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Mass Culture and Class Distinctions in the Novels of Nathanael West

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

MASS CULTURE AND CLASS DISTINCTIONS
IN THE NOVELS OF NATHANAEL WEST

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY

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Nathanael West's novels have long been noted for their bridging of European avant-garde techniques and American mass culture forms; this especially appealed to intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s affirming a highbrow affinity for lowbrow art at the expense of what they perceived as a threateningly monolithic middlebrow taste. But the novels actually balance two opposing but complementary critiques. On the one hand, West's novels dramatize the pessimistic, psychoanalytic critique of the authoritarian culture industry that Theodor Adorno was beginning to develop in the 1930s. On the other hand, the novels register the symbolic effects of mass media technology that Walter Benjamin (and Jean Baudrillard after him) articulated with more optimism. The appeal of West's critique to post-World War II intellectuals may also have to do with the way West's novels both depict and engage in middle-class conflicts concerning aesthetic taste. West's life and work, when analyzed from the
perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu's cultural sociology and Andrew Ross's discussion of American intellectuals and popular culture, suggest two things. First, many of the characters' conflicts in the novels are precisely those of the most culturally well-endowed fraction of the lower middle class, a class fraction in which West found himself economically for much of his life. Second, the novels' obvious literary influences and the main characters' taste discriminations manifest the cultural strategies of an arriviste intellectual, one who, like the late-nineteenth-century Dandy and then the twentieth-century "camp" producer in the entertainment industry, exploits his own sense of disqualification as a traditional, responsible intellectual by affecting an extreme decadent or kitsch taste. In the 1960s, as Pop Art emerged and the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century notions of avant-garde were declared dead, West's self-consciously embattled attempts to create an avant-garde art undoubtedly contributed to his novels' appeal and led to their inclusion in the canon of American late modernism.
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INTRODUCTION

The dream life of a highbrow, lowbrow existence.

W. H. Auden, "West's Disease"

Nathanael West's work has long been admired for its balanced critique of mass culture in the 1930s. West's novels, it is often observed, depict mass culture in a way that neither defends nor condemns it. They take mass culture as their subject but manage neither to adopt a condescending tone nor descend into adopting its forms uncritically. The earliest explicit praise for West on this count came in a 1951 Partisan Review article in which Isaac Rosenfeld reviews several recently published works including a reissue of The Day of the Locust. Isaac Rosenfeld exclaims that West's writing is the "nearest thing to a new art form ever to be derived from the materials of mass culture" (110). He explains that what distinguishes West's writings from those "that have come out of the intellectuals' recent interest in popular culture" is that the latter are inept--"lucubrations [that are] self-conscious or condescending or inspired by mawkish concern over the fate of culture" (109-110). West's novel, on the other hand, Rosenfeld insists, "is neither an apology for nor a condemnation of the popular," for West is "in touch
with popular culture over its whole range," staying "clear of the platitudes and condolences over the death of culture" (110-11).

In this brief review article, Rosenfeld naturally cannot offer much evidence for his conclusion; he merely notes that West wrote his Hollywood novel from firsthand experience as a scriptwriter. But Rosenfeld's assessment of West is important because he sets it within the context of a debate among intellectuals at that time about how to understand and evaluate mass culture--and even more important because this debate was emerging at the very time that West's novels were beginning to be republished and to gain more than a specialized, cult audience, which is all they had had in the 30s and 40s. Between Miss Lonelyhearts' original publication in 1933 and its third reprinting in 1950, for example, less than 20,000 copies were printed (White 5-6). But in 1955, 190,000 copies were printed, and between 1959 and 1964, another 145,000 copies (7-9). The Day of the Locust has a similar sales history. After two 5,000-copy printings in 1950, the novel rose to a 250,000-copy printing in 1953 and totalled an additional 225,000 copies in six more printings over the next eleven years (21-24).

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1 White does not list the number of copies for the first reprinting in 1934, but given that the original printing was of 2,200 copies (1,400 of which were kept by the printer when Liveright went bankrupt and were eventually remaindered), and the two subsequent reprintings (by Harcourt, Brace and Company) were each 5,000, it is safe to assume that the first reprinting was no greater than 5,000 copies.

2 Sales of both novels published together continued to rise in the next decade: between 1962 and 1974, 389,000 copies of the New Directions dual publication were printed (24). The respectable sales of these two novels in the 1950s, along with the publication of his Complete Works (7,600 original copies; 24,600 total
This suggests that interest in West's writing, which began in the 1950s and grew into the 1970s when his work attained a secure position in the academic canon of American modernists, is due at least in part to intellectuals' and academics' interest in mass culture.

Rosenfeld is, of course, creating something of a straw man in characterizing his fellow intellectuals as reactionary critics of mass culture. Yes, there were the T. S. Eliots who, at the time, were still expressing elitist reactions to democratic culture that, as Alan Swingewood indicates in his study of intellectuals' "myths" of mass culture, dates back at least to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and was famously expressed by José Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930). But Rosenfeld was writing to the readers of *Partisan Review* for whom middlebrow culture or "kitsch"--not lowbrow, mass-marketed entertainment--was becoming the real enemy. In recounting the history of the magazine, Richard Pells notes that because its young editors and contributors were intellectuals over five printings) seems to have led the Berkeley Publishing Corporation to print 100,000 copies of *A Cool Million* in 1961 (17). Since this is by far the largest printing of that novel, one can assume that it was never as well received as the other two.

3In his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* (1948), for example, Eliot warns that mass culture is lowering "the standards" of culture, undermining the kind of common culture that provides a society with moral order and that can only be sustained by an elite minority (91). He unapologetically defends cultural hierarchy, challenging the assumptions that a high culture of and for a minority elite has no place in twentieth-century Western society and that high culture must be made accessible to mass audiences (105). High culture, he insists, must be maintained by the elite who, although traditionally dependent on the upper classes, are not to be defined as or affiliated with a class (107ff).
"conditioned almost entirely by the catastrophic effects of the depression," the magazine reflected, in its early years, a suspicion of the Popular Front's "proletarian aesthetic" in the early 1930s and of the same movement's shift later in the decade toward a literature that affirmed democratic values (334, 338). With this suspicion of the Popular Front's aesthetic choices came the magazine's insistence that only aesthetically avant-garde art, especially high modernist art, could be genuinely revolutionary. Also with this suspicion came a wary, begrudging respect for the imaginative power of the mass media, especially film. In the decades that followed the depression years, Pells argues, the "offspring of Partisan Review's founding family would frequently vent their wrath on the descendants of the Popular Front by elevating the lowbrow at the expense of the middlebrows" (338).

Rosenfeld is clearly part of this Partisan Review "offspring"; although he does not explicitly state that the "intellectuals" he mentions are middlebrows, he implies as much in criticizing them for their reactionary and clumsy

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4 Clement Greenberg expresses this view in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," published in Partisan Review, 1939--the same year The Day of the Locust was first published. Greenberg argues that the European avant-garde of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was grounded in the "bold development of scientific revolutionary thought" of nineteenth-century Europe and thus a part of the emerging "superior consciousness of history" (99). He also acknowledges that the early, Bohemian avant-garde was uninterested in politics and that subsequent avant-garde artists withdrew from society, coming to regard themselves as above and beyond the social order they despised, even while often depending on the upper reaches of that social order for financial support. Yet, Greenberg concludes that "the avant-garde forms the only living culture we now have," and he predicts that because the elite class of patrons is disappearing, "the survival in the near future of culture in general is thus threatened" (101).
condemnations of mass culture. Further, the affirmation of mass culture that Rosenfeld articulates is echoed by the twenty-four intellectuals who contributed the very next year to a Partisan Review symposium titled "Our Country and Our Culture," which Andrew Ross has examined in his history of intellectuals’ engagement with mass culture in the postwar decades. The two dozen writers responded to the following set of questions about their engagement with mass culture:

Must the American intellectual and writer adapt himself to mass culture? If he must, what forms can his adaptation take? Or, do you believe that a democratic society necessarily leads to a leveling of culture, to a mass culture that will overrun intellectual and aesthetic values traditional to Western civilization? (qtd. in Ross 52)

The Partisan Review editors concluded, Ross explains, that while most of the intellectuals expressed a sense of exclusion from mass culture and an anxiety about its effects, they also expressed a somewhat more "affirmative" attitude towards the institutions that sustained that culture than they and their counterparts had been willing to express in the late 30s and 40s (51). But it was Leslie Fiedler, in 1955, who best demonstrated how the defense of popular culture could be used as a weapon against middlebrow taste.

Fiedler’s essay "The Middle Against Both Ends" is framed as a defense of comic books. Like Rosenfeld highlighting West’s firsthand experience in the movie business, Fiedler opens by proudly announcing his expertise as a reader of this popular genre: "I am surely one of the few people pretending to intellectual respectability who can boast that he has read more comic books than attacks on
comic books" (Cross the Border 15). But the essay is really an attack on what Fiedler calls the "enlightened genteel" (24), or the "sentimental egalitarian[s]" who "dream of universal literacy leading directly to a universal culture" and who "turn to art for entertainment and uplift" (25). These middlebrows, Fiedler argues, while more than willing to entertain nostalgic and picturesque recreations of rustic folk culture, shrink from facing contemporary culture, which is "brutal and disturbing, the quasi-spontaneous expression of the uprooted and culturally dispossessed inhabitants of anonymous cities" (20). These cultural expressions are "contrived mythologies which reduce to manageable form the threat of science, the horror of unlimited war, the general spread of corruption. . . ." And these mythologies are "exploited for profit. . . . mass-produced by nameless collaborators, standardized and debased. . . . the patented nightmare of us all. . . ." But the middlebrows want to repress this nightmare, Fiedler insists, and this "fear of the instinctual. . . . motivates their distrust of serious literature, too" (24). Thus, they ignore the historical lesson that "our highest and lowest arts come from a common antibourgeois source" (22); their "fear of the vulgar is the obverse of [their] fear of excellence" (28).

Given this linking of highbrow and lowbrow taste against middlebrow taste (by an intellectual who considered himself highbrow), one cannot be surprised that a few years later Fiedler declares in Love and Death in the American Novel that West "appears to us from our present vantage point the chief neglected talent" of the 1930s (485). Fiedler maintains that West addressed more directly
than did his fellow novelists the horror and violence that, according to Fiedler, lay at the heart of the Depression experience (481-487). In explaining West’s uniqueness, Fiedler seems to shift the debate away from West’s blend of high and low culture to his novels’ distinction from, on the one hand, the documentary realism of the proletarian novel, and, on the other hand, the self-absorbed "novel of sensibility" (489). And, in fact, this generic distinction is the one that many critics focused on in the 1950s and 60s. Daniel Aaron, one of the few champions of West’s work before the Complete Works was published in 1957, for example, explains the growing interest in West in the 50s and early 60s this way:

In the reappraisal of the literary 'thirties, West has caught up with and overtaken most of the triple-decked Naturalists whose solemn and often infelicitous documentations no longer are devoured with relish. (161)

Shortly after the original publication of Miss Lonelyhearts in 1933, Angel Flores had thanked West for giving "us anguish and terror and fantasy... at the very crucial moment when the current vanguard taste insists on directing literature towards the casehistory, gravymashpotato tradition" (68-69). But in the 1950s and 60s, it was West’s blending of the European avant-garde with American popular culture genres that especially appealed to American intellectuals, even though that appeal was framed in opposition to the aesthetics of 1930s proletarian fiction:

West could not be accused of divorcing dreams from reality, but [rather was lauded for the fact that] the literary and artistic streams that fed his bizarre imagination--the French school of the fin de siècle, Dostoevsky, squalid pulp fiction, the comic strip, the cinema--set him apart from the Proletarians who saw no revolutionary significance in dreams. (Aaron 163)

If, as Richard King has argued, the debate in the U.S. about the relationship
between modernism and mass culture began in the 1930s, then to the heirs of that debate in the 1950s and 60s, West’s novels seemed to promise that the gap between (high) modernism and (low) mass culture could in fact be bridged.

In the late 60s and early 70s, a slight shift in artists’ and (largely academic) intellectuals’ responses to mass culture led to a slight shift in academics’ reception of West. The rise of Pop Art and of sales of West’s novels, on the one hand, and the intensive study of the novels by academics, on the other hand, seems to have resulted in a defense of West by academics against what they perceived as his popularization. Randall Reid opens his 1967 monograph on West’s novels, for example, with the warning that "after years of being out of fashion, [West’s] work now suffers from another danger, that of being taken for granted" (1). In the title essay of his collection Cross the Border--Close the Gap, written fifteen years after his 1955 essay "Both Ends Against the Middle," Leslie Fiedler explains that contemporary Pop artists have turned to genres "most associated with exploitation by the mass media" (Westerns and pornography, for example) and are using them without "parody, irony--and even critical analysis" (69). Furthermore, he implies that this strategy is the contemporary artist’s response to the transformation of the avant-garde into kitsch that Fiedler described in his 1964 essay "The Death of Avant-garde Literature": now that the Ivy League literature major is the new middlebrow audience, the objective of "highbrow or truly experimental art" (namely, to insult its audience) has been exhausted (56). One can see how in this environment, West’s novels naturally lose their appeal to (Pop) artists, yet, partly
for that reason, increase their appeal to academics trying to defend their legitimacy as highbrows. For this reason, Randall Reid introduces his study of West's novels by not only distinguishing West from those hostile to mass culture but, more importantly for Reid, from those he perceived as celebrating it:

Neither those who denounce television nor those who have made Batman a Camp hero can tell us as much about popular culture as West does. Here, as always, he is the enemy of simple enthusiasms—of both the hip and the square, the hot and the cool. He regarded popular culture with ruthless sympathy; he understood it too well to like it and too well to feel superior to it. (11)

Reid thus expresses admiration for West's balanced attitude towards mass culture, as did Rosenfeld, but unlike Rosenfeld, Reid is more concerned with distinguishing West from mass culture enthusiasts.

Despite this slight shift in emphasis, it is clear from this short history of West's reception that his place in the canon of American modernists was secured in large part because of the fact that he wrote "about" mass culture in a complex way and that he did so in a decade to which American intellectuals and academics in the 1950s and 60s referred back as a frame of reference for responding to mass culture. However, perhaps because West became something of an icon, a "necessary figment of American literary mythology," as Jonathan Raban suggested sarcastically in the early 1970s, close and theoretically informed studies of West's treatment of mass culture have been long in coming. Early studies note his uses of popular culture, but they do not really explain them. In 1971, for example, Joan Zlotnick followed up West's comment that he had originally planned to write Miss Lonelyhearts in the form of a long comic strip and notes a few features of
the novel that reflect the comic strip genre. But she concludes only that it is a "paradox" that West uses a popular culture form to "attack" popular culture. With so much attention paid in the last decade or so to questioning and understanding the opposition of high and low culture, and specifically of high modernism and mass culture, it seems appropriate, then, to study closely West's uses of mass culture. That is, if one assumes, as Fredric Jameson first argued in 1979, that "we [should] read high and mass culture as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena," that "the dilemma of the double standard of high and mass culture remains, but... as an objective contradiction which has its own social grounding," then West's novels are certainly due for fresh examination (133-34).

Such an examination is already under way. In a 1987 essay on The Day of the Locust, Thomas Strychacz pushes beyond the common observation that the novel "reflects West's interest in cinematic modes of narration" (150), framing his discussion with the assumption that West's text is "literary" and thus attempting to make some order out of non-"literary" texts, i.e., Hollywood movies. Strychacz refuses to see West's text as insightful in any simple way; specifically, he does not see The Day of the Locust as exposing the "reality" behind the film industry's masquerade. Rather, Strychacz sees the novel as a literary, artistic text that "acts upon, rearranges, and controls the discourse of films" (154). So, while

5Blake Allmendinger, in a 1988 article on The Day of the Locust published in Literature/Film Quarterly, also acknowledges that it is now a "commonplace" to observe that the novel has a "film-like quality of its own," and he proceeds to
acknowledging that there is a difference between "art" and "mass culture," Strychacz sets out to explore the "delicate relationship" between the two enacted in and by West's text.

Better understanding this "delicate relationship" between West’s aesthetics and his critique of mass culture is the principal goal of the first two chapters of this study. These chapters examine West’s novels in light of two related but competing critiques of mass culture that were contemporary with West: Theodor Adorno’s rather harsh psychoanalytic critique of the culture industry and the more sympathetic critique of mechanical reproduction initiated by Walter Benjamin. But in both chapters, it is assumed that these critiques are closely related to their authors’ respective interests in expressionist and surrealist aesthetics--and that West’s critique of mass culture thus should not be separated from his choice to use these aesthetic orientations. The first chapter, which explains how West uses psychoanalytic theory and case studies to depict the regressive effects of mass culture, also highlights the limitations of this critique, limitations that have long been documented in studies of Adorno’s reductive analysis of the culture industry as a potentially totalitarian manipulation mechanism. But since the purpose of this study is not to defend West’s critique but understand it, exposing this

argue that the film aesthetic that informs the novel is an aesthetic derived from silent movies, and that the conflict between this aesthetic and the (then) emerging aesthetic of "talkies" contributes to the conflicts in the novel, especially the sense of betrayal experienced by the characters who come to Hollywood to improve their lot. West, Allmendinger concludes, "turns the artistic and economic change [of silent films to talkies] into a pattern of poetic truth" (110).
limitation serves as a caution against exaggerating the "insight" of West's novels.
The second chapter places West's novels in a seemingly more sympathetic light as historically accurate depictions of the cultural effects of mass media technology. But this dimension of West's novels does not cancel out the less appealing dimension described in the preceding chapter. Rather, these two perspectives are in tension in West's novels. Moreover, the second chapter also explains why, even though West's novels were well received in the early years of post-war, postmodern culture in which the impact of the reproduced visual image was and continues to be far greater than it ever was before World War II, the novels depict a modern rather than a postmodern mass culture.

If the first two chapters contribute to the long-standing interest in defining West's critique of mass culture, the last three chapters of the study draw on a different implication of the novels' reception in the 50s and 60s. As Leslie Fiedler insists in "The Middle Against Both Ends," the "problem posed by popular culture is finally, then, a problem of class distinction in a democratic society" (Cross the Border 27). Fiedler may well have agreed with Russell Lynes' pronouncement in Harper's, 1949, that "it isn't wealth or family that makes prestige these days. It's taste and high thinking" (310). But Fiedler recognized that, although there is no simple correlation of cultural distinction and social class, aesthetic judgements are in fact mediated by class backgrounds and aspirations. Hence, he concludes his essay on middlebrow taste by labeling it the taste of the "petty bourgeoisie" and describing the typical member of this class as angrily rejecting highbrow art.
because it "reminds him that he has not yet, after all, arrived" and angrily condemns lowbrow art because it "suggests to him a condition to which he might easily relapse" (27-28).

In exposing the class conflict at work in this 1950s culture war, Fiedler was, of course, openly engaging as a combatant in the conflict. In his study of the Cold War era culture wars in the U.S., Andrew Ross offers some helpful insight into Fiedler's combat strategy. Ross argues that Fiedler misreads middlebrow culture as a spreading, colonizing, homogenizing force when, in fact (argues Ross), the middlebrows are extraordinarily sensitive to cultural distinctions, attempting to identify with both highbrow and lowbrow taste and thus create new and complex relations between these tastes (60). By characterizing middlebrow culture monolithically, Fiedler is clinging to a particular hierarchy that best serves his interests, that assumes that a highbrow is "naturally" of greater social standing than the middlebrows. Essentially, he is attempting to pull rank, attempting to guard his power as an intellectual to draw the lines of taste (the content of the categories being irrelevant) (60-61). As such, he is trying to "legitimize social inequalities," make the middlebrows' middling social status appear to be precisely what they deserve (59). If Fiedler is misreading the middlebrows, then, is he also misreading West? Is Fiedler wrong to suggest that West was the most willing of his contemporaries to juxtapose the inherently offending aesthetics of the avant-garde with the equally shocking aesthetics of popular culture? The answer to this question is what the last three chapters of this study pursue.
Chapter 3 examines West’s social background, his education and the trajectory of his early career to understand his own sense of his class position, which is necessary in order to begin examining how what Fiedler calls the "problem of class distinction" might influence West’s treatment of mass culture in his novels. Drawing on Andrew Ross’s wrestling with this general problem in No Respect and on Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the social determinations of highbrow and middlebrow taste in Distinctions, the analysis of West’s biography suggests that, while he was clearly a "highbrow," this distinction was a tenuous one for him. Newly arrived into the class of artists and intellectuals who comprise the highbrows, and without a great deal of legitimate cultural capital, West exploited his subordinate status within this class just as the Dandies did in nineteenth-century Europe--with aristocratic affectation, but an affectation that often bordered on the pretensions of the upper-middlebrows.

It may be argued that the study of taste distinctions and their relation to class conflicts does not really apply to the study of art production, in this case, West’s production of his novels. Alluding to Pierre Bourdieu, for example, Ross argues that "social differences are expressed not through what people produce but primarily through what they consume, in other words, through the appropriation of distinctive cultural signs" (59). This is a useful recognition of the commonplace that an artist has limited, usually temporary control over the reception of his or her cultural product. In analyzing consumers’ aesthetic choices, as Bourdieu did in the research he began in 1950s Paris and published in Distinctions, this
commonplace is as much an assumption as it is a conclusion. But surely in producing a piece of art, literary or otherwise, the artist is performing an "appropriation of distinctive cultural signs." And surely if one is examining the reception of an artist, such as West, by professional readers, students and teachers of literary art, such those who helped place West's work in the academic canon, one can assume that these professionals' appropriation of the art is in part a sympathetic response to the author's appropriation of particular signs. The distinction between consumers and creators is one that must be maintained, of course, even among highbrows, as Russell Lynes indicated nearly half a century ago in his essay distinguishing "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow." But to define the highbrow creator as a "professional man" who is concerned primarily with "the communication of ideas" within a particular art medium and genre and for whom the product's status as "art" is secondary at best--this is too simplistic for someone such as West who, like many of his contemporaries, not only wrote novels but took part in editing journals, speaking and criticism (Lynes 316-17). Also, as West's biography makes clear, he was in fact very concerned with the public perception of his cultural consumption: as a young man he became something of a master of posturing--with his dress, his conversation, his stories. Consequently, in this third chapter, West's biography and correspondence is examined for evidence of patterns in his appropriation of distinctive cultural signs.

Chapter 4 examines West's first publication, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, against the background of his struggles to stake out his social and cultural
position as an artist and intellectual. Although intended as a piece of avant-garde writing in the form of dadaist black humor, the prevailing aesthetic in the novella seems to be a decadent aestheticism, suggesting that in writing this novella, West is essentially posing as a Dandy, attempting to exploit his marginal status within the class of highbrow intellectuals. In guardedly working out this decadent aestheticism in the novella, West also depicts the aesthetic disposition of particular fraction of middlebrow cultural consumers, which anticipates his depiction of the title character in Miss Lonelyhearts. This character is then analyzed, and his "problems" (and West's representation of them), which have been analyzed in Chapters 1 and 2 above, are shown to be not only the result of the culture industry's authoritarianism and reproduction technology, but also the manifestation of his position within a specific class fraction.

Chapter 5 first sets West's use of popular culture materials in the context of Rueul Denney's survey of intellectuals' interest in popular culture in the early decades of this century, indicating that West's tenuous social position as an intellectual plays a role in his uses of this material in his second and third novels. The remainder of the chapter examines the way in which West experiments with a "camp" sensibility in his last novel, The Day of the Locust, a logical strategy given his development as an intellectual and writer. The effect of his experimentation is ambivalent at best, but his use of it demonstrates again West's acute sensitivity to the difficulties intellectuals and artists in the 1930s faced in positioning themselves vis-a-vis mass culture.
CHAPTER 1

PSYCHOANALYZING THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

The importance and relevance of Freudian psychoanalytic theory to West’s work, especially to Miss Lonelyhearts, has long been established, in spite of West’s insistence in "Some Notes on Miss L." that "psychology has nothing to do with reality" and that American novelists "cannot learn from" Freud but should instead use "the great body of case histories. . . in the way the ancient writers used their myths. . ." (66-67). With his 1962 pamphlet on Miss Lonelyhearts, Stanley Edgar Hyman was the first to apply Freudian theory to West’s work, sketching out Miss Lonelyhearts’ Oedipus complex (16-17) and dismissing West’s disclaimer of psychological realism with a shrug: "Some or all of this may be Westian leg-pull" (11). Later in the 1960s, two critics developed the brief analysis that Hyman had sketched out, fitting their readings to the framework of archetypal criticism that Northrop Frye’s work made so important in this decade. In his 1964 monograph, Victor Comerchero argues that West’s statements about psychology are "not mere legpull" but rather his recognition that psychological case studies "can now be used in an archetypal sense" and that, consequently, in Miss Lonelyhearts West has used case studies of "Oedipal homosexuality" as the basis of his story, just as the Greek dramatists used their myths (95-96). Comerchero then proceeds to
elaborate on Hyman's Oedipal analysis, especially noting the fusion of sadism and masochism that are motivated by Miss L's homoerotic impulses, a fusion that finally results in a "schizophrenic state" that allows Miss Lonelyhearts to make manifest his "repressed castration complex" (96, 97, 99). Roger Abrahams, much like Comerchero but more explicitly Jungian, suggests that West's comments indicate that the novelist should use individual case studies to portray "archetypal dramas of human existence" (24). He then proceeds to document the "sado-masochistic pattern...[that] accounts for an important inner rhythm in the structure of this novel" (32).

In the 1970s, two critics analyzed the novel's main character as if he were a patient (and the critic a psychoanalyst). West's comments to the contrary, James Hickey assumes that the novel is "an intensely compelling projection of a disintegrating mind" and, with excruciating detail, argues that Miss Lonelyhearts regresses from a state of obsessional neurosis (which Hyman, Comerchero and Abrahams had already pointed out) to the catatonic stupor characteristic of schizophrenic hysteria (115, 127, 140-44). Richard Geha, a psychologist, provides an analysis of Miss Lonelyhearts' "condition" that confirms much of what the other critics have concluded but does so with a clarity and coherence that bears summarizing: Miss Lonelyhearts' Christ-complex (his attempt to rescue his correspondents) is a symptom of castration anxiety that has not been

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1 This (Jungian) pattern is actually a three-part cycle consisting of "[male-oriented] sadistic action, [female-oriented] masochistic docility, and [infantile-oriented] retreat to bed and isolation" (34).
appropriately repressed, as is clear from this scene in the novel that opens with Miss Lonelyhearts sitting in a park, staring at the stone obelisk in front of him:

The stone shaft cast a long, rigid shadow on the walk in front of [Miss Lonelyhearts]. He sat staring at it without knowing why until he noticed that it was lengthening in rapid jerks. . . . He grew frightened and looked up quickly at the monument. It seemed red and swollen in the dying sun, as though it were about to spout a load of granite seed.

He hurried away. (89)²

Early in the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts recalls that as a boy, "something stirred in him when he shouted the name of Christ" (75). This unnamed thing strongly suggests the phallus, for the boy "play[s] with this thing" but never lets it "come alive"; also, Miss Lonelyhearts identifies it as a snake that frightened him when it began to uncoil (75-76). This passage leads Geha to explain that Miss Lonelyhearts has "inadequately repressed" his childhood memory of the castrated female body (his mother's, presumably) (Geha 118). That memory keeps recurring, prompted especially by the correspondents' letters, which are almost all about mutilated and violated female bodies. And it is to resist this recurring memory that Miss Lonelyhearts adopts strategies that become increasingly regressive: "Castration horror forces Miss Lonelyhearts rapidly backward through the anal and oral phases" rather than forward beyond the Oedipus complex that concludes the phallic phase and begins the period of latency (119).

Taken together, these analyses suggest two things about Miss Lonelyhearts'

²All quotations from West's novels are from The Complete Works of Nathanael West.
"condition": First, for much of the novel, the condition manifests the symptoms of an obsessional neurosis, which, according to Freudian theory, is triggered by castration anxiety and causes a regression from the phallic (Oedipal) stage of libidinal development to the anal stage of development, which is characterized by sadistic and masochistic thoughts and behavior. Second, near the end of the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts' condition has degenerated to a psychosis. But does this consensus suggest that West is not following his own recommendation in "Some Notes" that American novelists use psychological case studies rather than psychological theory as source material for narrative and character development? Not necessarily. All the critics above apply Freudian theory to the novel without noting any parallels between the novel and specific case studies, but there is evidence of parallels to two Freudian case studies--the "Wolf Man" (From the History of an Infantile Neurosis [1914/1918]) and "Dr. Schreber" (Psycho-analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia [1911]).

Miss Lonelyhearts' condition, as it is manifested and its brief history sketched in the early chapters of the novel, is analogous in several ways to that of the "Wolf Man" whose condition Freud analyzes primarily as an obsessional neurosis (113). First, like the Wolf Man, Miss Lonelyhearts recalls suppressing masturbation as a child: he "discovered that something stirred in him when he shouted the name of Christ, something secret and enormously powerful. He had played with this thing, but had never allowed it to come alive" (75). (In the next sentence he identifies this "thing" both as hysteria and as a "snake"--a classic
phallic symbol, of course.) A few sentences later, when Miss Lonelyhearts reenacts that childhood excitement by chanting "Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ," he once again does not allow the excitement to be fulfilled: "the moment the snake started to uncoil in his brain, he became frightened and closed his eye" (76). Also like the Wolf Man, Miss Lonelyhearts' behavior is often "sadistical-anal"--and especially hostile towards women (Freud, *Infantile Neurosis* 25-26, 68). Miss Lonelyhearts twists the nipples of Betty's breasts early in the novel and beats Faye Doyle near the end of the novel. He also beats the gay old man whom he finds warming himself in a public rest room. As he beats the man, Miss Lonelyhearts thinks of a small frog he stomped to death out of rage and also of his miserable correspondents whom he would so like to beat, as he did the lamb whom he and his college friends tried to sacrifice as a practical joke. Finally, Miss Lonelyhearts demonstrates one of the Wolf Man's most obvious and persistent neurotic behaviors: the obsessive attachment to piety, and specifically what Freud calls his "identification for the figure of Christ," which provides the patient with relief from his fear and anxiety of the phallus described above (113-15).

Miss Lonelyhearts' religious experience that concludes the novel, however, bears less the marks of the Wolf Man's obsessive attachment to religion than it

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3Freud notes of his patient as a boy: "he began to be cruel to small animals. . . to crush beetles underfoot. . ." (209).

4Freud also describes this process as the setting free of the homosexual libido and its attachment to a religious concern for mankind.
does the marks of Dr. Schreber’s delusions of a grand union with God. For while there are common threads in Freud’s analysis of these two cases (homosexual impulses are important to both men’s conditions), Freud makes a fundamental distinction between the Wolf Man’s neurotic condition (which Freud was able to treat successfully) and Dr. Schreber’s psychotic condition (which Freud merely speculated about upon reading the judge’s memoirs; Schreber was never Freud’s patient). Leading up to his delusion of union with God, Schreber explains, he experienced symptoms of paranoia, especially the delusion of persecution (Psycho-Analytic Notes 25-27). The parallel in West’s novel, of course, is Shrike’s badgering of Miss Lonelyhearts. This is not presented as a delusion, exactly, but it is clear that Miss Lonelyhearts fails to enjoy Shrike’s rhetoric as the other newspaper men do, suggesting that perhaps Shrike keeps after him because he realizes that Miss Lonelyhearts feels persecuted by his rhetoric. Another parallel is that Schreber and Miss Lonelyhearts both experience being transformed into women as part of becoming one with God (Psycho-analytic Notes 17-21). Schreber describes his union with God—which, like Miss Lonelyhearts’, gives him access to a "root-language" with God—as a state of bliss that is essentially voluptuous; Freud speculates that a key factor in the incubation of Schreber’s delusion is Schreber’s reverie that "after all it really must be nice to be a woman submitting to the act of copulation" (29). And this recalls Miss Lonelyhearts’

5The parallel between Miss Lonelyhearts and Dr. Schreber’s case was suggested to me by Dr. Joyce Wexler in January, 1990.
feeling upon being seduced by the masculine Mrs. Doyle: "He had always been
the pursuer, but now found a strange pleasure in having the roles reversed" (101).

But if West consciously drew on Freud's case studies as "ancient writers"
drew on "myths," to what end and to what effect? This chapter argues that a
primary effect, if not the primary purpose, of West's use of psychoanalysis is to
present a critique of mass culture. None of the Freudian critics summarized
above suggests with any specificity how West might have used these case studies
to critique U.S. culture in general or U.S. mass culture in particular. After
spelling out West's "allusions" to the Oedipal/castration complex, for example,
Comerchero seems at a loss to describe the function or purpose of this complex--
except to suggest that the alternation of sadism and masochism parallels West's
own response to suffering and complements other aspects of the novel that merge
to form a "protest against a world so flattened and absurd that true compassion is
unendurable" (100, 102). Like Comerchero, Abrahams never relates his analysis
to specific cultural phenomenon; he only argues that the novel is an example of
the "'existential,' the 'chaotic experience,' or the anti-romance novel," and he
concludes with vague abstractions: Miss Lonelyhearts "wants to advance into
existence, accepting the dualities of life and finding a unity in diversity" (24, 35).
(Hickey and Geha both intend only to show that Miss Lonelyhearts can be
successfully analyzed as a pathological character.)

It is here that the Frankfurt School's use of psychoanalytic theory is most
helpful. For it provides a coherent theory, partly but not wholly speculative, of
mass psychology and, more specifically, of the psychology of mass culture.

Fascism and Mass Culture: Mutual Concerns

Following the work of Erich Fromm in the late 1920s and early 30s (before Fromm acrimoniously left the Frankfurt School in the late 30s), Theodor Adorno held that Freud's theories of sexuality provided the "missing link between ideological superstructure and socio-economic base"; described society's "libidinal structure," a structure determined both biologically and socio-economically; serving as a society's "cement"; and structured its political authority (Jay 92-93). Adorno assumed that these libidinal structures were inexorably linked to socio-economic conditions, but he also believed that understanding these structures was central to understanding the nature and effect of socio-economic conditions. In the late 1930s, when Fromm began to question the basic principles of Freudian psychoanalysis and develop alternative principles, Adorno (with Max Horkheimer) retained his belief that, while Freudian psychology did not offer any hope for social change, its psycho-sexual theories of the individual were important to retain and use in a qualified way in the critique of mass culture, a critique that Adorno and Horkheimer were then beginning to develop (Jay 102-03). Similarly, while

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6Martin Jay points out that the Frankfurt School scholars were the only group at this time willing to attempt the integration of Freudian and Marxist analysis (86). Wilhelm Reich, who had tried such an integration, was being thrown out of both the Communist party and the psychoanalytic movement at this time. Also, the Frankfurt School's interest in psychoanalysis probably began with Leo Lowenthal who was analyzed by Frieda Fromm-Reichmann in the mid-1920s. Horkheimer also underwent analysis in the late 1920s and encouraged Adorno to do his first bit of writing on psychoanalysis at the same time (87).
they rejected the biological determinism underlying Freud's later, metapsychological theories (e.g., the theory of the death instinct articulated in Civilization and Its Discontents), Adorno and Horkheimer accepted the pessimistic conclusions of these later theories as manifestations of what Horkheimer called in his letter to Leo Lowenthal, "Freud's great flair for the situation" (qtd. in Jay 102).

