the human end and the inhuman begin. There is the associating of the Jew with all vulnerable humanity, the poor soul, the cripple, the fool. There is the protective irony of the mocker, who alternately identifies with, and rejects the vulnerable fool, because he can never resolve the tension between the compassion and disgust he feels for him.

All these qualities are distinctly present in the work of Nathanael West, and one can sense that this mode of fiction, what he himself called "my particular kind of joking,"² would never have occurred to a Christian imagination. We know from biographical evidence that West deliberately resisted any Jewish influence and "typicality." The Jews portrayed in his novels could delight the most rabid anti-Semite. But for all his shouting denials, his all-American name, his Ivy-League dress and girlfriends, West remained an urban Jew in his deepest self-consciousness, and retained a compelling kinship of the imagination with his East-European grandfather, Weinstein, and the ghosts of those who came before him.

As an American, living in the 1930's, West was well aware of the "ennobling of violence." He knew that violence came to be thought of not as an evil but as the climax of social progress. But as a Jew, he was enough the child of a long tradition of nonviolence to be shocked and tormented every day in a world where "violence is idiomatic,"³ and in Miss Lonelyhearts he created a portrait of a man whom the ordinary horrors of ordinary American life drove to despair, madness, and death.

Unable to be entirely the tough American "boy in the backroom,"⁴ and resisting the natural inclination to be the fool, whom pity destroys, West must ridicule both.

I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laughter is "bitter," I must laugh at the laugh.⁵

he says in Balso. Leslie Fiedler comments on this Jewish phenomenon of self-mockery in fiction:

The Jewish American writer chooses, characteristically, to work in neither the traditional tragic nor the traditional comic mode; for he feels both modes to be aristocratic, that is, pre-industrial, pre-mass-culture genres, reflecting the impulse of a reigning class to glorify its own suffering and to laugh at the suffering of others postulated as inferior to them, to treat only its own suffering as really real. The Jew functions in his deepest imagination (influenced, of course by the Gentile culture to which he aspires), his own inferior, and he must consequently laugh at himself, glorify himself, if at all, by laughing at himself. This is the famous Jewish humour, rooted in a humility too humble to think of its self-abasement as religious, and a modesty too modest to think of its encounter with pain as really real. This is also the source of a third literary genre, neither tragedy nor comedy, though like both, based on the perception of human absurdity.⁶

West's "private unfunny jokes" cut deep. But his disgust and indignation are grounded in his compassion for the "poor broken bastards," a compassion

which only one who has been a victim himself can feel for his fellow victims.

Despite the unbelievable clarity with which West sees the destructive forces governing human existence from within and from without, he refuses to abandon the quest for meaning and faith, or to ease the tension of the dialectic. "All order is doomed," he declares, "yet the battle is worth while."⁷

Does that mean that redemption is in sight? No. The vast "Sargasso Sea"⁸ of misery and despair, which West creates in each of his novels, offers no such promises. Then, "is it not worth while?" That is not true either. But this is the way in which the Jews learned to argue with God and, ironically, dispute with Him, those ultimate questions of human destiny. This is the spirit in which the ancient sages had spun their reverent dialectic around the Talmud. It is also the spirit in which Lenny Bruce acted out his irreverent, and yet deeply religious dialectic, in an intricate network of black-humour jokes.

Incongruous as it may sound, the two are mysteriously linked in a common sensibility, a unique formulation of a general spiritual predicament. The fool, says Enid Welsford, is "he who gets slapped."⁹ The Jews have been slapped.

CHAPTER I - FOOTNOTES

¹Robert Alter, After the Tradition (New York: Dutton, 1969), p. 29.

²Richard Gehman, "Introduction," Nathanael West, The Day of the Locust (New York: Bantam Books, 1953), p. xx.

³Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Violence," Contact, v. I (October, 1932), p. 132.

⁴Edmund Wilson, "Postscript," The Boys in the Back Room (San Francisco: Colt, 1951), p. 51.

⁵Nathanael West, The Dream Life of Balso Snell (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 129.

⁶Leslie Fiedler, Waiting for the End (New York: Delta Books, 1965), pp. 84-85.

⁷Nathanael West, Miss Lonelyhearts (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 56.

⁸Nathanael West, The Day of the Locust (New York: Bantam Books, 1963), p. 81.

⁹Enid Welsford, The Fool: His Social and Literary History (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1966), p. 316.

CHAPTER II

"HE WASN'T NATE AFTER THAT. . . ."

"What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe." (Kafka, Diaries)

Nathanael West was born Nathan Weinstein in New York City on October 17, 1903, the child of Jewish immigrants from Russia. His mother, Anna Wallenstein, came of a cultivated family, and had been very beautiful as a girl. His father, Max Weinstein, a building contractor, was gentle, kind and understanding. There was a strong emotional bond between father and son. Of West's two sisters, he was fond of the younger one, Laura, who resembled the father. Their friendship continued into adulthood, when Laura married West's college friend, S.J. Perelman.

West received his early education at two Manhattan grammar schools, where he was a mediocre and indifferent student. He was remembered as a thin, awkward, ungainly child, "something of a dreamer."¹ A former counselor at Camp Paradox in the Adirondacks, where West spent several summers, also recalls him as a "quiet chap and not much of a mixer." Bookish, and more withdrawn than other boys, he admired athletic achievements and was greatly interested in and attracted to sports. Baseball particularly was his great passion, but his hopes for a major league career were brought to an abrupt end by an episode recorded by a childhood friend:

He was pitching for Camp Paradox that day. . . because he was one of the three campers who owned a fielder's glove. He sure-God hadn't made it because he could field, and neither could he hit far or run fast. The game stayed tight till the late innings, when Pine Tree loaded the bags with two down. The third out looked like a cinch. A long high fly was heading straight for Pep, who didn't have to budge to make the catch. Pine Tree chalked up four runs and the game, though, when the ball hit Pep on the head and rolled away for a homer. . . . He wasn't Nate after that, not to anybody. He was Pep.³

The incident left a deep mark on West's consciousness, and he dramatized it much later in an unpublished short story, "Western Union Boy." The story is concerned with the recollections of a middle-aged man who feels that his life has been a failure. Trying to remember when it all started, he thinks of one of his early boyhood flops, when he had dropped an easy fly ball at a critical moment of a baseball game. As a result, he was chased from the field by a mob of angry spectators. He managed to escape to a nearby woods, where he spent the night in a hiding place, trembling with fear. Even after the night was over, the boy's terror remained the same.^{3A} The incident is autobiographical, and West retold it to his friends frequently. Wells Root, a close friend in West's later years who listened often to the baseball story, remembers that West felt that "if they [the mob] had caught him, they would have killed him."⁴

The crowd in pursuit of a scapegoat appears in A Cool Million and serves as the pivotal image in The Day of the Locust. The figure of the scapegoat, the persecuted "other," hunted by his tormentors (real or imagined), is present and implied throughout West's work. Ultimately, the reason for West's preoccupation with this image cannot be known, but its being an archetype deep in the Jewish collective unconscious must be considered. After all, West was a Jew.

After his graduation from grammar school, West enrolled at the DeWitt Clinton High School, where he soon distinguished himself as one of its weakest students. Although there were both a school newspaper and a literature-and-art magazine, The Magpie, West took no part in these or any other extracurricular activities. In June 1920 he left Clinton without graduating.

According to his sister's recollections, West had begun reading Tolstoy when he was ten. By the time he was thirteen he had gone through a great number of Russian authors, of whom Dostoevski impressed him most; and had read Flaubert, whom he admired, and Henry James, whom he respected, but whose artificialities of language he deplored.^{4A} Such literary precocity implies that there existed some potentials in the young West which Clinton was unable to arouse.

In February 1922, he enrolled at Brown University as a transfer student from Tufts (where he only stayed for two months), on the basis of the transcript of another Nathan Weinstein from Boston.⁵ Due to the fortunate windfall of credits in Chemistry, Biology, Physics and Economics--subjects uncongenial to West's mind, but required by most colleges--earned by Nathan Weinstein of Boston, West was able to confine himself almost entirely to courses in literature, philosophy and history. The miraculously inherited credits (and an apparent change in his attitude) enabled him not only to pass his courses, but to graduate from Brown in two and a half years.

West's enthusiasm for classwork was sporadic. Generally ignoring what he should have been reading for classes, he was deep in Dostoevski, Huysmans, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud. He disliked "middle-of-the-road

realism. . .middle class writers writing on the middle-class."⁶ In 1933, he wrote in Contempo:

Lyric novels can be written according to Poe's definition of a lyric poem. The short novel is a distinct form especially fitted for use in this country. France, Spain, Italy have a literature as well as the Scandanavian (sic) countries. For a hasty people we are too patient with the Bucks, Dreisers and Lewises. Thank God we are not all Scandinavians.⁷

Socially, the "quiet chap, not much of a mixer,"⁸ underwent an amazing metamorphosis at Brown. Described by his roommate, Philip Lukin as "a typical college type of the sophisticated variety,"⁹ he became an Ivy-League fashion plate. (Another friend, however, claims that West carried his "collegiate" role to the point of caricature, and remembers him as resembling "a well-heeled mortuary assistant.")¹⁰ Despite his slightly quaint appearance and reserved manner, West was friendly and kind to fellow-students, and extravagantly generous with the large allowance received from his father.

With a group of drinking and high-living adolescent Bohemians, he attended dances, parties and beer-parlours, and was persona grata with the elite of the college: Quentin Reynolds, Frank O. Hough, and Jeremiah Mahoney. Except for one thing--the fraternities. The fraternities at Brown did not accept Jews. Reynolds recollects that West "spent a lot of time at my fraternity house--Delta Tau Delta--and everyone liked him."¹¹ Similarly at Hough's fraternity, "the snootiest and most anti-Semitic fraternity on the campus,"¹² West was a welcome visitor, because "nobody ever thought of Pep as being Jewish."¹³

Both Reynolds and Hough claim that the fact that Jews were not admitted to fraternities "never bothered Nat."¹⁴ This sort of complacency

is rather alien to the Jewish temperament, and entirely inconsistent with West's character and behaviour. West's roommate, Lukin, is probably closer to the truth when he surmises that the exclusion from the Brown fraternities generated deep-seated and long-lasting bitterness in West. With Lukin, also a Jew, he often discussed this sensitive subject, ticking off the fraternities he might agree to join, and insisting that he would only join "one of the better ones."¹⁵

West was nineteen when he entered Brown, an age when a man faces most crucially the problem of self-definition and identity. This confrontation is particularly difficult for a second-generation American Jew, who received little or no education in the Jewish religion. His position is inevitably ambiguous. For him the plight centres around the challenge of alienation and assimilation. Possessing intelligence, good breeding and a wardrobe from Brooks Brothers, why should he endure the humiliations and misfortunes that the crude, Jewish outcasts and pariahs had to endure?

Confronting this dilemma, many have consciously rejected their Jewish culture, society and family, only to discover that they were unconsciously "contaminated" by it. Heine, who considered his Jewishness an "affliction," chose assimilation and even baptism, but remained uncomfortably aware of himself as "the other." Intellectually repelled by, and emotionally drawn to Jews, he never resolved the conflict, until time unkindly solved it for him. Weary and sick he confessed:

I no longer am a fat Hellenist, the freest man since Goethe, a jolly, somewhat corpulent Hellenist with a contemptuous smile for lean Jews--I am only a poor Jew, sick unto death, a picture of gaunt misery, an unhappy being.¹⁶

According to Sanford, himself a Jew, West "writhed under the accidental curse of his religion":

. . .he changed his name, he changed his clothes, he changed his manners (we all did), in short he did everything possible to create the impression in his own mind--remember that, in his own mind--that he was just like Al Vanderbilt. It never quite came off.¹⁷

West had nothing to do with any organized Jewish activity on campus, shunned Jewish girls, hung around the snobbish Gentile fraternities hopelessly hoping to be pledged, and desperately resisted the truth: that he cannot be truly indistinguishable from "them."

