

The Problem of Language in *Miss Lonelyhearts*

Almost halfway through his story *Miss Lonelyhearts* gets sick. His sickness is essentially spiritual—he is, the chapter title says, “in the Dismal Swamp”—and it has been brought on by his job. His girl friend, Betty, brings him some hot soup and advice: quit, try another line of work. He tells her that quitting would not help much because he would still remember the letters. She does not understand, so he offers her an explanation of unusual length and formality:

Perhaps I can make you understand. Let's start from the beginning. A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he's tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator.¹

Here he stops, satisfied it seems that there is no more to say. Betty still does not understand, to no one's surprise, but we do: *Miss Lonelyhearts* cannot answer the letters because he has found that his values do not, cannot, justify genuine suffering, including his own. (For he is suffering too, languishing in the dismal swamp.) Hence he is the victim of the joke: the advice-giver is himself sick-of-it-all, in desperate need of advice.

He does not say what his values are (or were), but he does not really need to. He has found them, he implies, not just wanting, but false. His crisis then is intensely personal, because *he* has been false, and still is. He no longer claims a proper name, and he wears at all times his workaday non de plume, a women's at that. But not only is he no lady, he cannot fulfill the requirements, as he construes them, that his pseudonym entails. He has become a misnomer. In one sense, though, the name suits him: he is as lonely a heart as any of his correspondents. Accordingly, the only

identity he feels entitled to is the same one they assume, the victim. Better any identity than none, we might say, but not so. For he has come to doubt all values and therefore the value of suffering itself. If it has no value, neither does the role of victim. One simply suffers, that's all, without upshot or significance, the butt of a joke.

What makes the joke *bad* is the fact, as Miss Lonelyhearts sees it, that the suffering his correspondents express is genuine. Others have agreed. In his review of the novel, for instance, William Carlos Williams protested, "The letters which West uses freely and at length must be authentic. I can't believe anything else. The unsuspected world they reveal is beyond ordinary thought." Thirty some years later Randall Reid said the same thing: "They [the letters] have the vividness and the unarguable reality of a revelation."² Both statements, cueing off Miss Lonelyhearts, couple authenticity and revelation. The letters reveal a reality that is unarguable. They are, like revelation, their own evidence. Upon seeing them one believes them, if not instantaneously, like Williams, then slowly, gradually like Miss Lonelyhearts. Their truth, in other words, is not a matter of fact, but an article of faith, and no one has questioned it. I think we should, just as I think that, deep down, Miss Lonelyhearts himself does. At issue is a central concern, the nature of language, both as a theme and as the medium of West's novel.

Miss Lonelyhearts deals primarily not with people, but with letters, with various orders and disorders of words. In his personal relations he is not engaged in dialogue, the language of spontaneous give and take, nearly so much as he is confronted with speeches, with words as deliberately composed as those of the letters, if not more so.³ Notably, in the two days (and chapters) before he beds himself in the dismal swamp, he hears two speeches, one by Mary Shrike, then one by Fay Doyle, that amount to letters in the flesh. "People like Mary were unable to do without such tales. They told them because they wanted to talk about something besides clothing or business or the movies, because they wanted to talk about something poetic" (p. 199). Like Mary like Fay: they simply have different poetics. Understandably Miss Lonelyhearts listens to neither. They reveal a reality, unarguably, but it is hardly one of genuine suffering, much less of profound humility. Instead they betray mere attitudes struck, postures assumed, poses wantonly displayed, a comic pornography of suffering and trouble. If they express anything authentic—though it is doubtful that these women give a fig about authenticity—it is a desire for suffering, for indisputable reality, personal significance. And if they are to be pitied, it is because they do not, perhaps cannot, suffer.