These last two points distinguish the Frankfurt School's use of Freudian theory from the use to which that theory is put in Lawrence DiStasi's essay on aggression in Miss Lonelyhearts"--the only published essay to date suggesting that West's use of psychoanalytic theory is an integral part of his critique of mass culture. There is no disputing DiStasi's claim that the novel "objectifies in fiction the pessimism of Freud in Civilization and Its Discontents" or that West extends this pessimism to the role of mass media in contemporary culture (83-84). But because DiStasi (unlike Adorno) accepts Freud's assumption in Civilization and Its Discontents that aggression is a part of man's "fundamental nature" rather than the product of a specific socio-economic system, the focus of his analysis is to demonstrate how the novel provides insight into universal truths. Miss Lonelyhearts' deadness, he writes, represents "the loss which is sustained by the human organism in its repression-riddled drive toward order and civilization" (89). Also, Miss Lonelyhearts' "attempts to re-bind the aggressive component with the force of Eros" give the novel its basic structure--"the alternation of episodic violence with attempts to use love to bind the violence" (90). A greater limitation
of DiStasi's analysis is that, because he relies almost exclusively on Freud's metapsychological work *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he is unable to connect his analysis of aggression and mass media with his analysis of the psycho-sexual dynamics operating in the novel. He states in passing that the novel demonstrates through its main character that the mass media have made more people aware of suffering while at the same time depriving them of the equipment they need to resist the guilt that extends from suffering (85). But the last two thirds of DiStasi's essay is devoted to explaining how the novel alternates episodes of aggression with episodes of attempts at a binding love. His analysis produces conclusions much like those of the psychoanalytic critics summarized above—unrelated to the operations of the mass media. Adorno, however, allows us to put this consensus of psychoanalytic criticism about *Miss Lonelyhearts* to use in articulating more precisely West's critique of mass culture in this novel as well as in *A Cool Million* and *The Day of the Locust*.

Adorno persistently characterizes U.S. mass culture, or rather, its effects, as psychologically regressive. For this generalization, the Frankfurt School and Adorno in particular have long been criticized, not so much by those who wish to defend mass culture as a positive vehicle for fostering self-autonomy and promoting democratic values as by those who find the generalization reductive in its implication that U.S. mass culture is the product of an industry whose
influence borders on the totalitarian. In his recent comparative study of the Frankfurt School, Richard Wolin reiterates the explanation that usually accompanies this criticism, namely, that when the members of the Frankfurt School were forced in the early 1930s to leave Germany and their study of German class culture, they uncritically transferred to their study of U.S. culture many of the conclusions they had begun to draw from their studies in their homeland. Wolin concludes that the "ease with which Weimar democracy passed over into a fascist social order was turned by the Frankfurt School into a parable concerning the foibles of liberal democracy in general," a parable that led to Adorno's conclusion that liberal democracy was simply the veneer on a "totally administered world" (59). This criticism, however, does not rule out that some aspect of the School's critiques of the Weimar Republic might be relevant to understanding certain aspects of U.S. mass culture in the 1920s and 30s. Bernard Gendron, for example, while acknowledging Adorno's "intolerance and mistaken explanations" about American popular culture, also insists that such limitations should not deter critics "from attending to the important questions Adorno has raised" about the "codes of the dominant culture" that steadfastly resist subversive

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7 Tom Bottomore summarizes this criticism in his short history of the Frankfurt School (46). Alan Swingewood echoes and elaborates on this criticism by contesting the Frankfurt School's conclusions that reification is ubiquitous, (i.e., the working class is fully "integrated into contemporary capitalism") and that this reification is imposed from above by a totalitarian culture industry. He also adds another common objection, namely, that the Frankfurt School assumes there is no hope of any proactive revolution to overthrow the culture industry, and that the only "genuinely negative and revolutionary opposition is confined to a privileged elite and a subversive art" (Myth of Mass Culture 18).
or alternative readings (35-36). That is, one can well argue that the psychoanalytic critique of mass culture that Adorno develops does in fact help explain the authoritarian aspects of mass culture, without assuming, as Adorno does, that mass culture is solely and successfully authoritarian.

It is also important to note that Adorno himself did not approach fascism and mass culture in exactly the same way. As will be explained below, Adorno argues that mass culture fosters a regression of the libido, but in his study in 1940 of American "fascist agitators," Adorno suggests that fascism fosters a more basic regression—a regression of what Freud calls "identification" and thus, by implication, a regression of ego development. In "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," Adorno draws primarily on Freud's discussion of the "libidinal organization of groups" in *Group Psychology* (Group Psychology 110). In this work, Freud sketches an evolution of group development on which Adorno relies. First, there is the individual outside the "primitive group," possessing "his own continuity, his self-consciousness," and so on (86). Then, the individual joins a first-order group, one that is primitive and "unorganized," but a group nonetheless. In this first-order group, the individual loses his distinctiveness, his individuality, for the "unorganized" group intensifies emotion and inhibits intellection—i.e., makes the individual less an individual, assuming one privileges reason and autonomy as the key attributes of the individual (84-85). As the first-order group evolves, however, it becomes equipped "with the attributes of the individual" as that individual was before entering the first-order group (87).
Adorno accepts Freud's description of the second-order group as a commendable ideal; such a group would achieve at the social level what Freud's psychoanalytic practice tries to achieve at the individual level—"freedom in the sense of a certain self-sufficiency and autonomy of the individual" and the "emancipation of man from the heteronomous rule of his unconscious" ("Freudian Theory" 136). But instead of the emancipation of the individual, Adorno argues, fascism encourages a regression to a kind of first-order group (although hardly primitive or disorganized), that is, a social structure that creates "dependence" rather than helping individuals realize "potential freedom." The psychological mechanism of this regression as Adorno describes it is the "expropriation of the unconscious by social control" (136)—precisely the kind of regression Freud identifies in first-order groups where the ego is "impoverished," "surrender[ing] itself to the object," "substi tut[ing] the object for its own most important constituent" (Group Psychology 113). Adorno concludes that Freud "anticipates almost with clairvoyance the postpsychological de-individualized social atoms which form the fascist collectivities" ("Freudian Theory" 136). In short, Adorno believes that Freud's description of the ego surrendering itself to the object is an accurate description of what fascist propaganda seeks to achieve—and did achieve in Germany.

Adorno is careful in this study of American fascism not to state explicitly that the existence of these agitators in the 1930s and early 40s proves that consumers of mass culture are already "postpsychological de-individualized social
atoms" (136). For Adorno's critique of mass culture is based on the notion of psychological regression, not on the more extreme notion of some "postpsychological" state. That is, Adorno's critique of mass culture is based on the Freudian model of obsessional neurosis, whereas his critique of fascism is based on the Freudian models of psychosis and hypnosis, both of which Freud regarded as outside the bounds of psychotherapy. For example, the psychotic, Freud argues in Group Psychology, cannot sublimate his libidinal instincts; hence, he must repress them, and in doing so, block the possibility of transference, which Freud believed to be the key to psychological healing. Similarly, Freud observes that hypnosis is an apt analogy for the kind of regressive behavior characteristic of first-order groups. For hypnosis, he would later write in Introductory Lecture XXVIII on Analytic Therapy, "seeks to cover up and gloss over something in mental life" whereas psychoanalysis "seeks to expose and get rid of something" (Introductory Lectures 450). That is, hypnosis "leaves the patient inert and unchanged, . . . unable to resist any fresh occasion for falling ill," whereas psychoanalysis is "serious work" intent on removing "resistance" through the "educative" assistance of the analyst (451).

Of course, Adorno does not warn against inferring a parallel between the psychodynamics of fascism and the culture industry. He clearly believes the culture industry has the potential to affect Americans the way fascist propaganda affected his fellow Germans. But this fear, unwarranted or not, is a fear that West seems to have shared with Adorno. That is, West seems to have been
particularly sensitized to the dangers of fascism in the 1930s. Leslie Fiedler implies in *Love and Death in the American Novel* that the "most admired novelists" of the 1930s (485), West included, were caught up in the "ennobling of violence" and manifested in their work a

naked love-fear of violence... a kind of passion not unlike that which moved the Germans before their final defeat, a desire for some utter cataclysm to end the dull dragging out of impotent suffering. (484)

In other words, Fiedler suggests that these writers manifested fascist tendencies uncritically. This is hardly a plausible evaluation of West’s treatment of violence, which is closer to the satiric and critical treatment of violence in the work of George Grosz and other German writers and artists opposing the emerging fascism in the Weimar Republic—writers and artists whom West admired. It is perhaps this admiration that led to West’s sensitivity to fascism. But whatever its cause, West’s interest in fascism is clearly evident in his third novel, *A Cool Million*.

West’s principal parody in this novel is the self-made success theme purveyed in Horatio Alger’s novels for boys. Shagpoke Whipple is the caricature of the American who uses this moralistic success ethic for crudely ideological purposes. An ex-President of the U.S. who now owns a bank, Whipple refuses to loan the main character, Lemuel Pitkin, the money he needs to prevent the unjust foreclosure on the mortgage of the small cabin in which he and his mother have been living in. His justification is that Lemuel is "too young to borrow" and, further, that it is possible for someone like Lemuel to earn fifteen hundred dollars
in three months. "This is the land of opportunity," he reassures Lemuel; "you have an honest face and that is [worth] more than gold," and America "takes care of the honest and industrious" (149-150).

However, when Lemuel next meets Mr. Whipple (in prison), Mr. Whipple's clumsy boosterism takes a fascist turn towards scapegoating. Explaining the failure of his bank, Mr. Whipple refuses to blame "the mob," as he calls his defrauded customers, and instead blames "Wall Street," "the Jewish international bankers" and "the Communists": "I was the victim of an un-American conspiracy," he sighs (172). The next time Lemuel meets Mr. Whipple, the man has founded the "National Revolutionary Party, popularly known as the 'Leather Shirts'" (186). As he seeks recruits from among the homeless and unemployed, Whipple calls for a revolution of the middle class which, he claims, is being "crushed between two gigantic millstones," international "Capital" (represented by Jewish bankers) and international "Labor" (i.e., Communism) (188). Whipple's recruiting efforts are depicted several more times in the remainder of the novel, and they culminate in the National Revolutionary Party's victory over "sophistication, Marxism and International Capitalism," which establishes Mr. Whipple as the dictator of the U.S. (255).

Biographer Jay Martin lists more than a dozen quasi-fascist groups on the order of the Ku Klux Klan that emerged in the 1930s, including William Dudley Pelley's Silver Shirts who self-consciously imitated Nazism--groups whose rhetoric West is clearly parodying in this novel (232-34). So West understood quite well
the same American fascist groups that Adorno studied in the following decade. But did West see any connection between these groups and mass culture? It appears so, for West weaves into his parody of fascism several extended satiric treatments of mass commodification. One manifestation of this is West's repeated references to interior decoration. Asa Goldstein, a New York interior designer, who sets the plot going, purchasing the little farmhouse that Lem and his mother rent from Whipple to place in his show window on Fifth Avenue, thus making the house into kitsch. Goldstein is also the person responsible for designing the "themes" of the various rooms in Wu Fong's brothel (first, international; then, during the reactionary depression years, American), making it the most successful such establishment in New York. Drawing on Adorno's analysis of mass culture in "On the Fetish Character in Music and Regression of Listening," we can see that Goldstein's practice is fundamentally reifying, removing small fragments of indigenous cultures and reproducing them, not to increase the enjoyment of the brothel's pleasure-seekers, but to give the appearance of aesthetic sophistication, a sophistication that is, in fact, banal, standardized ("On the Fetish Character" 274-75).

The novel's criticism of commodification is explicit in two other passages. The first is an uprising of Native Americans led by chief Israel Satinpenny who delivers a diatribe against U. S. culture (231ff). The focus of his diatribe is industrialization and commercialization: he condemns the white man for coming to the New World only to make clever consumer products, from cigarettes to
doorknobs to plumbing that "hide[s] his vomit." And he is delighted that this
commercialization is now coming back to haunt those who have managed it:

[The white man, Satinpenny says,) is up to his neck in the articles of his
manufacture... All that worries him is how he can go on making little
painted boxes for pins, watch fobs, leatherette satchels... He is dying of a
surfeit of shoddy. (233)

This, of course, echoes Miss Lonelyhearts' dreams of various collections of
second-hand consumer products and looks forward to Tod Hackett's musings on
the "dream dumps" on the back lots of the Hollywood studios. But it also
parallels what Eugene Lunn calls, in a discussion of Adorno and Horkheimer's
Dialectic of Enlightenment, a "critique of the productivist manipulation of nature"
(238). This critique, Lunn explains, assumes that the Enlightenment went wrong
when it "viewed nature (including human drives) as separate from--and in
adversary relation to[--]the knowing 'subject,' who must learn to manipulate
nature for utilitarian advantage." This results in alienation from nature, from that
which is objective in one's self; it also results in the privileging of repetition over
historical development. Further, it creates a regression to a primitive state of
impotence in the face of nature; it is as if nature takes its revenge (239). Miss
Lonelyhearts, as if anticipating Satinpenny's speech, notes as he observes the
skyscrapers surrounding him, that "Americans have dissipated their radical energy
in an orgy of stone-breaking... [doing] their work hysterically, desperately, almost
as if they knew that the stones would some day break them" (100).

The most explicit linking of fascism and commodification in the novel
comes in West's description of the Chamber of American Horrors. This traveling
museum features a large hall filled with objects that are clearly meant to recall the critique of commodification mounted by dada and surrealism: a "Venus de Milo with a clock in her abdomen," a "gigantic hemorrhoid" lit with a pulsating light, and so on (240). But the museum is actually a propaganda machine for the combined forces of Capital and Labor, the opponents of Whipple's fascist "revolution": it features a drama, for example, that presents the history of the U.S. as one of shameful exploitation, from the colonists' exploitation of the Indians and the Southerners' exploitation of African-Americans to the exploitation of small investors by Wall Street investment firm (239-240). Ostensibly, the passage suggests that fascism is the root cause both of imperialism and commodification. But, of course, the exhibit ignores the role that "Capital" has played historically in exploitation. The effect of the passage, then, is to blur the line between capitalism and fascism, which, of course, is the blurring that the Frankfurt School saw occurring in the late 1920s and early 30s in Weimar Germany.

There is other evidence in A Cool Million that suggests that West saw similarities between fascism and the mass culture of America's capitalist democracy. West places at the climax of the novel a vaudeville scene that dramatizes the sadomasochistic personality, for example. But this scene will be discussed below. Here it only remains to note that West concludes Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust by having main characters lapse into psychosis--in the case of the former novel, a psychological state that could either
be psychosis or self-induced hypnosis. In each case, the main characters’ symptoms throughout much of the novel are neurotic but become psychotic or hypnotic in the end. As was explained above, Adorno defined the effect of fascism in precisely these terms. That is, West’s characters in these two novels move from neurotic states that Adorno associates with mass culture to the psychotic state he associates with fascism. Coincidentally, this affirms Adorno’s general evaluation of U.S. mass culture as potentially duplicating the totalitarian control of a fascist propaganda machine. It appears, then, that Adorno and West expressed in similar psychological terms the same fear about the potential effects of mass culture in the U.S.

**The Sadomasochistic Personality as Critique of Mass Culture in the Novels**

Although Adorno makes a distinction between fascist and mass culture regression, it is a fine distinction since both notions of regression can be traced back to Erich Fromm who developed a specific theory of regression from his socio-psychological research in Germany in the early 1930s, research commissioned by the new director of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer. Fromm’s initial research, described and posthumously published in *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*, led to his theory that a totalitarian social structure required a particular personality type he labeled "sadomasochistic" (Wolin 54-55). Initially targeting monopoly capitalism and only later applying this to fascism proper, Fromm argued that as economic power becomes concentrated in the hands of a small elite group, individuals in that society regress psychologically; in
Freudian terms, as their ego weakens, the influence of the social superego strengthens. The sense of helplessness experienced by adults then affects the development of their children's egos: those developing egos become more and more exposed to the "direct and unmediated influence of predominant social institutions." Fromm observed two primary symptoms of this regression and underdevelopment--"deference to superiors, contempt for inferiors" (Wolin 55). Consequently, he labeled this personality type sadomasochistic, concluding that an "authoritarian social structure produces and satisfies those needs which develop on the basis of sado-masochism" (qtd. in Wolin 56).

Freud, from as early as his publication of Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905), regarded sadism and masochism as the "active and passive forms" of a "single perversion" (qtd. in Laplanche and Pontalis 401-402). As he developed and revised his theory of instincts, Laplanche and Pontalis argue, Freud came to see masochism as the primary component in this pair (as do Fromm and Adorno). At the same time, Freud continued to insist that both masochism and sadism are manifestations of the same phenomenon, the derivation of pleasure from pain, and that this phenomenon shapes the early development of the ego. This stage of the ego's development reaches a crisis in the Oedipal stage, a crisis of competing demands (Moore and Fine 13). If those competing demands are not resolved, the subject does not progress from this early (anal) stage of development into the genital, post-Oedipal stage. Instead, the subject falls victim to a crisis of ambivalence: the conflicting feelings of affection and hostility reach
"the point where action seems unavoidable yet unacceptable." As a defensive measure, the subject represses one of the two conflicting feelings, and this repression leads to obsessional neurosis. Masochism and (less often) sadism are considered symptoms of this neurosis because these behaviors are inherently ambivalent: in order to repress one’s feelings of hostility towards another, for example, one manages to find pleasure in repressing that hostility by turning it upon one’s self and then identifying with the one inflicting that hostility.

Fromm’s and Adorno’s interest in sadism and masochism is obvious. Fromm wanted to explain how entire classes of people could knowingly embrace an authoritarian social structure; Adorno wanted to explain how mass culture consumers could derive pleasure from something he considered hostile to them. Thus, in a late essay on jazz that reiterates the thesis he developed in his earliest use of psychoanalysis to critique the culture industry, Adorno compares the ostensibly "rebellious gestures" of jazz to the rebellious gestures of the sadomasochistic type described by analytic psychology [i.e., Fromm], the person who chafes against the father-figure while secretly admiring him, who seeks to emulate him and in turn derives enjoyment from the subordination he overtly detests, concluding matter-of-factly that "this propensity accelerates the standardization, commercialization and rigidification of the medium" ("Perennial Fashion" 122).

Adorno reiterates this thesis in "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," which he wrote shortly after completing his 1936 essay on jazz: the pleasure of the culture industry’s music, he says, "is given only to be simultaneously denied"; "the new phase of the musical consciousness of the masses
is defined by displeasure in pleasure"--as well as by pleasure in displeasure, one might add (271, 274). People’s responses to the "isolated charms" of the culture industry’s reified music are "ambivalent" since their "sensory-pleasure turns into disgust" as they feel betrayed by the absence of genuine satisfaction (290). On the one hand, listeners achieve "self-surrender and pseudo-pleasure through identification with power"; on the other hand, underlying this pleasurable surrender of the self is the knowledge that the security of shelter under the ruling conditions is a provisional one, that it is only a respite, and that eventually everything must collapse. Even in self-surrender one is not good in his own eyes; in his enjoyment one feels that he is simultaneously betraying the possible and being betrayed by the existent. Regressive listening is always ready to degenerate into rage. (295)

Whereas Freud came to see the fundamental ambivalence expressed in masochism and sadism as "one of the great polarities which characterise the sexual life of the subject, . . . recognizable in the later oppositions phallic/castrated and masculine/feminine" (Laplanche and Pontalis 403), Adorno, following Fromm, uses this fundamental psychoanalytic principle to describe the fundamental psychological effect of the culture industry on individuals.

From the perspective of Adorno’s theory, the conclusions of the psychoanalytic readings of Miss Lonelyhearts discussed above suggest that Miss Lonelyhearts’ obsessional neurosis, manifested in his alternating masochism and sadism, is as much the result of his experience with(in) the culture industry as it is the effect of castration anxiety. Hence, Miss Lonelyhearts is right in explaining his "problem" to Betty as the situation he finds himself in as advice columnist.
While at first he takes the job as a joke, that is, assuming that he can maintain some distance and control over his response to the letters, he soon discovers that he is "the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator" (106). The perpetrator, ultimately, is the newspaper medium. But that medium is personified by Shrike. He not only jokes at Miss Lonelyhearts; he makes it impossible for Miss Lonelyhearts to write independently of his rhetoric. The culture industry as West portrays it in this novel is thus extremely authoritarian: Shrike essentially takes over Miss Lonelyhearts’ consciousness; he traps Miss Lonelyhearts into the job by refusing to fire him, even when Miss Lonelyhearts tries to sabotage the newspaper’s circulation by recommending in one of his columns that a correspondent commit suicide.

As producer of the column, then, Miss Lonelyhearts is like the jazz soloist Adorno describes—chafing at Shrike’s callous exploitation of people’s suffering while nonetheless emulating him (until he is able to escape into delusion), then deriving a masochistic pleasure from this subordination, a masochistic pleasure that takes the form of his Christ complex, his attempt to minister to his correspondents. At the same time, as a reader of his own column, Miss Lonelyhearts is manifesting symptoms of Adorno’s regressive listener: he feels "that he is simultaneously betraying the possible and being betrayed by the existent" (Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character of Music" 295); he believes, the narrator states, that "he [is] capable of dreaming the Christ dream" but feels guilty that he has betrayed this dream (West, Complete Works 115). Miss Lonelyhearts’
identification with the victims of the culture industry, the regressive listeners, elicits sadistic responses from him, which is consistent with the sadomasochistic personality, since the listeners are socially inferior to Miss Lonelyhearts and therefore the natural targets of his contempt: he is educated and skilled enough to be a producer in the culture industry whereas his correspondents are only qualified to be consumers.

Miss Lonelyhearts' attempts to curb these sadistic impulses (which he acts out on Betty and on the "clean old man") lead him to a kind of secondary, moral masochism. In his affair with Faye Doyle, for example, he assumes a passive role and allows her to dominate him sexually. Unable to control his own communication with his own correspondents and elicit responses from them, but also unable (like Shrike) to set aside his guilt about their suffering, he forces himself to keep pursuing his "Christ-dream," which leads him in the end to adopt the moral masochism of self-conscious humility. Repressing the contempt for Peter Doyle that Shrike openly shows the crippled man in the speakeasy, Miss Lonelyhearts forces himself to be sympathetic to this man whom he has cuckolded. The masochism of this behavior reaches its climax when, in closing scene of the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts walks forward to embrace Peter Doyle and is accidentally shot and plunged to his death.

Sadism and masochism are also depicted in A Cool Million and in The Day of the Locust as the effects of the culture industry. In the former novel, the main character, Lemuel Pitkin, manifests only masochism--not even the slightest hint of
sadistic aggression. On the other hand, virtually every encounter he has with another character is marked by aggression against him. However, sadism and masochism are depicted together in the penultimate chapter that describes Lemuel's role in a vaudeville act. Lemuel has been hired by the comedy team of Riley and Robbins to be their "'stooge'" (249). After delivering their punch lines, they club him to knock loose any of his many prostheses; as they return to their lines, Lem replaces the missing prostheses with extras from a box at his feet; and this continues to the end of the act. As he has throughout the novel, Lem complies sheepishly with his dismantling, a compliance so consistent that it urges the reader to regard it as masochism. Consistent with Adorno's use of Freud's theory, Lem's behavior turns aggression against a prohibition back upon himself. In Lem's case, the prohibition is against complaining about his working conditions, i.e., about being violently dismantled. For, as both the person who found him the job and his new employers emphatically tell him, he is lucky to have a job at all in the depth of the depression. The fear of no job at all--of utter dissolution, presumably--forces Lem into the masochistic role of being repeatedly hit every night, without moving or altering his pose of "sober dignity" (250). And being in this role, Lem accepts the prohibition as law: "although he had a headache from their blows he was made quite happy by this. After all, he reasoned, with millions out of work he had no cause to complain."

But the strength of the critique of mass culture comes in the depiction of the show itself. When the comedians first see Lem, they are instantly excited, for
they know that their audiences will be respond enthusiastically: "You're a riot! You'll blow them out of the back of the house," they exclaim (248). The ambivalence of this seemingly enthusiastic response is suggested by the narrator who pauses for a paragraph to explain that "to be perfectly just, from a certain point of view, not a very civilized one it must be admitted, there was much to laugh at in our hero's appearance" (248). The narrator is admitting here that this act represents for its audiences a rebellion against notions of social civility; the act encourages the audience to identify, through their laughter, with the power that causes the repeated dismantling of the worker. In identifying with the power of destruction, the audience is also able to achieve a sense of mastery; that is, in responding to the comedians as they know the comedians intend them to, they are identifying with the comedians who demonstrate their mastery over Lem, their employee, by destroying him. At the same time, however, in identifying with the power that destroys the self, the audience is implicitly acknowledging that this power is law, and that it may very well extend its destructive force to themselves. This entertainment, then, can be read as what Adorno calls "pseudo-pleasure," a surrender of the self that offers only a provisional and temporary security ("On the Fetish-Character in Music" 295).

Like Miss Lonelyhearts, Tod Hackett in The Day of the Locust dramatizes the dilemma of the cultural producer who, like Adorno's jazz player, is caught between the industry he serves and the consumer with whom he tries to identify while guiltily exploiting. And also like Miss Lonelyhearts, Tod alternates between
masochism and sadism. In Tod's case, these regressive behaviors manifest themselves primarily in Tod's relationships with Faye Greener and Homer Simpson. Faye, while the consummate consumer of mass culture, a character whose identity is depicted as wholly mediated by the culture industry, is for this very reason also the symbol of that industry's ubiquitous influence, the personification of its authoritarianism. Tod's pursuit of her as a lover is thus an exercise in masochism. Frustrated in his pursuit, he tries once to rape her, and he twice fantasizes assaulting her, but these sadistic impulses are the secondary complements to his masochism, for he has known from the beginning that she will not yield to him. Studying Faye's photograph in Chapter 3, for example, Tod recognizes that her seductive pose is an invitation, not to pleasure, but to a "struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love" (271). Consequently, he resigns himself to deference towards the character who represents the dominant power of the culture industry. Or rather, he represses (rather than resolves) his aggression at the superior power of the culture industry in favor of a masochistic attempt to be destroyed by her, an attempt that seems to motivate his immersion in the mob at the end of the novel as well as to explain his regression into hysteria in the last lines of the novel.

Towards Homer Simpson, however, Tod expresses sadistic aggression, not because Homer is the successful rival for Faye but, in part, because he is clearly Tod's social inferior: inarticulate, culturally illiterate, psychologically fragile, a retired hotel clerk. More significantly, Homer reflects the masochism that Tod
manifests in his relationship with Faye and which derives from his subordinate position within the culture industry. As with Miss Lonelyhearts, the source of Homer’s masochism is clearly depicted as castration anxiety. This first appears with his aborted liaison with Miss Martin, the hotel patron delinquent in her payments. When he begins to realize that she is willing to seduce him as payment for her bill, he begins to grow excited but finds the sensation "terrifying" (291). Almost ready to consummate the seduction, a single phone call from the front desk makes him leave the bed, under "acute distress" (294). And when Miss Martin "stretch[es] herself out in a way that couldn’t be mistaken," he flees the room. Generalizing, the narrator explains that Homer’s emotions can build and surge like a wave but always collapse short of the "crash" (294). That this impotence is born of castration anxiety is clear from Homer’s reaction to first meeting Faye. He is obsessed with his memory of her; he feels "more alive than he had at any time since Romola Martin" (314). But his growing desire again results in fear. The narrator confirms Homer’s reasoning that chastity is his only defense against destruction: "He couldn’t shed [chastity] even in thought. If he did, he would be destroyed" (313). The narrator then generalizes that Homer is simply the type of person who cannot lust without being destroyed. Not unlike Tod, Homer has difficulty resolving ambivalence; hence, he must repress one or alternating poles of that ambivalence, at the cost of neurotic symptoms. 8

8Homer’s castration anxiety surfaces again when Homer confesses to Tod the distress caused him by the "dirty black hen" that Miguel keeps with his fighting cocks (371). He is disturbed that the cocks have torn off most of the hen’s
Homer's castration anxiety, while depicted in the novel simply as a personal characteristic, becomes masochism when he encounters Faye. After the two have been living together for awhile, the narrator observes, Faye becomes bored and begins to "persecute him" (366). Homer understands that the end of the relationship is in sight, yet he consciously, masochistically, increases his "servility and his generosity" (367). The narrator stresses the masochistic quality of Homer's behavior: it "was like that of a cringing, clumsy dog, who is always anticipating a blow, welcoming it even" (emphasis added). Tod's sadistic behavior towards Homer at the end of the novel, then, can be read as yet another attempt on Tod's part to identify masochistically with Faye's (destructive) power--another attempt, that is, both to defer to his "superior" and contempt his inferior. And Homer's death at the hands of the mob can be read as an ultimate gesture of masochism, a reluctant and grudging submission to the regressive reception of the culture industry that the mob itself represents.9

Rather than identifying with the power of the phallus, Homer identifies with the hen because, like her, he is being baited and threatened by Faye. At the end of the bar scene where he makes his confession, for example, she turns towards him suddenly and he "lean[s] away as though she were going to hit him" (375). The anxiety surfaces once more as he sits with Tod outside the house where Faye is entertaining Claude, Abe, Miguel and Earle. Noticing that Tod is irritated by his elaborate but habitual hand exercises, Homer clasps his hands between his knees; as if repressing an unconscious homoeroticism, Homer "clamp[s] his knees shut" to hold his hands, which are "struggling to get free" (389).

9Homer also makes an appropriate target of Tod's aggression because Homer represents the person who has escaped the influence of culture industry. Although, like his fellow Midwesterners, he has retired to California after years of dull labor (twenty years as a hotel bookkeeper, following a regular routine of
Ultimately, Tod's sadomasochistic personality reflects the psychological makeup of those who comprise the mob--Midwesterners, the regressive consumers of mass culture whom Tod paints rather obsessively throughout the novel. In fact, near the end of the novel, he begins to realize that he is suffering "from the ingrained, morbid apathy he liked to draw in" the Midwesterners, that his pursuit of Faye in order to "be galvanized into sensibility" is essentially the same pursuit that brings the Midwesterners to Hollywood (365). In an epiphany of sorts preceding the last scene of the novel, Tod explains that the Midwesterners feel betrayed by the culture industry because their "daily diet" of sensational stories in newspapers and movies has hypertrophied their capacity for pleasure (411-12). The immediate betrayal of the Midwesterners is simply seeing that Hollywood itself is not as pleasurable as seeing the product it produces. But the real betrayal, as Tod sees it, is that consumption of the culture industry's product has made these people incapable of genuine pleasure: "They don't know what to do with their time. They haven't the mental equipment for leisure. . ." (411). In "working ten hours, eating two, sleeping the rest"), he has not fed himself on the pleasures of the mass media (294). His entertainment in Hollywood, before he meets Faye, is watching an irritable lizard in the back yard. After he meets Faye, he tries to force her memory from his mind, singing the only song he knows: the national anthem (314). He contemplates "buying a victrola or a radio," but he knows he never will, just as he will never venture to visit the places pictured in the travel bureau pamphlets he reads. All he seems capable of doing is continuing what he did for twenty years: putting up guests. When he finds Faye in bed with Miguel, he knows his role as servant is finished, so he slips into a catatonic state, assuming the intra-uterine position which Tod observes as the perfect escape: "Everything perfect in that hotel" (403). It is understandable that those who are bound to pleasures that are inherently dissatisfying might be resentful towards someone who seems to have escaped that bondage.
short, their consumption of the culture industry's product has caused them to regress in their capacity for pleasure. Anticipating Adorno's thesis that the pleasure of commodified art is "given only to be simultaneously denied," Tod explains that the culture industry fosters regression by offering a form of pleasure that ultimately denies them real pleasure ("On the Fetish-Character in Music" 271). Because those in the crowd have accepted this offer for so long, they are virtually powerless to rebel against it, even when they understand its effect. Hence, throughout the novel their rage is latent.

Once these culture consumers are together in a crowd, their inhibitions are temporarily absent, as in a dream (or psychosis, or hypnosis). As part of a crowd, the individuals gain some real power and are able to pose a real threat to those who otherwise threaten them with violence. The police trying to keep the theater entrance clear, for example, have no reluctance in using violence: once they arrest someone from the crowd, they beat him. They don't do this openly, of course. They joke with the offender first, cut him out of the crowd, take him out of view, and then begin the beating. But the implication of this part of the scene is that even in Hollywood the threat of violence is used to enforce order; even in the entertainment industry, or perhaps especially in that industry, the threat of violence is present (because needed): Hollywood, after all, West seems to suggest, is a rather authoritarian place and the producer of an authoritarian mass culture. This is why the Midwesterners individually can only express their anger by staring, or by listening to angry, religious cult preachers; only together in a
mob, and then only temporarily (i.e., before they awaken, as it were), can they vent their rage against that which was presumably their source of diversion from jobs that Tod describes as "dull" and "tedious" (411). For all its violence, then, the mob is primarily masochistic and thus a good example of the sadomasochistic personality that the Frankfurt School defined in order to understand critically the mass psychology of authoritarian cultures and cultural institutions.