Although none of West's college friends seemed to have taken his literary aspirations seriously, some of the material used in The Dream Life of Balso Snell began to take shape in his final college years. The name of a Brown professor, who also coached baseball, was Snell and that name amused West because of its closeness to "smell." On several occasions during his last two years at college, West invented various adventures of a hero by that name.

To celebrate Spring Day of 1924 at Brown, Quentin Reynolds was elected to make a speech. He asked West for help and received from him a manuscript describing Balso's pilgrimage into the bowels of the legendary Trojan Horse. The speech, says Reynolds, was a resounding success:

English professors who had ignored me now looked at me speculatively. Had they all unknown been harboring a genius in their midst: Pep had sworn me to secrecy, but finally the pressure was too great; I told Ben Clough, our favorite professor, the truth, that Pep had written it all. Pep told Clough that I was lying, and he called upon Sid Perelman to back him up. Sid did so.¹⁸

After his graduation in 1924, West persuaded his father to send him to Paris, where he visited bookstores, grew a beard, and had a great time playing the Bohemian dandy:

. . .long hair and a rapt look wouldn't get you to first base. Even dirt and sandals and calling Sargent a lousy painter was not enough. You had to be an original.

When I got to Montparnasse, all the obvious roles had either been dropped or were being played by experts. But I made a lucky hit. Instead of trying for strangeness, I formalized and exaggerated the costume of a bond salesman. I wore a carefully pressed Brooks Brothers clothing, sober but rich ties, and carried gloves and a tightly rolled umbrella. My manners were elaborate and I professed a great horror at the slightest breach of the conventional. It was a success. I was asked to all parties.¹⁹

The turmoil of Surrealism and Dadaism interested West, but, as usual, he remained skeptical and detached from the current trends. He enjoyed Paris and liked its charming sophistication, but was not overwhelmed.

He returned to New York early in 1926, worked for his father for a while, and then in 1927 got a job as assistant manager at the Kenmore Hotel on East 23rd Street. The hotel became a gathering place for West's friends and a haven for his homeless pals and acquaintances, who were given rooms free of charge. (Erskine Caldwell and James Farrell among many.) His father, like so many others, was ruined by the 1929 crash, and West found himself for the first time without money. Unable to devote himself to writing, he grew to hate the trivial hotel chores and his estrangement and detachment from the world were steadily increasing.

In 1931, he took a leave from his hotel job, and together with Sanford, also a novelist, rented a place in the Adirondacks. There, they wrote in the mornings, and fished and hunted in the afternoons. West was

working on Miss Lonelyhearts.

Soon after this vacation, West's first novel, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, was privately printed in a limited edition of five hundred copies. Ignored by critics and public (one review appeared in Contempo), the book listed "Nathanael West" as author, and thus marked West's official change of name. Asked how he got the name, West explained to William Carlos Williams: "Horace Greeley said, 'Go West, young man.' So I did."²⁰ Considering West's care in choosing names for his characters, his answer is pregnant with symbols and implications.

What some call West's anti-Semitism had by then become considerable:

He hated loud talk, ostentation, sharpie clothes, public display of emotion, Bronx intellectuals (meaning Jews), Jewish girls (bagels, he called them), sentimentality, and perhaps above all himself.²¹

In 1932 West had become co-editor with William Carlos Williams of a little magazine, Contact, and in 1933 associate editor of another magazine, Americana. Before Americana expired, West published in it a short story "Business Deal," condemning the Hollywood "pants pressers" (Jews), and some excerpts from Balso. He applied for a Guggenheim fellowship, but failed to get it.

West was working on the sixth version of Miss Lonelyhearts, when his friends Josephine Herbst and John Hermann persuaded him to leave his job at the hotel permanently, and to settle in Bucks County, where he could devote all his time to writing. In 1933, Miss Lonelyhearts was completed, published and reviewed enthusiastically. With West's luck, or "with God's help," as the Jew would say, the publisher chose that moment to go bankrupt, and by the time a new publisher was found, the reviews were forgotten. Miss

Lonelyhearts sold fewer than eight hundred copies, and West's income from his first two books and three years of writing came to \$780.

At about the same time, West announced his engagement to Alice Shepard, a Roman Catholic who had been his fiancée for three years. Although he had bought a marriage licence in 1929, their marriage never took place. West blamed it on poverty, but Sanford explained it differently:

She (Alice) was. . .tall and good looking, conventionally so, as are five million American girls of any generation. She was Christian, and Pep, of course was Jewish, and as I gathered it from him, that was the all-important difference. I believe it caused the ultimate break between them.^{20A}

After the republication of Miss Lonelyhearts, the book was sold to Twentieth Century Fox, and West received a writing contract at \$350 a week. Given little to do at the studio, and watching his novel turned into a murder thriller, he left Hollywood after several months, disillusioned and embittered.

Back in New York, he wrote A Cool Million. It appeared in 1934, was unfavorably reviewed and sold poorly.

Without money and with no possibilities open, West returned to Hollywood as a script-writer. From 1935 until his death in 1940, he remained in Hollywood, turning out trivial screenplays for B movies. He was a competent but detached screenplay-writer, reserving his true dedication for his novels. The Day of the Locust was written between studio assignments.

With his Hollywood salary, West was able to live in comfort for the first time since 1929, and to devote weekends to his favorite passtime, hunting. There is something tragi-comic in West's determination to be an outdoor man, be it Babe Ruth or Nimrod. With his ornate hunting outfits,

and his imported hunting dogs, who always turned out to be shivering "biscuit eaters," he seems to be equally miscast as country squire or athlete. Edmund Wilson, who enjoyed discussing guns and hunting with West, said that he always exhibited

. . . a quick Jewish sense of humour, and the quality of his imagination was both Russian and Jewish. Hunting was largely a following of the Hemingway fashion. He told me once about shooting a bear in the Adirondacks, but. . . the effect of the story was to make me feel sorry for the bear.²²

Sanford, remembering their hunting trips, claims "there was no more dangerous man to be in the woods with than Pep West."

It wasn't that he didn't know guns were meant for killing. It was simply that he was too bloody fumble-fingered to put the knowledge to use. He was not only capable of handing you a piece with the hammer cocked; he was also capable of nudging you with the barrel. He did that to me once with a loaded shotgun. . . .²³

West published his last novel, The Day of the Locust, in 1939, hoping its success would get him out of Hollywood. It sold under fifteen hundred copies. (Bennett Cerf blamed the commercial failure on the distaste women readers expressed for it.) Some critics objected to its morbidness and lack of social realism, demanding "more documentation--most of all, perhaps, a few ordinary people."²⁴

West summed up the critics' response in a letter to Scott Fitzgerald: "the box score stands: Good reviews--fifteen per cent, bad reviews--twenty-five per cent, brutal personal attacks--sixty per cent."²⁵ As an afterthought he added that he was planning another novel.

In 1940, West met Eileen McKenney, the protagonist of Ruth McKenney's My Sister Eileen. They fell in love instantly and were married

in April 1940. Elated, West wrote to Bennett Cerf that he was no longer interested in pessimistic writing, and intended to write only "simple, warm, and kindly books" in the future. It seems too cruelly ironic that the predilection for no happy ending in West's fiction should also prevail in his personal story.

On December 22, the Wests were returning from a hunting trip in Mexico, when West, a poor driver, went through a stop sign near El Centro, California. Their car crashed into another automobile. Eileen died instantly, and West an hour later, on the way to the hospital. His body was shipped to New York and buried in a Jewish Cemetery.

Thirty-seven years old at the time of his death, West was practically unknown. The report of his death in the New York Times featured Eileen's name in the headline of the story and gave West almost no recognition. The item appeared in the amusements and movie page.

West's reputation has risen continuously. His long neglect by the critics of the period is now being rectified by his enthusiastic discoverers. After his death.

The publication of West's Complete Works in America, in 1957, brought awesome critical acclaim. As S.E. Hyman says: ". . .there was general agreement that West was one of the most important writers of the thirties, as American as apple pie. West's picture appeared on the cover of the Saturday Review, looking very Jewish."²⁶

CHAPTER II - FOOTNOTES

¹James Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, undated), p. 4.

²Ibid., p. 7.

³John Sanford, "Nathanael West," The Screen Writer (December, 1946), pp. 10-16.

^{3A}Light, op. cit., p. 132.

⁴Ibid., p. 133.

^{4A}Ibid., p. 8.

⁵Ibid., p. 6.

⁶Ibid., p. 28.

⁷Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Miss Lonelyhearts," Contempo, v. III (May 15, 1933), p. 9.

⁸Light, op. cit., p. 9.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 16.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁶Heinrich Heine, Confessions, quoted by G. Karpelis, Jewish Literature and Other Essays (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1911) p. 362.

¹⁷Light, op. cit., p. 133.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁹Nathanael West, "L'Affaire Beano," an unpublished story quoted by Richard Gehman, "Introduction," The Day of the Locust (New York: Bantam Books, 1953), p. xiv.

²⁰William Carlos Williams, Autobiography (New York: 1951), pp. 301-302.

^{20A}Light, op. cit., p. 74.

²¹Light, op. cit., p. 63.

²²Ibid., p. 67.

²³Ibid., p. 69.

²⁴Louis Salomon, "The Day of the Locust," The Nation (July 15, 1939), pp. 78-79.

²⁵Gehman, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁶Stanley Edgar Hyman, Nathanael West (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 11.

CHAPTER III

". . .THE ANCIENT STREETS OF OUR MISERY."

There is no simple formula for identifying the Jewish sensibility of a Jewish writer. The materials of art itself and their tangled connections with reality are too complex to be neatly categorized. The distinctiveness of the Jew and its multiple cultural and traditional elements, also escapes easy definition.

Nathanael West stands far outside traditional Judaism, and yet he is significantly linked with it. This link has nothing to do with Jewish literary tradition, but has everything to do with basic values and assumptions of Judaism; it is not a bond of influence, but rather that of affinity, of almost a blood relation, more ancient and deeper than literary influence.

His is a modern, universal song, with an ancient Hebrew melody. It is that melody, the "nigun"* which communicates the sense and intensity of an experience felt and recollected, that makes his work particular, and hauntingly Jewish.

An old Jewish proverb says: "The fool is half a prophet"; another one says: "The heart is half a prophet." Throughout Yiddish literature, which is largely derived from folk culture, the heart occupies a prominent position. To "have a heart," to be capable of love, means to be human. To be human means to assert the existence of God. To continue for centuries

* The Hebrew word nigun, describes not merely melody, but the tone and inner feeling.

the onesided dialogue with God, and the preaching of love under the constant threat of annihilation, is to be a madman or a fool.

Although the fool in Nathanael West differs considerably from the fools in Yiddish writers such as Mendele, Sholom Aleichem or Bashevis Singer, he shares crucial characteristics with them. The twentieth century Zeitgeist and the American society are quite unlike the closely-knit misery of the East-European "shtetl." Success, money, power--all conspire to cast out love, to freeze the heart, to dull sensibility. The modern fool's fate is much more difficult than that of his predecessors. His loneliness is deeper and his defeats more constant. But like his predecessors, he is engaged in an all-important quest, a quest for love and faith.

West sees too clearly the cruel absurdity of such a role in such a world as ours. He is fully aware that all the odds are against his fool. Nowhere does he allude to any promises of success or reward. And yet, driven by a passionate desire and need to remain human, he is unable to abandon his desolate pursuit, or to avert his heart from the ambiguous fool. Physically removed from the ghetto, and mentally struggling to wean himself from the Jewish "mystique," West could not silence the echoes of the distant past.

The unhealthy old Jewish town within him was
far more real than the new hygienic town
around him....¹

i. The Shtetl

Though the struggle for livelihood was continuous and seldom successful, the East-European "shtetl" Jews never regarded it as the reason for existence. Life to them was seen in terms of ends, not functions. Cut

off from, and constantly threatened by the outer world, they were bound together by firm spiritual ties, and by a sense of destiny that meant a sharing of poverty, fears, hopes and a peculiar sense of humour.