That is, they have nothing really to speak of, Mary and Fay. Their words merely fill in their blanks. And what is true of them may also—

since West's characters are consistently thin—be true of the others, of Betty, of Desperate, of Broad Shoulders, of Shrike, of Miss Lonelyhearts himself.⁴ For that reason, if no other, Shrike can burlesque the letters, the expressions of undeserved, unmitigated suffering, just as effectively as he can parody the conventional formulae of value, of the life worth living:

This one is a jim-dandy. A young boy wants a violin. It looks simple; all you have to do is get the kid one. But then you discover that he has dictated the letter to his little sister. He is paralyzed and can't even feed himself. He has a toy violin and hugs it to his chest, imitating the sound of playing with his mouth. How pathetic! However, one can learn much from this parable. Label the boy Labor, the violin Capital, and so on . . . (p. 240)

So you buy a farm and walk behind your horse's moist behind, no collar or tie, plowing your broad swift acres. As you turn up the rich black soil, the wind carries the smell of pine and dung across the fields and the rhythm of an old, old work enters your soul. To this rhythm, you sow and weep and chivy your kine, not kin or kind, between the pregnant rows of corn and taters. (p. 212)

Shrike can handle them with equal facility because he insists that they bear the same message, and that it is their only message: the human race is a poet that writes the eccentric propositions of its fate, and propositions, fate, the race itself amount only to so much noisy breath, hot air, flatulence.

Miss Lonelyhearts reluctantly suspects as much. That is why he can find no sincere answers, why he can take nothing he says or thinks seriously, why he lacks the courage of his clichés, why he converts even an original formulation immediately into a cliché.⁵ "Man has a tropism for order," he thinks to himself; "The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against Nature . . . the battle of the centuries." A capital "N" no less. Four sentences later he dismisses it for good: "All order is doomed, yet the battle is worthwhile" (p. 209). No wonder then that only a little while later he casts his explanation to Betty in the third person—it accommodates exactly his ironic self-consciousness, the distance between what he wants to believe and what he suspects. No wonder as well that his explanation sounds like another speech, one that he has often rehearsed to himself; it is so pat, so articulate, the cool, collected rhetoric of desperation, of futile resolves, private last-stands. For if he can only bring himself to believe what he says, that the suffering is genuine, he may yet hope to believe that it can be justified. That is, faith, once succumbed to,

may wax and multiply like irony succumbed to. But the "if" is difficult; it requires breaking the force of irony, which is considerable. Not only can it move mountains, it can annihilate them. And people, too.

Irony is not always humorous, but humor is always ironic. And the letters in the book are humorous.

I am in such pain I dont know what to do sometimes I think I will kill myself my kidneys hurt so much. . . . I was operatored on twice and my husband promised no more children on the doctors advice as he said I might die but when I got back from the hospital he broke his promise and now I am going to have a baby and I don't think I can stand it my kidneys hurt so much. (p. 170)

The writers have had nothing to do with the terrible turns their fates have taken—they are innocent—and neither they nor anyone else can do a thing about their difficulties. Their problems are, by their own terms, insoluble; they themselves are, by their own accounts, schmiels with Weltschmerz; "I don't know what to do," concludes Sick-of-it-all (p. 170). "Ought I commit suicide?" queries Desperate (p. 171). "What is the whole stinking business for?" muses Peter Doyle (p. 232). They are actually seeking confirmation, not advice; they want someone else to see them as they see themselves. Also, the letters are all graced by the common touch, illiteracy. The writers seem sublimely unaware that their words, like double agents, constantly betray them. "But he [Broad Shoulders' boarder] tries to make me bad and as there is nobody in the house when he comes home drunk on Saturday night I dont know what to do but so far I didnt let him" (p. 226). Betrayal is revelation, but of a fundamentally ambiguous sort: we cannot say whether the words of the letters misrepresent or faithfully execute their authors as they really are. Either way, though, they are funny. The slip of the tongue, Freudian or otherwise, reliably gets a laugh.

Miss Lonelyhearts, however, no longer finds the letters funny because he assumes they are authentic. Genuine suffering, he tells Betty, is no joke. This difference between his response and ours gets us at last into the troubled heart of the novel. Suffering is not funny, certainly, but it has been since Eden, no less than vanity and folly, the very stuff of humor. Pathos, too, of course, and tragedy, but we pay for the loss of Paradise with laughter as well as tears, and comedy is one of the more common forms of man's inhumanity to man. But nothing is more human, for we are considering one application of our capacity for abstraction, our ability to translate instances of suffering and pain into symbol systems that go absurdly awry. Humor is a function of symbolic consciousness. It involves the displacement if not the annihilation of persons, their particular reality,

by words, a particular scheme of concepts. The unnamed perpetrator of the joke is language, like West's, for example, when he describes the letters as all alike, "stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife" (p. 169). Just as West's words undercut the letters, so the letters' words displace their writers: "it dont pay to be inocent and is only a big disapointment" (p. 170). Miss Lonelyhearts no longer finds the letters funny because he refuses to consent to this displacement, to bless this annihilation with a laugh. He looks over or through their words to their writers, as he imagines them: profoundly humble, genuinely suffering, terribly real.