Adorno's critique of U.S. mass culture was negative, but so was his aesthetic: he insisted that modern art needed to resist commodification and that it could only do so by structuring into itself the frustration and anguish of the alienated, regressive subject living in mass culture (Lunn 258ff). Eugene Lunn observes that Adorno's aesthetic did not solely derive from his cultural critiques; it also derived from his early training in and appreciation for German expressionism. In other words, Adorno's critique derives not only from his experiences in the Weimar Republic and his personal intellectual history but also from his expressionist aesthetics. This suggests yet another reason that Adorno's cultural critique is so helpful in articulating West's. For West also demonstrated an interest in German expressionism. This interest has been ignored, his biographer Jay Martin being the only one even to mention it. Martin goes so far as to claim that German expressionists were "no less important" to West than the French avant-garde of the same time:

Kafka and Brecht bear as much resemblance to West as the French do. He read Kafka in 1930, when Knopf published a translation of The Castle, and he probably heard Josephine Herbst talk about Brecht. He admired Gottfried Benn. But since he was unable to read German at all well, he
attended more closely to German art, responding with greater enthusiasm to Max Ernst, George Grosz, and Otto Dix than to either German writers or to French writers or painters. (82)\textsuperscript{10}

And Josephine Herbst suggests that Grosz's *Ecco Homo* helped inspire West to finish *Miss Lonelyhearts* in 1932 ("Hunter of Doves" 312). However, just as the expressionist influence on West accounts for only part of his aesthetic, so too does his negative critique of the culture industry's authoritarian tendencies account for only part of his novels' critique of mass culture. The next chapter, then, explores a different aspect of that critique.

\textsuperscript{10}Martin doesn't develop this connection (since, in order to defend West's "genius," he maintains that the influence of both expressionism and surrealism was minimal) except to state that West absorbed the expressionists' "awareness of the grotesque" and their "savage and bitter treatment of dreams" before Martin dismisses the influence, along with that of the French avant-garde, as minimal (82-83).
CHAPTER 2
REPRESENTATIONS OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

In the preceding chapter, West's novels were analyzed as representations of the psychological effects of an authoritarian culture industry. As such, the novels express the anguish of individuals whose desires are simultaneously aroused and frustrated, whose subjectivity is given a false autonomy that actually results in regression. Evoking this anguished sense of a diminished subject is, of course, typical of expressionist art, which Theodor Adorno championed as one of the few artistic forms that could achieve any authentic autonomy from the culture industry. And West's acknowledged success in critiquing the culture industry stems in part from his sympathy for German expressionism. However, West's novels reflect in a much more obvious way the influence of symbolist and surrealist techniques, as all the monographs and many essays on his work acknowledge. And these techniques, as West adapts them in his novels, tend to counter the sense of anguish evoked by the expressionist features of his work.

West's Use of Surrealism and the Code of Mechanical Reproduction

In a helpful contrast of Theodor Adorno's allegiance to expressionism with Walter Benjamin's interest in symbolism and support of surrealism, Eugene Lunn
remarks that while expressionists shared something of the fin-de-siècle symbolists' "obsession with decay and death" and their cultivation of a "sense of doom and the abyss," their "fatalistic feeling of the loss of mastery and control of a congealed and unyielding social mechanism," in general, the symbolists, and later the surrealists, were less interested in expressing the anguish of an alienated, impotent, diminishing subject than they were in distancing themselves from subjectivity and finding alternative experiences, truths and realities in language and objects (45). The symbolist poet and his modernist successor were indeed "hyperconscious," Lunn continues, and could "experience personal anguish, or rail against the crushing of the self in the modern world," but the symbolists sought a release of sorts in exploring the "mysteries of language" and its powers, the cubists in manipulating the always already constructed "object-world," the surrealists in presenting the traces of that object-world unmediated by consciousness, meaning or morality (Lunn 47, 49, 57).¹ This sort of release from the anguished self is precisely what expressionists want to avoid. But West does not avoid it altogether. Rather, his novels manifest in many ways what Lunn notes of symbolist-surrealist art--"a rejection not merely of realist 'mimesis' but also of romantic self-expression, a focus on objectifying and depersonalizing functions of language, image, and sound" (58).

One example is the absence in his novels of a central, controlling

¹ West does not seek the mystery of words; that's where he differs from the symbolists, as do the cubists and surrealists, although his penchant for dead objects and dead words is in sympathy with the symbolists.
consciousness that can register the anguish of the diminishing self. In Balso Snell and Cool Million, it is West's nonstop parodying that denies the reader empathy—or virtually any sustained identification or emotional response. The Day of the Locust at first seems to be narrated from the perspective of Tod, the main character, but his character is never well developed; further, the second quarter of the novel, Chapters 7-12, is narrated from Homer Simpson's point of view. In Chapter 13, the narrative point of view returns to Tod and remains there for the rest of the novel. Miss Lonelyhearts is consistently narrated from the perspective of the title character, of course. But it is well-known and often noted that in early drafts West not only used first-person narration but had combined in the title character what in the later drafts became the two characters, Miss Lonelyhearts and Shrike. West thus avoided writing a single novel with a central, conflicted consciousness.

West's style also reflects the influence of symbolist and surrealist art. His terse sentences, packed with sharp-edged, tawdry images and crisply-stated banalities, and his short, quickly-sketched scenes that end abruptly, shift cinematically and proceed episodically—these features of his style prevent the kind of emotionally disturbing response evoked by expressionists such as Kafka. One can also point to West's tendency to blur the figurative and discursive modes of writing when writing potentially expressive scenes. In the second chapter of Miss Lonelyhearts, for example, Miss Lonelyhearts is described leaving work and walking home. In the first paragraph, the figurative language is kept distinct from
the discursive, or, rather, the figurative language, in the form of a simile, clearly serves the discursive language: "he found that the weather had turned warm and that the air smelt as though it had been artificially heated. He decided to walk to Delehanty’s speakeasy for a drink" (70). But in the next paragraph, as he works his way across a little park and we expect to get a sense of how he feels and what he is thinking, an aggressive metaphor swallowed mouthfuls is slipped in: "He entered the park at the North Gate and swallowed mouthfuls of the heavy shade that curtained its arch." A couple of paragraphs later, Miss Lonelyhearts tries to express anguish and compassion at the wasteland scene he is surveying: "'Ah, humanity. . . .'" he sighs. Immediately the sigh is wrenched, it seems, from the realm of self-expression to the self-consciously figurative: "But he was heavy with shadow and the joke went into a dying fall." We learn that the sigh was already a "joke" and thus hardly expressive of genuine emotion. Miss Lonelyhearts tries to "break [the joke’s] fall by laughing at himself," which also fails. What we, as readers, are experiencing here are not successive stages of emotion but rather a successive series of images that continue to fail their expressive functions yet force themselves upon the consciousness of the narrator.

Robert Edenbaum, in arguing that West was the only American writer in the late 1920s and 30s to experiment with dada and surrealism, points out other features of West’s novels that resist an anguished response: adapted from dada, his blasphemous black humor that seeks to shock and disgust (primarily in The Dream Life of Balso Snell) and his parodies of the banal (used in all his novels);
adapted from surrealism, highly visualized imagery that juxtaposes disparate elements without concern for "the subtleties of metaphor" (120-23). But the latter feature, West's debt to surrealism (as surrealism is viewed by Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard), is the key to identifying in West's novels not only what competes with the expressionist representations of mass culture but what extends the critique implicit in those representations beyond the psychological effects of mass culture products to the cultural and symbolic effects of mass media technology. For both Benjamin and Baudrillard as regard surrealism's exploration of and experimentation with the depersonalized world of images and objects as a uniquely perceptive encounter with a fundamental and fundamentally new dimension of modern culture: the ubiquity of mass reproduced images.

For Benjamin, surrealism follows the mechanical reproduction and mass distribution of visual images in destroying the mystical aura that has kept art estranged from real life.² Benjamin is aware of the paradox of his claim that surrealists return art to its "materialistic, anthropological" base by letting "image and language take precedence." But this language is not meaningful language but rather language "itself," language "where sound and image, image and sound

² Benjamin regards "aura" as a form of ideology that perpetuates a form of alienation--alienation especially of the working classes from any form of genuine, lived art, which he assumes to be revolutionary. Consequently, he commends the surrealists' writings for being "concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms," for overcoming the vestiges of religious ideology still haunting art by finding in "profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration. . ." ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Illuminations 179).
interpenetrate with automatic precision," language that leaves no gap open "for the penny-in-the-slot called 'meaning'" (178-79). In short, language as pure signifier, freed from its moorings in the signified. But how does freeing of language from meaning (i.e., reducing the sign to the signifier) reintegrate art and life? It doesn't, really; it only clears the way for this integration. Like other constituent elements of aura (such as individual autonomy), meaning is a "bad tooth" that needs loosening so that people can "step outside the domain of intoxication" into the domain of a more genuine experience (192).

The surrealists dispel the mysticism of aura by creating "a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday" (190). This meaningless, "pure" language will not usher in a revolution, however. Rather, Benjamin champions surrealists for much the same reason his friend Theodor Adorno championed selected expressionists: because they use language (and images and sounds) to maintain "pessimism all along the line. . . . Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom. . . ., but three times mistrust in all reconciliation. . . ." (190-91). Benjamin does not see surrealist writing as a means for creating anything constructive or lasting; he sees it as a means for facing a new reality, for understanding and engaging a new set of material and social conditions. And because that new technological reality is itself based on pure signifiers, Benjamin believes surrealism, at the moment he is writing, is the only form of art with any potential for changing the material and
social order.³

In Symbolic Exchange and Death (1976), Jean Baudrillard acknowledges that Walter Benjamin was the first to understand mass culture from the principle of reproduction rather than of production, as was (and would remain) common for Marxist critics: "Benjamin and McLuhan saw that the real message, the real ultimatum, lay in reproduction itself, and that production as such has no meaning. . . . Simulacra surpass history" (Selected Writings 139). As Mark Poster observes in his introduction to Baudrillard’s Selected Works, because Baudrillard is convinced that the new, visual mass media "structure a unique linguistic reality," a reality "dominated by simulation, . . . objects and discourses [with] no firm origin," he is essentially extending Benjamin’s theory of the mechanical reproduction of art "to all reaches of everyday life" (1).⁴ However, this oversimplifies what Baudrillard finds important about the work of Benjamin and the surrealists and thus what Baudrillard’s theories can illuminate in West’s novels. One doesn’t need Baudrillard’s theory to observe, as at least three commentators on Miss Lonelyhearts have in the late 1980s, that the novel’s fretting over the possibility of genuine expression may simply be a recognition of the inherent "problem" of

³ This is why Benjamin explains that "to organize pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images" (191 emphasis added). To engage in political action, he is insisting, the "artist" must be deployed "at important points in this sphere of imagery" (emphasis added).

⁴ Similarly, Mike Gane indicates that Benjamin and Baudrillard are working on "parallel" projects in that both men suggest that capitalism is driven more by a code of reproducibility than by the needs of production (96, 167n3).
language when the relationship of signifier to signified is assumed to be arbitrary. Nevertheless, two closely related theses in Baudrillard’s shifting, enigmatic work are particularly relevant to West’s novels: first, that the commodity system of production and the sign system of meaning (and meaningful communication) both operate on a principle of equivalency (sometimes referred to as the principle of exchange), and second, that this principle, at least in the first half of this century, was in the process of giving way to what Baudrillard calls the "structural law of value," the law of pure difference, the law of indeterminacy.

5 The essays by Mark Conroy, Jeffrey Duncan and John Keyes are each discussed below.

6 Baudrillard in no way regards this "law" as the inherent law of language, as the way things must be and always have been. In The Political Economy of the Sign, he posits "another side or beyond of sign value," which he calls the "symbolic" (Selected Writings 82). The symbolic, unlike even the most indeterminate sign system, operates by radical "ambivalence," a "type of exchange that is radically different from...exchange values or sign values" (91-92). In Symbolic Exchange and Death, Baudrillard speculates that this "symbolic exchange" predates modern history (Selected Writings 120). Drawing on Marcel Mauss’s theory of gift-exchange, Baudrillard explains that the key feature of symbolic exchange is "reversibility--cyclical reversal, annulment" (122). He insists that this principle is fatal to all systems of value: the exchange value that drive economics as well as the differential value that constitutes language. It does not matter if the system of signs, for example, is determined or not; that is, it does not matter if signs are determined within a stable system of signifieds or if they operate in a system of indeterminate relations of signifiers: "the obligation of reversibility puts an end simultaneously to determinacy and indeterminacy" (124). A system of production or meaning can bind and unbind energies[,] but what it cannot do...is to be reversible. The process of value is irreversible. Only reversibility then, and not release or drift, is fatal to the system. And this is exactly what is meant by the term symbolic "exchange." (124)

Baudrillard states that this primitive order is "beginning to explode at all levels of our society," suggesting ambiguously that a radical state of indeterminacy could lead back to this primitive order (119).
Baudrillard began developing these theses in earnest in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972). Elaborating on his thesis in *The System of Objects* that consumption is better understood as the operation of a reductive sign system than as the meeting or manipulating of needs, Baudrillard argues that not only consumer behavior but the entire field of political economy needs to be regarded as the effect of a binary opposition, use value/exchange value, which functions just like the opposition signified/signifier. He explains that the system of commodity exchange, which Marxism has traditionally critiqued as the alienating transformation of labor and use value into products that can be exchanged, is not really a perversion or distortion of labor or use value but the necessary complement of the very notion of use value. In other words, use value is to exchange value what the signified is to the signifier.\(^7\)

Signs and commodities, then, both operate by the principle of equivalence. In the sphere of political economy, the principle of equivalence ensures that products can be exchanged; in the sphere of signs, equivalence ensures that communication can be exchanged. Economic exchange and linguistic exchange are not only homologous; they are interdependent: "it is because the logic of the commodity and of political economy is at the very heart of the sign... that signs

\(^7\) In insisting on the importance of the differential logic of the sign, Baudrillard is trying break a Marxist analysis free of its dependence on value: "for there to be a system at all, use value and exchange value must be regulated by an identical abstract logic of equivalence, an identical code" (*Selected Writings* 65). Hence, Baudrillard is insisting that the "differential logic of the sign" (which makes all things interchangeable and thus equivalent) is indeed the heart of the present political economy.
can function as exchange value"; conversely, "it is because the structure of the sign is at the very heart of the commodity form that commodity can take on, immediately, the effect of signification" (78). In short, "like the sign form, the commodity is a code managing the exchange of values" (79). Baudrillard's point here is not just that commodification and consumption, meaning and communication, are the operations of a code, but that the code of equivalence manages these operations. These exchanges are not free or autonomous, but rather controlled and determined in order to maintain a system of equivalence. 8 And the significance of this thesis is that this code of equivalence is itself the problem of capitalist culture: it is not the manipulation of needs or the alienation of labor from use value, but the functioning of this code.

While, as explained above, Baudrillard's critique of political economy seems at times to suggest that there never was such a thing, at other times, and especially in view of his later work, his critique suggests only that the notion of political economy no longer applies, although it did in the past. His clearest explanation of this change is in Symbolic Exchange and Death (1976). There he reiterates what he argued in For a Critique:

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8 And the possibility of multiple meanings of signs, of "polyvalence," does not fundamentally escape this determination:

This one-to-one assignation of Sr [signifier] to Sd [signified] can be complicated quite easily into an equivocal or multivocal relation without violating the logic of the sign. A signifier may refer to many signifieds, or vice versa: the principle of equivalence, ergo of exclusion and reduction, which roots the arbitrariness of the sign, remains untouched. (Selected Works 81-82)
The commodity law of value is a law of equivalences, a law which functions in every sphere; it equally refers to the configuration of signs where the equivalency of a signifier and a signified permits the regulated exchange of referential content (Selected Writings 127).

But now he makes clear that the law of equivalences is the "classical law of value" and that counter to it is a new law:

the structural law of value [which] means the indeterminacy of every sphere in relation to every other, as well as their specific content (and consequently, the transition from the determined sphere of the sign to the indeterminacy of the code). (Selected Writings 127)

This structural law of value is not completely different from the law of equivalences because Baudrillard still opposes both laws to that of symbolic exchange (although, as usual, he is not wholly consistent, for at the beginning of Symbolic Exchange, he states that contemporary culture is closer to the law of symbolic exchange than any other cultural epoch in Western history). However, Baudrillard insists, contemporary culture cannot be understood without this notion of the structural law of value.

Baudrillard’s conception of this new value is based on his assumption, drawn from Benjamin and McLuhan, that the age of production has been superseded by the age of reproduction. The goal of the economy is not to produce more or better commodities but to reproduce, to generate models that can be duplicated infinitely. Consumption itself has become a system of signs. So signs themselves are no longer determined by the notion of the signified:

9 What he here calls the "structural law of value" is what he calls the "differential logic" of the sign in For a Critique.
All the great humanist criteria of value, all the values of a civilization of moral, aesthetic, and practical judgement, vanish in our system of images and signs. Everything becomes undecidable. This is the characteristic effect of the domination of the code, which is based everywhere on the principle of neutralization and indifference. (Selected Writings 128)

As the analyses below will bear out, West’s novels are situated between the shift from production to reproduction. Baudrillard suggests such a stage when he discusses Benjamin and the surrealists: it is the stage of industrial simulacra, the transition stage between the first stage of simulation (in which the natural order is merely imitated in appearance) and the third stage (in which models rather than materials are the origins, and reproduction rather than imitation the mode of simulation). Exchange values and the principle of equivalence still operate in this stage; the role of the machine, stamping out products, is still important; the critique of commodification still relevant. At the same time, it is possible for Benjamin to show, Baudrillard writes, that "reproduction absorbs the process of

\[10\] As he wrote much earlier in System of Objects, this new code is a system of sorts but not a language per se. It is a system of classification without a "syntax of communication (Selected Writings 14). It creates categories rather than constructs communities (15). Rather than "structure social relations[,] it demarcates them in a hierarchical repertoire" (19). Consequently, Baudrillard argues, the code of consumption is not just another code among other social codes. Rather, consumption is the code that "establishes, for the first time in history, a universal system of signs and interpretation" (20). As a radically reductive system of signs, it is breaking most other forms of social relation in a way unthinkable even during the nineteenth century--the golden era of production:

Undoubtedly objects have always constituted a system of recognition (repérage), but in conjunction with, and often in addition to, other systems (gestural, ritual, ceremonial, language, birth status, code of moral values, etc.).[.] What is specific to our society is that other systems of recognition (reconnaissance) are progressively withdrawing, primarily to the advantage of the code of "social standing." (19)
production and alters its goals" (Selected Writings 138). The sign in the second stage of simulation is not yet fully indeterminate, not yet fully operating by "modulation" or "distinctive opposition," that is, by difference (139). This is why, then, West's novels must be placed in this historical stage: they point beyond the critique of commodification and alienation, but they are not radically indeterminate. They demonstrate the logic of equivalency, but also the differential logic of serial repetition (138).

Placing West's work in this frame adds new significance to the novels' persistent questioning of the possibility of genuine expression. Instead of seeing this questioning as the dissolution of something absolutely essential to human (social) life, or as an inevitable feature of all language properly understood in poststructuralist terms, one can see it as the representation of language at a particular stage of social, technological and economic life; it becomes a critique of commodification through a questioning of the sign, but a critique only possible because it acknowledges the new reality of reproduction, namely, that referential meaning is not merely withering but being replaced by a new form of reality.

Superimposition and the Sphere of Pure Images in The Dream Life of Balso Snell

Whatever its aesthetic failures, The Dream Life of Balso Snell successfully creates the sphere of pure object-images for which Benjamin commended surrealism and which Baudrillard insists is indicative of the industrial form of simulation that serves as the transition from first- to third-order simulation. There is a good deal of first-order simulation represented in the novel. The title
character, for example, recognizes near the end of the novella that he has been "tricked" into reading or listening to the literary productions of would-be artists inhabiting the Trojan horse—a sentiment shared by the reader as well who soon suspects that West has created a piece of writing in such bad taste that he dares the reader to endure it (37). Like the actor who flatters and entertains his arty, off-Broadway theater audience, then verbally abuses them, drops a ceiling-load of excrement on them, and finally mockingly encourages them to discuss the play with him afterwards, West seems to corner his reader into knowingly accepting the hoax. For everything in the novella is counterfeit. The stories, pamphlets and letters are all used to win either sexual favors or a paying audience. So the counterfeit seems inescapable. An escape from the hoax is precisely what the reader is looking for—and never finds. Because the entire novella is openly counterfeit, it points beyond the first order of simulation to the second order, which concerns itself with the possibilities and technique of serial reproduction. Some of the characters express concern that authentic expression seems impossible, but even the expression of that concern is presented as disingenuous, or at best naive. Hence, the counterfeiting in the novella evokes indifference to the question of the origin and originality of the texts that Balso encounters. It is the indifference of dream work, the condensing and displacing of images, that simply does not allow the reader to step outside the dream and interpret its contents—dream work that constitutes a sphere of pure images.

West sustains this sphere of pure images throughout the novella by
adapting the collage technique, as Deborah Wyrick has pointed out—specifically, the junk construction technique most commonly associated with Kurt Schwitters (14-15). Like Schwitters, West primarily uses borrowed materials: the novella is packed with parodic set pieces. And these set pieces, along with characters' identities, are regularly superimposed upon each other. From the perspective of Benjamin and Baudrillard, the technique of superimposing borrowed and used-up materials upon each other works to create a sphere of non-referential images. For it deprives the image or text of the possibility that it may be an original production or the reflection of some natural origin.

The first instance of superimposition begins when Balso, seeing a boy hide in a tree a packet of what seem to be letters in a tree, retrieves and reads them. Balso finds himself reading a diary written by a John Gilson for his English teacher, Miss McGeeney. In the second entry, however, Gilson's persona is suddenly exchanged for another: "Sometimes my name is Raskolnikov," he announces (14). It is Raskolnikov's "Crime Journal," then, that Balso reads to the end, Gilson's persona never returning to the text. The reader is returned to the first narrative frame when Balso finishes reading and returns the manuscript to the hollow tree, only to have the boy who deposited it there ask him if he likes the theme. Replying as the boy's teacher ("I'd give you [a] B minus"), Balso momentarily enters the frame of the very text he has been reading. Shortly, Balso

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11 Wyrick separates the selection of found materials from the technique of superimposing them upon each other; I treat this as one technique.
is reading another of the boy's manuscripts, his aesthetic manifesto, framed as a narrative that in turn frames a collection of remembrances of a friend, part of a speech, and two imagined scenes. Upon finishing this text, Balso again finds himself inside John Gilson's first narrative, meeting the school teacher Miss McGeeney, who is metamorphosed from the slim girl Balso believes he is embracing, and then listening to another aesthetic manifesto.

The shifting and doubling of narrative frames and personae accelerates in the second half of the novella. By Deborah Wyrick's count, the novella's sixth section, which takes up most of the second half of the novella in recounting Balso's dream, includes "eight discrete formal entities" superimposed upon each other (15). 12 In the seventh and final section, Balso wakes from his dream only to discover that the letters that comprised much of that dream are chapters from a novel that Miss McGeeney is writing. But the narrative frame of the fifth section

12 There are actually only four narrative levels in this section, although there are, as Wyrick implies, seven shifts. Balso dreams he is a young man again, seducing Janey Davenport. Janey insists that he kill her previous lover, Beagle Darwin, to win her love and has Balso read two of Beagle's letters to her, written to explain why he jilted her. In both letters, Beagle's strategy is to help Janey imagine what would have happened had she accompanied him to Paris. In the first letter, Beagle creates a scenario in which Janey dies in Paris. The scenario is narrated by Janey in first person. In the second letter, Beagle continues the scenario, but from his perspective; that is, he imagines how he would have reacted to Janey's death. This is written primarily in the third person. The Beagle in the hypothetical scenario then imagines how he would respond publicly to the news of Janey's death (of which he has already learned). This hypothesizing leads Beagle to imagine himself playing a Hamlet character, and the text of the narrative actually shifts into dramatic form. At this point, the reader has stepped through four narrative frames: the play is being imagined by Beagle (II) who in turn is being imagined by Beagle (I) whose letter is being read by Balso who is dreaming this entire episode.
is hardly restored when the two discover that they are old sweethearts, exchange seduction speeches, and then have the consummation of their love represented in several clusters of parodic allusions. The superimposition of parodic stories and texts upon each other not only destroys the texts' aura, the possibility that they will each mean something; it also threatens the value of exchange upon which the production of commodities is based. Just as a piece of junk no longer has commodity value, the aesthetic cliches West collects in this novella no longer have significance as art. Collecting and displaying them in an art venue, as it were, the artist gives the junk new value, but it is a value that goes beyond exchange value into differential value—the pure difference of the signifier. That is, just as superimposing used and found objects on a canvas negates their status as commodities and as referential signs, making them pure objects, superimposing text upon text dramatizes the texts' status as pure text, defined by little more than its arbitrary, differential relation to the other texts that mark it out.

Miss Lonelyhearts and the Law of Serial Reproduction

In Balso Snell, West restricts himself to art, as Benjamin does in his essay on mechanical reproduction. In Miss Lonelyhearts, West shifts his focus to the mass media and other commodities. Early in the novel, West depicts the link that Baudrillard makes between the sign and the commodity by juxtaposing the failure of meaningful discourse to the failure of commodities. In the first chapter, for example, as Miss Lonelyhearts reads through his correspondence "searching for some clue to a sincere answer," he lights a cigarette only to find that it is
"imperfect and refuse[s] to draw" (68). In the next chapter, as he sits in the barren park and "searche[s] the sky for a target," a clue that will give his anger and frustration meaning and thus resolution, he spies only a newspaper rising in the breeze "like a kite with a broken spine" (71). When Miss Lonelyhearts recalls the time when he and two college friends tried to kill a lamb in a mock religious sacrifice, he observes that the attempt is foiled not only by an inaccurate blow but also by a knife that easily breaks on the makeshift altar (77). As Miss Lonelyhearts struggles against the onset of a paranoia of disorder, he observes that

all the inanimate things over which he had tried to obtain control took the field against him. . . . The collar buttons disappeared under the bed, the point of the pencil broke, the handle of the razor fell off, the window shade refused to stay down. (78)

Miss Lonelyhearts flees to the street in a panic and immediately muses on the absence of meaning from the discourse he hears there: "No repeated group of words would fit their rhythm and no scale could give them meaning" (78-79).

Much later in the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts sits in his office, once again trying to write a column. Looking out his window, he sees the spring rain "changing the dusty tar roofs below him to shiny patent leather" (116). The city, transformed into the reflecting image of commodities, becomes "slippery" and provides him "no support for either his eyes or his feelings." He is unable to continue writing, for he realizes that his words have become a slick, mirror-like surface that reflect and exchange light but are ultimately ungrounded.

The commodity's transformation into sign is dramatized in Miss
Lonelyhearts' daydreams in which, first, his correspondents attempt to construct the letters of his assumed name with sea shells and personal junk, and second, he attempts in similar fashion to construct a cross from pawnshop articles and seashore refuse. Mark Conroy suggests that the relationship between Miss Lonelyhearts and his readers is likewise a construct, "not from nature, but from the runic fragments of discourse and human fabrication" (112). But it is a construct that neither the columnist nor his readers control: "He can be a saviour, they a faithful flock, only insofar as the paper allows both to exist linguistically, as words" (113 emphasis added). Conroy also suggests that Shrike is controlled by the newspaper: the editor personifies "the relentless mechanism of the paper" and his cynicism reflects the paper's "cynical relation to its audience" (114). Conroy generally characterizes this mass medium in terms of the alienating and reifying effects of commodification: those who write for the paper, Miss Lonelyhearts included, are necessarily taking part in "exploitation"; the language of the paper is "fraudulent discourse"; to write at all for the paper, Miss Lonelyhearts must abdicate "any true self expression" to "glibness and cliché" (117). That is to say,

13 Shrike calls Miss Lonelyhearts' writing "the same old stuff" (69).

14 Jeffrey Duncan makes a similar argument but from a New Critical rather than a poststructuralist orientation:
Words in the novel fail to do the job West's characters assign them--to reveal a reality beyond themselves. But at the same time the words of the novel, West's words, manage quite successfully to do their job, to reveal all they need to, the patterns their sound and sense make. . . . [West's words constitute] their own reality, and their only job is to be right, self-consistent, aesthetically correct. (97)
he does not suggest that the novel glimpses a new way of understanding culture, even though he concludes with the axiom that "the stories we tell... are as necessary as they are fraudulent" (124).

However, in linking the newspaper’s discourse to the process of mechanical production, Conroy points the way to understanding the importance of reproduction in the novel. Conroy aptly suggests that the newspaper is a manifestation of the production process Miss Lonelyhearts speculates on as he surveys the city’s skyscrapers: "Americans have dissipated their radical energy in an orgy of stone breaking" (West, Complete Works 100). The newspaper is a giant machine, a force of production. But Conroy is also apt in noting that the force is the "repetitive activity of the economic system" (115 emphasis added). It not only transforms natural resources, labor and language into commodities; it indefinitely reproduces its own products: it "reproduce[s] language to infinity" (115 emphases added). Hence, Shrike’s discourse is not merely "machinelike letter without spirit," not merely the dead form of something once live; it is letter without origin, as Conroy implies in the subtitle of this section, because it is parodic, i.e., simulated. Conroy concludes that the discourse of the newspaper (which includes the discourses of both Shrike and Miss Lonelyhearts) is fraudulent and exploitative because it is a dead, machine-produced imitation of authentic expression and communication. However, this observation, though accurate, can be extended to the observation, equally accurate, that the novel’s discourse manifests the effects of serial repetition.
One acknowledgement of serial repetition is Miss Lonelyhearts’ reaction to his fellow writers’ opinion that he is too introspective and psychological in his writing to reach a wide audience. Smiling as he overhears this diagnosis in the speakeasy, Miss Lonelyhearts contemplates that

like Shrike, the man they imitated, they were machines for making jokes. A button machine makes button, no matter what the power used, foot, steam or electricity. They, no matter what the motivating force, death, love or God, made jokes. (84)

The emphasis here is on the effect of the law of serial reproduction, not on the crushing effect of mechanical force itself. The newspaper men are not just dead machines; they are dead machines that can only reproduce the same product indefinitely, an activity that is itself a reproduction of Shrike’s activity. Miss Lonelyhearts then asks himself, "Was their nonsense the only barrier? . . . Had he been thwarted by such a low hurdle?" (84). The answer, of course, is yes. But the hurdle isn’t the jokes themselves. The hurdle is Miss Lonelyhearts’ inability to avoid reproducing Shrike’s discourse. This is most clearly dramatized near the end of the novel when Miss Lonelyhearts tries to deliver an authentic religious message to the Doyles, the two correspondents he has managed to contact directly, hoping to break the restrictions of the newspaper’s discourse. After delivering only a few words, Miss Lonelyhearts knows that what he is saying is "ridiculous"--a joke (129). He believes that he has failed because, "by avoiding God, he had failed to tap the force in his heart and had merely written a column for his paper" (129 emphasis added). But his real failure is the failure to recognize that, as he said earlier of his colleagues, the "motivating force, death,
love, or God" is irrelevant. As a serial reproduction machine, Miss Lonelyhearts is driven by a code of simulation: he can only reproduce jokes. When he tries one more time to deliver an authentic message, he again fails—and so does his self-analysis, for he believes he has "substituted the rhetoric of Shrike" for his own, when in fact he has merely repeated Shrike's rhetoric.

Miss Lonelyhearts' efforts at genuine expression and meaningful communication are necessarily frustrated, for they belong to the sphere of aura which has been exploded. His problem, in this view, is not that he has become as deadened as his audience; his problem is that he cannot adjust to a new form of perception and expression dictated by the very medium he is using. But what of the "real" suffering expressed in the letters cited in the novel, the "inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering," as Miss Lonelyhearts describes them to Betty (106)? Miss Lonelyhearts suggests to Betty that the authenticity, the "aura" as it were, of these letters has disrupted his ability to write the column, to reproduce the newspaper's discourse. This suggests that "aura" (in the sense of authentic expression and representational veracity) is still alive and well among the masses. But in fact, in the world of the novel, it is only alive (though not very well) for Miss Lonelyhearts. John Keyes has amply demonstrated that the letters are anything but what Miss Lonelyhearts claims they are. West's treatment of them "isolates and satirizes the typicality of complaint, heightens the internal confusions, increases the likelihood of unintentional self-exposure, turns the archetype into a comic cliché" (13). The correspondents' sufferings, he continues, are "explicable,
not mysterious," a "reservoir of false emotions," "pornographic, provoking excess" (13-14).

Keyes is ultimately relying on the assumptions of first-order simulation: while suggesting that the letters "involve us in what is now called the problem of language, the trustworthiness of words as signs, their current (in)capacity to represent a reality beyond themselves," his analysis of the individual letters supports his thesis that the correspondents' "self-indulgent prose masks paralysis of will" (15, 22-23 emphasis added). Nonetheless, he is right that Miss Lonelyhearts misreads not only the individual letters but the newspaper medium (14). For in reading the letters, Miss Lonelyhearts is indeed already reading his column, for some of the letters are always reprinted in the column and certainly all of them are written for the purpose of being reprinted. This may or may not make all the correspondents self-indulgent, but the fact is that to receive advice from the columnist, the correspondent's letter must also be reproduced in the paper: no reproduction, no advice. In this very real way, then, the law of the medium, the law of serial reproduction, controls the discourse of both columnist and correspondent.

A Cool Million and Simulations of Success

In his third novel, West returns to the perpetual burlesque of his first. A Cool Million is ostensibly a satire of the naive Gospel of Success and of American fascist movements in the 1930s, parodying the boys' stories that Horatio Alger wrote in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. West's seamless
imitation of Horatio Alger's style and plot formula makes the novel fail as satire. Kingsley Widmer, while acknowledging that the mocking of Alger’s naive gospel of success is consonant with the general disillusionment caused by the economic depression in the early 1930s and a warning against the fascist rhetoric that could play effectively on that disillusionment, nonetheless points out that Alger’s gospel of success is perhaps the most "naive" and "trite" form of "American cultural affirmation" around at the time (53, 52, 57). Consequently, the vehemence of West’s parody is as trite as its material; his shrill mocking of "the gross American costuming in innocence" thus seems to betray West’s own innocence (65). As strong as this aesthetic response is, it assumes that the novel is trying to expose and denounce fraud, that the novel attempts to look behind the false rhetoric of popular culture but fails because it does not look deeply enough, that is, because

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15 Even though Alger’s 120-plus books sold up to 20 million copies in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, they were mocked, even in those decades, as poor writing and simplistic advice. Rychard Fink notes that near the end of his career, Alger wrote long introductions to his new releases, defending his work against continuing criticism (15). Fink also indicates why the criticism was justified: comparing the idea of individual success and the self-made man in Alger’s novels with similar notions in the writings of Adam Smith, Benjamin Franklin, Emerson, and Herbert Spencer, Fink concludes that "Alger offered a purer and more naive strain of the success theme than any of the men with whom commentators usually link him" (27).