Jewish humour can provide a means of indirect aggression; it can release bitter self-criticism, self-mockery and irony. It is expressed in symbolic shrugs, subtle hints, gestures and sighs, but rarely in pure and carefree laughter. Like the Yiddish language, which reflects a strange mixture of holiness and grandeur inherited from The Bible, with profanity and coarseness acquired at the market place, it is ready to challenge and undercut every value it is prepared to defend or even worship.

An old saying demonstrates a classic expression of Yiddish irony: "Thou hast chosen us from among the nations--why did you have to pick on the Jews?" The first statement is an affirmation, using language of the Scriptures, and a tone of holiness and reverence. The second is a question, using market-place Yiddish and a familiar, almost upbraiding tone. Though the faith of the first statement is being challenged by the scepticism of the second statement, it is not invalidated by it. The two contradictory interpretations create a tension which remains unresolved. The Jews believed both things simultaneously, because only if they took the myth of the Chosen People with the utmost seriousness, yet at the same time mocked their pretensions to being anything but the most wretched people on earth, could they survive. The constant juggling of counterposed elements and the paradoxical insistence that daily frustrations and life's futility do not obliterate an urgent need for human affirmation, enabled them not only to stay alive, but to continue to seek and to fight for love. Maurice Samuels has explained this technique as follows:

We must be careful to understand the nature of Sholom Aleichem's laughter. It is more than a therapeutic resistance to the destructive frustrations and humiliations of the Exile. It was the application of a fantastic technique that the Jews had developed over the ages to counter the torments and discrimination to which they were continuously subjected. It was a technique of avoidance and sublimation; also a technique of theoretical reversal. They had found the trick of converting disaster into a verbal triumph, applying a sort of Talmudic ingenuity of interpretation to events they could not handle in their reality. They turned the tables on their adversaries dialectically, and though their physical disadvantages were not diminished thereby, nor the external situation changed one whit, they emerged with a feeling of victory.²

Because of its own limitations, the world of the East-European Jew did not impose on him the burden of power struggle, hubris, and similar pretensions to aristocracy.

Rejecting the whole ethos of historical aggrandizement as it has come to us from the Greek drama and been colored by the era of Christian expansion, the Yiddish writers express through the theme of anti-heroism their admiration for those who do not exert their social will but live and endure in silence, as well as their contempt for what the outer world takes to be greatness but which they often feel is no more than an appetite for blood.³

So the great themes in Yiddish literature were: The virtue of powerlessness, the power of helplessness, the company of the dispossessed, the sanctity of the insulted and the injured, and the heroic potential of the fool in an environment which is seen as unalterable.

The fool who appears in Yiddish literature is not the familiar figure of the hero's servant or clown who provides comic relief. Nor is he the traditional Western protagonist who defies fate, and is heroic insofar as he attempts to change it. Instead of Aristotilian hierarchies, the Jewish ethos and literature recognize two eternal categories: the

victim and the victimizer. The Jewish fool, though elevated to the rank of protagonist, is still a victim, a loser, only occasionally winning a bitter, ironic victory.

Since the fool is by definition the deficient one in terms of normal social judgment, he can only be made a hero when everything else fails. The Jewish fool remembered from legends and folk tales, became a potential literary hero when the ordinary Jew could no longer be considered master of his fate. He remained, though, an ambiguous and ironic hero who, denied the choice of action, could only define himself in terms of his reaction against the evil-in-power that surrounded him.

Under such circumstances, foolishness seemed a blessing in disguise, a way of remaining innocent in action as well as in thought. The author, through employing the fool, could ridicule vulnerability and elevate it ironically to a positive value at the same time. (This is exactly what West does in Miss Lonelyhearts. He satirizes the weakness and ineffectuality of Miss Lonelyhearts, but at the same time exalts them. Juxtaposed with Shrike's callous jokes, they become the only moral alternative West offers in this novel.)

Using the fool as protagonist, Jewish writers could explore the irony of faith which could coexist with doubt. Just as irony became the Jewish means of defence against an otherwise intolerable reality, the ironic fool became a literary device for retaining trust in God while facing constant persecution.

ii. The Yiddish Classics

Mendele Mocher Sforim,* (1836-1917), Sholom Jacob Abramovitch's persona-narrator, was a caustic, sharp-tongued satirist. Split between the pious Jew and the sceptic of the Enlightenment (Haskala), he "jokingly" said about himself that "only God above hated the Jews as much he below." His best known book, The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin III, begins with a fool-victim and ends with a fool-hero. As the protagonist finds himself threatened by an openly hostile Gentile world, he ceases to be the target of laughter and becomes the subject of compassion. In an environment which denies him the dignity of pride and the choice of action, he can do no more than react, and in his effort to stay alive, retain nothing but the sense of his own human worth.

During their travels in quest of the remnants of the ten lost tribes of Israel, Benjamin and Senderl, whom Mendele fashions after Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, encounter a variety of misadventures. Among other disasters, they get kidnapped and forced into the Tsarist army. They escape, are apprehended, and are facing courtmartial, when Benjamin makes a speech in their defence at the trial:

We would like to inform you that we don't know a thing about waging wars, we never did know, and we never want to know. We are, praise be to God, married men, and our thoughts are devoted to other things. We can't waste our time on these matters, they don't even concern us.⁴

Although this is a very human plea and it questions seriously the wisdom of "married men" who do wage wars, it does not vindicate Benjamin's position. Benjamin may be morally superior to the organized evil that would

* Hebrew for "The Seller of Books"

destroy him, but his political impotence and ignorance of the world are ridiculous and pathetic virtues. His victory (for he wins his release from the army, in the end) is an ambiguous and very ironic one, and the author shows both contempt and compassion for the anti-heroic hero he is forced to root for. His ambivalence toward this "winner" of arguments who is more moral in his unworldliness than his adversaries are in their "realism," is understandable. Whether resigned or reacting, a passivist or a pacifist, he is a miserable victim, a fool, defenseless in a malevolent world.

In Fishke the Lame, another tale about a poor wretch of a Holy Fool, Mendele has this to say:

Paupers live in their obscure holes and make children quietly. Who cares? They are fruitful and multiply on the face of the earth. The harvest, may the Evil Eye not harm them, is great. And then the young ones, suddenly stand on their own feet and a fresh crop of new, quivering little Chaikes, Chaims, Yosels--naked, barefoot, clad in rags, cluttering up the houses, the synagogues, the streets, the towns and getting between everyone's feet.⁵

The bitter irony of this passage is obvious. God is put on trial and found guilty. And yet, the ultimate authority of faith is not eradicated, faith which is not so much a question of religious belief, but more a habit of trusting that somehow, sometime, somewhere, right will triumph over wrong, the human over the inhuman. Mendele's reaction to his protagonist's laments is an interesting comment on this peculiar faith:

It's almost like spite work! Oh Lord of Nations, whom hast Thou punished? Two unfortunate miserable cripples, who would have been far better off if they'd never been born?

I made a pious face, shook my head and said "Ta, ta, ta! You mustn't talk like that!" I did not say this because it answered Fishke's cry of woe in any way, but rather

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because it has become a custom in the world, when misery forces someone to start asking embarrassing questions, you must chide him and slow him down with at least a "ta, ta, ta." Having thus satisfied tradition, I went on to speak like a human being.⁶

Although there is more self-tolerance and affection at the basis of Sholom Aleichem's (Solomon Rabinowitch, 1859-1916) humorous stories, his characters, similarly to those of Mendele, are caught in the dilemma of no longer finding complete deliverance in the traditional God, yet being unable to conceive of abandoning him. Tevye, one of Sholom Aleichem's principal characters who, like the other protagonists, represents the Jews, the "luckless people," describes it as follows:

I feel so wretched that I have to get it off my chest; so I talk it over with Him, with the Almighty, about the way He deals with me. He is, I say, a merciful Father. He has pity on me, but He shows me what He can do, too; and what can I say? Maybe it has to be that way. He is high in heaven, high up, and we are here below, sunk in the earth, deep in the earth. So we must say that He is right and His judgment is right.⁷

Another of Sholom Aleichem's famous characters appearing in many stories, Menahem Mendl, writes in a letter:

First of all, I'd like to inform you that, God be praised, I'm well and am enjoying life and peace. And may blessed God arrange matters so that we should always hear from one another only good news and glad tidings. Amen!

Secondly, you should know that all week long I've been lying sick in Boiberik, that is, not dangerously sick, God forbid--just suffering from a nasty illness. What happened is that I fell on my back, so that I'm now unable to turn from one side to the other. . . .⁸

Menahem Mendl's naive failure to recognize the discrepancy between "first-of-all" and "secondly" is comic and it provokes laughter. But it suggests more than humour. The two statements of faith and misery are again symbolic of the simultaneous presence of two contradictory kinds of experience. As in the saying, "Thou hast chosen us among the nations--why did you have to pick on the Jews?", Mendl's first paragraph, using religious phrasing, represents the inherited and unquestioning knowledge of God, while his second paragraph lapses into the vernacular and represents the daily experience of misery and suffering.

Again the fool is employed to affirm faith, and to expose the absurdity of such a faith in a world which provides daily evidence against it. Again through the use of irony, simplistic hope is undermined, but not discarded.

The modern, post-Freudian reader is aware of the potential dangers of a continued "technique of avoidance and sublimation." The post-Holocaust Jew has seen the consequences of the passive acceptance of defeat, accompanied by the ironic joke and antirational faith. And yet, despite the ominous implications, Issac Bashevis Singer (1904 ----), the son and grandson of Polish rabbis, and a twentieth century Jewish-American writer, picked no other survivor out of the ashes, but the old sad fool, Gimpel.

Unlike his literary predecessors (notably Bontshe Schweig, by I.L. Peretz, 1851-1915), Gimpel is fully aware of the discrepancy between his external and internal self. "I am Gimpel the Fool. I don't think myself a fool," he says as he presents himself to the reader. Having considered the alternatives of faith and of scepticism, Gimpel deliberately

chooses faith at any cost, i.e. chooses to be the fool.

I resolved that I would always believe what I was told. What's the good of not believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe; tomorrow it's God himself. . . . (17)*

In the name of what is alternately referred to as "faith," "belief," or "gullibility," Gimpel marries a shrew, raises six kids, none of whom is his own, foregoes the privilege of being master of his household, and the pleasure of revenge on an environment that has constantly harassed and ridiculed him. Finding "a man's form" in his wife's bed, Gimpel muses:

Another in my place would have made an uproar, and enough noise to rouse the whole town, but the thought occurred to me that I might wake the child. A little thing like that--why frighten a little swallow, I thought. (15)

The struggle between faith and scepticism is explicit throughout the story, but the faith is founded on a strange, ambiguous divinity. In his dialogue with the Spirit of Evil, Gimpel is told:

"There is no world to come," he said. "They've sold you a bill of goods and talked you into believing you carried a cat in your belly. What nonsense!"
 "Well then," I said, "and is there a God?"
 He answered, "There is no God either."
 "What," I said, "is there, then?"
 "A thick mire." (21)

In order to preserve this peculiar belief, and to retain his moral sanity in a mad and dishonest world, Gimpel must sacrifice pride, virility, reputation and the balm of revenge. With a beggar's sack and stock in hand, he becomes a story-telling wanderer, detached from this world, and dreamily committed to "some other place." And what is that other place?

* All references are to Issac Bashevis Singer, Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories (New York: Avon Books, 1965), unless otherwise indicated.

The other place is as ambiguous as the divinity that supposedly governs human destiny, but Gimpel somehow manages to defy a philosopher's logic and a psychiatrist's diagnosis.