But Shrike recognizes a laugh when he sees one, and Miss Lonelyhearts knows it. That is why he has to insist that the letters are not funny: they are not because in truth they are, and that, in his opinion, is wrong, all wrong. For it is not just the letters—he doesn't find anything funny. He will not be a party to humor per se, and therefore, consistently enough, he tries to leave the premises of language altogether, in violence, in women's flesh, in a rural retreat, and in a hand-holding soul-session in a speakeasy.

His expeditions fail, hardly to his surprise, because in them he only finds himself engaged face-to-face with more words on the loose. Sometimes they are spoken, sometimes they are enacted, but they are always there, inescapable.⁶ "With the return of self-consciousness, he knew that only violence could make him supple" (p. 183). Spiritually speaking, I take it. His violence serves a metaphysical cause self-consciously conceived.⁷ Instead of delivering him from language into whatever—say reality—it necessarily forces him into obeisance to language. For language is its maker. He works over the clean old man for his story, the dubious words of his life—"Yes, I know, your tale is a sad one. Tell it, damn you, tell it" (p. 191)—and sees him at last as the embodiment of his correspondents, his letters. Mary gives him a little of her body to tell him all of her tale; Fay uses her story as a pretext for sex, but she also uses sex as a pretext for her story. Betty believes in a *Sunset* version of *Walden*, and for a while Miss Lonelyhearts is able to relax in her belief, but when they get back to the city he realizes that "he had begun to think himself a faker and a fool" (p. 220). So he is back in language again, and not at all sure that he ever really left it. Like violence, his session of silence with Doyle serves a metaphysical purpose self-consciously forced to its crisis: "He . . . drove his hand back and forced it to clasp the cripple's . . . pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage" (p. 232). This may be a flight of the alone to the alone, but the wings are words, words like "love" and "communion," like "together" and "alone." His only real hope, then, as he has seen it all along, is Christ, appropriately enough.

Let us go back to the dismal swamp. "He was thinking of how Shrike had accelerated his sickness by teaching him to handle his one escape, Christ, with a thick glove of words" (p. 212). Shrike does not get his entire due: he has taught Miss Lonelyhearts to handle everything with a thick glove of words, to suspect that there may be nothing really for the glove to handle, nothing for it to do but make figures of itself, or that the glove, like a magician's white one, renders whatever reality it handles null and void. Genuine magic, though, not legerdemain. Destructive force. The word "escape," in this context, usually means a flight from reality to some more tenable opposite. In Miss Lonelyhearts' case, however, it seems to mean a flight from words in and of themselves to that only (as he sees it) which can redeem them, put them in their proper place—a flight from the terrible logic of Shrike to the Logos itself, Christ, the Word made flesh. The Word informs flesh, flesh substantiates the Word: reality then carries a life-time guarantee, its value insured by language. Then tropes can become unironic Truth, victims can become martyrs, and Paradise, that place of complete integration, can be regained.⁸

Or so a Christian might have it: not an escape, like Tahiti, the soil, hedonism, or art, but a redemption. West's script, however, follows the Christian's with a thumb on its nose and its fingers sadly crossed.⁹ Peter Doyle's letter moves Miss Lonelyhearts to holding hands. Later, though, Doyle's hearthside demeanor bankrupts the credibility of his prose, so much that Miss Lonelyhearts takes himself to bed. This time, however, instead of languishing in despair, he becomes the rock. In that metaphor of the Church he has finally, he solipsistically thinks, found himself. "The rock was a solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, his self-knowledge" (p. 245). Thus solidified, though, he feels nothing, and nothing (except the rock) seems real. Betty is a party dress to whom he can say anything without deliberately lying because there is no one to lie to and nothing to lie about. "He could have planned anything. A castle in Spain and love on a balcony or a pirate trip and love on a tropical island" (p. 245). He has changed the game from show-and-tell to play-pretend. As a preliminary to his union with Christ he seems to have gained himself by renouncing words and the world, as he had apparently hoped. But he has actually done nothing of the sort: Miss Lonelyhearts, a pseudonym, has merely become a metaphor, the rock, in a world that was never his.