16 Two more technical explanations: Randall Reid argues that Horatio Alger’s novels are "so ridiculous that they defy parody"; hence, in taking them as his material, West had to abandon his "gift for parody--condensed and suggestive summary" and attempt burlesque (107-08). Warwick Wadlington, suggests that West loses control over his imitation of Alger and thus can achieve neither a "'camp' interest" in Alger’s bad style nor a "savage bitterness in response to the Algeresque chicanery of the American dream" (313).
the novel exposes that which has already been widely exposed, leaving its own jokes too exposed (to be read with aesthetic pleasure). But the fact that West chose such an easy target to travesty suggests that perhaps he was not solely interested in exposing the American success dream as counterfeit. Perhaps he was also interested in portraying American culture as a kind of pure dream, cut loose from referents in the real world and thus perfectly suited to be reproduced indefinitely.17 Reading through typical examples of Alger's work such as Ragged Dick, Mark, the Match Boy, and Ben Bruce, one is struck by just how fantastic their premise is. Success in these novels (or rather potential success: Alger always leaves his hero established in the lower echelons of a large corporations) comes not from hard work but usually from a chance service done to a generous, wealthy person and results in establishing the hero on the road to "fame and fortune."18 And it is inevitably a combination of Christian virtue and hardy personality ("pluck") that makes the "chance" opportunity present itself. In this sense, Alger's texts have already moved beyond the sphere of production: success, and its achievement, are the result of a chance encounter of a virtuous personality and an opportunity--not the result of work completed or commodities produced. West's parody, then, as several commentators point out, operates merely by

17 This is hinted at by T. R. Steiner who proposes that A Cool Million is not only parody but also "fantasy, myth, . . . pure play," "a mirror of the popular imagination--an early piece of pop art" (157-58).

18 This is also stressed in the dozens of plot synopses of other Alger books advertised in the back pages of Ben Bruce.
reversing his hero's fortunes. Instead of demonstrating that hard work does not always or even usually lead to prosperity, which is the kind of Marxist critique common to many West's fellow writers from Dahlberg to Steinbeck, A Cool Million demonstrates that "pluck" and virtue do not always improve one's "luck." West is parodying a myth, known to his readers as myth, simply by reversing its principle premise.

One piece of the Horatio Alger formula remains intact in the novel: Lemuel achieves fame at the end of the novel, albeit as an unwitting martyr for Whipple's fascist cause. This conclusion highlights the stress placed on fame throughout the novel. Whipple, the mouthpiece of Alger's principles in the novel, encourages Lemuel to leave his small town and strike out to "win" the money his mother needs to prevent foreclosure on her mortgage. "You have an honest face and that is worth more than gold," he tells Lem, immediately contradicting himself by implying that without investment capital, Lem's chances for success are much diminished (149). Nonetheless, Whipple keeps returning to the importance of reputation and fame. In fact, this, rather than Lem's financial success, is what Whipple concludes with. Warning Lem that he will find "scoffers" who will tell him that

John D. Rockefeller was a thief and that Henry Ford and other great men are also thieves. Do not believe them. The story of Rockefeller and of Ford is the story of every great American, and you should strive to make it your story. (150 emphasis added)

Lem's story is a reversal of these success stories, of course, but its status as a story, and Lem's status as a symbol with shifting meanings, is never far in the
background. That status is thrust into the foreground when the poet Sylvanus Snodgrass sees him save a banker's daughter from death by trampling.\(^{19}\)

Snodgrasse, while his henchmen rob the growing crowd, proclaims Lem a much-needed national symbol to fill the spiritual void created by the depression (18384). Shortly after, Lem is recruited into Shagpoke's National Revolutionary Party, although his symbolic function in that enterprise is saved for the end of the novel.

Then Lem is recruited by a man posing as a manufacturer of glass eyes. Like Snodgrasse, Elmer Hainey is ostensibly interested in Lem's symbolic value ("Your duties are part of a sales-promotion campaign"), although Hainey simply uses Lem to disguise his bait-and-switch game. After a stint panning for gold with Whipple (which allows West to parody Bret Harte), Lem is again used as a sign, this time having his newly-scalped head displayed in Whipple's traveling freak show. Lem gets a larger audience when he is persuaded by Snodgrasse to become a feature in his traveling museum-theater-freak show, the "Chamber of American Horrors," which serves as a propaganda vehicle for the Communists to whom Snodgrasse has defected. From Snodgrasse's show, Lem gets a job with a comedy team who beat him literally to pieces as they tell their jokes. Each time he is beaten, Lem reaches into a box and pulls out a replacement for whatever prostheses have

\(^{19}\) In Alger's *Bruce Ben*, the character by the name of Sylvanus Snodgrasse is a writer of romances for the *Weekly Bugle*. There are two poets in the novel. The male poet is an amateur, Cornelius Clyde, who in the end decides to stay with "his business as a barber, as he finds that his poetry brings him fame, but not money" (312). The female poet, Gloriana Podd, is apparently more successful but less famous: her name "still appears in the Poet's Corner of weekly paper and magazines."
fallen off, dramatizing the principle of serial reproduction. When Lem is shot just as he is ready to deliver one of Whipple’s speeches from the stage, he is immortalized by Whipple as "the American boy," the martyr of the fascist revolution that has delivered the nation from "sophistication, Marxism and International Capitalism" (255). In being physically dismantled, Lemuel has become a pure symbol with arbitrary and thus exchangeable links to schemes that are themselves mere constructs.

The novel’s representation of the second order of simulation, of the position between the commodity law and the structural, however, is best seen in the roles played in the novel by Asa Goldstein, owner of "Colonial Exteriors and Interiors," and Wu Fong, the brothel owner who is Goldstein’s client. It is Asa who precipitates the action of the novel, pressing Squire Bird to sell him a Revolutionary War era cottage that Lemuel Pitkin and his mother are living in and paying for. With Asa’s offer in hand, Squire Bird tells the Pitkins they must settle the mortgage immediately or forfeit it. This threat prompts Lemuel to begin his Quixotic adventures, hoping to earn enough money to buy the house back, if not save it.

The novel opens with a sentimental description of the house as a "humble dwelling much worse for the wear, yet exceedingly dear" to Lemuel and his mother. Like the "junk that memory had made precious" to the correspondents whom Miss Lonelyhearts daydreams about, the Pitkins home is something with evident use value (98). It is obviously much used; whatever commodity value it
may have had, it has exhausted, leaving only its value as a "dwelling," a place to
live (just as a "vehicle" is merely something to drive).

Or so it seems. In the second paragraph of the novel, the dominance of
the law of commodity exchange is attested to when the scene is viewed from the
perspective of one who is in the business of managing consumption:

An antique collector, had one chanced to pass it by [and two pages later
we discover that, indeed, Asa has passed it by: chance turns out to be
determined], would have been greatly interested in its architecture. Having
been built about the time of General Stark's campaign against the British,
its lines reflected the character of his army, in whose ranks several Pitkins
had marched. (143-44)

The home now has a different kind of value: it represents the rugged strength of
the colonists who fought for political and economic freedom. It represents an
American national character constituted of the juxtaposition of independence and
historical precedent. As such, the house is now marketable. Later in the novel,
Lem learns that the house has literally been taken apart, transported to
Goldstein's New York store, and reconstructed. It is exchangeable, then, as a
commodity--but more as a commodified sign than as a commodified product, since
the home is on display and presumably the interested consumer would purchase a
replica or (more likely) selected furnishings presented against the backdrop of this
reconstituted house. The home's exchange value thus blurs with its differential
value. As the description cited above suggests, it is a sign with no genuine
referent, only the "lines" that arbitrarily "reflect" a vaguely-defined "character."

Further, when it is soon revealed that there is still a mortgage on the home, the
use value of the home suggested by its description as a "humble dwelling" is also
shown to be a function of exchange value. So Asa's expert retail eye does not so much transform the home from use value to exchange value as exchange one commodifiable sign for another.

Asa's "commitment," as it were, to reproduction and the differential logic of the sign is both literally and figuratively reflected in Wu Fong's brothel, where Betty, Lem's sweetheart, is brought. Betty's kidnapping and her forced labor in the brothel, a major subplot that parallels Lem's adventures in the novel, are precipitated by Wu Fong, who is obsessed with providing his clients accurate simulations of their ethnic and regional cultures. In fact, it is this obsession that actually prompts Betty's capture: Wu Fong sends two men into the New England countryside to retrieve a "real American girl," and "Betty suited him to the ground" (168).

This obsession with simulation is stressed throughout the narrator's two descriptions of the brothel. In the first, we learn that the brothel is modelled after "that more famous one in the Rue Chabanis, Paris, France--a 'House of All Nations,'" and, like its French prototype, Wu Fong's has "a girl from every country in the known world" (except, of course, America; hence the capture of Betty) (169). The brothel, then, is a simulation simulating another simulation. Each room in the brothel is "furnished and decorated in the style of the country from which [] came." Observing that there is "little use" in describing all the interiors (for, indeed, they all "carry out" the "same idea"), the narrator notes that the simulations are constructed with "real historical knowledge" (169). Betty's suite
has been prepared by none other than Asa Goldstein, who boasts that "even Governor Windsor himself could not have found anything wrong [i.e., unauthentic] with the design or furnishings" (170). But simulation doesn't stop with the room, nor with Betty's period costume, described in detail. It extends even to the board: for breakfast, Betty is served "buckwheat cakes with maple syrup, Rhode Island Johnny cakes, bacon biscuits, and a large slice of apple pie" (170). Parodying Alger's moralizing, West has his narrator state in an aside that Wu Fong's unflagging attention to detail could have earned him even more money and relieved him of the "stigma of being a brothel-keeper" if he had applied his efforts more "honestly." But, as West intends, the implication of this aside is that Fong's methods are perfectly consistent with the principles of economic success (and also that prostitution is only a stigma, a sign with an unfortunately low value).

The brothel is not entirely free of the notion of counterfeiting that Baudrillard associates with the first order of simulation, of course. The brothel,

20 In the description of Homer's house in The Day of the Locust, the narrator points out several examples of simulated decoration styles, but he concludes with an image of serial reproduction, not artifice: the two New England rooms in the house are "exactly alike in every detail. Even the pictures were duplicates" (288).

21 And it is certainly not a dramatization of the hyperreal. Wu Fong, for example, refuses to have the Spanish room overhauled, simply hiring a "Dolores O'Riely" from California, substituting a "Mission chair" for the one made of horsehide and steer-horn, and naming the room "Monterey" (203). When Asa complains that this is not a "genuine" simulation, Wu Fong replies that the room is "bound to be a losing proposition" because the style is "not obviously enough American even in its most authentic forms." Hence, perceived authenticity still
for example, is fronted by a Chinese laundry to conceal its real contents. And, of course, Wu Fong insists that the ethnicity, nationality and regional origin of his female laborers be exactly what they are marketed as. Yet the effort expended in creating the simulation is not intended to deceive Wu Fong’s clients; if it were, he would have no repeat customers. Nor is there any suggestion that its purpose is to cover over with distracting decoration the transaction of prostitution (conceived of as a commodified version of something natural). Rather, it is presented as the strategy of a mastermind of consumption, the strategy of someone who understands that simulation of the real is the law that consumer economics must obey (or at least who understands that it must be obeyed). In fact, what little we learn of this mastermind suggests that he is himself the product of a simulated institution. Wu Fong, the narrator mentions, is "a graduate of the Yale University in Shanghai" (168). This training, of course, equips him well for simulating international cultures. But even his own culture seems simulated in the one glimpse the narrator gives of him. Narrating the short scene in which Wu Fong receives Betty and her captors, the narrator focuses on Wu Fong’s reception room--its decor and furnishings, all of them Asian clichés: walls "sheathed in pink satin that had been embroidered with herons in silver," a silk rug, a "hideous ideal," burning incense, a gong. Later in the novel, Wu Fong responds to the "Buy America" campaign (initiated indirectly by the economic depression, but directly by the "Hearst papers") by turning his brothel into "an hundred per

goes some value.
centum American place" (202). He releases all his foreign employees (i.e., all but Betty) and hires girls from "genuine native stock." He also hires Asa Goldstein again, this time to redecorate all the rooms to simulate a variety of regional styles and historical periods. As Baudrillard says (in Symbolic Exchange) of capitalism under "the domination of the code," this is "not the brothel of prostitution but the brothel of substitution and interchangeability" (Selected Writings 128). 22

The Day of the Locust: From Illusion to the Hyperreal

In The Day of the Locust, Tod Hackett searches throughout the novel for the clues that will allow him to create a true aesthetic representation of Hollywood’s victims. It might seem that Tod is successful simply because he places himself behind the screen, in the back lots, among the film industry’s working underclass and its betrayed consumers who have come to California to experience first-hand what they have seen on the screen back home. However, what Tod encounters is more than mere illusion, deception and artifice; he encounters a world in which the sign is regarded less as artifice than as a reproducible object, a world in which the effects of the structural or differential law of value are beginning to take precedence over the effects of commodification.

The novel opens with Tod’s witnessing confusion among an army of actors who have marched to the wrong stage of the studio. The confusion may, at first

22 The translator, Charles Levin, notes that "Baudrillard is playing with the dual semantic surface of bordel: 'brothel' and 'chaos'" (148n4).
glance, seem to contrast with the accurate realism of the costuming as described in some detail by the narrator. Similarly, the scene may seem intended to expose the artificiality of the big screen. But, in fact, the opening scene actually reinforces the impact of the studio's ability to produce simulation, for nothing is more realistic than confusion when waves of cavalry and foot soldiers are maneuvering at close quarters. That is, the confusion of a real battle is now actually occurring on the stage, in the process of production. In giving the back stage a real life, West is not exposing the screen as deceptive, a trick of illusion, but rather as the reproduction of a process of production. The difficulty is not in getting the actors and props to seem realistic; the difficulty is in the technique of reproduction itself.

Tod witnesses a similar scene later in the novel as he wanders across the studio's back lots looking for the Waterloo set where he hopes to find Faye: as the battle scene is being filmed, Napoleon's army charges up a hill, only to have it collapse because the carpenters had not yet finished the structure supporting it. Again, this scene may seem intended to show that what is presented on the big screen is not what "really" happens. But Tod draws a different conclusion: "It was the classic mistake, . . . the same one Napoleon had made" (355). History has been repeated--with a difference, of course, but the difference is that the scene on the stage will be "fought over again the next day" (356). What prevails is the power of the production process to repeat--the historical mistake, its simulation of that mistake, and its reproduction of that simulation (by copying and distributing
The powerful law of reproduction is also personified by Faye Greener. Tod introduces her as a strong force, magnetic and fatal: throwing himself on her "wide, straight shoulders," her "long, swordlike legs," and her long "columnar" neck would like throwing oneself off of a skyscraper, he muses (270-71). But this force is the effect of the code of reproduction. She is introduced in the novel already twice reproduced--a still shot from her bit part in a film (270). Her gestures, which Tod and Homer both observe to be highly artificial, are simulations of codes reproduced on a screen; what gives them charm and seductive power has less to do with the fact that they are unnatural and artificial than with the fact that they are "meaningless," as Homer observes (304), pure movements, signs that cannot be penetrated.

Her "method" of making up stories is also more reproduction of a code than production of artifice. With her eyes closed and radio playing music, she begins to "go over" her "large assortment of stories," flipping through them "as though they were a pack of cards" (316). Tod interprets this method as mechanical as opposed to natural, as a "manufacturing process" rather than a creative one, as a fantasy unable to be made plausible because of a "humdrum technique" (317, 318, 320). But the technique is not just mechanical. It is reproductive. She doesn't "create" at all--either naturally or mechanically; she selects stories that are already constructed. And when she selects a story from her "pack," she merely replays the plot; she reproduces the plot in her mind, or in
this case, verbally for Tod. The reproductive quality of her method is emphasized by Tod's description of a promotional still shot from a Tarzan movie that Faye has pinned up where she can see it when she lies in her bed: this mechanical reproduction of a mechanical reproduction is Faye's "inspiration," Tod concludes, but "master copy" would be a more accurate characterization, since the story she proceeds to tell ends with a Tarzan-like character rescuing a young woman from a snake (318-19). Her method of reproduction also explains, for Tod, the little "grimaces and gestures" that had puzzled him to that point: what had seemed odd because unnatural now makes sense as simulation (320).23

Tod's attentiveness to the law of serial reproduction in Faye serves him well when he is burdened with Homer's confession near the end of the novel. Tod expects the speech to be expressive and cathartic, but he soon realizes it is repetitive and non-linear in arrangement. He makes sense of it when he perceives it as a piece of film, spatially arranged and serially reproduced. Also, when Tod sees Homer curled in a fetal position, he at first reads this as a symptom of severe psychological regression. Tod then thinks of a mechanical analogy: Homer looks like a coiled spring that has been stretched out and is now trying to regain its "original" shape. But in seeking to simulate its original shape, this commodified object is determined no longer by the machine that produced it but a model it is

23 Tod is repeatedly frustrated by Faye's insistence that her affection for him is "meaningless" (317). Yet, he accepts this as the law of reproduction when, to repress his desire for her, he puts away her photograph and his paintings of her and discovers that, in fact, this works.
The novel ends with the riot scene that follows the same logic as the opening scene at the studio and the Waterloo disaster. The immediate cause of the riot is Homer's beating of Adore: the mob responds in kind to Homer's rage. However, Tod has explained the mob's latent anger as caused by a sense of betrayal upon finding out that the "real" Hollywood does not yield the same excitement as its productions: "after you've seen one wave, you've seen them all" (411). The betrayal, then, is not so much that Hollywood is counterfeit as it is that Hollywood is a place of infinitely reproducible images. The Midwesterners have come seeking aura and have only found more of the same images they have been consuming all along. Not even their violence escapes this law, because the riot scene is itself a media event. Before the serious violence breaks out, a radio announcer is reporting on the premiere, shouting into his microphone, "It's a bedlam, folks. A veritable bedlam! What excitement! Of all the premieres I've attended, this is the most. . . stupendous" (410). Like the scene on the Waterloo set, the resulting disaster outside the theater goes beyond the "original" script, thus becoming hyperreal.

The scene also makes Tod's painting, "The Burning of Hollywood," hyperreal. Near the center of the novel, Tod recognizes that he is exaggerating the importance of the people who come to California to die" (334). He realizes that they aren't "really desperate enough to set a single city on fire." Consequently, he continues to work on his painting, assuming it to be a product
of his imagination. But when he finds himself in the middle of the mob, trying to survive the murderous desperation of those whom he thought he was just imagining, his painting suddenly becomes not just real but more than real. For the narrative suddenly shifts out of its realistic mode and turns the scene into a stage, with Tod (the set designer by trade) working on prop to intensify the flames' effect, "modeling the tongues of fire so that they licked even more avidly" at the Hollywood cityscape of buildings with simulated designs (420). Tod, despite his attempt to create a painting with all its auratic power, is compelled to copy the code he articulated when he surveyed the pile of junked sets: "no dream ever entirely disappears. Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day... it will be reproduced on the lot" (353).

Aside from Balso Snell, each of West's novels is set in the world of a major mass medium: newspaper, serial fiction, movies. (Radio is the only major medium excluded, although there are mentions of radio in Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust.) But in none of the novels does West attempt a broad exposé of the medium. His focus is narrow: advice column, dated Horatio Alger novels, Vine Street and the studios' back lots. However, in part because he maintained an interest in surrealism, West was able to represent a key element of this media culture--the principle of serial reproduction. And this is probably one reason that West was well received by the early postmodernist writers, especially John Hawkes. On the other hand, it is also a reason that West cannot really be
considered a postmodernist writer, and that will always make his work important but marginal. Serial reproduction, Baudrillard writes, is "a rather poor imaginary solution to the problem of mastering the world" compared to the first order (counterfeit) and the third order (simulation) (138). In representing that solution, West limits the imaginative power of his novels. And perhaps that is one reason the world of his novels, as commentators since W. H. Auden have observed, is a half-world.
CHAPTER 3
WEST AS "CAMP" INTELLECTUAL

The preceding two chapters have focused on West's aesthetic representations of mass culture's psychological effects and of mass media's symbolic effects. In the chapters that follow, the focus will shift away from the novels' depictions of the effects of the mass culture industry and its products to the social and cultural conflicts represented in and by the novels, conflicts that influence the reception of mass culture. In the preceding chapters, it was necessary to set aside the question of where West's novels themselves stand in relationship to the mass commodity forms they presumably depict critically. In Chapter 1, West's use of psychoanalytic theory, a use informed by his interest in expressionism, was shown to be a critique of the authoritarian tendencies of the culture industry. In Chapter 2, the novels were examined for their depictions of the cultural effects of mass reproduction of cultural products, depictions that are directly related to West's adoption of surrealist techniques. These chapters suggest that West's critique of mass culture cannot be separated from his aesthetic choices. The "balance" between his refusal to celebrate mass culture while portraying it so accurately and sympathetically, which critics have often noted in his critique, is partly the result of his juxtaposition of an anguished, psychological
expressionism and a parodic, objectifying surrealism. To use the consciously provisional distinction between modernist and avant-garde art recently articulated by James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger, West juxtaposes in his novels two distinct artistic cultures.

On the one hand, like a modernist, he seems to craft the junk of urban culture and experience into sophisticated works of art that protest against that very culture and experience. This is especially true of Miss Lonelyhearts. In his review of the novel the same year it was published, William Carlos Williams was only the first of many in the coming decades to praise West for taking a "sordid truth" of contemporary urban culture and creating a story of it with "skill and virtuosity," with "a fine feeling for language"--in short, with "taste" (71-73). This aspect of West's writing probably accounts most for his inclusion in the academic canon, for, as Naremore and Brantlinger suggest of other modernist texts, this one is "aggressively individualistic" and "contemptuous of bourgeois realism" (10). The strong modernist strain in the novels suggests that West is an autonomous social critic of the dominant social class and its culture industry; it also, however, allows the novels to be easily appropriated as "high culture" which, as Naremore and Brantlinger define it, is hostile to the "vulgar marketplace" but is less fundamentally critical of hegemonic ideals than modernism is--ideals such as a "pessimistic but sublime recognition of a tragic human condition" (9).

On the other hand, as West's parody in Miss Lonelyhearts' second chapter of the opening lines of T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land suggests, West seems to be
experimenting with some aspects of what has been called by Peter Bürger and others the "historical avant-garde," which was less reactionary towards the mass media, seeing in them the potential to destabilize the authority of autonomous art (both "high" and "modernist"), which it regarded as a vehicle of alienation, especially for the working classes.  

By looking solely at the aspects of West's writing discussed in Chapter 2 above, one can argue that West moves from imitating the technique of superimposition in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, which is easily (and often) read as modernist experimentation rather than dadaist rebellion, to imitating the mass-reproduced art forms of the comic strip (in *Miss Lonelyhearts*), the adolescent success novel (in *A Cool Million*), and the movies (in *The Day of the Locust*) in ways that throw into question the "aura" high/modernist art. In *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *A Cool Million*, for example, large portions of the text are lifted, respectively, from actual correspondence to a newspaper columnist and from several Horatio Alger novels. That is, instead of only bringing into the text "artifacts of urban mass culture" as Joyce and Eliot did

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1The second chapter in *Miss Lonelyhearts* opens with Miss Lonelyhearts leaving his office and walking to a park nearby. The allusion to the opening lines of *The Waste Land* seems sympathetic at first:

As far as he could discover, there were no signs of spring. The decay that covered the surface of the mottled ground was not the kind in which life generates. Last year, he remembered, May had failed to quicken these soiled fields. . . . (70).

But the allusion soon descends into grotesque parody:

What the little park needed, even more than he did, was a drink. . . . Tomorrow, in his column, he would ask. . . . his correspondents to come here and water the soil with their tears. Flowers would then spring up, flowers that smelled of feet.
(Naremore and Brantlinger 10), West actually uses forms of popular culture, a category of art (consumption) that is more or less that of the working classes and thus potentially of political significance because it often involves audiences putting to their own uses a mass-produced art that was initially intended for passive consumption (12).

**West and the "Dominant" Class**

But it may not be completely accurate to suggest that West is juxtaposing these two artistic cultures; it may be that West is alternating between them, or perhaps drawing on both in expressing yet a different artistic culture. After all, West achieves only fleetingly, in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the kind of aesthetic complexity and sophistication one expects of a modernist text, and he certainly did not experiment thoroughly with the kinds of avant-garde techniques that would fundamentally question his aesthetic skill and his authorial control over the novels. That is, as useful as this juxtaposition is for demonstrating how West's novels contain two opposing yet complementary critiques of mass culture and media, it does not satisfactorily define how or why these two critiques are opposed or what the effect of that opposition is.

As a starting point for beginning to explain the presence and function of these two artistic cultures in West's novels, it is helpful to associate them with two kinds of intellectuals, derived (by Andrew Ross) from Antonio Gramsci: the "traditional" intellectual "whose function [whether intentional or not] is to legitimize the cultural power of ruling interest" and the "organic" intellectual
whose role is to "promote the interests of a rising class," i.e., of a class rising to compete with the dominant class (146). Both intellectuals have a form of social power, Ross observes: the traditional intellectual draws power from the legitimacy of the dominant class, even if, like the modernists, he is critical of that class; the organic intellectual draws power from the ascending class--i.e., power from the threat that a subordinate class poses to the dominant class. (This, of course, is what many of the "historical" avant-garde, as first defined by Peter Bürger, attempted to do; Bertolt Brecht is a good example.) But there is a third kind of intellectual, Ross suggests, the one newly arrived into the dominant class and thus acutely sensitive to his social "impotence." Ross calls this kind the "camp" intellectual. And, like those who have written about "camp" after Susan Sontag, Ross locates the origins of this artistic culture in the nineteenth century (where the neat opposition of "traditional" and "organic" intellectual is easier to maintain). In the nineteenth-century, Ross explains, camp intellectuals such as Oscar Wilde were affiliated with highbrow theater and expressed their membership in the dominant class by maintaining a well-heeled "lifestyle" expressed in fine clothing, art appreciation and interior decoration, and communicated in lectures on the same (147). At the same time, the nineteenth-century Dandy opposed the values of the dominant class, posing as "anti-industry, pro-idleness; anti-family, pro-bachelorhood; ... anti-sport, pro-frivolity; anti-decor, pro-exhibitionism; anti-progress, pro-decadence" (147). However, by using largely "aristocratic affectations" to oppose the values and taste of the dominant
class, Ross reasons, the nineteenth-century Dandy attempted to exploit "his disqualification, or remoteness" from cultural power. On the one hand, the Dandy's aristocratic affectations "comfortably symbolized, to the bourgeoisie, the declining power of the foppish aristocracy" rather than the ascendant power of the professional humanists who at least sought to improve the institutions of education upon which the bourgeoisie depended. On the other hand, the Dandy's aristocratic affectations symbolized his distance from the "threatening, embryonic power of the popular classes" that the avant-garde often exploited in their art.

Ross's definition and description of the late-nineteenth-century "camp" intellectual is particularly appropriate to West's early life and work, for several reasons. West was an arriviste of sorts, since his parents, both émigrés, worked their way into the dominant class in the U.S. His intensive self-education in high culture was undercut by academic indolence, difficulties in writing and publishing, and extended employment in a lower-middle-class job. These conditions led him, like the nineteenth-century Dandy, both to feel disqualified from the dominant class into which he had recently arrived and to exploit that disqualification by opposing the dominant cultural values with distinctly (and thus somewhat outmoded) aristocratic ones.

In examining these social reasons for West's intellectual position and artistic strategy, which the remainder of this chapter will do, it is necessary to draw on perspectives from the work of cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, a pioneering and
influential study of the ways in which one's social background (largely defined by the father's occupational category), education and social trajectory (largely defined by one's own career or occupational path) strongly influence how one consumes and produces cultural products. Bourdieu's study, first published in 1979, is a set of analyses and reflections on 1,217 responses to a questionnaire survey conducted in Paris in 1963 and again in 1967-68 (13). Consequently, applying its results to West's cultural context in 1920s and 30s New York requires explanations.

As the English edition translator, Richard Nice, suggests in his Preface, the "aristocratic model of 'court society'" has endured with greater virulence in France than in other Western European countries, at least in the "arrogance of its cultural judgements" (xi). And the U.S., of course, never had a court tradition to begin with. Yet, Nice is right to point out that the English and Americans have long held a particular fascination for Parisian lifestyles. Whether or not one infers with Nice that Parisian culture has thus attained "a kind of universality," one must acknowledge that Parisian culture held a singular attraction for West, like other aspiring U.S. writers in the 1920s: when he was able to convince his family in the mid-1920s to support him while he tried to write his first novel, he immediately sailed for Paris. And, as the preceding chapter demonstrates, West was virtually alone among U.S. writers in the 1930s to reflect in his work the influence of French dada and surrealism.

Richard Nice also points out specific U.S. cultural productions that have clear equivalents in the French cultural hierarchy: public television, Sontag's
appreciation of camp, the *New York Times, Newsweek, Broadway* (xii). But more important is the fact that the three major taste categories or "zones" that Bourdieu identifies in Paris are essentially the same as those commonly used by intellectuals in the United States at least as early as Russell Lynes' 1949 essay, "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" (reprinted in *The Tastemakers* [1954]).

"Legitimate taste," Bourdieu explains, is taste for high art (which Nice notes is international), a taste that "increases with educational level and is highest in those fractions of the dominant class that are richest in educational capital" (16). This definition matches Lynes' definition of "highbrow" taste--taste that is generally found to be among those "in the ill-paid professions, notably academic" (311). Bourdieu and Lynes use the same term, "middlebrow," for the middle category. Bourdieu defines it as a taste for "the minor works of the major arts" and for "the major works of the minor arts" (16). Lynes cites Virginia Woolf's distinction between upper and lower middlebrows in defining this category much as Bourdieu does: the upper middlebrows, Lynes explains, attempt to supply the lower middlebrows with accessible forms of legitimate art (320). "Popular" taste, Bourdieu observes, is for cultural productions that are "totally devoid of artistic ambition or pretension" (16); likewise, Lynes notes that the "lowbrow is not interested, as the middlebrow is, in preempting any of the highbrow's function" (320). Lynes also

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2 Nice cites Russel Lynes' *The Tastemakers* as an example of work by "the pioneers of the sociology of culture," work that "contradicts the belief, held by many intellectuals in every country, that cultural differences are withering away into a common culture" (561n2).
claims that "lowbrows can be found in about equal percentages at all financial levels" (311). Bourdieu argues instead that it is most prominent among the working classes (16). However, Bourdieu acknowledges that lowbrow taste is present in the dominant class.³

Bourdieu's analysis of these taste categories relies, as Lynes's does not, on examining the correlation between one's taste and one's family, education and employment, which is precisely why Bourdieu's analysis is helpful in applying what is known of West's life to an understanding of his art. It is often assumed that class conflicts have been diffused as mass culture becomes ever more ubiquitous in this century--or at least that the conflict between the dominant middle classes and the working classes has been replaced by a conflict between, on the one hand, those who work in the culture industry and those who consume its products, and, on the other hand, the increasingly small pockets of minority groups and intellectuals who resist being dominated by the industry.⁴ Bourdieu would no

³Applying his theory that highbrow or legitimate taste is directly influenced by one's education, he notes, though, that popular taste varies in inverse ratio to educational capital (which explains why it is slightly more common among industrial and commercial employers or even senior executives [who all belong in the upper middle class] than among primary teachers and cultural intermediaries [who both belong in the lower middle class]. (16)

⁴In "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," Fredric Jameson expresses both of these views. Midway through his essay, Jameson suggests that it is implausible to "go on believing in categories like social class"; since "everything is [now] mediated by culture," phenomenon such as social class only exist in "the insubstantial bottomless realm of cultural and collective fantasy" (139). One page later, he suggests that the only "authentic cultural production" still existing, the only cultural production that "is dependent for its existence on authentic collective
doubt find much truth in Russell Lynes' assertion that "taste and high thinking" have replaced the "conventional social strata" such as family or wealth as markers of "prestige" (310). But Bourdieu would interpret this situation as suggesting that taste is an ever more important battle ground for marking one's social distinction. Bourdieu assumes, that is, that class conflicts are alive and well in the twentieth century, but more than ever manifesting themselves in taste judgements. Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams (introducing Bourdieu's work to those working in the Birmingham Institute tradition of cultural studies) highlight Bourdieu's key assumption that every person has endowments of economic and cultural capital which he brings to "the field of struggle that is the social formation. . . with the aim of reproducing the capital of his or her group and if possible augmenting it" (123). These endowments are manifested in judgements of taste, both in the production and consumption of culture products. Hence taste, as Bourdieu asserts in his Introduction to Distinctions, is "one of the most vital stakes in the struggles fought in the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural production" (11).

It is important to understand what precisely Bourdieu means by "dominant class," since that is the field of conflict in which West is engaged. Bourdieu defines the "dominant class" by the following employment categories, listed in life," is the production coming out of the "collective experience of marginal pockets of social life of the world system: black literature and blues, British working-class rock, women's literature, gay literature. . .," because these pockets "have not yet been fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system" (140).
descending order of economic capital and ascending order of educational and
cultural capital: industrial and commercial employers, public-sector executives,
private-sector executives and engineers, professionals, secondary teachers, higher-
education teachers, and art producers (17).\textsuperscript{5} That is, the industrial and
commercial employers tend to have the most economic capital and the least
cultural capital (in some cases, unable to rise above lowbrow taste) whereas
academics and artists tend to have least economic capital and the most cultural
capital. In defining the dominant class this way, Bourdieu blurs a bit the
categorical distinction between "intellectuals" and the "bourgeoisie" (12).\textsuperscript{6}
Bourdieu insists that all of the individuals in these categories belong to the
dominant class, that they all stand in and actively work to maintain a dominant
social relation to other social groups. Hence, Bourdieu would take issue with
Russell Lynes' assumption that highbrows, because they generally work in "the ill-
paid professions," are not part of the socially dominant class. Rather, Bourdieu
would note the implications of the financial trope that Lynes uses to explain how

\textsuperscript{5}This is largely the same in the U.S., although the categories comprising
public- to private-sector executives may be more difficult to place in hierarchical
order here than in France.