The grave waits and the worms are hungry; the shrouds are prepared--I carry them in my beggar's sack. Another "shnorrer" is waiting to inherit my bed of straw. When the time comes I will go joyfully. Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived. (23) (Italics mine)

Eli Wiesel remarked in one of his aphorisms on man: "The just man has a thousand truths, and that's his tragedy, the murderer has one alone, and that's his strength."

As times and conditions of the world change for the worse, the pursuit of truth becomes too painful to endure, and the quest for faith and love becomes more and more difficult. If the fool is a reaction against the evil of the environment, he must reject--and be rejected--more and more, as the evil increases. He cannot speak if no one listens. But yet there are always the stubborn few, "The Last of the Just," who cannot dismiss him from their consciousness.

For all his weakness and predisposition to misfortune, the fool in Eastern European Jewish literature had a firm sense of distinct self. The danger and horror from without threatened, but did not obliterate his identity from within. If God was conspicuously unobtrusive, the fool questioned his conduct occasionally, but still maintained a faith beyond hope and despair.

The modern man can no longer sustain this "triumph of identity despite failure of circumstances." He becomes part of the universal horror

that confronts him, and accepts or internalizes the alien or hostile external reality.

West sees the world in a state of chaos and darkness. God does not reveal himself through love or through history. There is no court of justice in history, only an appetite for power and blood. There can be no love and passion against the backdrop of sterility and impotence, only a spiritual vacuum, crippled sexuality and feeble attempts to communicate which fail repeatedly. There is no great past, only a puny present, a wasteland with little hope of redemption.

West's fool is denied the comfort of converting misery into oration, or equating weakness with moral victory, as Sholom Aleichem's fools do. He hasn't the solace of a mysterious, sacramental wisdom, given to Gimpel. West never permits him to escape, avoid, or consciously deny the tyranny of reality. Whether tortured by introspection like Miss Lonelyhearts, or completely unself-aware like Lemuel, whichever extreme he attempts, his destruction is imminent. West's fool is a degraded, abused, often pathetically ludicrous soul, and yet, the only aspiring one in each of his novels.

In The Day of the Locust West says:

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.⁹

That sigh of compassion is present throughout West's work, along with a savage thrust of contempt and anger. His Jewish dualistic perception of reality does not allow him to accept dogma of either faith or nihilism. But if the sentimental suffering of Miss Lonelyhearts is ridiculed, the

pragmatic cynicism of Shrike is exposed and condemned. If Miss Lonelyhearts' Christ dream is inadequate and absurd, pitted against the hopelessness of existing reality, it is also poignantly human; the only serious moral alternative in the bleak landscape of the novel. If Abe Kusich is a grotesque dwarf, his vitality, endurance and human heart redeem him and triumph over the well-formed but useless bodies and deformed minds of his fellow-creatures.

CHAPTER III - FOOTNOTES

¹Robert Alter, After the Tradition (New York: Dutton, 1969), p. 54.

²Maurice Samuels, "The Tribune of the Golus," Jewish Book Annual, v. xxv (1967-68), p. 54.

³"Introduction," A Treasury of Yiddish Stories, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Fawcett Premier Books, 1953), p. 47.

⁴Mendele Mocher Sforim, The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin III, tr. Moshe Spiegel (New York: Schocken Books, 1949), p. 123.

⁵Mendele Mocher Sforim, Fishke the Lame, tr. Gerald Stillman (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), p. 40.

⁶Ibid., p. 213.

⁷Sholom Aleichem, The Old Country, tr. Julius and Frances Butwin (London: André Deutsch, 1958), p. 174.

⁸Sholom Aleichem, The Tevye Stories and Others, tr. Julius and Frances Butwin (New York: Pocket Books, 1965), p. 168.

⁹Nathanael West, The Day of the Locust (New York: Bantam Books, 1953), p. 3.

CHAPTER IV

THE DREAM LIFE OF BALSO SNELL

Although The Dream Life of Balso Snell is not central to my thesis and therefore I shall not discuss it at length, nevertheless there are some elements in it that reveal much about West and about his remaining novels. So let me deal briefly with these.

Leslie Fiedler claims that the work of Nathanael West marks the beginning of the "great take-over by Jewish-American writers of the American imagination." "How fitting, then," he adds, "that West's first book--published in 1931, at the point when the first truly Jewish decade in the history of our cultural life was beginning--be called The Dream Life of Balso Snell, and that it turn out to be, in fact, a fractured and dissolving parable of the very process by which the emancipated Jew enters into the world of Western culture."¹

Balso begins his journey contemplating the Trojan horse:

The mouth was beyond his reach, the navel provided a cul-de-sac, and so, forgetting his dignity, he approached the last. O Annus Mirabilis!* (109)

"Not for him," Fielder continues, "the High Road to Culture via the 'horse's mouth,' nor the mystical way of 'contemplating the navel'; only the acherontic Freudian back-entrance: the anal-sexual approach. 'Tradesmen Enter by the Rear.'"^{1A}

* All references are to: Nathanael West, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, (New York; Avon Books, 1965), unless otherwise indicated.

Balso also marks the beginning of West's journey as a novelist and of the quest, which is continued by the protagonists of his future novels.

West dramatizes in Balso his multiple dualisms, with which he was to wrestle continuously in his later works: his love and hate for Jews, America, Art, Mind; his yearning for a transcendental view of existence and his profound awareness of chaos and futility.

In the murky interior of the Trojan Horse, Balso encounters a host of characters, most of whom serve as models for West's later novels. All are weak and ineffectual, but obsessed by the need for some heroic action. All are frustrated physical or emotional cripples, clowns, or fools, hung up on the preposterous idea that a search for meaning and values in life is necessary.

Maloney the Areopagite, the first pilgrim, is a Roman Catholic mystic writing a biography of Saint Puce, the martyred flea who "was born, lived, and died beneath the arm of our Lord." "After Christ died Saint Puce died, refusing to desert to lesser flesh" (115). Maloney, whom Balso finds trying to crucify himself with thumb tacks, and whose credo is "the lord dwells not in the bodies of the healthy and vigorous" makes a mockery of Catholic Mysticism, but also foreshadows the quasi-religious aspirations of Miss Lonelyhearts.

Raskolnikov Gilson, a young, precocious, introspective student, says about himself:

Though I exhibited myself as a clown, I wanted no mistakes made; I was a tragic clown. If it had been possible for me to attract by exhibiting a series of physical charms, my hatred would have been less. But I found it necessary to substitute strange conceits, wise and witty sayings, peculiar conduct, Art, for the muscles, teeth, hair, of my rivals.

All this much-exhibited intelligence is but a development of the instinct to please. My case is similar to that of a bird called the *Amblyornis inornata*. As his name indicates, the *Inornata* is a dull-colored ugly bird. Yet the *Inornata* is cousin to the Bird of Paradise. Because he lacks his cousin's brilliant plumage, he has to exteriorize internal feathers. (128)

Balso makes a weak pretense at admonishing the boy ("read less and play baseball"), but he reads the pamphlet to the end, and throws it away "with a sigh."

Beagle Darwin, another sad-eyed clown, appears in a dream within a dream, saying: "What is more tragic than the role of a clown?--pity and irony. Get it? The thousands of sweating, laughing, grimacing, jeering animals out front" (149)

In a letter to his pregnant girlfriend he burlesques her imagined suicide, and concludes, "If I treated you savagely, I treated myself no gentler. It is true that I concentrated on you, but only because it was your suicide." (146)

This is in essence what West does with his characters; he "feeds them with wormwood and gives them water of gall to drink" (Jerem. XXIII:15), but he treats himself no gentler.

When the official guide (the "archetypal Jewish father," according to Fielder) disconcertingly appears in the bowels of the horse, and cries in "an enormous voice," "I am a Jew! and whenever anything Jewish is mentioned, I find it necessary to say that I am a Jew. I'm a Jew! A Jew!" (113), Balso protests angrily. A people who "are like to a man sitting in a cloaca to the eyes, and whose brows touch heaven" (113) evoke his pity but mainly his disgust. Even if their aspirations are noble, the

pose is ridiculous and grotesque. After an involved metaphysical discourse, Balso indignantly wrenches himself free of the aggressive intruder "with a violent twist," and continues the journey on his own.

Whatever the symbolic significance of the tearing loose of the unwelcome censor may be, West never admits him again into the world of his fiction. No character in his future works declares so explicitly and outspokenly that he is Jewish. But the dreams his protagonists are haunted by are peculiarly Jewish dreams: the fears of alien pursuers, the pain of "otherness" and isolation, the violence and destruction culminating in Sodom burning, the pity and rage that result in bitter irony, and the urge to continue the futile quest for faith and love amidst defeat and failure.

Balso consists of a series of encounters and complications, all aimed at ridiculing man's pretensions, and parodying yet exalting his suffering. There is no discovery or ultimate truth at the end of this picaresque voyage, only "a long intricate drill" which turns a dry dream wet. Sex and dreams are shown to be no less bankrupt than intellect, art, and religion. The world is one enormous dungheap, as the initials BS appropriately epitomize. An April Fool's joke, not funny.

Though too onesided and excessively scatological, Balso is fascinating because it contains a storehouse of materials re-used in West's later books, and because, believed by critics and friends to be autobiographical, it is psychologically revealing of its author.

Although West declared Balso to be "a protest against writing books", he was astonished when the interviewer asked about his future plans. Of course, he had begun another book, "of quite a different make, wholesome, clean, holy, slightly mystic and inane."²

CHAPTER IV - FOOTNOTES

¹Leslie Fiedler, "Master of Dreams," Partisan Review, v. xxxiv, no. 3 (Summer 1967), pp. 339-59.

^{1A}Ibid.

²A.J. Liebling, "Shed a Tear for Mr. West," New York World Telegram (June 24, 1931), p. 11.

CHAPTER V

MISS LONELYHEARTS

Miss Lonelyhearts, described by West as "the portrait of a priest of our time who has a religious experience," begins with a mock prayer:

Soul of Miss Lonelyhearts, glorify me.
 Body of Miss Lonelyhearts, nourish me.
 Blood of Miss Lonelyhearts, intoxicate me.
 Tears of Miss Lonelyhearts, wash me. (5)*

and ends with a mock crucifixion:

The gun inside the package exploded and Miss Lonelyhearts fell, dragging the cripple with him. They both rolled part of the way down the stairs. (104)

The "priest" is a newspaperman who writes a daily sob-sister column for the New York Post-Dispatch. He is known to his correspondents as Miss Lonelyhearts, and is always identified only by his role.** When he was hired he knew that the job was a circulation stunt treated by the whole staff as a joke. Miss Lonelyhearts also considers it a joke at first. But after several months he sees that the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously and rely on his judgment and support. Forced for the first time in his life to examine the values by which he lives, he can no longer see the hoax of phoney salvation as funny, and finds himself the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator.

* All references are to Nathanael West, Miss Lonelyhearts, (New York; Avon Books, 1965), unless otherwise indicated.

** In an earlier draft West had named him Thomas Matlock, which could be translated "Doubter-Wrestler."

Unable to justify or explain the pain and misery which he must face daily in the letters "stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife," (6) he tries various methods to come to terms with his helplessness, all of which fail. Whisky and the cynical jokes of the speakeasy, half-hearted attempts to 'commit' sex, superficial calmness and order bought at the price of averting one's eyes from evil, all fail to relieve his anguish, or even to provide a momentary stay from confusion and pain.

The knowledge that nothing can be done about the omnipresence of suffering, paired with the simultaneous feeling that something must be done, drives him to despair and isolation. He knows that "Christ is the answer, but if he did not want to get sick, he had to stay away from the Christ business" (9). He knows that his dream of Christ, the unrealizable ideal of perfection, pitted against the hopelessness of existing reality, will drive him to madness, and wonders "if hysteria were really too steep a price to pay for bringing it (the dead world) to life." (18)

Defeated in all his attempted escapes, and unable to forget the sufferers whose lives have become entangled with his, Miss Lonelyhearts embarks on a "program for the attainment of salvation."¹ This program leads to what is alternately referred to as "sickness" or "religious experience." Whether his withdrawal is mystical or catatonic, by the time the experience has reached its culmination, Miss Lonelyhearts is broken and completely alienated from the world he has been trying to mend.

Though tragically ironic, it is only fitting that he should be accidentally killed by one of the desperate creatures who have led him to his ordeal, and whom "he was running to succor with love" (104). In his

death Miss Lonelyhearts becomes not redeemer, but victim of a world he could neither change nor escape (except through ceasing to exist).

The landscape of Miss Lonelyhearts shows a scene of decay, disorder, violence and pain. Though the action takes place in the spring, there is no evidence of rebirth anywhere:

The decay that covered the surface of the mottled ground was not the kind in which life generates. . . . May had failed to quicken these soiled fields. It had taken all the brutality of July to torture a few green spikes through the exhausted dirt. (11-12)

The sky looks "as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser" (12), and even in the country "there was nothing but death--rotten leaves, gray and white fungi, and over everything a funereal hush" (67). In this dead, decayed world, irrationality and violence triumph. Part of the violence is rooted in the Darwinian struggle for survival (and we see herons hunting frogs, and gentle fawns feeding on lily pads, in the idyllic pastoral setting of the countryside). Part of it stems from the unsatisfied spiritual needs of man.

Threatened by the physical world which has "a tropism for disorder" (57), and trapped in the loneliness and alienation which modern civilization has created for him in twentieth century America, man feels impotent, isolated and irrelevant. His only escape--dreams and illusions--has been weakened by commercialization and stereotyping:

Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst. (70)

Unable to delude himself successfully, man can only break out of the trap of passive suffering through active violence. In Miss Lonelyhearts

violence is omnipresent. "Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald."²

The letters to Miss Lonelyhearts are permeated with the theme of sexual violence and pain. The relationships between the four chief characters in the book reek of sadism, cruelty and violence. Miss Lonelyhearts himself confesses that "only violence could make him supple" (23), and, comparing himself to a dead man, thinks: "only friction could make him warm or violence make him mobile" (37). He tugs at his girlfriend's nipple unpleasantly, saying "let me pluck this rose, I want to wear it in my buttonhole," twists the arm of a nebulous old man whom he accuses of "homosexualistic tendencies," and crushes the head of the lamb which he had intended to "sacrifice."

The harrowing chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb," revealed in a dream, has all the overtones of the sacrifice of Isaac and Christ, but it ends in nightmarish slaughter. Miss Lonelyhearts, elected priest by his drinking companions, succeeds only in maiming the animal, and getting his hands covered with its "slimy blood." Similarly in the episode with the "clean old man," the suggestion is evident that in a world where love is dead, sadism and violence, being the perversions of love, must reign.

Refusing to let go of the old man, Miss Lonelyhearts "was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband" (34), and his emotions reminded him of the way 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. (33)

The difference between Miss Lonelyhearts and the remaining characters in the book, however, is that, although tainted by excessive introspection and self-consciousness, and "fallen" like the others, he is driven by guilt, pity and compassion. Fully aware of the madness and folly implied in the determination to be a "humanity lover" in an inhuman world, he cannot forget "all the broken bastards." Knowing that nobody will answer the door, he stands in front of it and keeps knocking; desolate, ridiculous, melodramatic, he is raging against a god whom he knows not be there, and a faith that he can neither accept nor reject.

If God is, why doesn't he make manifest some concern for the misery of man, whom He has created in His image? If He is not, how does one keep faith alive in a world where all forces from without and within, conspire to destroy it? Yet, the suffering, although purposeless, is unrelieved, permanent and real, and its mere existing makes a response necessary, if one is to remain human. Miss Lonelyhearts' ultimate distinction from the other characters is his determination to stay human in the "dead world of door-knobs" (18), where posters describing the events of the day read: "Mother slays five with ax, slays seven, slays nine. . . ." (46).

The other principal characters are William and Mary Shrike, Peter and Fay Doyle, and Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts' girlfriend. Although allegorical figures, they are convincing as people. The Doyles and Shrikes are symbols of an eternal dichotomy: the Doyles reflect the brutality

and grossness of life dominated by an all-sexual female principle; the Shrikes, the sterility and mechanical quality of life under the dominance of an antilife, dry intellect. Miss Lonelyhearts, the natural target for the destruction latent in both, is assaulted by "moon-driven" Fay Doyle, and cynical, manipulative Shrike.

Shrike, the feature editor, appropriately named after the bird of prey that impales its victim on thorns, is Miss Lonelyhearts' chief tormentor. He is the mocker, the embittered cynic who finds every human aspiration absurd, and is out to destroy it. "His features huddled together in a dead, gray triangle" (13), his face is blank, and his practiced expression--the dead pan--never changes. The god Pan is not incarnated but embalmed in Shrike. The vitality of nature is here reduced to the mechanical gestures and artificial shrieks of a "screaming, clumsy gull" (93); the murderousness of the Bacchic orgies is retained, but the creative power is gone. Shrike's speeches are masterpieces of evocative rhetoric, but their garish and grotesque theatricality is cold, piercing and sterile. His brilliant exploration of possible methods of escaping life's agony, consists of attacks and parodies of well-known literary themes, and mocks man's pretentious attempts to find happiness. The Soil, the South Seas, Hedonism and Art are extravagantly described, jeered at, and rejected for their ultimate inadequacy. In conclusion he offers the one hope: "the First Church of Christ the Dentist, where He is worshipped as Preventer of Decay. The church whose symbol is the trinity new-style: Father, Son and Wirehaired Fox Terrier." (62) (It is interesting to note that the speech was spoken by Miss Lonelyhearts in an earlier draft.)*

* S.E. Hyman, Nathanael West, University of Minnesota, 1962, p. 18.

The women in Miss Lonelyhearts are incomplete cardboard dummies. Whether oversexed or undersexed, with "breast like balloons," (50) "nipples stuck out like tiny red hats" (37) or like "pink-tipped thumbs" (68), they are one-dimensional abstractions, and often caricatures of femininity and humanness.

Mary cannot give herself to a man. With Shrike, her husband, she is playing the virgin, and he finds sleeping with her "like sleeping with a knife in one's groin" (40). With Miss Lonelyhearts she teases and titillates with her breasts, but

Although Mary grunted and upset her eyes, she would not associate what she felt with the sexual act. When he forced this association, she became very angry. (37)

Fay Doyle is a man-eating monster, a failed sea-goddess who looks "like a police captain" (50). With "legs like Indian clubs, breasts like balloons and a brow like a pigeon" (50), she presents a serious threat to a frail, introspective young man in search of identity. Miss Lonelyhearts follows her meekly, watching "the action of her massive hams; they were like two enormous grindstones" (50), as he listens to her undress:

She made sea-sounds; something flapped like a sail; there was the creak of ropes; then he heard the wave-against-a-wharf smack of rubber on flesh. Her call for him to hurry was a sea-moan, and when he lay beside her, she heaved, tidal, moon-driven. (51-2)

Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts' girlfriend is reminiscent of West's Gentile fiancée, Alice Shepard, whom West did not marry. West's friend, John Sanford, as mentioned above, explains it: "She (Alice) was tall and good looking, conventionally so, as are five million American girls of any generation."³ Because Betty "often made him feel that when she

straightened his tie, she straightened much more" (23), Miss Lonelyhearts associates her with the principle of order. When his confusion and chaos become intolerable, he goes to see her, hoping to find some comfort in her composure. But as soon as they meet he realizes that "her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily," and therefore "his confusion was significant while her order was not" (23). Betty cannot help him, because for his order to be significant it must come from within, not from a job in advertising or a walk in the Zoo, as Betty would have him believe. Even an idyllic interlude on the farm, where Betty takes him to recover from what she calls his "city troubles," (58) fails to produce satisfactory results:

When they reached the Bronx slums, Miss Lonelyhearts knew that Betty had failed to cure him and that he had been right when he had said that he could never forget the letters. (69)

Miss Lonelyhearts is an urban man, and his "city troubles" are a part of the essence of his internal self, just as Betty's country serenity is a part of her "Connecticut farm" self.

On the defense, he examined her laugh for "bitterness," "sour-grapes," "a-broken-heart," "the devil-may-care." But to his confusion, he found nothing at which to laugh back. Her smile had opened naturally, not like an umbrella, and while he watched her laugh folded and became a smile again, a smile that was neither "wry," "ironical" nor "mysterious." (24) (Italics mine)

The words in West's quotation marks provide a catalogue of adjectives applied to Jewish humour, and describe the kind of laughter which is neither carefree nor gay: the laughter of the Jewish clowns and fools, who try to find in mocking irony a psychic relief from an insufferable reality, the laughter of lonely hearts, which West referred to as "my particular kind of joking."⁴

To Betty, this is as alien and incomprehensible as her "evident belief in the curative power of animals" (65), is to Miss Lonelyhearts. She cannot understand the hysteria lurking behind Miss Lonelyhearts' compulsion to identify himself with "all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent" (34), or the mixture of pity and disgust that he feels for them. When he rages,

"Wife-torturers, rapers of small children, according to you they're all sick. No morality, only medicine. Well, I'm not sick. I don't need any of your damned aspirin. I've got a Christ complex. Humanity. . . I'm a humanity lover. All the broken bastards. . . ." (25)

Betty can only stammer helplessly, "Why don't you let me alone? I felt swell before you came, and now I feel lousy" (26), while she is insisting that she loves him.

At times Miss Lonelyhearts would like to be like Betty. He is attracted to the prospect of "her gingham apron, his slippers beside the fireplace" (25). But her world excludes his letter-writers, and insists on averting one's eyes from human misery. And that is the one thing he cannot do. He must accept the dualities and search for a unity in diversity, although he knows that all attempts to aspire to meaning and spiritual fulfilment, are subject to frustration and defeat. He cannot find simple, healthy delight in trees, grass and country smells, because "the unhealthy old Jewish town within him is far more real to him"⁵ than the clean country smells around him. He is obsessed by the human odour (offensive to Betty (65)) and cannot resist the morbid compulsion to wallow in it. It is through the meeting with Peter Doyle, Fay's crippled husband, that Miss Lonelyhearts, the "humanity-lover" and "leper-licker," finds the focus of his world, and his conviction that he must redeem the suffering of others to fulfil his "messianic" mission.

Peter Doyle wears the universal face of passive, miserable, suffering humanity. "He looked like one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests (81). "As he hobbled along, he made many waste motions, like those of a partially destroyed insect" (80), reflecting all the pathos and futility of a meaningless life, the repeated motions without purpose, and the irrelevance of suffering itself.

Miss Lonelyhearts is repelled by Doyle when he first sees him, but as he listens to Shrike's vicious jokes, his attitude changes. He stares at the cripple with a smile "full of sympathy and a little sad" (81), and after a while "the strain of wordless communication began to excite them both" (81). Doyle hands him a letter containing the all-important question: "what is it all for? What is the whole stinking business for?" (83) And Miss Lonelyhearts, inspired by a vision or delusion, becomes suddenly aware of the answer. Forcing himself to clasp the cripple's wet hand, which he finds repulsive, "with all the love he could manage" (84), he sees the solution in Christ and the doctrine of Agape, the making of a whole of conflicting parts, by acceptance of order in divinity.

Following "divine" instruction, he "climbs aboard his bed" (91) in preparation for the holy "journey":

In three days he had gone very far. It grew dark in the room. He got out of bed, washed his teeth, urinated, then turned out the light and went to sleep. He fell asleep without even a sigh and slept the sleep of the wise and the innocent. (91)

But neither the sleep nor peace can last. When he is awakened by the arrival of his friends, Miss Lonelyhearts is indeed transformed. He is a "calm and solid" (93) rock, indifferent and immune to "what goes on in the sea" (95). Shrike and Betty are mere "waves" splashing at his feet

for attention. The savage irony, however, is in the fact that Miss Lonelyhearts has gained his indifference to pain through a complete loss of contact with reality. He opens the door for his friends (two of whom are women) completely naked, and makes no attempt to cover himself. Calmly, he stares into space "examining each cracker before popping it into his mouth" (95).^{*} His spiritual alienation and withdrawal from the world have now assumed physical dimension.