\textsuperscript{6}When quoting Bourdieu, I will use his terms "bourgeoisie" and "petite
bourgeoisie"; when not quoting Bourdieu, I will use the terms "upper middle class"
and "lower middle class." Bourdieu defines the "petite bourgeoisie," what I will
call the lower middle class, by the following employment categories (in ascending
order of cultural, rather than economic, capital): craftsmen and shopkeepers,
clerical and commercial employees, junior administrative executives, junior
commercial executives and secretaries, technicians, medical-social services, primary
teachers, cultural intermediaries and art craftsmen (17).
the artist and his work are appropriated by the highbrow "consumer" ("editors, critics, dilettantes") (316). The artist, Lynes explains, is

taken up by the highbrow consumer and made much of. In fact, [the artist] may become... a vested interest [of the highbrow], and his reputation will be every bit as carefully guarded by the highbrows as a hundred shares of Standard Oil of New Jersey by the middlebrows. He will be sold--at a par decided by the highbrows--to the middlebrows, who are natural gamblers in the commodities of culture. (316-317)

Bourdieu would argue that the highbrow consumer Lynes describes here is a broker of cultural capital. Bourdieu does not suggest, of course, that cultural capital has the same kind of political and social power that financial or material capital has. In fact, he argues that intellectuals form a dominated fraction of the dominant class. Nevertheless, Bourdieu maintains that highbrows, whom Lynes characterizes as "self-appointed intellectuals" (317), have enough social power to remain distinct from the lower-middle and working classes.

The highbrows maintain this social power because they legitimize their consumption of art by maintaining an "aesthetic disposition," a commitment to the "absolute primacy of form over function" (29-30). That is,

nothing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works, the aptitude for taking a specifically aesthetic point of view on objects already constituted aesthetically. . . . (40)

Bourdieu reasons that this aesthetic disposition is a sign of class distinction

\[\text{As he does repeatedly in this work, Bourdieu adds that the "appreciation" of "common" or ordinary objects as aesthetic objects is an even greater mark of aesthetic distinction (40). Bourdieu's notion of aesthetic disposition bears some similarity to Benjamin's notion of aura: they both suggest that aestheticism can be used by the dominant class to distance itself from lower classes.}\]
because the cultural capital this disposition yields "can only be acquired by means of a sort of withdrawal from economic necessity" (54). That is, in privileging an object's formal qualities and in seeing that object primarily as expressing a style in relation to a closed universe of other styles, one expresses a lifestyle that is characterized by the suspension and removal of economic necessity and by objective and subjective distance from practical urgencies, which is the basis of objective and subjective distance from groups subjected to those determinisms. (54 emphasis added)

What makes this removal from necessity possible, of course, is economic power—the same power that "asserts itself by the destruction of riches, conspicuous consumption, squandering, and every form of gratuitous luxury" (55). Because it cannot compete with the wealthier, dominant fractions of the dominant class on the economic field, the dominated fractions--academics and artists, for example--invest in "cultural capital," becoming expert in an aestheticism that appears hostile to economic power (hence, to "commercial" art) but that in fact, by virtue of its ostensibly voluntary distancing from economic necessity, expresses indirect solidarity with the remainder of the dominant class. One sees, then, the irony in Russell Lynes' description of the highbrows first as brokers of artists' cultural "stock" and then as obsessed "with the evils of the monetary temptations with which America strews the artist's path" (317).8

8Bourdieu also places "art producers" with academics as those in the dominant class with the most cultural capital; that is, he considers both as "intellectuals" (which is how I, also, will use this term throughout). Lynes argues that artists should be regarded as a separate class, a class outside the hierarchy of highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow. He is correct that these categories are largely categories of consumption, but Bourdieu recognizes that art producers make
Looking at West’s life from a distance, it is safe to assume that he belongs in the dominated fraction of the dominant class. West manifested his commitment to this aesthetic disposition in several ways. From the late 1920s, when his attempt to live the life of the avant-garde artist in Paris was aborted, until the late 1930s when he began earning fairly large income as a screenwriter, West often hovered near poverty. But for the most part this poverty was self-induced: he worked at various jobs only long enough to earn enough money to sustain himself for months on end as he wrote novels and plays. In the early 1930s, especially, he steadfastly resisted the pressure of his mother--reduced to a lower-middle-class lifestyle because of the continued decline of her husband’s business in the late 20s and early 30s--to leave off his "serious" writing and either try to become a successful writer in Hollywood or embark on some other more secure career (Martin 228). From 1927 to 1933, he worked as a hotel manager in New York City without becoming exactly well-off: he twice declined to consider marriage because he did not feel financially secure (106). What money he did earn he spent as one removed from economic necessity: he took two long vacations in 1931 and 1932 to work on Miss Lonelyhearts, and, together with the Perelmans, he bought a farm where he took up the gentlemanly sport of bird judgements that are essentially manifestations of a taste category and that have some influence on how their art will itself be judged. Bourdieu makes the same connection between art producer and broker in the lower middle class: he places "cultural intermediaries" (journalists, advertising creatives, interior designers) and "art craftsmen" together as the most culturally well-endowed of the lower middle class.
hunting. After his three-month stint in Hollywood in 1933, he tried for the next two years to lead a life removed from economic necessity: he spent much of his time hunting on his farm, writing and planning several unsuccessful writing projects in New York City, and participating sporadically in political rallies. These were probably the most difficult two years of his life, financially, but he refused to seek a career outside of writing. Even in the difficult years of the depression, then, West did just about everything he could to maintain a lifestyle removed from economic necessity, even though that necessity remained a persistent concern.

West's attempt to create an intellectualist lifestyle ostensibly and voluntarily removed from economic necessity and thus demonstrative of economic power, continued even after these lean years were over. Beginning in 1936, he began to gain some respect in Hollywood as a competent screenwriter. In two years, he had apparently saved a good deal of money and was quite confident in his ability to produce original scripts. Consequently, he asked that his contract with Republic not be renewed, and he collaborated with two other writers in 1938 to create a script that netted him $2,500 when M.G.M. bought the fifty-one-page "treatment" (Martin 284). But he used most of this money to produce a play in New York. When it failed, he had to return to Hollywood for work, signing first with Universal and then with RKO for whom he was working when he died in 1940.

However, while West's aesthetic disposition marks him as a member of the
dominant class, his family background, his education, and his early career (or lack of one) indicate that his membership in this class was new and remained tenuous, which in turn is why his work should be considered as that of a "camp" intellectual.

West's Cultural Endowments

West was raised in an upper middle class family that was fairly well endowed both economically and culturally. West's father, Max Weinstein, and his mother, Anna Wallenstein, were born into Lithuanian Jewish families that were emerging into the Russian middle class. Lithuania, dominated by German commerce and culture in the nineteenth century, allowed Jews like the Weinsteins and Wallensteins far more freedoms and privileges than Jews enjoyed elsewhere in Russia (Martin 13-18). Lazar Wallenstein, Nathanael's maternal grandfather, managed to build up a rather large construction business specializing in railroad stations. He invested a good deal of his economic capital in developing his family's cultural capital, sending his five daughters to a gymnasium in one of the larger cities in Lithuania and his two sons to art school. In fact, he arranged for his son Saul to be adopted by a Russian general so that Saul might have the freedom to travel to St. Petersburg and enroll in the art conservatory there (17).^9

With the revocation in 1881 of German Home Rule by newly-crowned

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^9When that plan was preempted by the need for Saul to accompany one of his sisters to America, Lazar made it possible for the pair to tour galleries in Paris and London before sailing for the U.S. (21).
Alexander III, many Lithuanian Jews began immigrating to the U.S. West's parents were among them, immigrating separately but marrying a few years after arriving in the 1890s (Martin 13). Max and Anna managed to build a lifestyle somewhat parallel to the one in which Anna had been raised. Max, who had worked for Lazar in Russia before immigrating with his brothers to the U.S. in the 1890s, began and sustained a successful construction contracting business, specializing in small apartment buildings and residential hotels. He followed real estate trends closely, it appears, building in progressively up-scale neighborhoods and moving his family into portions of his newly-built apartments (Martin 23). His income allowed Anna to retain a cook and governess while the children were young and to vacation each summer in New England (23, 25). He and Anna enrolled their three children in schools of academic distinction (24). And they stayed active in the arts, thanks in part, no doubt, to the artistic training of Anna's brother:

With intellectual organizations, musicians, and painters on the upper West Side and in Yorkville... they had some association. As a matter of course, they went regularly to the Metropolitan Opera, in full dress, jeweled and elegant. (25)

They were not religious, attending a synagogue perhaps twice a year and then only frequenting the German Temple Israel,
where Rabbi Robert Harris, the author of several books, had been called from England to preach the learned message of Judaism in an impeccably correct and rhetorically distinguished English accent. (26)

These fragmentary pieces of evidence suggest that the Weinsteins had, at least in the teens and 20s, a lifestyle befitting the upper middle class. However, they were newly arrived into this class: the upper-middle-class status of Anna's family had just been achieved by her father, and she and Max had both had to start over again upon immigrating to the U.S. The value they placed on their cultural capital in contrast to their economic capital is difficult to determine precisely. On the one hand, their attendance at the opera, if accurately portrayed, and their purchase of handsomely-bound "classic" authors for their children suggest the kind of appropriation of art Pierre Bourdieu finds typical of the commercial and industrial employers whose economic capital far outweighs their cultural capital. For this class, "a 'night out' at the theatre is an occasion for conspicuous spending" (270). Yet, the economic capital to sustain the kind of appropriation of art that always manifests one's economic capital was surely in limited supply in the Weinstein family. Max was a commercial employer, but a small one, and, in fact, the precariousness of the family business was demonstrated in the late 1920s when tightening credit began to strangle it. Further, because they were educated as Europeans, Max and especially Anna regarded American middle-class culture as somewhat debased, a sentiment
fostered, no doubt, by the anti-Semitism that restricted somewhat their social mobility. One of West's cousins said of the extended family, "We were not going to be American peasants; we were going to be American gentlemen" (Martin 26). This distinctly (albeit anachronistic) European conception of their class status--gentry versus peasants--suggests that the Weinsteins were as concerned with advancing their cultural capital as with advancing their economic capital. They thus fall neatly in the middle of the dominant class as Bourdieu has described it--between the large employers (whose great economic capital and weak cultural capital lead them to a taste for luxury) and the artists and intellectuals (who are economically poor but culturally rich); that is, in terms of combined economic and cultural capital, the Weinsteins belonged to the professional fraction of the dominant class.

The Weinsteins, like Lazar Wallenstein before them, invested a good deal in their children's education. To ensure good training for his young children, Max deliberately built a house on a lot next to the first New York grammar school to use in-class training for teachers, a school called the "Model School" for its leadership in progressive education reforms (Martin 34). Later, the Weinsteins sent West and his siblings to De Witt Clinton High School, a school highly respected for its academic program (Mortimer Adler and Lionel Trilling were enrolled there at the same time West was) (35). In these high school years, the Weinsteins also sent West to a summer camp--"highly conventional, formalized, middle-class [and] Jewish"--presumably to strengthen his solidarity with the upper
middle class (40). They were able to send West’s older brother Wally to Columbia University (he was expelled and eventually went to Tulane) and West first to Tufts University, an small New England college, and then to the more prestigious Brown University (49). His parents wanted their sons to earn a university degree no doubt because they understood that, as Bourdieu argues, college degrees function much as aristocratic titles used to function—as "the attribution of status... which every group produces by assigning individuals to hierarchically ordered classes" (23). Coming from a family that had been ascending into the European gentry, education seemed the best guarantee the Weinstein family could afford to ensure that their inherited cultural capital would be well-invested in the New World.

Martin states repeatedly that West resisted the upper-middle-class values of his parents by refusing to participate fully in school and later refusing to consider taking an active role in his father’s construction business. Both in grammar

10 What is distinctly aristocratic about a university degree, Bourdieu explains, is that it grants its holder the right not to have to prove the value of his cultural capital:

Whereas the holders of educationally uncertified cultural capital can always be required to prove themselves, because they are only what they do... the holders of titles of cultural nobility [university degrees]—like the titular members of an aristocracy, whose "being"... is irreducible to any "doing"... only have to be what they are, because all their practices derive their value from their authors... (23)

11 "He resisted, by indifference, all of his family’s efforts to enlist him in work or to encourage him to enter a profession... West set himself strongly against conventional goals... by opposing school" (33).
school and high school, for example, he was frequently tardy or absent and his work incomplete (35, 37-38). His indifference persisted throughout his college career. He was asked to withdraw from Tufts after his first semester there because he was neither attending classes nor completing assignments (51). West then transferred to Brown University where he eventually graduated, but with less than a stellar record, having been placed on academic probation once and reduced to tears to persuade a professor in West's final semester to change a failing grade to a "D" in order to graduate (62-63). As for his role in his father's contracting firm, while West worked in the Bronx for his father during summer vacations in his college years and for two years after graduating from Brown in 1924, he proved to be as dedicated to his employment as he was to his schooling: he spent at least as much time reading, writing and visiting museums and other cultural attractions as he did supervising his father's construction crews (75-76). Finally, in the fall of 1926, against his father's wishes, he convinced his uncles to support him for a year in Paris where, he hoped, he would be able to establish himself as a literary artist (77-78).

West's reluctance to engage fully in his education and in his father's business does not constitute, however, a genuine or fundamental protest against a upper-middle-class values. For while West was indifferent about his academic work, he was nonetheless intent on acquiring his scholastic "title of cultural nobility," as is evident from the fact that he altered his high school transcripts to gain admittance to Tufts and allowed two years of someone else's college credit to
be recorded on the transcript with which he was admitted to Brown. In other words, although largely self-taught in literature and the other arts, West seems to have appreciated the role of the educational system in legitimating his "autodidactism" (Bourdieu 24). He seems to have appreciated the fact that "educational qualifications [are] . . . seen as a guarantee of the capacity to adopt the aesthetic disposition" (29). For that "disposition" legitimates not only the cultural capital he acquires in higher education but also his appropriation of cultural productions outside the academic curriculum. He also seems to have had an appreciation for the cultural capital he inherited from his well-educated, European family--an appreciation that itself may have added to his lax scholastic habits since, as Bourdieu maintains, the "efficiency" of the scholastic transmission of cultural capital "depends on the amount of cultural capital directly inherited from the family" (23). With a good deal of legitimate culture inherited from his family, then, West could afford to be indifferent about his appropriation of culture in school: the college degree would merely certify his competence as a "'connoisseur'"--a competence already acquired from "slow familiarization" with high culture, rather than from diligent study in school (66).

As already suggested, West chose to extend the familiarity with legitimate culture his parents passed on to him, cultivating an intense devotion to aestheticism. Of course he read the classic nineteenth-century Russian, French and English authors whose works his parents gave their children in handsome sets: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekov, Shakespeare, Thackery, Dickens, Hardy, Balzac and
Maupassant. But he read them alone in his room, precociously, even training a
toy bulldog, his sister Laura claims, to keep siblings from disturbing their brother
(31). He not only read Field and Stream regularly; he often tried to emulate with
his friends in surrounding parks the gentlemanly pursuits depicted in the magazine
(31, 35-36). He supplemented this traditional, upper-middle-class literary home-
training with the exotic and the bizarre. And he was an avid patron of movies and
of Broadway theater, claiming (with his customary exaggeration, undoubtedly) that
before entering college he saw "every worthwhile production on Broadway and... a
great many that were not" (qtd. in Martin 36). This mixing of highbrow, middlebrow, lowbrow and exotic-esoteric tastes suggests the strength of cultural
capital West received from his family. 12 It suggests that West understood
something of the ease of the bourgeois, the sense of confidence that gives them
permission to sample art on the borders of legitimacy without threatening that
legitimacy.

As such, his "rebellion" against upper-middle-class culture was only an
apparent one, for as Bourdieu insists, aesthetics--epitomized by the appreciation
of pure form at the expense of content--has as its material and social precondition
a certain "distance from necessity" that only wealth can afford (53-54). Often, this
"freedom from necessity" is epitomized by scholastic training, the "world of

12 I distinguish "exotic-esoteric" from the other three categories because, while
it is a form of highbrow taste, it is a debased one; i.e., it is a form favored by the
Dandy or "camp intellectual" who plays up his debased taste both as an example
and protest of highbrow taste.
regulated games and exercise for exercise' sake" (55). Just as Lazar Wallenstein demonstrated his distance from necessity by planning to send his son Saul to study art in St. Petersburg, Max and Anna Weinstein demonstrated their distance from necessity by sending Wally and Nathanael to New England colleges for liberal arts training, even though they apparently intended both sons to return to Max's construction business or pursue a profession at least similarly lucrative. West, of course, seemed more interested in scholastic titles rather than scholastic training. Nevertheless, his aestheticist resistance to his parents' idea of legitimate culture is also typical of the upper middle class:

It is not surprising that bourgeois adolescents, who are both economically privileged and (temporarily) excluded from the reality of economic power, sometimes express their distance from the bourgeois world which they cannot really appropriate by a refusal of complicity whose most refined expression is a propensity towards aesthetics and aestheticism. (55 emphasis added)

This is not to discount the real distinction between West's values and those of his parents but rather to stress that, as an adolescent and young adult, Wets was well (though newly) established in the dominant class, even though he gravitated (in terms of his ratio of cultural to economic capital) from the middle fraction of that class to the most dominated fraction, namely, the fraction of intellectuals and art producers.

Aristocratic Affectation and "Well-armed Pretention"

While at Brown, West continued pursuing his self-taught aestheticism. But the particular form this pursuit took on can be interpreted both as the pseudo-
aristocratic affection of the late-nineteen-century Dandy and as the "social bluffing" or "well-armed pretension" characteristic of the most culturally well-endowed fraction of the lower middle class, the fraction most populated with cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 362-365). That is, on one hand, West's aristocratic affectations are typical of an arriviste, which West was, not only economically and culturally but ethnically as well: he could not join any fraternities at Brown, for example, because he was Jewish. At the same time, his arriviste status was exacerbated by his years of academic indolence. Bourdieu explains that failure to certify the cultural endowment one inherits from one's family can result not only in having eventually to seek employment as a cultural intermediary (and thus descend in economic status out of the dominant class) but also imitating with well-planned casualness the assured sophistication of intellectuals and artists in the dominated fraction of the dominant class. Since the latter interpretation is stronger, it will be explained below, with the understanding that some of West's behavior could also be interpreted as that of a Dandy.

West's "well-armed pretension" during his college years is best illustrated by his essay on Euripides. The essay was initially written for a course in Greek drama in translation (one of only two college courses for which West received an A) and then published in the first issue of Casements, the Brown literary magazine for which he designed the cover (Martin 60-61). The essay begins by comparing of Euripides' plays to an eclectic collection of literature, comparisons intended to be cleverly audacious:
The tawdry melodrama of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." The dirt of a Restoration play by Wycherley. The sex alarums by the propagandist Brieux. The bloody sensationalism of the Old Testament. The box office symbolisms of Carl Capek. . . . The stretching of the long arm of coincidence as Thomas Hardy never dared stretch it. (61)

With this flippant introduction, West manifests the "'arty' off-handedness" of those who have been "declassed," so to speak, from the dominant class into the upper end of the lower middle class; he attempts (rather successfully) to give the impression of wide-ranging cultural capital without having to go too far to prove its depth (Bourdieu 326). He is, on one hand, mocking the highbrow status of Euripides by bringing him into the realm of the middle- and lowbrow: The Bacchae is "'a vaudeville act' starring the 'team' of Tiresias and Cadmus" (Martin 60). At the same time, he is betraying the limits of his own cultural capital, using his parodic comparisons to deflect attention away from what he does not know.

This defensive use of parody becomes more pronounced as the essay develops into long strings of inflated and contradictory quotations from literary critics and historians, paralleling what Bourdieu describes as the "conspicuous refusal [through parody, in this case] of the heavy didacticism and grey, impersonal, tedious pedantry which are the counterpart or external sign of institutional competence," a refusal that is typical of the declassed fraction of the new lower middle class (326). West also parodies the sycophantic reverence of
legitimate culture that is characteristic of the stable and promoted fractions of the lower middle class, declaring a particular scene from Euripides to be "among the greatest things in drama" and concluding the essay with mock obeisance to the dramatist: "The most I can accomplish is to throw a few soiled flowers on a Parnassus of laurel and bay, heaped up by his more capable admirers" (Martin 61). In so doing he manifests yet another characteristic of the declassed fraction: skill in "identifying the 'soppy' objects of popular taste or petit-bourgeois aestheticism. . ." (Bourdieu 362). Finally, West signs his essay "Nathaniel v. W. Weinstein," adding the title of nobility to his name and thus, perhaps, revealing a special weakness for (outmoded) "aristocratic qualities ('stylish,' 'distinguished,' 'refined,' recherché')" that Bourdieu finds typical of such cultural intermediaries.

West's cautious pretentiousness is also evident in his extra-curricular activities at Brown. On the one hand, he fraternized with the somewhat hedonistic and status-conscious athletic and social fraternities. Attending their parties and frequenting movie houses with them, West always wore stylish, Brooks Brothers suits to make himself distinguished, even though (or perhaps because) he was never admitted to any of these fraternities because he was Jewish (Martin 53). On the other hand, he formed a small, closed literary group he titled the Hanseatic League, alluding to his family's German cultural heritage. As the founder of this group, West played the role of the "highbrow" aesthete that F. Scott Fitzgerald conveniently defined in 1920 with the character of Thomas Parke D'Invilliers in This Side of Paradise (Fitzgerald 50-51). Interestingly, a member
of the League recalls the members mocking "what the common man was relishing those days," and "descending from our ivory tower to sample and reject the cloying sweets of the public fare" (Martin 57). It seems doubtful that West genuinely believed he was descending from an ivory tower when he dressed up to socialize with his fraternity friends; he no doubt wanted to get as close to full membership in these upper-middle-class Gentile fraternities as possible. After all, his parents' economic and cultural heritage would suggest he deserved that membership. But being denied full membership, he exaggerated his liminal status to best advantage by aestheticizing it, by playing the aesthete. In both groups, he was somewhat pretentious, but by being in both groups and playing them off one another, he kept his pretentiousness well-armed against being discovered as just that.

Viewing West's behavior as calculated sophistication suggests a revision of his biographer's evaluation of his college years that also accounts for the hesitancies and self-doubting that West expressed in the decade and a half he lived after graduating from Brown. Jay Martin insists that West's personal reading of highbrow, avant-garde literature in college was "omnivorous," and he consistently implies that, at Brown, West embarked on a program of self-education far superior to what he could have received in the classroom where his performance was average and below (68). It is possible, however, that West's self-education was not worth enough cultural capital to give him the all-important confidence and ease that comes with the aesthetic disposition of the dominant
class, especially the dominated fraction of that class which is well-endowed with cultural capital. While he apparently read the most prestigious European little magazines of the period (transition, The Egoist, The Criterion), for example, there is little to suggest that West was confident about his understanding of what he read. For Martin admits that West was mostly concerned in college with being a "dilettante"; he wanted more "to be regarded as a literary man than to write literature," since he wrote little, and that "rather casually" (70, 73). Consequently, Martin is perhaps overstating when he writes that West "had educated himself to the meaning" of modernism--as if that "meaning" can be clearly distinguished from the modernists' "methods," which, Martin admits, there is slight evidence that West understood very well (71). What is more likely is that, unwilling (and to some degree, perhaps unable because under-prepared) to work diligently at building up his endowment of legitimate cultural capital (by appropriating "high" culture in the broadest sense of the term, i.e., as it overlaps canonical, modernist and avant-garde art), West felt compelled to cut corners and become expert in the more marginal forms and products of legitimate or high culture, preferring the "strange and exquisite to the accomplished and achieved" (Martin 69).

**Working in the Lower Middle Class**

If West had doubts about the value of his cultural capital at Brown, if he were already sensing he may be slipping into the lower middle class, then these fears were certainly exacerbated when he encountered such difficulty after his graduation from Brown becoming an avant-garde writer and intellectual despite
the promising cultural endowment he inherited from his family. After graduation, he failed to publish anything but one story, and he was forced to take a lower-middle-class job as an assistant hotel manager. In short, between the time of his graduation in 1924 and the publication nine years later of Miss Lonelyhearts, West's social status clearly declined. Jay Martin implies that single most important factor in this decline was the decline of Max Weinstein’s construction business. It is certainly true that his father’s business difficulties had an impact on West. Within two years of his graduation from Brown, West (with the financial backing of his two uncles) had managed to persuade his extended family to finance a year-long tour of Europe. His passport indicates that West was to pursue personal studies throughout western Europe, but his intention was to spend at least a year in Paris and establish himself as a fiction writer (76-81). Because his business was doing poorly, West's father at first resisted the proposal, wanting West to remain and devote his time to the construction firm as West apparently had done sporadically in his two years after graduating from Brown in 1924. Max finally consented, but almost immediately after West’s arrival in Paris in October, 1926, West’s father began entreating him to return home: a credit constriction, an early sign of the on-coming economic depression, was making it difficult for Max to borrow the monies he needed for his contracting business. West yielded to his father’s entreaties and threats and returned to New York in

13 Max's brother and business partner Charles, whose son Nathan had recently died, and Anna's brother Saul, who had been destined for a career as an artist in Russia, are the two uncles (76-77).
January, 1927, having spent less than three months abroad (91).

Too much importance can be attributed to the decline of Max’s business. West, after all, had apparently been unable to land a job that involved writing in any way; unlike so many of the avant-garde writers of his time and generation, he did not work at all in the editing or publishing business. Nor was he drafting and submitting much writing for publication—even to little magazines. And this was in keeping with his writing production at Brown: there he did very little writing outside of class assignments and none at all for the campus literary organs. The only known writing he produced is the short story of St. Puce (which appears in *Balso Snell*), a parody of a Huysmans-inspired hagiography that West wrote for a classmate. So the reversal in his father’s fortunes in 1926-27 did not exactly precipitate a reversal in West’s writing production; it is at best uncertain that West would have come any closer to entering the ranks of avant-garde writers and artists in Paris had he stayed on for a full year (or two, as he claimed in the 1930s to have done).

Returning from Paris, West soon found himself the night manager of a hotel. In occupation, then, he entered the employment category that Bourdieu defines as "junior administrative executives" and situates near the middle of the lower middle class (17). And West continued exhibiting the kind of pretentiousness he had cultivated at Brown. Chafing at his job at the Kenmore Hall after returning from Paris, for example, West planned several get-rich-quick schemes, some as fraudulent as his earlier altering of his academic transcripts.
(106). And even though he apparently only pursued one such idea to its failure (the creation and marketing of a new candy), this desperate fantasizing no doubt fueled his sense of phoniness. He applied the same strategy to his writing, sending to the little magazine *transition* some lines from Flaubert's *Temptation of St. Anthony* arranged in verse (it was not printed) and to the *Overland Monthly* a story in the tall-tale tradition, "A Barefaced Lie," pieced together, so West said later, from a number of outdoors stories in *Field and Stream*, a magazine he had read faithfully as a boy (this story was accepted) (108). From his college reading of medieval hagiography, inspired by reading Huysmans and Anatole France, West considered writing the biography of the third century saint, St. Pamphile (109). Although not intended as a hoax, West's plan for a "book of popularized short biographies of painters" is similar to the hoax he wrote for the *Overland Monthly* in that it attempted to make use of his cultural self-education by writing for a popular market.

West's cautious, well-armed pretentiousness is also manifested by his reticence to discuss legitimate culture with his peers during this period. After returning from Paris and beginning his job at Kenmore Hall, West began regularly attending the salon-like Sunday teas in the home of George Brounoff, son of Platon Brounoff, a Russian music director and composer who had immigrated to America (114). Martin characterizes these sessions as "seriously intellectual"; the

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14West would use the same strategy in writing *A Cool Million*, splicing together sentences from Horatio Alger novels to create nearly one third of the novel's text.
group, heavily influenced by Spengler, discussed "abstract questions of history and philosophical developments" and attended John Reed Club meetings (114-15).

The group also kept up on and discussed highbrow arts: Dostoevsky and other Russian novelists, modernist plays from Chekov to O'Neill and Ibsen, art exhibitions from Stieglitz's studio to the Museum of Modern Art, and Beethoven directed by Toscanini to Stravinsky (114-16). Here was a group of young men devoted to the most highbrow tastes of their day. Yet, even though West had graduated with a Bachelor of Philosophy from Brown, he apparently was reluctant to participate in the philosophical discussions. And while at times he "turned the discussion" to writers such as Coleridge, Rilke, Mann, Gide, Proust, Pound and Hulme, which "suited... the general intellectual spirit of the gatherings," the Dadaist literature he often brought and the portions of Balso Snell he read to the group were condemned for lacking "seriousness." 15

On the other weekend nights, West was likely to be found with a rather different and looser set of friends--writers and artists in and around Greenwich Village (110). A few were college classmates: S. J. Perelman, working on his first book of humor; Quentin Reynolds, a journalist; I. J. Kapstein, an editor at Knopf (112). And more than a few were well-known and influential writers and intellectuals: Michael Gold, Dashiell Hammett, Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos and E. E. Cummings (113). But West's reticence was even more

15While West seems to have been determined to introduce the group to avant-garde art, it is clear that he discussed only what he felt he was a specialist in--and what was most unfamiliar to his colleagues.
pronounced in this social circle than in the Brounoff group. Kapstein notes that West had an intense and cutting wit but that he was "not particularly articulate"; he did not speak on many subjects, but when he did, it was with "passion" (112). Others remark on West's shyness: he would sometimes stand through an entire party, listening intently on many conversations and participating in none (113). It was as if West worked with great care and caution to speak sparingly and then only passionately about obscure and marginal artists or audaciously about popular but non-modernist writers (such as Dreiser) in order to give the impression he knew "something about everyone writing at the time" and was "extraordinarily dedicat[ed] to the modern movement"--the impression he gave Martin Kamin, owner of one of New York's most avant-garde bookstores (112).

In the summer of 1930, West expressed his lack of confidence in his artistic-intellectual abilities and aptitude to Beatrice Mathieu, The New Yorker's fashion correspondent in Paris. They had met the year before when she was visiting New York, and, under the assumption that they were soon to be engaged, they agreed that she would look for an apartment for West when she returned to Paris while he tried to publish Balso Snell and complete enough of Miss Lonelyhearts to get an advance that would allow him to quit his job at the Kenmore Hall and come to Paris (Martin 117). However, West became quickly discouraged. When Balso Snell was rejected the first time he sent it out to a publisher, he refused to send it out again for a long time, and when he was refused an advance as well as a contract from Clifton Fadiman of Simon and
Schuster for Miss Lonelyhearts, West began to doubt he could ever be a writer (118-19). Bravely applying for a passport, he listed his occupation as "writer" (which he had not done in 1926) but manifested his self-doubt by stating that his purpose for travel was to study. He went so far as to write Mathieu that he would be arriving in Paris before July 18 and to book passage, but he canceled shortly before the ship's departure and expressed his frustration and anxieties in the following letter to Mathieu:

I guess I'm yellow. I was afraid to go out and do... to try and earn a living writing, hacking. I'd rather work in a hotel, and I'm not at all sure that I could hack out enough... I feel like, I guess I am, a phoney... I am afraid that I would have spent my few hundred dollars [for the trip to Paris] without getting anything done. (119-20, ellipses in Martin's text)

West's sense of failure as well as his short-lived flashes of aesthetic bravura (as with the hoaxes, for example), undoubtedly stems from his partly-justified doubts that his auto-didacticism had not been genuinely certified by his higher education in the humanities--from that gnawing sense of phoniness and self-indulgence that belies a genuine commitment to the avant-garde. If West had really earned his degree and genuinely appropriated the high culture dispensed at Brown (even though the avant-garde generally resisted this high culture), he probably would have been more confident in pursuing his own modernist/avant-garde art.

West did make it into the intellectual class eventually (i.e., the dominated fraction of the dominant class), and more specifically, into a fraternity of some of the most important and influential U.S. modernist writers of the time. While
frequenting Brentano's bookstore in the late 1920s, for example, he became acquainted with literati such as William Carlos Williams and Robert McAlmon, and through these friendships edited the short-lived small magazine *Contact* for which he solicited and selected some of the most experimental work being done in the U.S. at the time. He also worked briefly for the satiric small magazine *Americana* whose contributors included George Grosz. In submitting an application for a Guggenheim Fellowship grant to write an intellectual history of his generation of college-educated men, he received recommendations from F. Scott Fitzgerald, Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson and George S. Kaufman. Nonetheless, he arrived and remained on the margins of this class, seemingly ever conscious of his late arrival and ever doubtful of his full membership there. It is not surprising, then, that his first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, adopts an aesthetic strategy that can be interpreted both as a Dandy-ish affectation of pseudo-aristocratic taste and as "well-armed pretension."
CHAPTER 4
BALSO SNELL, MISS LONELYHEARTS, AND CONFLICTING CULTURAL PRETENSIONS

In Chapter 2, the hoaxing that is depicted in The Dream Life of Balso Snell and that also seems to involve the reader (who may well feel that he or she is being dared by West to endure this indulgence in bad taste) was interpreted as a representation of a new cultural and symbolic reality created by the capabilities of mass media technology for mass, serial reproduction of cultural products. This interpretation focused on the novella's use of the superimposition technique, the shifting and doubling of narrative frames and personae, and concluded that the effect of this technique is to question the text's referential status and thus its "aura" as a piece of art. However, in this chapter, Balso Snell will be analyzed against the background of West's personal issues as a young intellectual examined in the preceding chapter and against what is known of the American reception of dadaist and surrealist techniques in the 1920s.

There is no question that the novella is an attempt at dadaist burlesque and black humor, as demonstrated in Chapter 2 above. The novella manifests all of the characteristics Matei Calinescu associates with the avant-garde as distinct both from the high and decadent strains of modernism: "intellectual playfulness,
iconoclasm, cult of unseriousness, mystification, disgraceful practical jokes, deliberately stupid humor" (124). For example, the novella’s debunking of auratic art extends to the paragons of experimental modernism, from Proust to Joyce: by desecrating what American highbrows regarded as some of the greatest contemporary literature, the novella appears to be attacking the cult of the artist rather than the art itself—the feature of modernist art that links it to high art and distinguishes it from the historical avant-garde, the belief modernist writers encouraged "in the transcendent value of their own sophisticated craft" (Naremore and Brantlinger 10). The novella even dramatizes in one scene the function of the avant-garde that Peter Bürger prioritizes in his theory of the European avant-garde movements of the second and third decades of this century, namely, their success in recognizing art as an institution rather than as a sum of autonomous art works: in the theater scene that concludes John Gilson’s aesthetic manifesto, just before the he drops excrement on his audience, the actor steps forward and proclaims that the true avant-garde artist cannot be nourished by the bourgeoisie but must instead "undermin[e] institutions" (30).¹

However, despite its burlesque, scatology and technical superimposition, the novella does not ultimately subvert highbrow taste or even effectively reject

¹Bürger concludes his discussion of this function of the avant-garde with this historical observation:
The historical avant-garde movements were unable to destroy art as an institution; but they did destroy the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity. . . [and] the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones. (87)
the aesthetic disposition of the dominant class, because by the late 1920s, dada was regarded in America as decadent and aestheticist—even by those such as Malcolm Cowley and Matthew Josephson, who had championed dada in the early 1920s for its rebelliousness in the face of high modernism. Cowley, who had been enamored with dada in the early 1920s in Paris, regarded it then as the epitome of the "religion of art" (Exile's Return 148-157). But by the late 1920s, he maintains in his retrospective, this religion of art was seen as an ineffectual route to escape the deadening materialism of American culture (236ff). Josephson, more intimately involved than Cowley with the Paris surrealists, denounced them shortly after returning to the U.S. and adopted a perspective similar to Cowley's. In his retrospective, he refers to dada as the "amusing perturbations" of those just back from their "literary tourism" in Paris (274). The "daring young men" of dada who "amused" him in Paris, he writes, were only "pretending to occupy a Nietzschean high aesthetic ground "'beyond the beautiful and the ugly'" (140). And surrealism he describes as an escapist fantasy (225, 292). The New York Post's announcement of George Jean Nathan's decision to discontinue the American Spectator in 1937 succinctly summarizes the American evaluation of dadaism as decadent aestheticism: "Nihilism, dadaism, smartsetism--they are all gone" (qtd. in Martin 103). How aware of this reception West was is hard to tell, but set against the American reception of dada at the time, the novella's dadaism seems to be an affectation of an aristocratic sensibility.

This is evident from the material chosen to be burlesqued in the novella.
Substantial portions of this material comes less from the symbolist tradition that Jay Martin identifies than from Huysmans and Dostoevsky, two writers with whom West was more familiar than either the French symbolists or the early surrealists he lists in his advertisement for Balso Snell. West did, of course, borrow from the symbolists the concentrated effect of the prose poem, and he alludes to Baudelaire's poem "Anywhere Out of This World" by name both in the novella (Balso considers it as a title for his poem in the first chapter) and in the title of his advertisement, "Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone." More generally, as suggested in Chapter 2 above, West drew on the symbolists' rejection of art as representation or expression in favor of trying to objectify language in art. But it is from Huysmans and Dostoevsky that West derives the particular decadent aesthetic in the novella, an aesthetic that aspires to an elitist, aristocratic sensibility by its display of the grotesquely repulsive.

Parodying Huysmans and Dostoevsky

The aristocratic nature of Huysmans' aestheticizing of the grotesque is embodied in the main character of Against the Grain, Des Esseintes, depicted as

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2 Martin suggests that West as young man in the early 1920s was strongly attracted to a cluster of English, French and American writers who expressed and embodied a symbolist formalism in their work, "aesthetes in the tradition of the nineties or avant-garde writers" (69). Alluding to George Jean Nathan's essay 1927 "The Code of a Critic" in The Mercury, Martin maintains that to the end of his life, West shared, in a less extreme form, both Nathan's commitment to the primacy of style in literature and also something of his skepticism about "world problems". . . . (100) My analysis which follows will bear Martin's assertion out, but it will do so with greater specificity.
the last in a long line of aristocrats, who distinguishes himself not only from the "common," indiscriminate and easily-surfeited tastes of the bourgeoisie, but also from "persons of delicate, refined visual organs, well trained in appreciations of literature and art" (95). He regards himself as one of

the class of persons, of nervous organization and enfeebled vigour, whose sensual appetite craves highly seasoned dishes, men of a hectic, over-stimulated constitution. Their eyes almost invariably hanker after that most irritating and morbid of colours, with its artificial splendours and feverish acrid gleams,--orange. (95)

He seeks not the beautiful, not the most refined, but the most unpleasant of aesthetic experiences. These experiences are often unpleasant precisely because they are so obviously artificial, so "unnatural." They are also unpleasant because, while refined, they are not purely cognitive or abstract. Des Esseintes' aesthetic always accounts for pleasures other than those of the pure gaze which, as he notes in distinguishing himself from those with a trained and "refined visual organ," defines the more traditional highbrow aesthetic. Hence, he is not ashamed to

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3In using the grotesque to express a refined decadence, Huysmans is writing within a centuries-old genre. John Clark points out in his recent study of grotesque satire that the etymology of the word grotesque leads back to the grottos of Nero, with their florid wall paintings that, when discovered, inspired "exotic" and "effete" art styles (18). Given West's extensive use of Huysmans, it is important to review the aesthetic expressed in Against the Grain, Huysmans' most famous and influential work, and the work that models an aesthete's engagement with mass culture.
refer to taste in its most literal sense as a "sensual appetite craving highly seasoned dishes" (95). He is not privileging the bodily pleasures at the (full) expense of the cognitive ones; he is not, in other words, merely reversing the priority, as a lowbrow burlesque might do. Rather, he is manifesting cultural wealth potlatch fashion in showing he can afford, from his secure position, to invest in these gourmet sweets. For example, in describing his taste in nineteenth-century French literature, Des Esseintes praises Baudelaire, the Goncourts and Zola, but, wanting to avoid restricting himself to appreciating writers the dominant taste recognizes as great, he then turns to minor writers:

The subordinate writer of decadence, the writer still individual though incomplete, distills a balm more active, more aperitive, more acid than the author of the same period who is really truly great, really and truly perfect. In his view, it was in their ill-constructed attempts that the most acute exaltations of sensibility were to be seen, the most morbid aberrations of psychology, the most extravagant eccentricities of language pushed to its last refusal to contain, to enclose the effervescent salts of sensations and ideas. (295)

Des Esseintes' obsession with the morbid and eccentric is an exercise of his "naturally" acquired cultural capital. He is secure enough to pronounce as tasteful that which is not regarded so by the dominant, legitimate taste. Taking highbrow taste (which privileges the unpleasant, "acquired" taste over the visceral and accessible tastes) to one extreme, he "enjoys" what is most unpleasant--the diseased and dying. At the same time, what he is enjoying is "sensations and ideas" experienced as "effervescent salts"--again, the reference to literal taste. Further, it is a taste that, because psychological (not to mention pathological), is a taste that stands between the vulgar taste represented by the body and the "pure,"
legitimate taste represented by the soul and mind. It is the taste of madness, with
madness occupying a ground between and beyond the opposition of body and
soul, sensation and reason.

In *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, West parodies Huysmans’ aestheticism
several times by applying its principles to scatological materials. Although the
characters who employ the aesthetic are not the wealthy aristocrats that
Huysmans’ characters are, their results are much the same; the novella’s shabby
aesthetes savor the psychological pleasures of morbidity and aberration. In the
first two scenes of the novella, West burlesques Huysmans’ penchant for Catholic
mysticism. Balso’s opening poem is a paean to the entrance he has just made
into the Trojan Horse, mingling allusions to modernist poetry (Gertrude Stein’s
"Tender Buttons") and Renaissance painting (Giotto) with allusions to Old
Testament prophetic visions. However, it concludes with a religious aestheticism
that climaxes in Huysmans-like grotesquery:

Round and Ringing Full
As the Mouth of a Brimming Goblet
The Rust-Laden Holes
In Our Lord’s Feet.
Entertain the Jew-Driven Nails. (5)

A few pages later, the penchant for hagiography demonstrated in Huysmans’ *En
Route* is burlesqued in the biography of St. Puce the flea, told to Balso by

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4In *Down There* (*Lá-Bas*), the hero Durtal criticizes literary naturalism and
1890s aestheticism as being escapist; he offers as an alternative "primitive
mysticism," exemplified by Medieval painters of gory crucifixion scenes and, with
reservations, by Dostoevsky (7-10).
Maloney the Areopagite. The burlesque begins with Balso finding the mystic trying to crucify himself with thumbtacks and descends into bathos as the mystic luxuriates on the grotesque details of the flea's life in the armpit of Jesus Christ, comparing sounds and sights he finds there, for example, to Bach fugues and the Cossos maze, and concluding with a decadent comparison of the crucified Christ's sun-baked armpit to "the petal-like skin" of an "old actress" (12). Although the religious allusions are absent in the next caricature, Huysmans is mentioned by name. Balso happens upon a Miss McGeeney who tells him of her proposed biography of Samuel Perkins who, emulating Des Esseintes' synesthetic experiments, has built an entire aesthetic based only on his sense of smell, finding the odors of his wife, for example, "a whole world of dreams, seas, roads, forests, textures, colors, flavors, forms" (36).

These are burlesques, of course, but they are burlesques of an aestheticism regarded as decadent, weak and out-moded. West had expressed a keen interest in Huysmans as a college student and, in fact, wrote the St. Puce story while at Brown, in 1923 or 1924. But this interest was already widespread enough among

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5 Several of the mystics Maloney reveres are mentioned in En Route (23). Also, Maloney may be a reference to Jeremiah Mahoney, a classmate of West's at Brown who claims to have been a member of the "Hanseatic League" that West formed (no doubt copying a similarly-named group in Aldous Huxley's classic camp novel, Zuleika Dobson). Mahoney told biographer Jay Martin that the League members comprised a "kind of intellectual elite, perhaps, descending from our ivory tower to sample and reject the cloying sweets of the public fare" (57).

6 He also expressed interest in James Branch Cabell and the "sophisticated" school of writing, as Cowley called it, that attempted to produce an American tradition of highly stylized, mannered writing (After the Genteel Tradition 170).
Ivy League college students to have been documented in F. Scott Fitzgerald's widely-read novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920). In that novel, Huysmans is presented as an author whom young literary men read and then leave behind in their pursuit of a stronger, more vibrant literary tradition. Amory Blaine, in his year or so of aestheticist reading and writing under the tutelage of D'Invilliers, the art-for-arts'-sake devoté, describes his reading of Huysmans and Pater as his most extreme delving into "the misty side streets of literature" (106). When Amory meets Burne Holiday, however, his interest in Huysmans reverses. What Amory sees and admires in Burne is an "intense earnestness" unencumbered by "dread stupidity" and hollow "enthusiasm" (123). As Burne introduces him to the religious writings of William James and Tolstoy and to the poetry of Whitman, Blaine feels that his year of aestheticist reading has grown "stale and futile," that his interest in Catholicism was really an interest in a "gaudy, ritualistic, paradoxical Catholicism," one that Huysmans and his American sycophant Ralph Adams Cram have made "convenient and ready-made" (224-225). In this context, the burlesquing of Huysmans in West's novella betrays an admiration for the material being burlesqued; it belies an attraction to an aristocratic aesthetic that is only anachronistically avant-garde.

More difficult to explain as an expression of a decadent aestheticist taste in *Balso Snell* is the more sympathetic parodying of Dostoevsky, specifically of *Notes*...
from Underground. For Notes is regarded as a seminal literary example of grotesque expressionism rather than of decadence, of existentialist alienation rather than of aestheticism or art-for-art's-sake. In his study of the modern satiric grotesque (a study that cites West's works repeatedly), for example, John Clark explains that Notes from Underground was instrumental in shifting the focus of the grotesque from bizarre and ominous visual imagery to the psychology of the grotto's occupant which dominates that genre in the late nineteenth century and for a good part of the twentieth (20). 7 Beginning roughly with Dostoevsky's underground man, Clark explains, this psychology is that of the alienated man: "modern satire has been especially fond of utilizing the absurdities of perverse gothic underground men entrapped in their entropic universe" (22 emphases added). 8 Clark assumes that the anguish, spitefulness and self-loathing of the underground man represents an honest response to a universal modern condition. Everyone, the underground man exclaims in his conclusion, is a cripple these days, "divorced from life," "still-born" (114-115). And his (anti-)heroism, expressed in the seventh and eighth chapters of Part One (and anticipating the existentialism of Camus and Sartre) consists in refusing to believe that man would act in his best interest if he were only enlightened, and in asserting that there is something in

7 Clark cites one or more of West's novels as examples of four of the six strategies he discusses--"debunking the author," "dislocating the language," "discordant endings" and "infernal repetition"--and two themes--"scatology" and apocalypse (48, 52, 84, 125, 151).

8 In his study of the modern satiric grotesque, Clark cites Notes from Underground more than any other single work (nine times).
man that is stronger than his urge to pursue his advantage, stronger and more important than enlightened but deterministic and restrictive systems of thought, namely, his deliberate choice of what is clearly to his disadvantage (20, 18, 23).

Many of West's readers have assumed that West's second publication, Miss Lonelyhearts, depicts the title character as an anti-hero like Dostoevsky's underground man, responding with anguished irritation at Betty's neatly ordered world as well as at the entropic world of his correspondents and of the products of mass culture (79). They have also assumed that Miss Lonelyhearts is West's own existentialist refusal to concede that the universe is anything but entropic and man's hope for order anything but a "tropism for order" (104). But in Balso Snell, there is none of this philosophical weight (and there is really rather little of it in the subsequent novels as well). Especially as far as the novella is concerned, it is important for understanding West's use of Dostoevsky to note that the underground man's strategy for choosing that which is not advantageous consists primarily of cultivating an aesthetic pleasure in that which is most unpleasant, an enjoyment that consists "precisely in the hyperconsciousness of one's own degradation" (7). "In despair occur the most intense enjoyment, especially when one is very acutely conscious of one's hopeless position," he reiterates (8). Anticipating the decadent aestheticism of Huysmans, the underground man describes his enjoyment as a "certain refinement of enjoyment," a savoring of a strange enjoyment," a peculiar taste, that he manages to wring out of his "hell of unsatisfied desires turned inward" (11 emphases added). To reiterate, this
aestheticization of displeasure, this "substituting an aesthetic scheme for an ethical one," can be read as "the tragedy of modern man," as Ralph Matlaw does in his Introduction to his translation of the Notes (xv-xvi). But while the underground man suggests somewhat bitterly in the conclusion that everyone is beginning to develop a "taste" for their alienation by cultivating fantasies from ready-made fragments of literature, he obviously regards himself as the pioneer of this taste (115). He defines this aesthetic as an anti-aesthetic, a willful and spiteful deviation from the beautiful: "At the very moment when I was most capable of recognizing every refinement of 'all the sublime and beautiful,' . . . I would, as though purposely, not only feel but do such hideous things. . ." (6-7). He says wistfully that he would like to have been a "loafer," an aesthete who could seek out "the sublime and the beautiful in the nastiest, most unquestionable trash," but that this life was a "golden dream" for him, a dream he had to reject (17-18). Yet he describes such a life as leading him into his present life as an underground man, his aestheticism helping him increase the enjoyment of his degradation in much the same way, as we saw above, that Huysmans' Des Esseintes enjoys his minor Latin and medieval writers, his irritating colors and artificial sets. For months at a time, the underground man says, he debauches himself and then holes up in his room, losing himself in reveries and dreams of the "sublime and beautiful," dreams purely artificial, "ready made, violently stolen from the poets and novelists"--and often concluding with scenes of further debauchery (50-51).

Throughout Dostoevsky's novella, the underground man's status as a
cultured, educated person is critical to his enjoyment. For the "sensuality" he derives from his misery, which he compares to a toothache, depends on its being the misery, not of a primitive man, but of an educated man maliciously groaning over the toothache several days after it has begun (14). His fits of aristocratic taste lead him to isolate himself from the clerks he used to work with and make him appear ridiculously affected in the company of his bourgeois friends at a party. When he returns some money borrowed from a friend at the party, he includes with the money a note whose "aristocratic playfulness" he admires, reassuring himself (despite his obvious boorishness the night before at the party) that his note is written by a "cultured and educated man" (95). And upon cruelly badgering Liza to leave after their brief sexual liaison (rationalizing his behavior by arguing that the outrage and hatred she carries away with her will stand her in good stead), he reflects, "for a long time afterward I remained pleased with the phrase about the utility of outrage and hatred, in spite of the fact that I almost fell ill from misery" (114).  

The parodic imitation of Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground in The Dream Life of Balso Snell, then, is not inconsistent with the attraction to the aristocratic, decadent aesthetic demonstrated in the parody of Huysmans. For what is being imitated as much as anything is the aestheticizing of spite and

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9This aestheticizing of irritability is closely related to West’s aestheticizing of freaks, which is discussed in the next chapter below. In an early attempt to explain how he manages to derive pleasure from his degradation, the underground man compares himself to a freak: "I am terribly vain," he says. "I am as suspicious and touchy as a hunchback or a dwarf" (8)
irritation. This aristocratic appreciation of the vulgar and abrasive is articulated most clearly in the Crime Journal of 12-year-old John Gilson that Balso reads shortly after entering the Trojan Horse. The persona of the Crime Journal is "Raskolnikov," who is writing from an insane asylum where is he is imprisoned for committing a murder much like that of his namesake in Crime and Punishment. Like the underground man, he has a hypersensitivity trained upon his degraded state of living: "My mind was full of vague irritations and annoyances. My body was nervous and jumpy. . . . I was a bundle of physical and mental tics. . . . overpowered by the heat, odor, and nastiness of I" (17). Also like the underground man, he seems to enjoy, even cultivate, this degraded state, moving to the off-Broadway theater district because he wants to be miserable:

I could not have lived in a comfortable house. The noises (harsh, grating), the dirt (animal, greasy), the smells (dry sweat, sour mold), permitted me to wallow in my discomfort. (17)

His hypersensitivity, the equivalent of an acute aestheticism, is aggravated in this environment, but like the underground man, Raskolnikov seems to understand that his state of anguish is a manifestation, proof as it were, of his cultural capital, proof he proudly exhibits when he recalls the newspaper headline announcing his murder, "CULTURED FIEND SLAYS DISHWASHER" (16 emphasis added). Hence, though Raskolnikov "wallows" in his own stench, he states that he cannot abide the idiot's vulgarity, so much like his own: the idiot stinks, makes the harsh noise of a toilet flushing when he swallows, and he often laughs hysterically, a laugh Raskolnikov compares to that of bass soloist in the opera Faust he recalls
(and in so doing demonstrates again his highbrow taste) (18). In an ultimate manifestation of this narcissistic aestheticism, he murders the idiot strictly for "literary" reasons; the idiot's laughter, he claims, disturbed his aesthetic "balance" (20). There is nothing therapeutic about this murder, however. At the conclusion of the chapter, Raskolnikov compares the memory of the murder to a grain of sand irritating the oyster of his mind. He pictures the other irritating and vulgar memories surrounding the murder as secretions intended to alleviate the "original irritation" of the murder. But the alleviation leads to further irritation and then to fear that the accumulated irritations will kill him, just as the pearl does the oyster.¹⁰

Again, this is decadent aestheticism posing as avant-gardism; underneath the dadaist technique, there is a Dandy-ish aesthetic working here, an exploiting of the artist's sense of disqualification and distance both from the dominant aesthetic and from the working classes who might genuinely threaten the distinction that the dominant class maintains through aesthetic aura. One can see why Robert McAlmon said that the manuscript of Balso Snell he reviewed was

¹⁰The aesthetic "pleasure" that Raskolnikov derives from the vulgar is demonstrated by the juxtaposition of extreme aestheticism and vulgarity in his execution of the murder. The murder is carried out with the aesthetic (and ascetic) deportment of the Dandy affecting a Greek classicism, although that deportment is constantly undone, as when, for example, Raskolnikov finds himself hacking the idiot's throat instead of cleanly slicing it. The murder is planned simply, without elaboration. The murderer strips naked, ostensibly to avoid creating incriminating evidence, but also to increase his physical excitement, one that soon becomes erotic. Juxtaposing a high- and lowbrow description of his naked body, the narrator says, "I noticed that my genitals were tight and hard, like a dog's, or an archaic Greek statue's" (21).
"too Anatole France" for him (Martin 123).\(^{11}\) This would have been an very odd response to the novella had it been dadaist in the way that movement was received and used in New York in the early 1920s. For as Dickran Tashjian documents in his study of that reception, the anti-art of dada was received as a liberation from European art, not as an attack on the institutionalization of art the European dadaists were combatting. Further, dada was seen as the gateway to greater freedom in use of subject matter; dada gave the few artists who knew about it permission to embrace machinery, "the industrial-urban environment," and communication technologies as legitimate subjects of art (7). But McAlmon recognized in West's allusive, glib and severely-sculpted style the marks of "art literature," which Americans associated with the Europeanized writing of the expatriates (such as McAlmon himself in the 1920s).

West's "parodying" of an increasingly outmoded highbrow, Europeanized tradition in this novella thus betrays an aspiration for writing a work that manifests his own recognition and expression of highbrow taste while at the same time recognizing that the aristocratic source of that highbrow taste is one regarded as fading away into literary history by those Americans such as Robert McAlmon, Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley who, one can safely say, were among the most highly respected tastemakers in the country. The seemingly

\(^{11}\) A decade later, Clifton Fadiman's New Yorker review of The Day of the Locust gave West the back-handed complement of being "about the ablest of our surrealist authors" whose new novel "has all the fascination of a nice bit of phosphorescent decay" (Martin 337-38).
avant-garde features of Balso Snell, that is, are primarily self-conscious affectations of an aristocratic sensibility—affectations very much in keeping with the tradition of the "camp" intellectual, the intellectual plagued by a sense of social impotence and disqualification from the powers accorded the "traditional" intellectual, yet flaunting that impotence and lack of seriousness as a way to make the best of his weak position. He seems to speak autobiographically when he has the narrator of John Gilson's aesthetic manifesto complain that he has had to resort to the "strange conceits" and "peculiar conduct" to compete with the more natural beauty of his rivals (26). The narrator compares himself to a dull and ugly cousin to the Bird of Paradise, having to "exteriorize internal feathers" in order to compete with him. This disadvantaged artist must "convert everything into fantastic entertainment"; he has become obsessed with the "extraordinary" (27). In making this confession part of his novella, West seems to be doing what he is describing: exploiting his knowledge of a narrow, marginal sliver of highbrow art to distinguish himself as belonging, however tenuously, to the artist's fraction of the dominant class.

"Sensitive Yet Hardboiled"

In parodying Huysmans and Dostoevsky, West also depicts characters using taste distinctions to compete with each other socially. That is, the aristocratic aesthetic implicit in the dadaist burlesques of decadence is not only the result of West's clever use of allusion and parody but also the result of distinguishing this aesthetic from two others. Balso Snell represents one taste category from which
the artists in the novella seek to distance themselves: the highbrow commitment to high art (as that category can be distinguished from modernism and avant-gardism). He is caricatured as an aging, reactionary lyric poet with a naive reverence for highbrow culture, a parody of the "traditional" intellectual. But within the world of the novella and in relation to the other characters, he functions as a conservative highbrow. When he encounters the Catholic mystic, Maloney the Areopagite, for example, he listens patiently to the story of St. Puce but then recommends that Maloney not be so "morbid," introspective and bookish (13). Upon reading John Gilson's first manuscript, the Crime Journal, Balso sighs, reflecting that "the world [is] getting to be a difficult place for a lyric poet," and then, anticipating West's own comments on the use of psychology in Miss Lonelyhearts, asks the youngster, "Interesting psychologically, but is it art?" (22-23). Upon reading Gilson's aesthetic manifesto, Balso sighs again and responds again as a highbrow might, blaming Gilson's dadaist irreverence on modern social conditions, from "nineteenth-century science," "the decline of the western world" and "commercialism" to "the wearing of soft hats," "movies" and "tabloids" (31). After awaking from a nap near the end of the novella, Balso finally finds his own voice and begins a review of traditional seduction arguments in an attempt to win over Miss McGeeney. While pedantic, this speech, like Balso's paean upon entering the Trojan Horse at the beginning of the novella, manifests both reverence to and familiarity with classical high culture.

The dadaist-decadent artists, because they seek to be experimental rather
than traditional in their highbrow taste, distinguish themselves from Balso, but
without much animosity. However, the same cannot be said of the more receptive
audiences of the two major artists in the novella: Beagle Darwin and John
Gilson's persona in his "Pamphlet." Beagle, the author of two letters, is depicted
as a young man who, as West himself did, goes to Paris to pursue a career in
avant-garde art; similarly, Gilson is depicted as a young avant-garde, his
"Pamphlet" being an aesthetic manifesto of the kind frequently issued in little
magazines in the 1920s. Both authors are involved in sadistic relationships with
their lovers, Janey and Saniette respectively, who also serve as their audience. A
major reason for the authors' sadism is that these women represent to the artists
the upper-middlebrow cultural consumers that Bourdieu finds most common at
the top end of the lower middle class. Individuals in this class, he suggests, are
vulnerable to misrecognitions of legitimate culture, that is, to what Bourdieu calls
"mistaken identifications and false recognitions which betray the gap between
acknowledgement and knowledge" (318, 323). They believe that recognizing
legitimate taste is important, but they do not have enough education to consume
legitimate art with any real understanding of it. They have much "goodwill"
towards legitimate culture, but that goodwill does not consistently translate into
comprehension; they live "divided between the tastes they incline to and the tastes
they aspire to" (318, 323, 326).

This aptly describes the two female lovers. Both are easily duped into
sexual liaisons with men claiming to be Bohemian poets; the two women alternate
between desiring a sentimental love affair and being "worldly." Janey feels the thrill of "beautiful" love for Balso and pleads with Beagle to let her "make love like a child--tenderly, confidingly, prettily" and to love her "as a mother" (38, 41, 44). She is attracted to Beagle because he is a poet on his way to Paris, the Mecca of the avant-garde, yet she can't bear his left-bank cynicism; and when she tries to act sophisticated, telling him in French of her pregnancy and then contemplating suicide from a second-story window, she fails--falling to her death by sheer clumsiness immediately after deciding she can't go through with her suicide (46). In much the same way, Saniette is portrayed as sentimental--always optimistic and claiming to adhere to a genteel code of love, while enduring the artist's self-proclaimed "sadistic" beatings in order to prove that she is "of the world" (25, 29).

The sadistic response simply symbolizes the need of the artist to maintain his distinction as a member of the (dominated fraction of the) dominant class, to ensure that he does not appear to concede to the taste of those who are less well endowed culturally. This is the same reason for Balso Snell's violent reactions to two of the characters in the novella--the guide who meets him upon entering the Trojan Horse and Miss McGeeney, the biographer of another biographer. In both cases, the characters are displaying a form of middlebrow taste that is less reverent and more pretentious than Balso Snell's. The guide tries to engage Balso in discussing esoteric aesthetic theory. Balso's few and short responses to the guide suggest that Balso is as well-informed as his host, but the guide manages to
bully Balso into trying to please and match wits with him. The guide's conversation and his short story are as pretentious as he is overbearing: he explains that his story is a "tale of my people, full of local color," and his interpretations of his brief allusions to aesthetic pronouncements by famous writers and painters are absurd. He keeps throwing out one quotation after another to impress Balso without having to carry on any sustained, coherent explication of the quotations. Balso tears loose from him with a "violent twist" and flees (9). Later, Balso meets Miss McGeeney, a schoolteacher who is writing a "genial satire on humanity" disguised as a biography for children (32-33). The text as she describes it, however, is neither satire nor children's biography but rather a pedantic description of an aesthete's absurdly over-developed sense of smell, a sense he develops into a Proustian sort of olfactory aesthetics. Like the guide's aesthetic discussion, this one is simply mystification intended, as Miss McGeeney states, for the "discriminating adult" (33). And Balso responds as he did to the guide: he breaks free of her grasp and hits her "a terrific blow in the gut" (36). Both of these characters occupy a social position and perform a cultural role that threatens Balso's position and role as a highbrow artist and

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12 The guide, who claims defensively that he is Jewish, parallels Bourdieu's own caricature of the middlebrow, the practitioner of what Bourdieu calls "cultural goodwill," a caricature derived from Leopold Bloom whom Bourdieu calls Joyce's "Wandering Jew":

Jewish and petit bourgeois, and therefore doubly excluded, doubly anxious to be included, he bows, just in case, to everything which looks as if it might be culture and uncritically venerates the aristocratic traditions of the past. (321-23)
intellectual. For the guide and McGeeney are cultural intermediaries, individuals at the top end of the lower middle class (in terms of cultural capital) who broker highbrow culture for the lower middlebrows. Balso perceives himself as a poet and thus a member of the (dominated fraction of the) dominant class, so he must be vigilant in making distinctions between himself and the individual just below him in the social class hierarchy. The guide and Miss McGeeney represent the fraction of the class just below the upper middle class, where Balso believes his membership is. Hence, when the guide becomes uppity and Miss McGeeney aggressive, Balso reacts with violence to maintain his distinction.

In the closing passage of John Gilson's "Pamphlet," the target of these violent reactions by Balso Snell, John Gilson and Beagle Darwin is clearly identified as the specific fraction of the lower middle class that is comprised primarily of cultural intermediaries. In this passage, the artist in whose voice the pamphlet is written imagines revenging himself on the audience that is the source of his constant irritation. He imagines attracting a group of patrons to a small theater, entertaining them, dumping a ceiling-load of excrement on them, and then offering to discuss the "happening" with them. The narrator describes this "distinct" audience in some detail:

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13Bourdieu places primary school teachers just below cultural intermediaries in terms of cultural capital, but it is obvious that Miss McGeeney belongs in both categories, although her pretentiousness can be nicely explained as the result of her attempt to move up one step in the cultural hierarchy of the lower middle class. Bourdieu places secondary teachers just below the most culturally well endowed fractions of the upper middle class: higher education teachers and artists (17).
smart, sophisticated, sensitive yet hardboiled, art-loving frequenters of the little theatres. . . the discriminating few: art-lovers and book-lovers, school teachers who adore the grass-eating Shaw, sensitive young Jews who adore culture, lending librarians, publisher's assistants, homosexualists and homosexualists' assistants, hard-drinking new[s]paper men, interior decorators, and the writers of advertising copy. (30)

As a group, this audience is outside the significant, culturally well-endowed fractions of the dominant class--the academically-credentialed aesthetic elite; the editors and owners of publishing houses; the literary critics of the big daily newspapers, the large monthlies and weeklies, and the literary monthlies; and the artists these taste brokers of the dominant class help to maintain. The lending librarians and school teachers in the theater audience represent traditional occupations at the top end of the lower middle class where they function as cultural intermediaries, brokering highbrow taste to the lower middle class--the librarians directly, and the teachers through education. The publisher's assistants can be categorized as junior executives, who are usually near the lower end of the lower middle class (where lower middlebrow taste predominates), but the nature of their work, publishing, requires that they have cultural capital approaching that of the upper middlebrows. The journalists, advertising copywriters and interior decorators represent the new upper-middle-class occupations that epitomize for Bourdieu the cultural intermediaries whose taste he defines as well-armed pretension (and to which the declassed members from the upper middle class are attracted, as discussed in Chapter 3).

True to the upper-middlebrow taste typical of this new lower middle class, the theater audience is not overly anxious or serious in its pretension (as those
with lower-middlebrow taste tend to be): it is "smart," "hardboiled," and thus well-equipped to avoid to the more obvious pitfalls of middlebrow taste. But its taste is not truly grounded in the aesthetic disposition that marks the highbrow taste of academics and artists in the dominated fraction of the dominant class. This audience's taste is not only hardboiled but "sensitive"--in other words, malleable, ever adaptable to what aesthetic pose it feels it should have. It is susceptible to flattery because it works hard to maintain its distinction from those with lowbrow taste: the performer imagines flattering his audience's "difference from other theatre-goers" and congratulating them on their "good taste in preferring Art to animal acts." Finally, the audience is vulnerable to misrecognizing legitimate art, a vulnerability the performer exploits by encouraging the audience to discuss his practical joke as if it were serious art.

Three groups in the theater audience are identified by their lifestyle rather than by occupation: the art- and book-lovers, the Jewish adorers of culture (based, undoubtedly, on the Brounoff group with whom West met regularly in these years), and the homosexuals (whom West implies are taste-makers, anticipating Susan Sontag's similar observation in her 1964 "Notes on Camp" essay). These types could easily be classified as highbrow rather than upper-middlebrow, although each group is described by the narrator in a distinctly diminutive way: book-lovers (rather than bibliophiles) suggests a casual or neurotically-obsessive attachment to the physical object rather than to aesthetics; the phrase "sensitive young Jews who adore culture" draws simultaneously on
American suspicions of Semitism and of male effeminacy—as do the terms "homosexualists and homosexuals’ assistants." Including these types in a group of lower-middle-class cultural intermediaries indicates how difficult it is to distinguish the aristocratic taste of the (highbrow) camp intellectual from the well-armed pretension of the upper-middlebrow. But this is obviously a distinction that West wanted to blur. For the same reason, he ultimately attributes the most avant-garde texts in the novella (the Crime Journal, the aesthetic manifesto and Beagle Darwin’s two letters) to a young schoolboy and his teacher: West did not feel confident enough attempting a piece of avant-garde writing without making it possible to be read as a parody of middlebrow pretentiousness. Ironically, then, the kind of pretentiousness that dadaist burlesque targets in the end becomes a strategy to cover West’s own pretensions to highbrow art.

These pretensions are most obvious from the dust-jacket advertising copy West wrote for the novella, copy that implies that West is commodifying dada just as any shrewd upper-middlebrow might ("Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone"). By suggesting that the novella belongs to a sophisticated French tradition of black comedy, the copy seems to be pandering to an audience who enjoys being shocked as much as discovering rare, imported finds in literary boutiques.¹⁴ But what is most important about observing West’s aesthetic

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¹⁴One might also point out that Balso Snell abundantly demonstrates the limitations of dada that many modernist scholars attribute to the movement, namely, that it is too self-conscious, too egotistical, almost adolescent in its narcissism. Matei Calinescu, for example, suggests that the avant-garde works were so "openly ironical and self-ironical—and joyfully self-destructive" that they
strategies in his first published work is that he was extraordinarily sensitive to the social causes and effects of taste judgements. And that sensitivity plays an important role in his next novel, Miss Lonelyhearts.