After a long night, the awaited "fever" finally arrives, and Miss Lonelyhearts, "the rock," becomes a "furnace" (102). "He was conscious of two rhythms that were slowly becoming one. His heart was the one heart, the heart of God. And his brain was likewise God's" (103). But the vision of unity and wholeness is a fleeting one.

The doorbell interrupts his religious experience and he sees the cripple, Doyle, coming up the stairs. Miss Lonelyhearts feels that the moment of the miracle has come. With his arms spread for the moment of Revelation, he rushes down the stairs to meet Doyle, and to fulfil his "messianic" mission:

He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would
be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple,
had been made whole. (103)

Although Doyle "shouted some kind of warning" (104), Miss Lonelyhearts, in his eagerness to love and heal, does not understand the shout and hears it "as a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S., Catholic-mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband" (104), whom he was "running to succor with love" (104).

* The scene has powerful echoes of the appearance of Maloney, the Catholic mystic, in the bowels of the Trojan Horse; he is also naked and is attempting to crucify himself with thumb tacks.
The Dream Life of Balso Snell

The gun inside the package exploded and Miss Lonelyhearts fell, dragging the cripple with him. They both rolled part of the way down the stairs. (104)

Death by the accidental explosion of a mechanical thing is the final irony. It is the most logical way for Miss Lonelyhearts to be destroyed. Given a world where all values are suspect, and possibilities of help, perfection and hope are listed, theoretically examined, and proven futile, there can be no dignity in death any more than in life. The accidental shooting, lacking even the significance of a deliberate act, reflects the sense of gratuitous and mechanical human destruction, and makes a point of the pointlessness and absurdity of loving, in a world where love is dead and irrelevant. If a fool insists on pursuing a Christ-dream amidst the sordidness, violence, and futility of a "dead world of doorknobs," his dream must lead to pain, intense isolation and a squalid, useless death.

There is no promise of redemption or any divine intervention in Miss Lonelyhearts. Things are as they are: unrelenting and absurd. The hysteria and sentimental pity of a Miss Lonelyhearts cannot heal or save the world. He is an impotent, self-conscious, pathetic "nebish," who is not capable of maintaining any distance from the world, or from his own self-corrosive psyche. He can only become a victim of the world he seeks to love, but cannot love, and becomes fragmented by the broken world he wants to mend. Yet when we consider the alternatives--"The Gospel according to Shrike," the callous "joke-machine," or the retreat from experience, and the moral shallowness that underlay the surface harmony of Betty's "method"--we find in Miss Lonelyhearts the only serious moral alternative.

If West portrays Miss Lonelyhearts as a mawkish, sentimental fool of pity, he does it with compassionate irony, whereas he deals with Shrike's dissociated cynical intelligence with harshness and disapproval. Shrike's sterile and destructive mockery is satirized and disqualified as a response to human pain and loneliness, whereas Miss Lonelyhearts' feeble attempts to find some way out, although inadequate, are the only evidence in the book of a man's poignant struggle to remain human.

The desperate need for faith and a demonic lucidity that resists it; the endless quest for meaning, affirmation and love, and an awareness of irrationality, chaos and hostility; the disparity between secular facts and the suppressed religious ideals; the ambivalent love-hate attitude to the anti-heroic Holy Fool, who, when everything else seems to have failed, reveals a most worthwhile heroic potential--these are the themes in Miss Lonelyhearts and throughout West's work. These are also the themes that most Jewish writers have been always, singularly obsessed with.

It is not that the unadaptable man, the wanderer and dreamer, or the fool and scapegoat, is an exclusively Jewish invention. It is only that the Jews--with God's help--have been for many centuries, persecution-crisis-and-holocaust-prone, and have thus developed an unhealthy inclination to identify with "all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent" (34).

The ironic compassion with which West treats Miss Lonelyhearts often raises his protagonist's fate from pathos to tragedy. Although his inability to fathom the mystery of human suffering or to forget it, leads to his disintegration and ultimately to his death, nevertheless in the desolate quest for love and spiritual significance, he transcends all

other characters in the book and the alternatives they offer.

In West's raging, mocking, agonizing protest against a world so flattened and absurd that true compassion is unbearable, there is some vague affirmation. And in Miss Lonelyhearts' ironic anti-heroism, some peculiar, sad victory.

CHAPTER V - FOOTNOTES

¹James Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, undated), p. 75.

²Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Miss Lonelyhearts," Contempo (May 15, 1933), p. 1.

³Light, op. cit., p. 74.

⁴Richard Gehman, "Introduction," Nathanael West, The Day of the Locust (New York: Bantam Books, 1963), p. xx.

⁵Quoted in Robert Alter, After the Tradition (New York: Dutton, 1969), p. 29.

CHAPTER VI

A COOL MILLION

After the hysteria and unrelieved distress of Miss Lonelyhearts, A Cool Million appears to be a well-deserved "vacation" for Nathanael West, a momentary rest from walking the metaphysical tightrope.

If Miss Lonelyhearts reveals the impossibility of the Christ dream in a faithless world, A Cool Million is a burlesque exposure of the dangers inherent in the American Dream, and the perversions of that dream in twentieth-century American life. Sandwiched as it is between Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust, A Cool Million seems to be a temporary digression. However, it extends the argument of Miss Lonelyhearts by stating that the Holy Fool can also be an ass--his destruction will still be imminent. And it foreshadows the pivotal theme of The Day of the Locust: the violence and destruction latent in the frustrated, bored, disillusioned mob.

Consistent with the theme, a devastating satire of the Horatio Alger novels, all of which West read in preparation of the character of Lemuel Pitkin, A Cool Million is aimed at exposing the naive orthodoxy of the Protestant ethos that work, abstinence, opportunity and righteousness inevitably lead to success. "Lifting" portions of the text directly from some of Alger's novels,* West parodies the simplistic sentiments and the

* D.H. Shepard, in an article, "Nathanael West Rewrites Horatio Alger Jr.," Satire Newsletter III, 1963, (13-28) claims that West has deliberately woven together quotations not only from Alger, but such American heroes as Calvin Coolidge and John D. Rockefeller Jr. and used their own words in the bitter context of the 1930's.

slogan-ridden idiom in which they are written, and points out the dangers of such public, legendary heroisms that propel a national community into self-congratulation and blind it to its own weakness and decay.

The action of the novel is largely slapstick, and the characters are broad stereotypes often seen in B movies. The sly, ancient Chinaman; the pock-marked lecherous merchant; the wronged, educated Indian who hates the paleface from whom he had accepted "civilization, syphilis and the radio, tuberculosis and the cinema" (232); various foreign spies from the Right and from the Left; mysterious terrorists and a miscellaneous array of slick-talking villains.¹

All are united in a conspiracy against our shlemiel victim Pitkin and his friend, Betty Prail. Betty's story is a very sad subplot. She becomes an orphan at twelve and gets raped on the same occasion; is pursued by mad dogs, and bad men; and faints each time she is raped, which is often; and finally gets kidnapped by a wrinkled-faced Chinaman who pretends to be running a laundry which is in fact a house of ill-repute. But Betty's end is happier than Lem's, because at Lem's funeral, she is alive, and officially attached to the politician Mr. Whipple as his "secretary." Guileless Lem, however, ends by being canonized as the hero of the "Storm Troopers" that stand for everything his own trusting nature has seemed to stand against.

Aside from the burlesque indictment of American material civilization, the book's deeper concern lies with the precariousness of American freedom, and with the potential, indiscriminate violence stored up in the restless, anonymous crowd.

Writing just after the accession to power of Hitler, West was clearly aware of the vulnerability of America to totalitarianism disguised as chauvinism and America-firstism. Whipple's slogan of "America for Americans!" must have sounded disturbingly convincing and his street-corner recruiting, ominously familiar to anyone, let alone a Jew. As leader of the "Storm Troopers," Whipple says:

. . .the only and prime purpose of the National Revolutionary Party is to get jobs for everyone. There was enough work to go around in 1927, why isn't there enough now? I'll tell you; because of the Jewish international bankers and the Bolshevik labor unions, that's why. It was those two agents that did the most to hinder American business and to destroy its glorious expansion. (187)*

Yes, West was concerned about the fate of America. In an editorial article for the Americana magazine he speaks about the American civilization that "exudes a miasmatic stench" and ought to be given "a decent but rapid burial."² But although America and the American Dream are used as the microcosm in A Cool Million, the stench goes far beyond this.

Addressed by Whipple, the masses, trapped by a set of beliefs which have little relation to reality, are seething with frustration, the cause of which they cannot understand. Lacking insight into their discontent and unable to combat it, they leap to violent aggression at the sign of a random scapegoat:

. . .the crowd ran off in all directions, shouting "Lynch him! Lynch him!" although a good three-quarters of its members did not know whom it was it was they were supposed to lynch. This fact did not bother them, however. They considered their lack

* All references are to Nathanael West, The Complete Works, (New York; Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957), unless otherwise indicated.

of knowledge an advantage rather than a hindrance, for it gave them a great deal of leeway in their choice of a victim. . . .

As time went on, the riot grew more general in character. . . .The heads of Negroes were paraded on poles. A Jewish drummer was nailed to the door of his hotel room. The housekeeper of the local Catholic priest was raped. (245-6)

Ultimately, the theme of A Cool Million is the corruption and evil of the world. The conflict is between the Divine Fool, who represents helplessness, impotence, trust and unflinching optimism, and the world which remains consistently absurd, cruel and malevolent. Although the polarities are burlesqued, the farce has the edge of splintered glass. The fact that the Holy Fool is identified with America, and is used in the Valhalla of fascism, doubles the irony, and implies that in a world where the fool's helplessness, instead of evoking compassion, inflames more desire to treachery, betrayal, and murderousness, a subsequent reversal of all human values must take place.

The warning message seems to be: "go ahead, 'dismantle' and kill your fool, be he the scapegoat Jew, or the naive American; but remember that by murdering trust and love, you are unleashing fascism--a brutal anti-humanitarian, anti-life force."

Lemuel Pitkin is all fool, all externality, and as a result all his suffering is physical. He loses his teeth, his eyes, a leg, his scalp; is imprisoned, tortured, beaten up, exhibited for public amusement, caught in riots, victimized by Communists, exploited by capitalists, and killed as martyr to an American fascist movement.

Trusting, honest, and full of good intentions, Lem sets out on his picaresque journey, hoping to emulate the traditional success stories of Rockefeller and Ford. Coached like Candide, by a "philosopher,"

"Shagpoke" Whipple, former President of the United States, Lem never questions the fact that "America is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and industrious, and never fails them" (150). The journey takes him from one anti-Horatio Alger disaster to another, and focuses a glaring light on the dangers arising from confusing naive idealism with brutal reality. With back-to-the-wall fierceness, the notion that decency and industry are all a young man needs to reach the top of the heap in America, is systematically demolished. The successful ones are shown betraying society, and society is seen betraying its failures.

Whipple can manipulate his slogans of "freedom," "fair play," "open competition," for gain, but Lemuel is incapable of juggling paradoxes, and his faith and unawareness make him a gullible tool in the hands of the worldly manipulators, and a "kin" to the "pit" only, not to success. "Refusing to be discouraged or grow bitter and become a carping critic of things as they are" (247), Lem goes from rags and "a humble dwelling much the worse for wear, owing to the straitened circumstances of the little family" (143), to even worse rags and "dismantlement," and a job as "entertainer"* at the Bijou Theatre. It is the latter, "venture" in which Lem is playing the "stooge" to two corny clowns, that brings his tragicomic quest to a horror-climax:

. . . both actors turned on Lem and beat him violently over the head and body with their rolled-up newspapers. Their object was to knock off his toupee or to knock out his teeth and eye. . . .

* Leslie Fielder says in Waiting for the End, (New York; Delta Books, 1965), p. 67 ". . . the Jew enters American culture 'on the stage, laughing.'"

Then Lem, whose part it was not to move while he was being hit, bent over and with sober dignity took from the box at his feet, which contained a large assortment of false hair, teeth and eyes, whatever he needed to replace the things that had been knocked off or out. (249-250)

And then the fun begins all over again, to the general delight and merriment of the spectators, who are "convulsed with joy" (250).

On this very stage of the Bijou Theatre, Lemuel Pitkin, trying to make a speech to aid Mr. Whipple's take-over of America, is killed by an assassin's bullet. The final, ruthless twist of irony occurs when Whipple addresses the Leather Shirts who are parading in honour of Lemuel Pitkin, "martyr" of the fascist party of America.

The opening words of his address are: "Why are we celebrating this day above other days?" (254) The sentence is from the Haggadah, the Passover service,* that celebrates the Jews' flight from Egypt and their deliverance from slavery. Whipple follows it with the Haggadah (Hebrew for legend) of Lemuel's life, which he sums up:

Jail is his first reward. Poverty his second.
Violence is his third. Death is his last. (254)

and youthful Storm Troopers roar, "Hail, Lemuel Pitkin!" "All hail, the American Boy!" (255)

Lacking Miss Lonelyhearts' self-awareness and irony, Lemuel's suffering appears to be less acute, but it seems to me that the indictment of the world that inflicts the pain on this humble, helpless shlemiel,

* It reads: *מה לעולם לא נחגג את היום הזה מעל כל ימי השנה?*

"Ma nishtanah halailah hazeh mikol haleilot?"

"Why are we celebrating this night above other nights?"

who is not able to retaliate or to defend himself, is deeper and more pessimistic. As gloomy as the prophecy of West's vision may have been in 1934, the facts of history were much grimmer. The reign of fascism did happen; Lemuel Pitkins were dismantled and murdered in the name of nationalism, superpatriotism and such "noble" ideals, and the world looked on, busy establishing immigration rules which could prevent some thousands of children destined for "dismantlement" from finding refuge anywhere in the world.

A Cool Million poses the question: at what point does the absolute failure of the Holy Fool completely demolish the notion of his being any kind of success? How long can the struggle for moral values persist, when its cost is physical extinction? Obviously the confidence in the Holy Fool's function must diminish, as the world grows colder and more heartless. But he doesn't entirely leave the Westian scene.

CHAPTER VI - FOOTNOTES

¹Constance Rourke, American Humor (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, undated). See chapter on Yankee trader.

²"Editorial," Americana (November, 1932), front page cover.

CHAPTER VII

THE DAY OF THE LOCUST

The Day of the Locust was written in Hollywood, where West worked as a script-writer. It was his last book, published in 1939, a year before his death. As in his former novels, West's central theme, and what appears to be his deepest concern, is what Paul Tillich calls "the shaking of the foundations." The Day of the Locust, using the unreality of Hollywood as a dramatic symbol of an attempt to disguise the barrenness and meaninglessness of modern life, sums up the demented civilization and foretells its doom. Leitmotifs of apathy, lechery, frustration and violence dominate all episodes; time and space are dislocated, mixing up the events of history with those in the movie sets, and blurring the distinction between reality and artifice or nightmare. Disjunctive as the scenes may seem, the recurring movement in each leads from dream through disillusionment to chaos and violence. Every relationship, social meeting, ritual occasion, turns to babel, bedlam, riot. The pressure towards disorder takes its final form in the apocalyptic mob-scene with which the book ends. A radio announcer stands above the crowd, asking in a high, hysterical voice "like that of a revivalist preacher whipping his congregation toward the ecstasy of fits...., 'Can the police hold them? Can they? It doesn't look so, folks....'" (130)* The mob grows, shoving, bulging, pushing. Within, it stumbles and swirls, releasing the most primitive powers--lust,

* All references are to Nathanael West, The Day of the Locust, (New York; Bantam Books, 1963), unless otherwise indicated.

distrust, hostility and hatred for anyone "different," and the desire to break and kill to avenge a life of emptiness.

The landscape of the Hollywood "dream-dump" is crowded with garish ugliness and monstrosity. The architecture is incongruous, make-shift and ghastly; it reflects the people, the freaks. "Only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas. . . ." (3) An inner voice, however, calls for charity:

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. (3)

In Hollywood, where men are "eating cardboard food in front of a cellophane waterfall" (80), where imitation mountains collapse under imitation armies, and Eros lies "face downward in a pile of old newspapers and bottles" (80) in his papier mache temple, people are lured by dreams which can never come true. The Cheated* who people the dream-factory are denied the heroics played up by the movie tabloids, and must turn to lesser excitements to satisfy their thwarted emotional hunger. Betrayed and disillusioned by perverted dreams, they are bored, and can only find a brief sense of reality and aliveness in violence. For a moment, a plane crash or a bloody cock-fight can satisfy their "drained-out feeble bodies and the wild, disordered minds" (92); when it disappears, emptiness returns, and the hysterical craving for incongruity begins to gnaw at them again.

The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. (132)

* The original title of the novel. (Richard Gehman, Introduction to The Day of the Locust, XIX.)

The people in The Day of the Locust are uniformly disgusting, deformed, dried up, slovenly, and malicious. Apart from the usual film-colony grotesques, The Day of the Locust parades witless cowboys, failed actors, emotional cripples, a dwarf and a memorable mindless Hollywood Blonde. All characters are shown to be hopelessly trapped.

Tod Hackett is a painter who was hired to learn set and costume designing in Hollywood. "A very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other" (2), who had grabbed the job "despite the arguments of his friends who were certain he was selling out and would never paint again" (3), Tod bears some resemblance to West. Like West, he is interested above all, in "the lonely crowd," in those who "had come to California to die" (2), and is planning to put them in his painting, The Burning of Los Angeles. Tod is self-aware and aware of his predicament. He is afflicted with a moral impulse whose traditional forms have collapsed. The standards of compassion and decency which he tries to maintain, are vitiated by his own disbelief in their authority. He knows that he is powerless and ineffectual as a moralist (toward the crowd) and as a male (vis a vis Faye Greener). He feels threatened by the mob-monster's force and overwhelming numbers, but is also aware of sharing their ennui, frustration and violence; attracted by Faye's "structural beauty," but conscious of his desire to crush and rape her. In his ineffectual ambivalence he resembles Miss Lonelyhearts, but unlike him, Tod combines his concern with detachment. He makes explicitly clear that "he had never set himself up as a healer" (112), but as an artist who:

. . . would paint their [the crowd's] fury with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization. (92)

Despite his disbelief in all the self's poses, "nevertheless, he refused to give up the role of Jeremiah" (66), the prophet of coming destruction. Preparing for his painting, which eventually becomes a reality, he draws sketches of the main performers: Claude Estee, Faye Greener and her father Harry, Homer Simpson and Abe Kusich.

Claude Estee is a successful screen-writer who lives in one of the monstrous villas with a "realistic, lifesize reproduction" of a dead horse at the bottom of his swimming pool. (13)

He was master of an involved comic rhetoric that permitted him to express his moral indignation and still keep his reputation for worldiness and wit. (15)

While ridiculing the movie colony and their false idols, Claude participates in their caricature existence, and his clever jokes, although milder and more sophisticated than Shrike's, resound with echoes of the latter's mocking cynicism.

Harry Greener, an aged "bedraggled Halequin" (21), is the epitome of the failed actor, who, having found in clowning his sole method of defence against life, never parts with his stage-pose. His face "like a mask" (67) conceals subtle degrees of feeling, showing only the studied, gross vaudeville stance. Even on his deathbed he groans "skillfully a second-act curtain groan, so phony that Tod had to hide a smile" (67). A smile mixed with pity and compassion, because "Harry suffered as keenly as anyone, despite the theatricality of his groans and grimaces" (67).

Faye Greener is another of West's "ersatz" Venuses. She is beautiful and enticing, but "her invitation was not to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love" (10). Her "subtle half-smile uncontaminated by thought" (91), drives Homer to total

servility and submission, Tod to a desire to "crush her egglike self-sufficiency" (53) and the dwarf Abe Kusich to a dirty fight, in which he "incapacitates" a man thrice his size. Going from childlike day-dreaming ("any dream was better than no dream and beggars couldn't be choosers")(50), to sordid reality (a job as a call-girl to earn money for her father's funeral), Faye retains her beauty, buoyancy, and the invulnerability of "a cork" floating on the sea, to the very end.

Homer Simpson, the clerk from Iowa, impresses Tod as "an exact model for the kind of person who comes to California to die" (22). In his lethargy and total alienation from his intelligence, his own body and the very experiences he undergoes, he is the perfect product and paradigm of the cheated crowd's sterility and latent murderousness.

For all his size and shape, he looked neither strong nor fertile. He was like one of Picasso's great sterile athletes, who brood hopelessly on pink sand, staring at veined marble waves. (27)

Homer's suffering, which he cannot articulate, is "basic and permanent." Unable to find an escape in dreams or poses, Homer resorts to sleep and listless "baking" in the sun.

. . .whether he was happy or not is hard to say. Probably he was neither, just as a plant is neither. He had memories to disturb him and a plant hasn't, but after the first bad night his memories were quiet. (34)

The only sign of life about Homer, was his hands. Their exaggerated but ineffectual gestures are the mute expression of what Homer has no words for. They become particularly bothersome to Homer, after he meets and begins to adore his fake idol Faye. His hands itch, burn, jerk "as though troubled by dreams" and their fingers twine "like a tangle of thighs in

miniature" (47) until he is forced to snatch them apart and sit on them. Since sex inspires terror of pain and humiliation in Homer, he agrees to Faye's arrangement in which she permits him to worship her like a devoted eunuch. In return she owns him and humiliates him, and eventually leaves him. Abandoned by the object of his adoration, Homer turns to the one place where he finds security, what West, in the Freudian jargon, calls "the Uterine Flight" (124). His body emerges from the foetal position to join the crowd massed in front of a Hollywood movie opening, where he meets his climactic end, but his mind never resumes even its former minimal functioning. Carried by the mob, he walks "like a badly made automaton and his features were set in a rigid, mechanical grin" (132). When a stone thrown by a little boy, hits his face, Homer is shocked out of the inactivity of his grief and withdrawal, and tries to trample the child to death. The crowd takes its cue from the incident, and in a moment the lethargy of the bored, tired, "cheated ones" disappears and the brutality of the race emerges. Homer, "his jaw hanging as though he wanted to scream but couldn't," is caught "by his open mouth and pulled forward and down." (135)

Homer, like Peter Doyle, represents "all the broken bastards," the passive, hurt, victimized humanity. But he also stands for the mob, an instinctive force which has been thwarted and perverted, and its cruel, violent revolt against powers which have tricked it and denied it expression.

Abe Kusich is referred to by Tod as "an important figure in a set of lithographs" (4) on which he is working in preparation for his magnum opus, The Burning of Los Angeles. Kusich is a dwarf, loud, tough and

pugnacious; a deformed, grotesque figure, desperately trying to assert himself as "normal." Tod's feelings for him are mixed:

Despite the sincere indignation that Abe's grotesque depravity aroused in him, he welcomed his company. The little man excited him and in that way made him feel certain of his need to paint. (4)

Abe's chief characteristics are his "outsiderness" and his identification with the suffering victim. As a dwarf he is the obvious "other"; nevertheless, he refuses to accept his inferior status. He is independent and tenacious, and pursues fun and women with a glee and vitality lacking in the "normal" males. As the epitome of the victimized sufferer, he identifies himself with the brutally maimed, dying cock in the gruesome cock-fight, watched by everyone else with "sportsmanship" and amusement. Additional evidence of West's intention to identify Abe with the ultimate in human suffering is made clear in Tod's comment to Homer Simpson (himself a heap of misery) that Homer could learn about agony from Abe. While trying to respond to Homer's appeal for sympathy, Tod hears:

. . .four short sounds, ha-ha and again ha-ha,
distinct musical notes,. . .made by the dwarf.
"You could learn from him," Tod said.
"What?" Homer asked, turning to look at him.
"Let it go." (112)

Abe is likened to "a dog wrapped in a blanket," (5) a "terrier in a harness" (101), a "rabbit dashed against a tree" (116). He kicks, scratches, grabs cowboys between the legs. His favorite pose is: "fists clenched and his chin stuck out." (116). He generally gives as much as he gets.