Alienated Cultural Intermediaries

In Miss Lonelyhearts, the conflicts in taste judgement that are depicted in Balso Snell become focused on the conflicts within the class fraction represented by the sophisticated theater audience in the novella, the class fraction positioned, in terms of cultural capital, on the border between the lower and upper middle class. Shrike, like John Gilson and Beagle Darwin in Balso Snell, consistently works to distinguish himself from the pretentious, upper-middlebrow taste typical of this class. He seems to demonstrate in his set speeches--condensed, cartoonish caricatures of various aesthetic positions--that he is familiar with but critical of the latest and most important highbrow trends in aesthetics. In the longest of these pieces, for example, Shrike quickly and wittily parodies several art trends: two varieties of primitivism (rural and South Seas), an upscale hedonism and a distinctly middlebrow aestheticism (107-109). He prefers the riskier strategy of selecting lowbrow cultural products and granting them aesthetic distinction. This is illustrated early in the novel when Shrike is visited in a bar by a female bookstore clerk and struggling writer. Walking in on one of Shrike’s monologues could easily be recuperated as high art (124-125). Deborah Wyrick, proving Calinescu’s thesis true by assuming no real conflict between dada and high art in her study of West’s collage technique, notes that dada "exalt[s] the personality of the creator" (164).
to Miss Lonelyhearts, Miss Farkis assumes Shrike is discussing the "new thomistic synthesis" and is terribly interested (72-73). Anticipating his fellow journalists' bitterly raw verbal treatment of women writers, Shrike mocks her interest as that of a "fake European" and proceeds to read satirically from a newspaper clipping about a Colorado cult and its use of an adding machine to say prayers for a condemned criminal. Similarly, near the end of the novel, Shrike creates a party game out of the correspondents' letters, "Everyman his own Miss Lonelyhearts" (132ff). Shrike is aware that his writers serve as cultural intermediaries; in fact, his parodies of various dominant aesthetic trends are generally given to Miss Lonelyhearts to incorporate into his columns. However, he can maintain emotional distance from this upper-middlebrow function whereas Miss Lonelyhearts cannot. At the same time, Shrike's parodying and extreme sensitivity to aesthetic distinctions are not devoid of the "'arty' off-handedness" that is characteristic of both the camp intellectual and the upper middlebrows with the greatest cultural endowments. In discussing his relationship with his wife, Mary, bitterness leaks into his voice, piercing for a moment the artifice that the camp intellectual never drops.

But this bitterness is more evident in the writers (other than Miss Lonelyhearts) who work for Shrike. As they soberly criticize Miss Lonelyhearts' use of Huysmans' religious aestheticism (rather than wittily offering another alternative, as Shrike does), for example, they bitterly reflect on their educational experience:
At college, and perhaps for a year afterwards, they had believed in literature, had believed in Beauty and in personal expression as an absolute end. When they lost this belief, they lost everything. Money and fame meant nothing to them. They were not worldly men. (83)

This is not only skepticism; it is also a manifestation of a phenomenon that Bourdieu finds common among those in cultural intermediary occupations such as journalism: "ascetic dispositions and devotion to culture associated with the ambition to pursue by further accumulation of cultural capital, a rise made possible by an initial small accumulation" (351). These journalists' ambition to accumulate cultural capital at the expense of "money and fame" reflects their naive idealism concerning the value of an ascetic, too-earnest aesthetic. And because they are so earnest and naive, they are quickly disillusioned. One might argue, of course, that the narrator makes clear that these men are not ambitious: "Money and fame meant nothing to them," he states (83). But their bitterness at being journalists on a second-rate newspaper, expressed earlier in the same passage by their misogynist jokes about successful women writers, reveals that class status is indeed important to them: they feel they should be members of the (dominated fraction of) the dominant class simply by virtue of their cultural capital. The narrator implies that the dominant class does not appreciate cultural capital--only economic capital or the most convertible of cultural capital ("fame")--but that is not true. These men are not only excluded from the economically well-endowed fraction of the dominant class; they are also excluded from the culturally well-endowed fraction of the dominant class, the fraction comprised of artists and highbrows (intellectuals, editors, publishers, etc.).
Unlike his fellow writers who seem to have come to terms with their social position and have adopted an appropriate mode of aesthetic judgement, Miss Lonelyhearts wrestles with the cultural implications of his new position. His wrestling emphasizes a significant feature of his occupation, namely, that it is socially indeterminate. Although journalism was not exactly a new profession in the 1920s and 30s, writing an advice column was. Further, it resembles traditional journalism less than it does several of the other professions that Bourdieu groups together as socially indeterminate: "marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration" and the helping professions (357-59). Miss Lonelyhearts has renounced the traditional vocation of his minister father for this new, self-made vocation; he is one of the "new priests" of America, as Shrike calls him. As such, Miss Lonelyhearts' occupation is not only indeterminate; it also serves the function of a "cultural intermediary," since he attempts to make his aestheticized religion relevant to his working-class correspondents. Specifically, Miss Lonelyhearts is a participant, however reluctant, in the "cult of personal health and psychological therapy" that, according to Bourdieu, has risen with these new occupations that are positioned, in terms of cultural capital, just below the highbrows in the dominant class (369). Although Miss Lonelyhearts resists Betty's diagnosis of his "problem" as an illness, insisting instead that it is a genuinely spiritual and moral crisis, he is unable in his column to rely on what he calls the "Christ business"; instead, he falls back on self-help therapies. These kinds of therapies, Bourdieu suggests, are the result of the rise of a group of professionals
"whose domestic or educational training predisposed them to play the role of an ethical vanguard" but, for lack of adequate cultural capital, had to "find the substitute for the prestigious positions the labour market refused them, in the interstices between the teaching profession and the medical profession" (369). Miss Lonelyhearts, wanting to play the role of the pastor and prophet, must resort to a substitute role that blends the roles of teacher and therapist--and thus he represents the cultural producer or intermediary within the new lower middle class. The substitute role leads to substitute words and images for real solutions to real problems (365). Take Miss Lonelyhearts' correspondents: "Sick-of-it-all" and Gracie both need abortions and protection from abusive family members; 16-year-old "Desperate" needs plastic surgery to repair the hole in her face; "Broad Shoulders" needs her ex-husband to pay child support; Peter Doyle, a cripple, is ill-suited for a his job which requires a great deal of walking. But, feeling hopeless about their material state, they write for verbal solace. "Desperate" and Peter Doyle, specifically, couch their requests for advice in existential terms, asking Miss Lonelyhearts to explain the significance of their suffering; the others are implicitly asking the same. Also, Miss Lonelyhearts is aware that he is selling mere words--and that thus his job is not significantly different from the job of advertising copywriter that Betty suggests he take up. (Perhaps that is why, at the end of the novel, having reached a state of mind in which he feels he is finally able to serve his correspondents adequately, he has no difficulty telling Betty he will pursue the advertising job.)
Because Miss Lonelyhearts is acutely conscious that his occupation is socially indeterminate and, thanks to Shrike, subordinate within a hierarchy of cultural production, he feels alienated, and this sense of alienation affects his relationship to his correspondents. This alienation is typical of those in these socially indeterminate positions, Bourdieu explains, and it "sometimes provides the basis of an intellectual solidarity with the dominated classes," especially a sympathizing with the "discourses aimed at challenging the cultural order and the hierarchies which the cultural 'hierarchy' aims to maintain" (366). It is an alienation that makes Miss Lonelyhearts feel a certain solidarity with those in the working classes who are more unequivocally dominated than he is and more genuinely antagonistic towards the dominant classes. As Bourdieu argues, however, this sympathy remains at the level of discourse: the intermediaries' disposition, like their other cultural productions, are merely symbolic, for as intermediaries, as channels of upper-middle-class ideology (in Miss Lonelyhearts' case, a religious aestheticism) to the working class, they are performing "manipulative or conservative functions" (366). This aptly describes Miss Lonelyhearts's situation, for he feels alienated because his discourse cannot really engage any of his correspondents' real concerns. He is no different from the cultural intermediaries Bourdieu describes thus:

Obliged to live out the contradiction between their messianic aspirations and the reality of their practice... these "intellectual lackeys" are predisposed to experience with particular intensity the existential mood of a whole intellectual generation, which... seeks in a narcissistic self-absorption the substitute for the hope of changing the social world or even of understanding it. (366)
Aspiring to be a genuine mouthpiece of God and bring genuine assistance to his correspondents, Miss Lonelyhearts is thwarted from the outset by the fact that he is offering symbolic goods for material needs. In response, he retreats further into himself, taking ever longer dream-trips in his room. He sees himself as marginalized, excluded not just from the working class or the dominant class but from all classifications. His bedroom retreats become what Bourdieu calls a "sort of dream of social flying"—a (misconstrued) sense of freedom from all class distinctions, a "desperate effort to defy the gravity of the social field" (370).

Bourdieu points out that this place of social freedom has traditionally been occupied by intellectuals, so what the cultural intermediaries, like Miss Lonelyhearts, are attempting with their "anti-institutional temperament and the concern to escape everything redolent of competitions and hierarchies and classifications" is the "gratification and prestige of the intellectual at the least cost" (370). Bourdieu argues that in trying to make a distinctive place for themselves by being cultural intermediaries, by "making available to almost everyone the distinctive poses, the distinctive games. . . previously reserved for intellectuals," these cultural intermediaries are helping to create the perfect consumer, the consumer who also dreams of flying over "collective memories and expectations" and thus becoming isolated in confronting market forces (371). Hence, the intermediaries' dream of emancipation is simply coopted back into a hierarchy of taste determined by class structure.
This analysis of Miss Lonelyhearts complements rather than contradicts the analyses of this character in Chapters 1 and 2: Miss Lonelyhearts’ experience is mediated both by his social class position and by the nature of his work in the culture industry. However, in sympathetically portraying in Miss Lonelyhearts the dilemmas of a cultural intermediary, West has not ignored his own situation as a "camp" intellectual. Rather, as the next chapter bears out, West's career as a screenwriter in the 1930s seems to have made him aware of the aesthetic strategies of the twentieth-century "camp" intellectual who, finding himself within the (mass) culture industry, shifts from brokering the most rare and exquisite of tastes to brokering the most "wonderfully" bad expressions of taste produced within the culture industry.
CHAPTER 5

THE DAY OF THE LOCUST
AND THE USES OF CAMP SENSIBILITY

In the spring of 1939, as West's last novel was about to be published, he wrote several letters indicating that he still doubted his qualification as a writer of legitimate literary art and as a peer of his fellow intellectuals. He wrote the letters to writers who had befriended him in the 1930s, in part, no doubt, hoping to win from these friends favorable reviews of the new publication. But he was generally discouraged and pessimistic about his work. He complained to Malcolm Cowley, for example, that

the ancient bugaboo of my kind--"why write novels?"--is always before me. I have no particular message for a troubled world (except possibly "beware") and the old standby of "pity and irony" seems like nothing but personal vanity. . . . The art compulsion of ten years ago is all but vanished. . . . (Martin 335)

This confirms that West saw himself as something of a nineteenth-century "camp" intellectual or Dandy--adopting an aesthetic disposition against the dominant taste but now discovering how remote from cultural power that disposition really is (Ross 146-47). Writing at a time when he attended socialist committee meetings and discussed Marx and class conflicts a good deal, West sounds frustrated, even guilty that he is unable to eschew aestheticism and make his writing socially
"responsible," as he felt many of his colleagues were doing:

When not writing a novel . . . I do believe [in progressive, socialist politics] and try to act on that belief. But at the typewriter by myself I can't. I suppose middle-class upbringing, skeptical schooling, etc. are too powerful a burden for me to throw off—certainly not by an act of will alone. (336)

Given the biographical material reviewed in Chapter 3, West is both honest and accurate here when he muses that his novels are conditioned by his social class. West does not dwell on this conditioning, however, nor have literary critics since. Like them, West shifts his attention away from his class origins and onto the "truth" of his writing. In a letter to Jack Conroy written shortly after the one to Cowley cited above, West argues from Marx's favorable comparison of Balzac to the ideologue Eugene Sue that writing truthfully about the middle class produces better literary writing than writing from and for "wish-fulfillment," even if that wish is for a proletarian revolution (Martin 336). He even goes so far as to imply that, like Balzac's, his novels articulate a "superior truth" that can "reveal the structure of middle class society and its defects and even show how it would ultimately be destroyed."

Nonetheless, in his letter to Edmund Wilson, West again betrays some uneasiness about this defense of his novels. For he complains that his work is rejected not only by political radicals who regard his work as "Fascist" at times, but also by the "literature boys" with whom he shares a mutual detestation (presumably publishing house editors like Max Perkins, who cultivated "great" writers like Thomas Wolfe) and by the highbrow press whom, he claims, find that he avoids "the important things": "there is nothing to root for in my books"
(334).\(^1\) It is precisely this kind of pessimism that attracted readers to West in the decades after the war--even more so because West is writing this in the 1930s, refusing to embrace in his writing the progressive politics of leftist writers and intellectuals in the Depression, politics regarded by post-World War II readers as naive if not (in the 1950s) dangerous. However, this ignores the genuine anguish West expresses in his letters over his incapacity (not just his reluctance) to write on the same scale as his fellow intellectuals. To Fitzgerald he complained that upon sitting down to write, "I forget the broad sweep, the big canvas... the important people, the significant ideas, the lessons to be taught..." (Martin 334). To Edmund Wilson he reiterated the same complaint: "The highbrow press finds that I avoid the important things," and to Malcolm Cowley he echoed, "It seems impossible for me to handle any of the 'big things' without seeming to laugh or at least smile" (334-335). West's confession, then, that his "middle-class upbringing" prevents him from throwing off his skepticism about crossing class boundaries to help the working classes is as much an effort to convince himself that he still really does belong in the dominant class as it is a manifestation of his partial exclusion from that class. As Andrew Ross explains in his brief history of intellectuals at that time, they were beginning to see themselves as "responsible" intellectuals--on one hand, sympathizing with the unemployed and working classes, and, on the other, striving to become "universal" intellectuals, unattached and

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\(^1\)He also writes that he was rejected by the middlebrow press as too "shocking," but this is certainly an effect he sought as an avant-garde writer.
classless (215-16). There was even a temporary merging of left-wing and right-wing sentiments among the intellectuals, it appears. So West feels excluded not only from a wide, popular audience but from those fractions of the dominant class--the intellectuals, both "left" and "right"--who are able to maintain membership in that class because of their greater and more wisely invested endowments of cultural capital.

West’s late correspondence suggests that while his personal concerns in securing his class position, so evident in The Dream Life of Balso Snell, seem to have given way in his subsequent novels to larger social concerns, he remained concerned with maintaining or advancing his tenuous membership in the class of "serious" artists and "responsible" intellectuals. A brief examination of West’s uses of popular and mass culture forms in his novels reveals some of the same concerns about class position that have been discussed in the two preceding

2 I use the terms "left" and "right" in the way that Pierre Bourdieu does—as a distinction between intellectuals, all of whom are in the dominant class. Left (or left-wing or left-bank) intellectuals, he notes, tend to prefer contemporary art whereas right (right-wing or right-bank) intellectuals tend to prefer "older, more consecrated works" (292). These two kinds of intellectuals represent "two world views," two philosophies of life": on the one hand, the left intellectual represents "dark thoughts," "avant-garde theater," and the "anti-bourgeois pessimism of people with problems"; on the other hand, the right intellectual represents "rose-colored glasses," "boulevard theater," and "the social optimism of people without problems" (292). Further,

Whereas the "intellectual" fractions expect... from the artist a symbolic challenging of social reality and of the orthodox representation of it in "bourgeois" art, the "bourgeois" fractions expect their artists, their writers, their critics, like their couturiers, jewelers or interior designers, to provide emblems of distinction which are at the same time means of denying social reality. (293)
chapters, concerns created by his tenuous position between, on the one hand, the
new lower middle class and the dominated fraction of the dominant class, and, on
the other hand, between the roles of "responsible" and "camp" intellectual.

Legitimized Representations of Popular Culture

West's decision to incorporate popular culture materials into his novels,
which he began in creating Miss Lonelyhearts and extended to his writing of the
other two novels, is largely consistent with avant-garde strategies of taste. Pierre
Bourdieu argues that the avant-garde defines itself by opposing "all socially
recognized tastes" (294). Consequently, he continues, avant-garde artists
sometimes find themselves sharing "some of the preferences characteristic of
popular taste"--"rehabilitat[ing]," for example, "the most derided forms of popular
taste (kitsch, pop art)" (294). Much of what West does with popular taste, in Miss
Lonelyhearts especially, is indeed to rehabilitate it. However, his rehabilitation is
actually rather conservative and somewhat hesitant, confirming the sense of
disqualification from the "true" avant-garde that is particularly evident in his late
letters, as discussed above.

One example of West's caution in incorporating popular culture forms and
materials into Miss Lonelyhearts is his satiric treatment of the enthusiasm for
popular culture among intellectuals in the 20s--what Rueul Denney, in his survey
of intellectuals' interest in popular culture in the late nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries, has called the "'hot' years of America's discovery of popular
culture" (163). This enthusiasm, Denney explains, was strongly influenced by the
earlier "discovery," largely by the European avant-garde, of "a cultural inheritance of a primary and unique sort [that] had been acquired unconsciously"—engineering, musical reviews, and especially movie-making and jazz (Denney 167, 165). One small group of American writers was for a short time strongly committed to pursuing this discovery in their own art. And West's use of dada in *Balso Snell* suggests that he was probably aware of this group of writers—William Carlos Williams, e. e. cummings, Malcolm Cowley, Hart Crane, Matthew Josephson, Gorham Munson—who had argued, in the early 1920s, under the fleeting influence of dada, that American art needed to exploit the resources of its mass-marketed popular culture.³ For in "Some Notes on Miss L," West states that he originally planned to write the novel "in the form of a comic strip," the very kind of formal experiment encouraged by the small New York group of dadaists (66). He abandoned this idea, however, even though he retained something of the collage effect of comic strips by making each chapter a distinct set piece of often violent images—and even though he explained this decision in an article in a little magazine, *Contempo*, whose readers he probably assumed would be impressed that he at least considered rehabilitating one of the least legitimate forms of popular culture.

In taming his avant-garde ambition to rehabilitate the comic strip genre, West seems to have resorted to parodying the intellectualist response to popular

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³This generalization about the reception of dada is essentially Tashjian Dickran's thesis in *Skyscraper Primitives.*
culture in the 1920s that was less radical than that of the New York dadaists, the response represented by writers such as H. L. Menckens and Gilbert Seldes. For parodying these more widely published intellectuals allowed West to work the popular culture material into his novel without appearing too enthusiastic—an ethos he wished to avoid since the 1920s' enthusiasm for popular culture had waned by the time West was writing the novel in the early 1930s.

Much of the parodying of the 1920s' enthusiasm for popular culture is accomplished through the character of Shrike, in many ways a caricature of H. L. Mencken whose journalism, Denney maintains, not only epitomizes the peak period of intellectual enthusiasm for popular culture in the 1920s but also builds on the work of those who, around the turn of the century, pioneered the intellectual interest in popular culture. Denney suggests that Mencken yearned for an elite as passionately as Henry Adams; he was as much fascinated by the emotional springs of popular religion as William James; he was as contemptuous of status expenditure as Veblen. . . . At the same time, he shared with Variety editor Sime Silverman . . . an understanding of the popular arts as symbolic expressions of social and political values. (168)

It is Shrike who hires Miss Lonelyhearts, for example, exclaiming that "the Miss Lonelyhearts are the priests of twentieth-century America," and who continues to tease and taunt Miss Lonelyhearts about his religious experience in a way that betrays as much fascination as disgust (69). Shrike's disgust momentarily becomes Veblenesque when he mocks the trivializing of mainstream religion as it merges with the commercialism, affluence and conspicuous consumption of the new middle class: "Haven't you ever heard of Shrike's Passion in the Luncheonette, or
the Agony in the Soda Fountain?" he asks his speakeasy audience (74). And
later,

God alone is our escape. The church is our only hope, the First Church of
Christ Dentist, where He is worshiped as Preventer of Decay. The church
whose symbol is the trinity new-style: Father, Son and Wirehaired Fox
Terrier. (110)

The long speech that the above quotation concludes is also typical of Mencken in
that Shrike demonstrates a wide but passing knowledge of European art as he
satirizes Americans' cultish reception of that art--from escapes to the South Sea
(to imitate Gauguin) to an upper-middle-class, Hemingwaysque hedonism ("Golf
as well as booze. . . fornicate[ing] under pictures by Matisse and Picasso") to a
lower-middle-class devotion to the arts ("warming yourself before the flaming tints
of Titian, . . . nourish[ing] yourself with great spiritual foods by listening to the
noble periods of Bach," memorizing "immortal lines" of poetry, impoverished but
proud to attend classical music concerts at Carnegie Hall) (107-109). 4

4West returns to his parodic use of the 1920s' enthusiasm for popular culture
in The Day of the Locust where he imitates the writing of Gilbert Seldes whose
The Seven Lively Arts (1924), Rueul Denney notes, "climaxed this generation's
interest in the popular culture" by essentially selecting and dressing up in the
language of literary history the very things Variety was documenting (167). It is
the scene where Harry is introduced as a forty-year veteran of vaudeville--now, of
course, dying in Hollywood as he tries to land bit parts and peddle his silver
polish (281ff). Harry tells Tod that he once came very close to success as an
actor, and Harry proceeds to read the entire text of an old, laudatory review of his
act from the New York Times, the same review from which he quoted liberally
when he promptly placed an ad in Variety. The review claims that Harry's act is
evidence that "'The comedia del' arte is not dead, but lives on in Brooklyn,'" and
it offers a detailed account of the beating Harry receives from the four muscular
"Lings" in each act (282-83). Randall Reid observes that the review is "done
exactly in the manner of Gilbert Seldes. The blow-by-blow account of slapstick
movies and vaudeville acts. . . was a Seldes specialty" (121). West's immediate
Another way in which West goes about conservatively incorporating popular culture into *Miss Lonelyhearts* is by making use of William James’s study of popular religion in constructing the novel’s main character—and by announcing his use of this source in his brief published "Notes" on the novel: Miss Lonelyhearts’ "case," West states, "is classical and built on all the cases in James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*. . ." (67). West’s claim has been demonstrated by Marcus Smith to be a valid one. Smith points out, for example, that Miss Lonelyhearts’ girlfriend Betty fits James’s definition of the "Healthy Soul" (the person for whom religious experience is an experience of goodness, cheerfulness, optimism, simplistic hope), and that Miss Lonelyhearts typifies James’s "Sick Soul" (the person who has a nearly overwhelming, morbid sense of evil and fear) and a variant of the "Sick Soul," the "Divided Self" (the person who shifts erratically between the experiences of the "Healthy Soul" and the "Sick Soul"). Further, Smith traces Miss Lonelyhearts’ progress towards becoming the "Unified Self," the ideal goal that James sets for the "Sick Soul." But Smith observes that Miss Lonelyhearts’ mystical conversion experience in the last chapter of the novel is not exactly what James describes as the experience of the "Unified Soul." Rather, Smith explains, "Miss Lonelyhearts’ mysticism. . . is fatally mixed with Healthy-Mindedness, or at least one of the most striking features of Healthy-Mindedness, the belief in Mind-Cure" (47). West thus seems to be parodying James’s work on intent, then, is to mock intellectuals’ celebratory enthusiasms for popular culture in the 1920s by suggesting that such enthusiasms were irresponsible and could have negative consequences well into the 1930s.
religious experience, having Miss Lonelyhearts begin as a "Sick Soul" and progress backwards, as it were, to the state of the "Healthy Soul," all the while thinking he is progressing towards the state of the "Unified Soul." But Smith’s interpretation ignores the fact that James expresses deep sympathy for and appreciation of the popular, "Healthy-Minded" religious movements loosely called "Mind-Cure"—and thus the possibility that West is drawing explicitly on James in order to demonstrate his own respectful sympathy for popular culture. Rueul Denney argues that James’s Varieties was the first significant effort by an American intellectual to engage in popular culture studies: "More than anyone else, William James led the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual’s expedition across the railroad tracks to the popular-culture side of town" (157). So by using James’s cases to construct the character of Miss Lonelyhearts, West is giving his treatment of popular culture a great deal of legitimacy, drawing off James’s strong reputation as a distinctly American intellectual, scientist and philosopher.  

There is something of a precedent for this strategy in an essay on the state of American philosophy by Harold Chapman Brown in Civilization in the United States: An Inquiry by Thirty Americans, edited by Harold Stearns and published in 1922. Brown points to James as the first significant American philosopher to engage with science and still remain vitally interested in religion and morality. This James did, Brown writes, by taking people’s every-day experiences—of religion, in Varieties—seriously: "For him, the deepest realities are the personal experiences of individual man" (170). This sentiment, Brown insists, is key to the popular respect according to James’s writings:

In him, each man can find a sympathetic auditor, and words vivid with the language of the street, encouraging his endeavours or at least pointing out the significances of his experiences for the great business of living. (172)

But this same appeal, Brown adds, has resulted in James becoming "the refuge of the mystics and heterodox, the spiritualists and the cranks who seek the sanction of academic scholarship and certified dignity." Brown believes, that is, that
West's use of the *Varieties of Religious Experience* also suggests that he may have been following the lead of fellow intellectuals whose interest in popular culture had shifted away from celebrating and rehabilitating mass media products towards a search for a usable American past, a shift that Rueul Denney locates in the late 1920s and early 30s, when West was writing *Miss Lonelyhearts*. At this time, Denney documents, intellectuals turned to what they perceived as folk art and other art forms which seemed to derive from pre-twentieth-century cultural traditions: religious cults (Gilbert Seldes in *The Stammering Century*), the Natchez Trace pirates (Robert Coates's documentary by that title), American political history (William Carlos Williams in *In the American Grain*), for example. The 1920s enthusiasm for the predominantly urban, mass-produced

James's pioneering intellectual study of popular religion has been distorted and misused by the leaders of contemporary popular religion. One can see Miss Lonelyhearts as one of these "mystics," thinking he has attained the state of the "Unified Soul" when in fact he has simply attained the form of Healthy-Mindedness espoused by Mind-Cure. At the same time, one can see West himself "seek[ing] the sanction" of James's legitimacy by refusing to represent Miss Lonelyhearts' comic delusion satirically. It is in *Varieties*, after all, that James calls mind curism America's "only decidedly original contribution to the systematic philosophy of life" (85). So by leading Miss Lonelyhearts to this "philosophical" state of mind, West is adopting towards popular culture the knowing, sympathetic stance of a legendary American intellectual.

Another manifestation of this interest: there was "casual and even careless" broaching of the question, among critics, in the late 20s that the new audio-visual media could restore oral traditions that preceded "print and mass literacy" (Denney 169). This interest in folk culture was also complemented by a popularizing of cultural anthropology that placed a premium on archetypal patterns--a popularizing due in no small part to two best-selling books: *Mexico* by Stuart Chase and Marian Tyler (1931) and *The Patterns of Culture* by Ruth Benedict (1934). Denney's characterization of this interest is more than amply supported by Warren Susman's exhaustive research on the 1930s. Susman
forms of popular culture, in other words, shifted to a commitment to establish a solidarity with the American "folk," a commitment inspired both by the Depression at home and revolutionary changes in Russia abroad. It is a shift represented by the reviews and short essays of Edmund Wilson, for example, especially in the selections anthologized in his "documentary" of the 1920s and 30s, *The American Earthquake*, which features reviews of popular and highbrow culture in the 1920s section of the collection, and then shifts to reportage and critical essays on politics in the 1930s section. So in using William James's pioneering study of popular religious to structure *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West may well have been trying his hand at what many of his peers were doing, looking for a usable past in order to frame contemporary popular culture as a form of folk culture rather than merely as a manufactured mass culture to be celebrated and rehabilitated. It is certain, at least, that after writing *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West began preparing for his next novel, *A Cool Million*, by reading the novels of Horatio Alger whom he called the "Bullfinch of American fable" (Martin 230). The fascism that the new novel would satirize he also regarded in good anthropological fashion as a "genuine folk movement" (232). And upon

maintains that Americans entered the 1930s not only in search of a "satisfactory American Way of Life," as one might expect in the Great Depression, but also "fascinated by the idea of culture itself" (191). In fact, he suggests that in the 1930s there was a "popular 'discovery' of the concept of culture," a "newly awakened popular interest in anthropological. . . studies" that began in the 1920s and grew in the 1930s (153, 303n4). This in turn, Susman maintains, led to a fascination with "the folk and its culture" (205).

West also consulted nineteenth-century schoolbooks (235).
completing *A Cool Million*, West tried to develop what he believed was a "sure-fire commercial idea for a theatrical revue based on American folk materials" (Martin 247). With some encouragement from producer-director John Houseman, West outlined some of his ideas for a show that would use "American folk songs, dances and legends"--material, however, that would be "authentic," in no way "permitted to deteriorate to the "folksy" or "arty" in a Cape Cod Tea Shop sense" (248). He even told Houseman that he could "keep this sort of thing up forever" (249). But nothing came of West's proposal, which may well explain why his next (and last) novel reflects little interest in rehabilitating popular or folk culture forms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead, in *The Day of the Locust*, West's treatment of popular culture seems to be less a cautious attempt to follow the lead of contemporary avant-garde writers and responsible intellectuals than a cautious attempt to explore and exploit the possibilities for appropriating popular culture represented by contemporary camp intellectuals and taste-makers.

An Emerging Camp Sensibility

In his brief history of the camp intellectual, Andrew Ross explains that, if the late-nineteenth-century camp intellectual was the Dandy who affected the rarified, aristocratic sensibility of decadence, the twentieth-century camp intellectual is the cognoscente of "bad taste" (146-47). The nineteenth-century Dandy was primarily interested in creating or calling attention to modes of self-presentation for other intellectuals--like West attempting in *Balso Snell* to
position himself as an avant-gardiste within the small world of those who read and wrote for the little magazines, self-consciously veiling the outmoded, aristocratic sensibility of a late-nineteenth-century decadent aestheticism with dadaist black humor and collage technique. The twentieth-century camp intellectual, on the other hand, is more concerned with appreciating and in some cases producing mass culture products to be appreciated by a group of cognoscenti that is not limited to intellectuals. In part, this reflects the new situation of the twentieth-century camp intellectual, Ross explains, for he has moved from a rather small circle of fellow intellectuals, usually (especially in Europe) clustered around highbrow theater (one thinks of Oscar Wilde), to a position in the business of mass-marketed culture. Such a position is exactly what West found himself moving into in the 1930s. West thus follows the route Ross outlines for the camp intellectual's transformation from the nineteenth-century Dandy to the twentieth-century taste-maker, taking up temporary, then permanent employment as a screenwriter in Hollywood and thus becoming part of "an institution... within the popular entertainment industries" (147).

This position presented West with the opportunity unique to "camp" intellectuals, according to Ross, namely to be a "representative or stand-in for [the aristocratic] class that was no longer in a position to exercise its power to define official culture" (Ross 147). That is, becoming a scriptwriter in Hollywood put

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8While there are a few highbrow novelists regarded as camp in the pre-World War II decades (Ronald Firbank in England and Carl Van Vechten in America, for example), camp primarily came to be associated with movie stars and, later,
West in the position to maintain the nineteenth-century camp intellectual's parodic critique of the properly educated and responsibly situated intellectual who speaks with the requisite tone of moral authority and seriousness as the conscience and consciousness of society as a whole. (147)

From his late letters, discussed above, it seems that West was a bit too anguished about his perceived disqualification as a "properly educated and responsibly situated intellectual" to assume comfortably a "parodic critique" of that position; that is, while he was certainly in the position to write as a camp intellectual, he did so only in a limited way, as the analysis of The Day of the Locust below will bear out. Yet, it obviously had an appeal for him. Perhaps West saw this as an avant-garde strategy that Bourdieu characterizes as trying to "rehabilitate, but at a second degree, the most derided forms of popular taste (kitsch, pop art)" (294 emphasis added). Perhaps West wanted to experiment with the strategy of a writer and intellectual who, like Susan Sontag, discovers camp for a reading audience in order to negotiate for himself as an avant-garde writer a way to appropriate popular culture and yet maintain his distinction as a broker of taste in the dominated fraction of the dominant class--a distinction West may not feel is made clearly enough if the camp sensibility is sanctioned in the novel. In short, West may represent a camp sensibility in the novel to elicit an egalitarian pathos and at the same time maintain an aristocratic ethos--that is, to appear sympathetic to and understanding of the masses (as his fellow writers were unabashedly directors.
attempting to do) and yet to maintain enough distance from the cultural
disposition of the working and lower middle classes to feel secure of his own
status in the dominant class. But before considering West’s purpose in using the
sensibility, it is important to understand how West may have become acquainted
with it and how it is actually used in the novel.

West’s understanding of camp no doubt owes much to his employment in
Hollywood, and The Day of the Locust is the only novel West wrote after having
spent several years writing scripts for various studios. But if, as Ross suggests, the
twentieth-century camp sensibility has its roots in the decadent aestheticism of the
late-nineteenth-century Dandy, one should be able to see West’s camp sensibility
emerging out of the decadent aestheticist sensibility that informs Balso Snell.
And, in fact, this is the case.

As suggested in Chapter 4 above, Miss Lonelyhearts shares many of the
tastes and habits that Huysmans gives his character Des Esseintes, the epitome of
the decadent aesthete. Miss Lonelyhearts uses his retreats to his grotto to attain
an appreciation for the correspondents whose letters so irritate him. And at the
end of the novel, his mystical union with God can be interpreted as the
achievement of an aesthetic appreciation of his correspondents’ grotesque,
irritating suffering. Miss Lonelyhearts’ mystical/aesthetic state of mind, however,
not only parallels Huysmans’ classic decadent sensibility but also the sensibility
that Susan Sontag began to articulate in the 1960s as "camp." One begins to see
this latter parallel in Sontag’s comparison of West’s work to the photography of
Diane Arbus ("America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly," in On Photography). Sontag suggests in her essay that Arbus and West, both raised in cultured, upper-middle-class Jewish families, took interest in deformity as a way to simulate adversity—in short, to slum. Arbus explains the appeal of deformity this way, in her remarks collected posthumously in Aperture Monograph:

Freaks... was one of the first things I photographed and it had a terrific kind of excitement for me.... Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocratic. (3 emphasis added)

Arbus uses the word aristocratic here to mean the distinction of those who, by the very fact of their birth, have acquired something that others have to earn and prove. The fact that Arbus is discussing the experience of trauma here rather than property or power is beside the point. She is making the kind of distinction that Pierre Bourdieu believes lies at the heart of the notion of "legitimate" culture, the set of choices or tastes that distinguish the classes with the highest education, income and status from the others (6, 16). For legitimate taste is aristocratic because it is "essentialist," Bourdieu asserts; aristocrats regard "existence as an emanation of essence," not as the sum of things they do or don't do (24). Bourdieu applies this definition to the "titles" conferred by educational institutions, especially those titles intended to guarantee the graduate his or her possession of "general culture" (rather than merely technical expertise in a narrow field of applied knowledge) (23-25). Without such a title, Bourdieu observes, "holders of educationally uncertified cultural capital can always be required to
prove themselves, because they are only what they do" (23). On the other hand, those whose academic titles certify that they possess some "general" culture "only have to be what they are"; they only have to fulfill what it is assumed they already are; their cultural choices, in other words, "derive their value from their authors."9

Freaks, Arbus observes, using a metaphor from education, have already "passed their test"; they have already experienced trauma and, presumably, can regard it with calmness and distance and poise. This poise is basically the "aesthetic disposition" that Bourdieu regards as the fundamental quality of the "essence" that cultural aristocrats believe they have (28-30). The aesthetic disposition that comprises aristocratic taste, the insistence on the "absolute primacy of form over function," is often demonstrated by claiming that beautiful art can be made of something meaningless, or "ugly and repulsive"--the very kind of claim made by the decadent aesthetes, who, as explained in Chapter 5 above, consciously pursued an aristocratic lifestyle (30, 35). Hence, what Arbus is projecting onto the freaks is an aesthetic disposition, one that resembles the late-nineteenth-century decadents but also demonstrates the twentieth-century camp connoisseur's ability, as Sontag explains it, to "confront the horrible with equanimity" (41). In a manner parallel to the decadent aesthete who culls

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9Bourdieu does not believe, however, that the "entitlement effect" of an academic degree is solely a function of the education system; that would be meritocracy, not aristocracy. Rather, he claims, academic capital is in fact the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school (the efficiency of which depends on the amount of cultural capital directly inherited from the family). (23)
through long-forgotten art in order to derive exquisite pleasure, Arbus as camp connoisseur brazenly challenges herself and those who view her photographs to face horror "without squeamishness" (40). Viewing the freaks, in person or in the photographs, becomes a "self-willed test of hardness" (40). Unlike the moral satirist who uses freaks and misfits as a way to subvert the bourgeois ethic of success, Arbus uses them as a way to excite herself, to defeat boredom (42). Ultimately, this sensibility is aristocratic because, as Sontag notes, it is "based on distance, on privilege" (34)--on the "distance from necessity" that Bourdieu also considers essential to aristocratic taste (53-56).