"I don't forget nothing. I remember. I remember those who do me dirt and those who do me favors. I don't want anybody going around saying Abe Kusich owes him anything." (7)

Abe Kusich is not a "humanity-lover," or a "leper-licker." He is not Lemuel dismantled, providing amusement for sensation-hungry audiences. He laughs at himself, and if the laugh is "bitter," he laughs at the laugh.¹ He is not a hero defying fate, or hoping to change it or control it. But he is a human being, unable not to respond to pain or not to feel compassion. Ontological arguments and metaphysical dualities are beyond his reach. Merely to survive among Goliaths three times his size, who need so little stimulation to hate anyone "different," is for him precarious enough. To survive with exuberance and passion and to continue to fight for sex, love and life itself, is nothing short of miraculous.

Abe Kusich is a survivor. He doesn't "run to succor humanity," but "remembers those who do him dirt and those who do him favors." When attacked, he has learned to defend himself. Knocked unconscious, he comes to quickly "with a curse" (117), applies ice to his injured head and goes "on the town" to have fun. His indestructibility is not a natural gift, but a strength he has woven out of weakness. His pugnacity is not an outcome of nature's generous endowments, but of daily struggle to exist, and an urgent need to affirm life in spite of any odds.

Named after the moral and religious "leader of the Chosen people," Abe is an ironic replica of the great patriarch. But placed among unfeeling mockers, lifeless automatons and demented sensation-seekers, he is the only compassionate and life-affirming character in the novel. He whose affliction is so undeniably real, resists self-pity and resignation, and refusing to bow to defeat, converts his "grotesqueness" into an ironic but human victory. He alone when confronted with pain and suffering, shows mercy, compassion and pity.

Nervously observing the preparations for the cock-fight in which the odds are absurdly uneven, Abe comments on Juju, the splendid "six-time winner" (102), "he's a nice bird, but looks ain't everything" (102) and on the red, a plain-looking rooster with a cracked beak, "he may have been a good one once" (104). Nevertheless he begs to be allowed to handle the "undercock." The fight soon turns into massacre and the red cock into a "mass of blood and matted feathers." (106)

The little man moaned over the bird, then set to work. He spit into its gaping beak and took the comb between his lips and sucked the blood back into it. The red began to regain its fury, but not its strength. (106)

They pit the birds, and the red is repeatedly attacked and mutilated.

Abe, moaning softly, smoothed its feathers and licked its eyes clean. . . . Juju went into the air again and this time drove a gaff through one of the red's eyes into its brain. The red fell over stone dead.

The dwarf groaned with anguish, but no one else said anything. Juju pecked at the dead bird's remaining eye.

"Take off that stinking cannibal!" the dwarf screamed. (107) (Italics mine)

It is interesting to note the circumstances under which Abe enters and leaves The Day of the Locust. In both episodes he is seen as unwanted, humiliated, beaten, but not ultimately defeated.* In the first scene, Tod finds him sleeping on the hall-floor, and mistakes him for "a pile of soiled laundry" (5). He had been thrown out of an apartment by a woman who had accepted his money and favors, but rejected his advances. In the last scene, he is asked to leave Faye's house, for approximately the same reason, only

* The epithet from Balso and its tragi-comic connotation comes to mind: "The Semites, are like to a man sitting in a cloaca to the eyes, and whose brows touch heaven." p. 113.

this time he fights back ferociously enough to provoke cool Claude Estee's comment, "We'd better take the homunculus with us or he's liable to murder the whole household" (117).

But homunculus Abe has no such intentions. "Let's go see some girls. I'm just getting started," he says with gusto. He urges the others, "Come on, you guys--we'll have some fun," (118) but when they decline politely, says:

"Then to hell with you!"
That was his farewell. He let out the brake
and the car rolled away. (118)

With this Abe leaves the book, and the lifeless, loveless "hell" the others are doomed to remain in. Significantly, the final canvas, The Burning of Los Angeles, depicting "the people who come to California to die," does not include Abe Kusich. It includes only

. . .all those poor devils who can only be stirred
by the promise of miracles and then only to violence.
A super "Dr. Know-All-Pierce-All" had made the
necessary promise and they were marching behind his
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. (139)

Faye, Harry, Homer, Claude and Tod, are all among them. But Abe is conspicuously absent. He does not fit into the apocalyptic vision, where the central emphasis is on failure of nerve, and a determination to opt out of the challenges, complexities and threats of history. He has to "do his thing" with courageous engagement, despite threats and frustrations.

As a Holy Fool, Abe differs considerably from Miss Lonelyhearts or Lemuel, but he shares important characteristics with them, as well as with the unique subspecies of the Jewish Holy Fool.

Like the latter, Abe remains a practical loser, winning only an ironic victory, since he is by definition the deficient one in terms of "normal" social judgment. His physical disadvantages and external situation do not change one whit because of his moral strength, or human mercy, or faith in life. Abe is an ambiguous hero, if only because of his size and external stature (e.g. his funny large head) but he is the only one who excites Tod's creativity (4), the only one who identifies himself with the suffering cock and tries to preserve its life, the only one who keeps saying "yes" to life, regardless of constantly adverse circumstances. His deep awareness of life's futility and daily frustrations, does not invalidate his urgent insistence on joy, irrational as such emphasis may be. He gets kicked and beaten, but he retains his zest for living. He gets humiliated and rejected, but retains compassion for fellow-sufferers. He stumbles and fails, but he retains his insane faith in life, a faith which is beyond hope and beyond reason.

After the failures of the "Christ dream" and of the gullible submissiveness of the shlemiel, it seems appropriate to cast Abe, the dwarf, in the role of the Holy Fool. Abe Kusich is the personification of the Jew, "the stranger in a strange land."* West, as a Jew, could not help but see the descendent of warriors and sages dwarfed by centuries of the Diaspora, and reduced by history to a ridiculous, puny travesty of the magnificent Biblical past. West, the modern man, realized that the fool's divine function was dwarfed by a community not bound by any common sources

* His vitality, tenacity, guts, emotionalism, bragging, vulgarity, pushiness, etcetera, are epithets so commonly used wherever the presence of a Jew is as much as insinuated, that they do not require an explicit declaration. His name, Abe, not only refers to the Biblical patriarch, but has been incorporated into the American image of the Jew in everything from the principal character of anti-semitic jokes to the sentimentality of Abie's Irish Rose.

of feeling and devotion, a community for which nothing can be sacred, because they have lost their capacity to love and revere.

Abe Kusich is not naive. He knows evil, for he has been a victim of it. If he appears less saintly than West's other fools, it is perhaps because he is so much more human. The Jewish ethos of holiness lies precisely in being human. It is through affirming life and creativity and love, that the Jew asserts the existence of the Creator. It is his commitment to the world of daily human experience, his insistence that "yet the battle is worthwhile," and his unwillingness to concede the absurdity of an apparently absurd universe, that makes him the Holy Fool.

If Abe's is an ambiguous and ironic triumph, his determination and resilience create an aura of some secret spiritual independence around what would otherwise be just a bleak tyranny of circumstances.

CHAPTER VII - FOOTNOTES

¹Nathanael West, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, p. 129.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

It seems to me that as the novel develops, West's ambivalence toward Abe Kusich is replaced by compassion, and his indignation gives way to sad, poignant affection. The irony remains, but the tone of the destructive, mocking joke is gone. It is almost as though West were learning a lesson from the pugnacious midget with the powerful grip on life. By making him the sole custodian of compassion, mercy and life in The Day of the Locust, and saving him from the flames of burning Sodom, West must be trying to say something about his own insights.

Martin Buber describes the apocalyptic imagination as follows:

Everything here is predetermined, all human decisions are only sham struggles. The future does not come to pass; the future is already present. . . . Therefore it can be 'disclosed.' Such disclosures may be impressive, but what we can learn from them about the complicated facts of our lives is at best limited.¹

By contrast, "The task of the genuine prophet was not to predict but to confront man with the alternatives of decision."²

West, impressed by the ludicrousness of life as much as by its horror, was attracted to the notion of the Apocalypse, but he was also aware of the inadequacy of that vision. Although he saw the world as a wasteland with little hope of redemption, he knew that opting out of the battle was as ignoble as it was impossible--at least for him.

Tod Hackett refuses "to give up the role of Jeremiah." Jeremiah and the other Hebrew prophets were not oracles. They believed that human

actions could determine what the future would be, and tried to affect the people's actions by their prophecies. No matter how horrible they found reality to be, they did not withdraw from it because "the End is near," but only intensified their concern and passionate engagement.

West is a modern Jeremiah. It is the prophetic, not apocalyptic version of the messianic longing that he expresses in The Day of the Locust. He believes that "God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions." (Ecclesiastes 7:29). He cannot, nor does he attempt to, offer a panacea for dispelling the darkness, but he rejects the determinism of the Apocalypse which shuts off the possibility of being open to fresh experience. He does not merely predict The Burning of Los Angeles, but confronts man with the alternatives of decision. Abe Kusich is one such alternative. He is not an "instrument of redemption." He does not represent a humanly unattainable completeness and perfection, but only human fortitude, courage, and an eager acceptance of the world as it is, with all its injustices, cruelty and evil.

In the figure of Abe Kusich, the anguished dwarfed outsider, West has created a protagonist who lacks the traditional Western hero's imposing stature. The tragic hero appearing in Greek drama or the Christian epic, is as alien to Abe as the Empire was to the Jewish "shtetl." The hero's hubris and raging are as remote to him, as the wars between the Empires were to the "shtetl" Jew. What is most important to Abe is to continue to live. "Out of infirmity, he has built strength."³ Through courage, he makes his own values despite his limitations. If these values enable him to gain nothing but an inner feeling of human worth and a deep empathy for others, they are a significant moral alternative to sterility,

life-negation and indifference. In a cold, unfeeling world they may be the only factual, existential transcendence possible.

If West's attitude to Abe Kusich (the fact that he elevates him, albeit ironically, from a fool-victim to a fool-protagonist) has any symbolic value, it might suggest West's coming to terms with his own complex Jewish self. Perhaps Kusich, the created character, has succeeded in reforming his creator and has helped him to see beyond the materialistic Jewish "pants-pressers" he resented so much. Or maybe the fact that The Day of the Locust, written in 1939, the eve of the planned genocide of European Jewry, forced West to re-examine his views, and come to new conclusions. There is no doubt about West's admiration and respect for Abe Kusich. There is little doubt in my mind that through the portrayal of Abe, West was paying homage to a people whose heroic endurance and irrational insistence on life's savor and worth outlasted pogroms, inquisitions and constant threats of annihilation. Perhaps, if he had lived longer, this new awareness of the meaning and grandeur of the Jews' survival, would have enabled him to experience life differently, and, who knows, even to like himself a little. On the other hand, had he lived longer, he would have had to witness the modern invention of death camps, the climax of what he foresaw in his prophetic imagination.

CHAPTER VIII - FOOTNOTES

¹Martin Buber, "Prophecy, Apocalyptic and the Historical Hour," Pointing the Way (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1963), p. 312.

²Ibid., p. 312.

³Irving Layton, "There were no Signs," Collected Poems (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965), p. 1.

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