One can now see the camp sensibility expressed in the character of Miss Lonelyhearts, for Sontag's phrase "a self-willed test of hardness" aptly describes his attempts to steel himself against the suffering of his correspondents by aestheticizing it. These attempts are also camp in that they involve Miss Lonelyhearts reconciling himself to homoeroticism, especially in his relationship to the crippled Peter Doyle, depicted in three scenes. In the first, Miss Lonelyhearts grasps Doyle's hand to show his Christ-like empathy for the man's story of his difficult life as a cripple. As Doyle struggles to articulate his troubles, Miss Lonelyhearts observes the excited play of the man's hands "dart[ing] in and out of his clothing" (124). The sexual implication of this movement is confirmed when Miss Lonelyhearts accidently touches Doyle's "damp hand" under the table at which they are seated, jerks his hand away (presumably because he is revulsed),
and then "[drives] his hand back and force[s] it to clasp the cripple's" (126). The second exchange between Miss Lonelyhearts and Doyle takes place in the Doyles' apartment where Peter's canine antics (a defensive response to his wife's anger) include opening Miss Lonelyhearts' zipper just as he begins to deliver his message from Christ. Miss Lonelyhearts' failure to endure this homoerotic gesture without flinching (as it were) is thus linked to his failure to make genuine contact with these representatives of mass culture's consumers. In the closing scene of the novel, of course, Miss Lonelyhearts fatally embraces Doyle as the cripple enters the room to shoot him. Freudian critics have pointed out the homoerotic character of this clasp, but from a camp perspective, the clasp signifies that Miss Lonelyhearts is finally able to withstand the repugnance of homoeroticism without squeamishness. It is no coincidence that Miss Lonelyhearts' mystical experience, the climax of his bedroom retreats, leads to his embracing in homoerotic fashion the personification of mass culture. For both the mystical experience and the embrace are part of the camp intellectual's sensibility: having achieved the equipoise of the nineteenth-century decadent aesthete in his mystical experience, Miss Lonelyhearts can play the role of the twentieth-century camp intellectual by embracing mass culture in a moment of homoerotic camp.

The camp dimension of West's treatment of homosexuality in Miss

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10 Doyle's nervous use of his hands, and Homer Simpson's as well, are probably conscious allusions to Sherwood Anderson's story of the gay Wing Biddlebaum in "Hands," published in Anderson's "Book of Grotesques," Winesburg, Ohio. Randall Reid compares Homer and Biddlebaum but makes no mention of Biddlebaum's homosexuality (139-145).
Lonelyhearts is anticipated in The Dream Life of Balso Snell. In the latter, of course (and somewhat in the former), homosexuality is one of many representations of "deviant" sexual behavior, such as sadism and masochism, the intent of which is in part to offend both middle- and high-brow taste. But in the Crime Journal section of Balso Snell, West briefly depicts a scene of explicit gay camping that suggests he had at least a nascent awareness of what would only later become known as a "camp" sensibility. The Raskolnikov character who narrates the Journal first describes killing, in auto-erotic fashion, an idiot whose distinctly feminine hysteria arouses in him a sense of aesthetic "imbalance." His balance restored, the decadent aesthete feels himself transform into a young girl and then briefly and unsuccessfully "camps" for a group of sailors. West's use of the word camping to denote gay posturing--grotesque to the ignorati, seductive to the cognoscenti--is remarkable because the word was just beginning to be used in print with this connotation. How familiar West was with the gay subculture of New York is not known, but as one of the first writers in English to use the word camp this way in print, West obviously intended this scene to suggest an insider's knowledge of the gay scene in the Village. In short, his depiction of this camping

11Leslie Fiedler suggests this in "The Death of the Avant-garde" (Cross the Border). In his study of highbrow and avant-garde uses of the grotesque, John Clark calls decadence and homosexuality two of the "hyena-forms of extremity" (13).

12The OED, 1972 Supplement, indicates that the first published use of the term as meaning "to use exaggerated movements, gestures, etc., to over-act" is in a Broadway review publication in 1931; the review is of a show featuring gay characters.
scene is itself a kind of camping on West’s part.

West depicts this kind of gay camping at least once in each of his following three novels. *Miss Lonelyhearts* features the character of the "clean old man" with cane, gloves and "elaborate manners" who "goes soft" in the arms of Gates and Miss Lonelyhearts and giggles like a girl (86). Of course, because this takes place long before Miss Lonelyhearts achieves the mystical-aesthetic experience that makes possible his homoerotic embrace of the personification of mass culture, he reacts angrily towards the "clean old man" whom he imagines to be the representative of his correspondents, "the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent" (88). In *A Cool Million*, a customer in Wu Fong’s brothel is depicted lisping and mincing as he begins to seduce Lemuel Pitkin, appropriately dressed in a sailor’s suit (207). Since West calls attention twice in the novel to the elaborately executed bad taste of the brothel’s interior decor (as he does in *The Day of the Locust* to the "monstrous" taste expressed in the architecture and interior decor of Hollywood homes), this display of camp within the brothel perhaps suggests that West is trying to display an appreciation of "good" bad taste. In *The Day of the Locust*, Adore Loomis (the boy whose mother shuttles him from one audition to the next) and the unnamed female impersonator at the Cinderella Bar each croon pseudo-seductively for their respective audiences, suggesting that camp forms an important part of the entertainment that Hollywood generates within and for itself (rather than for its mass audiences).
These examples of camping are actually a sub-form of the "high camp" sensibility that Susan Sontag outlines in her "Notes on Camp," for the latter is meant to be witty and sophisticated rather than earnest, seductive or openly gay. Christopher Isherwood's definition of camp in The World in the Evening, which Sontag narrows considerably but does not really contest, relies on this opposition of "high camp" to "low camp." The gay physician, Charles, offers the first published definition of modern ("high") camp: "expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance," distinguishing this from the "utterly debased form" of camping epitomized by a "swishy little boy with peroxided hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich" (110). As isolated narrative elements, the camping scenes in West's novels are clearly examples of "low" rather than of "high" camp. However, these examples of "low" camp alert us to other evidence of a camp sensibility in West's novels, especially evidence of what Mark Booth calls "off-stage theatricality," a principal feature of the twentieth-century camp aesthetic (23).

The notion of "off-stage theatricality" overlaps the notion of serial reproduction discussed in Chapter 2. Both notions focus one's attention onto the reproduced image or object or gesture rather than onto the original or genuine image or object or gesture ostensibly being reproduced. (Perhaps this overlap explains why, as Andrew Ross suggests above, intellectuals with a camp sensibility gravitated to Hollywood in this century: off-stage theatricality may seem familiar to professionals working in the mechanical reproduction industry.) But in
addition to suggesting West's understanding of the impact of technology on the
culture of his time, the examples of "off-stage theatricality" in West's novels
suggest his understanding of an aesthetic used to wield power within the social
dynamics of that culture.

The visual nature of West's style provides the setting for his camp sensibility. Randall Reid notes that West's verbal representations of the bold, grotesque caricatures of James Ensor and George Grosz in Miss Lonelyhearts have the effect of stylizing the novel's setting "into stage sets"; the world of the novel is "as artificial and as sharply bounded as a picture in a frame" and as a theatrical stage (89-91, 93). As with the sets, so with the characters, many of whom (in all of West's novels) are depicted as bad actors who have no solid identity behind their artifices; they are merely the sum of their caricatured imitations, their exaggerated gestures. John Gilson works to make his theatrical performances "spectacular" and "odd" (27). Beagle Darwin, performing for his friends at Cafe Carcas, tries to emulate the antic madness of the tragic Hamlet but, even worse than Prufrock, bungles it, begins again, tries unsuccessfully to feel profound love or tragedy, and concludes by juggling cliches from Catholic mysticism as he passes out. Shrike is described as a dead-pan comedian from the silent films whose elaborate gestures contrast with his blank face. Harry Greener can no longer distinguish between expressions of his "real" emotions or sensations

13Josephine Herbst, in "Hunter of Doves," was the first to suggest that West drew on Ensor's paintings (313).
and his vaudeville acting.

Precisely because these performances are so bad, so cliched, they retain a certain stylishness that is an important feature of the camp sensibility.\footnote{In his study of the grotesque in modernist literature, John Clark suggests that this is an important element of the tradition of the grotesque. In tracing the sources of the anti-heroic sensibility, which he maintains is "the quintessential ingredient of [modern grotesque] satire's caustic grin and grimace," Clark discusses the Greek Cynics with their "overt shamelessness and audacity" exemplified by Diogenes' insults, both verbal and physical, and by the farcical treatment of their "hero" Hercules (35, 29-33). In describing the Cynics' adoption of Hercules as their anti-hero, Clark stresses the "masterful flare for the actor's pose and the melodramatic gesture" that "succeeded in undermining traditional culture and religion with their own avatar" (33). He is suggesting here that the Cynics, although as brutish and anarchic as their canine appellation indicates, retained something of the Dandy's concern for appearance: "Beyond all such ugliness, tatters, and noise persists a serene and cynical regard for stylishness and attention-getting mannerism" (34). (Clark may very well be thinking of camp as he writes this, even though he does not mention it by name, for he compares the Cynics to the counterculture of "beatnik" and the "hippie," contemporaries of camp as Sontag immortalized it [33].)} It is the "strongly exaggerated" behavior that Sontag identifies in the camp icons of film and that Mark Booth, in his exhaustive history of camp, identifies as the most prominent manifestation of camp: self-presentation characterized by the affected use of stereotyped roles; "public preening... almost always undercut by the person's lack of commendable features" (Sontag 279; Booth 18, 87ff). But if a camp sensibility is suggested by the male actors throughout West's fiction, it is epitomized by two characters in West's last novel: the would-be film star, Faye Greener, and the successful screenwriter, Claude Este.\footnote{Faye's performance is anticipated in the small scene in Miss Lonelyhearts where Mary Shrike abandons herself to the role of a Spanish dancer upon entering the El Gaucho club.}
Camp Icon, Camp Cognoscente

Film stars of the 30s and 40s hold a special place in the canon of camp, of course. For the glamour, wealth, exhibitionism and personality cultism of Hollywood is the form of early twentieth-century cultural production most resembling the self-presentation of the dandy. Sontag finds in the movie stars of this period some of the best examples of the "relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms" which distinguish camp self-presentation, examples that range from "the corny flamboyant femaleness" of actresses like Jayne Mansfield and Jane Russell to the more sophisticated and self-absorbed mannerisms of Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck and Mae West (279-81). Faye's fantasized theatricality is not as consistently "extreme and irresponsible" as Sontag feels good camp fantasies should be (284). There are breaks in her off-stage theatricality, especially moments of guilt and remorse to which a camp personality never condescends. For example, her guilt over torturing her father makes her vulnerable to Mrs. Johnson's insistence that she order an expensive funeral for her father. Also, after maliciously baiting Homer in the Cinderella Bar, she suddenly blushes at her behavior and tries to be nice by sweet-talking the bewildered man. However, these breaks are brief and temporary. And Faye is only a movie extra, whereas the camp icons Sontag cites are stars--Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis--and thus have far greater opportunities to develop their personalities. In the "half world" West creates for Faye, she clearly demonstrates the persistent use of exaggerated theatrical
gestures that is the basis of a camp personality, what Sontag calls the "proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive" (283).

Just how exaggerated her gestures are is made clear when the narrator has Homer Simpson--the most dull-witted and unobservant character in the novel--notice that her elaborate gestures were "so completely meaningless, almost formal, that she seemed a dancer rather than an affected actress" (304). Her gestures, however, do indicate how passionate she is about her theatricality, as artificial as it is. This passion is directed at herself, or rather, at a certain affectation of herself. She tells Homer, upon first meeting him, "I'm an actress. My mother was also an actress, a dancer. The theatre is in our blood" (309). She is exaggerating again, of course, imitating what she has read in screen magazines, but the attention she gives to her tiny part in a silent film earlier in the novel, the seriousness with which she makes Homer her agent, and the intensity with which she tries to impress screenwriter Claude Estee all demonstrate that her affectation is not something she turns on and off. Even though she has had little success in Hollywood and has no reasonable prospects of future success, she pursues her role of a movie star relentlessly. This passion demonstrates her naivete about the film industry, of course--or rather, her immersion in its manufactured fantasies, fantasies that she herself "manufactures" almost daily (315ff). Her naivete and fantasy are not tinged with pretension or the kind of aspiration to great art that is characteristic of kitsch. Tod senses that she has "almost enough" critical ability to "recognize the ridiculous" in her story-making--just enough, that is, to know that
her method won't get the "best results" and yet not be embarrassed by that method (317).

When Sontag writes of the "proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive," she is insisting that there be a certain innocence and completeness about the artificiality of camp performance. Almost midway through the novel, the narrator describes Tod's appreciation of Faye's performance in precisely those terms:

If Harry were asleep or there were visitors, Faye usually invited Tod into her room for a talk. His interest in her grew despite the things she said and he continued to find her very exciting. Had any other girl been so affected, he would have thought her intolerable. Faye's affectations, however, were so completely artificial that he found them charming. (316 emphasis added)

The completeness of Faye's amateurish artifice is illustrated in two other scenes in the novel. In the first, the setting is around a campfire in a dusty canyon just outside Hollywood (332-33). Miguel and Earle have just fixed and served a dinner of quail Miguel has trapped, and Faye eats "heartily" in spite of her "squeamishness" at seeing and hearing the birds prepared. Forgetting that she is here because her boyfriend, Earle, cannot afford to take her to a restaurant, ignoring the desolation of the setting and the desperation of her three male companions, Faye begins to feel excited. It is as if she is recreating the scene as part of an exotic adventure film, and when Miguel begins singing in Spanish, Faye

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16Tod makes Faye even more "charming" by imagining her, not unlike camp icon Marlene Dietrich in The Blue Angel, as a seductive performer against a backdrop of "perspiring stagehands and the wires that hold up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangles of paper flowers" (316).
finds herself dancing a rhumba with him in the dust. They become so engrossed in their performance that Earle's loud banging on the skillet, his whooping, and his attempt to join the dancing with his "crude hoe-down" cannot penetrate the "smooth glass wall" surrounding the couple. As in the performance of the female impersonator at the Cinderella Bar that Tod visits with Faye and Homer later in the novel, this otherwise "awkward and obscene" performance is transformed by the narrator into a moment of purely stylized movement.

In a similar scene near the end of the novel (the party that Faye and Homer host for Tod, Abe, Claude, Miguel and Earle who have gathered for a cockfight), Faye offers another "off-stage" theatrical performance so exaggerated that it takes on a life of its own. Trying to impress screenwriter Claude Estee with her knowledge of the movie industry, Faye relies on the same "charming" strategy that Tod observed her using in creating her story ideas for new movies: she draws on "bits of badly understood advice from the trade papers," pieces of information from fan magazines and rumors about the "activities of screen stars and executives" to produce a monologue in which "possibilities bec[o]me probabilities and w[̂i]nd up as inevitabilities" (386). She also uses an elaborate set of meaningless gestures that the narrator regards as "almost pure" because they have no connection to her speech. Like little Adore Loomis in his command performance of "Mama doan wan' no peas," Faye's gestures are remarkable to the narrator precisely because they are purely artificial, disconnected from any conscious attempt to represent something, to mean anything (370).
The violence evoked by these moments of "pure form," the threat of danger that always tinges Faye's naiveté, is also expressive of a camp sensibility--specifically, expressive of one of two complementary features of camp icons, features embodied in the archetypes of the girlish innocence of a Shirley Temple and the predatory Vampishness of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo (Booth 126-139). One sees this amalgam in Tod's introductory description of her "swordlike" legs juxtaposed by her "platinum" hair gathered girlishly with a blue ribbon tied with a little bow on the top of her head. Also, in her first meeting

17 Leslie Fiedler first identified this combination, calling Faye the "most memorable and terrible woman in an American novel of the 30's," a "fitting climax" to the series of female characters in novels by Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Anita Loos that shaped a new image of Woman (Love and Death in the American Novel 325). This image, he suggests, is an amalgamation of "America's Sweetheart and the vampire"--the bleached blonde. Fiedler's larger argument is that West's "neo-gothic" fiction, which blended nineteenth-century American gothic writing with 1920s European avant-garde techniques--especially surrealism and German Expressionism--was particularly appropriate for "capturing the quality of experience in a mass society" (489).

18 In this passage, Tod also describes Faye as an angular structure: she is tall, with wide, straight shoulders and a long, "columnar" neck--a skyscraper, he notes later (270-271). The camp significance of this description is suggested by a parallel description in Karl Huysmans' Against the Grain, that key document of the decadent aesthetic out of which camp evolved. Des Esseintes appreciates the steam locomotive, a "living, yet artificial organism that is every whit [Nature's] match from the point of view of plastic beauty" (104). One locomotive he describes as

a fair and fascinating blonde, the perfection of whose charms is almost terrifying when, stiffening her muscles of steel, pouring the sweat of steam down her hot flanks, she sets revolving the puissant circle of her elegant wheels and darts forth a living thing at the head of the fast express or racing seaside special! (105).
The other, a "dark-browed brunette," is just as powerful, "with thick-set loins, panoplied in armour-plating of sheet iron."
with Homer, Faye is dressed "like a child of twelve in a white cotton dress with a blue sailor collar" that shows off her "dainty, arched ribs and little, dimpled belly" (304). Yet, before long, this inviting softness gives way to a hard-edged viciousness. She insults her ill father, baiting him into a rage that she then silences by hitting him, "swinging her hand as though it were a hammer" (306).  

This is the Vamp side of Faye's personality. Coming out of the predatory female of Gothic fiction, the Vamp, even more so than the "traditional woman," is a marginalized figure and thus appealing to the camp sensibility. Further, the nineteenth-century fiction of the male vampire--Count Dracula--blends the aristocratic taste of an aesthete with the danger of murder (like Huysmans' Des Esseintes, Count Dracula is the last survivor of an aristocratic family), the mixture similar to that used by Wilde in The Picture of Dorian Gray. As popularized in film by Marlene Dietrich in The Blue Angel, the Vamp is not just a sexual predator; she is a cultural one, too, making the staid professor--the traditional intellectual and guardian of bourgeois culture--a slave, yet remaining outside the dominant culture by remaining essentially a gypsy performer, moving from one shabby beerhall to another. This certainly constitutes some of Faye's appeal for Tod. Early in the novel, he notes:

Her invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to

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19 In Chapter 1, this violence was interpreted as a manifestation of the sadism that Adorno argues is evoked by the culture industry. As such, Faye's behavior is one example of sadism among many in the novel. In the context of her characterization as a camp icon, however, Faye's sadism is a manifestation of the "bitchiness" often associated with those icons.
murder than to love. If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper. (271)

And this observation foreshadows the violence and sense of danger that surrounds Faye in the rest of the novel. Homer, attracted to her beauty, vitality and long legs upon first meeting her, nonetheless cannot bring himself to pull her off her father whom she is beating into silence: "She was so naked under her skimpy dress" (307). And immediately his fear is given some justification: she hits Harry square in the mouth to silence him. Later, Faye's dancing with Miguel in the canyon prompts Earle Shoope to hit him from behind with a skillet; similarly, her performance for the men in Homer's house after the cockfight results in a brawl. This violence, like the latent violence he observes in the Midwesterners, excites Tod. But the excitement has more than the psychological motivation discussed in Chapter 1. It is also the excitement of identifying and appreciating a personality as camp. It is an aesthete's excitement, the same excitement evoked by the antics of the campy Adore Loomis, who ends up touching off the riot that concludes the novel.20

Casting Faye in the role as a camp icon also helps explain her vulnerability to male predators throughout the novel, a vulnerability that otherwise seems to belie her own predatory nature. Survival is a key motivation of camp strategy, Mark Booth suggests in summing up his study of the psychology of camp behavior. Behind camp, he states, is "the idea of making the best of a bad job, of

20He strikes Homer with a stone; Homer then beats him, inciting the riot.
turning disadvantages into advantages. It seems, ironically enough, that camp is a form of pragmatism" (116). For Faye, the camp icon's complementary roles of Sweetheart and Vamp are necessary for survival. She has come to Hollywood to act, but, without sufficient skills, she seems doomed to the fate of her friend Mary Dove, who works in Mrs. Jenning's brothel to support herself between bit acting jobs. In order to survive without becoming that sort of victim, Faye must work her seductive charms on men like Tod and Homer, who are willing to spend money on her, while avoiding the threat both men pose to her artificial personality--Tod through rape and Homer through a suffocating live-in relationship.

As many characteristics of a camp icon that Faye may manifest, however, the camp sensibility is largely a function of the eye of the cognoscente who is able to derive a moment of pure stylization from an otherwise poor and exaggerated performance. Tod's musing that Faye's artificiality is so complete that it is "charming" certainly clues the reader to a camp perspective. But the perspective of the cognoscente's gaze is really embodied in the character of Claude Estee, the successful screenwriter whose self-conscious pretentiousness and sophisticated appreciation of Hollywood's most stylish masquerades epitomize the aesthetics of the twentieth-century camp intellectual in Hollywood. Claude is camping when he is first introduced in the novel, welcoming Tod to his party. Although, as Tod observes, he has the "rubbed features and stooped shoulders of a postal clerk," Claude is dressed "elaborately" as a refined gentleman (272). His mansion
replicates a southern estate, and when Tod arrives, Claude acts the part of the corpulent Southern plantation owner, swaying on his heels and thrusting out his belly" (271). At first, Tod views Claude as an upscale version of the "masqueraders" Tod has been observing on Vine Street. However, unlike the masqueraders whom Tod assumes are unaware of the tastelessness of their kitsch clothes and houses but whom he pities because their "need for beauty and romance" seems so great, Claude is fully conscious of the incongruity of his masquerade. His "desire to startle" is not "eager and guileless" as is the desire of the masqueraders whom Tod pities (262). As he greets Tod on the front porch, for example, Claude yells to his butler, "Here, you black rascal! A mint julep," and an Asian servant promptly arrives with a Scotch and soda (272). This kind of joking also lies behind his wife's placing of the rubber replica of a dead black horse in his pool. Mrs. Schwartzen explains to Tod that someone had casually commented at an earlier party that the pool "needed a dead horse at the bottom, so Alice [Estee] got one. Don't you think it looks cute?" (274).

Claude's role as a camp intellectual is not limited to his flair for tasteful clothes, tongue-in-cheek pretentiousness and extravagantly grotesque practical jokes. In his role as tastemaker, Claude grants the quasi-legitimacy of camp to the performance of an ex-silent movie star, Mrs. Jennings, and the movie she shows at her brothel. As he describes the brothel to Tod, admiring it as a "triumph of industrial design," Claude also admires the way Mrs. Jennings--forced into retirement by the talkies--poses as the aristocratic patron of avant-garde art,
insisting on conversing with her clients about "Gertrude Stein and Juan Gris" (276, 278). One can "never find a flaw in her refinement or make a breach in her culture," Claude explains. As the cognoscente, Claude points out with amusement that her refinement disappoints many of her "sportsmen," even though they are genuinely impressed with her elegant building and exclusive chauffeur service. Unlike himself, these ignorati are unable to appreciate the thoroughness of her pose, her offstage theatricality, as it were. Claude understands that the pose is packaging, but he appreciates its design as a design, as pure style; he is amused rather than disappointed that in her posing she is able to keep the functionalism of her design subordinate to the design itself. Claude’s camp appreciation of Mrs. Jenning’s chic taste is confirmed by the purpose for which he brings his party of men and women to the brothel in the first place—to watch a pornographic movie for amusement. This is the amusement of decadent camp—a combination of 1890s decadence and early twentieth-century slumming. The film is shown, appropriately enough, in a drawing room decorated in the rose, gray and violet that recalls the mauve decade, America’s version of the yellow decade of Wilde and Beardsley. The film is imported from France and "utterly charming," according to Mrs. Jenning. And while waiting for the film to begin, Mrs. Schwartzen begins stamping her feet impatiently; the party follows suit, imitating (in good slumming fashion) "a rowdy audience in the days of the nickelodeon" and finally staging a "mock riot" when the film jams (279).
Tod walks out of this scene, creating the impression on the reader that these are the decadents of Hollywood, carrying on while the barbarians are at the gates. Later in the novel, Tod surveys the junked sets and props in the back lots and imagines them as the "painters of Decay and Mystery" would imagine them (352). Tod, obviously, cannot commit himself to a camp sensibility, and the reason seems to be that he is committed to a decadent aesthetic. But how is one to interpret this? On one hand, one can see it as aesthetically regressive, or at least conservative: Tod is too obsessed with the aristocratic distinction of decadent European aestheticism to embrace the new aristocratic sensibility of twentieth-century camp. This obsession might even suggest that Tod remains in the role as a lower-middle-class cultural intermediary, his disengagement from Claude Estee's camp perspective a manifestation of his subordinate social status, and his grasping of a decadent vision a manifestation of the attraction of such cultural intermediaries to what Bourdieu calls "naively aristocratic qualities," an attraction that betrays the tension and strained affectation that lies behind their attempts to appear liberated from lower-middlebrow taste. If so, this distancing from the camp sensibility may be yet another example of West's caution in "rehabilitating" popular culture--similar, that is, to his decision not to create Miss Lonelyhearts as a comic strip novel and at the same time use William James's Varieties of Religious Experience to lend legitimacy to that novel's treatment of popular religious discourse.

On the other hand, Tod's decadent vision, which closes out the novel,
might indicate that West has returned to the decadent aesthetic he first developed in *Balso Snell*, but perhaps now with an understanding of the historical connection between decadence and mass culture. Patrick Brantlinger, in a recent collection of essays by cultural historians on the fin-de-siècle legacy, explains the connection this way:

the new "age of the masses" was also the era of the Decadent movement and the first l'art pour l'art modernisms. Mass culture and its apparent opposite, the artistic avant-garde, were the symbiotic corollaries of advanced capitalism between the 1880s and 1914. (98)

Further, he notes that the attempt by aggressive decadents like Wilde and Jarry to resist the middlebrow taste of commercial journalism merely took "the form of the very thing it deplored" and that the "obverse of Wilde's and Jarry's épater le bourgeois stance"--"the aesthete's adoption of the glitter of high fashion and a rarified consumerism" embodied by Huysmans’ Des Esseintes--is no less complicitous with the logic of consumption that requires an untiring search for the new (107). This complicity, other Marxist critics have suggested, is a manifestation of the aestheticization of civil society at the turn of the century, the result of a shift from a production-oriented capitalism to a consumer-oriented capitalism (which is another way of describing what Benjamin and Baudrillard explain as a shift in cultural orientation from production to reproduction, as was discussed in Chapter 2) (Eagleton 373).

Since West expressed an interest in decadent literature early and maintained that interest throughout the 1920s and up through the publication of
The Dream Life of Balso Snell, it is possible that in the 1930s, as he began to write explicitly from and about mass culture, he gave his main characters (Miss Lonelyhearts and Tod Hackett) decadent sensibilities in order to incorporate the critique of mass cultural aestheticizing into the very form of his narratives. In an often-quoted passage in The Day of the Locust, West has Tod Hackett observe the effect that the mass media have had on their primary consumers, the lower-middle class—titillating and surfeiting their grossest appetites, leaving them ill-equipped to enjoy their leisure time, making them "sophisticates" (115, 411-412).

From Jay Martin's summary of a speech West delivered at the Western Writers Congress in November of 1936, it appears that Tod's observation here expresses West's own attitude towards Hollywood: the speech, "Makers of Mass Neurosis," took the position that "Hollywood movies mislead and corrupt their public" (347). But West's choice of the word sophisticate in this passage of the novel places his earlier condemnation of Hollywood into historical context, drawing an analogy between the bored and restless Hollywood tourists (who represent the consumers of mass culture) and the decadent nineteenth-century dandies who affected boredom as a sign of their superior taste. Critic Randall Reid points out that West is implying here that the "psychology of decadence" made fascinating by Baudelaire and Huysmans has become a "mass phenomenon," with Hollywood's

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21 There is a similar, much-quoted, but also much shorter passage in Miss Lonelyhearts: observing a cityscape, the title character reflects that newspapers, cheap romances and movies have robbed the urbanite of genuinely therapeutic dreams and ideals (115).
streets "full of dandies with cheap, mail-order clothing and manufactured dreams" (135). But West may also have understood, given his strong interest in decadent literature and art as a young man, that the "psychology" of decadent aestheticism in the late nineteenth century was already a part of the "psychology" of mass culture.

From this perspective, Tod's ultimate refusal to adopt a camp sensibility suggests that he feels responsible for the victims of the culture industry: witness his concern for and guilt about Homer Simpson. As such, West may be expressing through Tod his realization that the camp approach to appropriating popular culture is, at bottom, exploitative. That is, while recognizing the appeal of camp to one in his position as an up-and-coming screenwriter (i.e., to one in the position of a camp intellectual), West may have also recognized that camp is a taste acquired and brokered at the expense of those for whom kitsch is not really a choice but a choice of the necessary.
CONCLUSION

The significance of the analyses of West's novels in the first two chapters of this study is not difficult to assess. West's novels have long appealed to readers because of the novels' insightful and balanced critique of mass culture. So showing that the novels' critiques share elements both with Adorno's pessimistic, psychoanalytic critique of the authoritarian effects of the culture industry and with Benjamin's somewhat more optimistic critique of the symbolic effects of mass media technology helps explain this appeal while drawing largely on theories that were contemporary with West. Further, by recognizing, first, that Adorno's and Benjamin's critiques of mass culture were informed by their personal attraction to two very different literary movements, Adorno to (high modernist) expressionism and Benjamin to (avant-garde) surrealism, and, second, that these two movements strongly influenced West's writing, the analyses in these first two chapters at least begin to take into account the aesthetic issues involved in the novels' critiques.

The significance of the analyses in the last three chapters, however, is more difficult to assess. The purpose for shifting the analysis from the novels' critical representations of mass culture to the ways in which the novels reflect and take part in the kind of social class conflicts that are played out with taste judgements is to integrate into this one study the interpretation of cultural forms (which is
what is done in the first two chapters, where the commodified forms of mass
culture are critically engaged with the modernist and avant-garde forms that
comprise West's novels) and the analysis of class formations. This integration has
been urged by Michael Denning as a way to get beyond the opposing ways in
which cultural critics have tended to study mass or popular culture, either by
interpreting cultural texts (as Fredric Jameson does, for example) or by
historicizing class formations (as Stuart Hall does) (254-55). Consequently, by
analyzing West's work from the perspective of his social class position and
concerns, these last three chapters attempt to set the novels' mass culture critique
in the context of what Denning calls the "social construction of cultural values"
(260). That is, these last three chapters seek to go beyond seeing the novels as
complex interactions of different kinds of monolithic cultural forms, expressions or
commodities to seeing them (also) as symbolic tools of engagement in class
conflicts.

This portion of the study succeeds in two ways, I believe. First, it helps
situate the characters in West's novels within a complex of social relations rather
than merely in relation to mass culture. Miss Lonelyhearts, for example, is not
merely suffering from the psychological effects of his work in the culture industry;
he is also experiencing the conflicts of his position (as a cultural intermediary)
within a specific social class formation: the culturally well-endowed fraction of the
lower middle class. Second, these last three chapters help explain the nagging
irritation many of West's readers have expressed at the seeming disingenuousness
of the narrative voice in the novels, the sense that West is frequently posturing in parody of himself. Understanding West's social position and aesthetic strategies as a "camp" intellectual may help in making judgements about West's place in the canon of American modernists, but it does not alleviate this irritation. In fact, it may exacerbate it. For in pursuing Bourdieu's sociological approach to the study of culture, we read West's texts as "markers in a symbolic class conflict" (Denning 262). But reading texts this way, Denning warns, puts one in danger of emptying them of content. That is, one's analysis can become a kind of perpetual or reflexive debunking, mimicking West's own reflexive debunking. Perhaps that is the risk of reading West.
WORKS CITED


VITA

I, Stephen P. Johnson, graduated from Trinity College, Deerfield, Illinois, in May, 1982, with a B.A. in English. In 1985, I was accepted into the Graduate Program of the English Department of English, School of Arts and Sciences, Loyola University of Chicago, and was granted a Graduate Assistantship. After completing the required course work, passing the Department's examination and carrying out the teaching responsibilities of the Assistantship, I was granted the M.A. degree in May, 1987. In 1988, I completed the course work for the Ph.D. degree in the Department of English, Loyola University of Chicago, while, again, serving as a Graduate Assistant to the Department, teaching and assisting in research. Upon successfully passing the comprehensive examination for the Ph.D. degree in May, 1989, I was granted a Teaching Fellowship by Loyola University for the 1989-1990 academic year. While teaching that year, I began work on my dissertation under the direction of Dr. Paul Jay. In the fall semesters of 1987, 1988 and 1989, I taught in and then directed the Writing Workshop Program of Loyola University School of Law.

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The dissertation "Mass Culture and Class Distinctions in the Novels of Nathanael West" submitted by Stephen P. Johnson has been read and approved by the following committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation, and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the content and form of the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee.

The dissertation is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Department of English.

Date 12/7/63  Director's Signature