Up to this point he has always been afraid of Christ. "As a boy in his father's church, he had discovered that something stirred in him when he shouted the name of Christ, something secret and enormously powerful" (p. 179). Later he construes this thing in clinical terms, as hysteria, though he wishes he could believe that it is more than that, that it is actual divinity. Whatever it actually is, his fear is the traditional one of self-

relinquishment, of letting go. But now that he has such a definitive sense of self—a rock is definite, if nothing else—he is ironically no longer afraid, and silently shouting the name Christ to himself, he gives himself up and over and has his union. “Christ is life and light” (p. 245). He is also love and Miss Lonelyhearts’ new feature editor (p. 246).

He is, in other words, yet another metaphor, a whole string of them—not the Word, but a word, signifying neither more nor less than any other. Nothing is redeemed, least of all language. Doyle arrives, bad poetry on a field rampant. He has come in the name of secular romantic love to avenge Miss Lonelyhearts’ alleged insult to his wife’s honor. The allegation is hers, of course, and it is as false as her honor, as her husband’s love, as his mission’s motive. Miss Lonelyhearts sees him as a sign and, mistaking his warning for a humble plea, goes in the name of divine love to perform a literal miracle, to save Doyle, to save all his correspondents in Doyle’s figure, just as he had sought to hurt them all in the figure of the clean old man. Doyle loses heart, so to speak, and tries to flee. Betty, the idle figure of Miss Lonelyhearts’ secular fancy, blunders in. Doyle’s gun accidentally goes off, and Miss Lonelyhearts meets his end at last, not as martyr, but as unwitting victim, and not as victim of “reality” but of a symbol system gone absurdly awry—of a joke, if you will—because there is no other way for it to go. There is no truth for Miss Lonelyhearts, only words.¹⁰

It may seem then that Shrike has the last word. All we really have, all we really are, says Shrike, is words, but he does not stop there. There is no cause for grief, he consistently implies, only occasion for jokes. Jokes are his form of prophecy, and they are self-fulfilling. Their form is their content, for their only point is the perfect pointlessness of it all. Nothing is wrong because nothing ever was or could be right. Nothing really matters, not even the fact that nothing really matters. This second step, though, Shrike follows by choice, not of logical necessity. He pronounces “truth” only in order to evade it, to protect himself from pain. Between nothing and grief he will take nothing, not because it is true, finally, but because it is easier.

But while Shrike may take this second step for the sake of comfort, one could argue that the novel takes it of necessity. In open concord with Shrike, it depicts language as radically false, a fundamentally misleading order of being, or nonbeing, as the case may be. Yet the novel is itself a form of language. It would seem then that either the theme must render the form futile, a design of dumb noise, or the form must render the theme gratuitous. But if the theme is gratuitous, the form is perforce futile: it is predicated on counterfeit, a phony issue. Either way (or both ways?) the

novel would amount to a display in negation, like the self-dismantling sculpture of Tinguely, like the jokes of Shrike. But Shrike is good only for a laugh, whereas the last elaborate joke of the novel occasions dismay. That is, we respond as if both the statement and the structure were ontologically sound. Now it could be that West has misled us to the very end, that we, to the extent that we care about the outcome, are the unwitting butts of his joke and he is snickering up his sleeve. If so, then West's novel would seem to give us the void as a stripper, taking it all off. On the other hand, our response may be warranted. Curiously enough, we have the same problem with the book that Miss Lonelyhearts has with the letters: whatever we finally deem it, we are necessarily engaged in an act of faith. But we need not, as a consequence, simply toss the book up for grabs.

For the sake of his faith, Miss Lonelyhearts must ignore the bad language of the letters. We enjoy the same language because it is so good: "I bought a new sowing machine as I do some sowing for other people to make both ends meet . . ." (p. 225). The paradox is simple yet profound. All of the demonstrations of bad language—the letters, Miss Lonelyhearts' awful answers, Shrike's parodies—all involve not only an exhibition of West's skill, but of the adequacy of language to his skill. In order to make humorous "nonsense" (as in the quote just cited), language must be able to make common sense. Further, it must make both kinds at once, since it is precisely the play of the one off the other that is funny. A joke reveals the meaningfulness of language. And like revelation, it constitutes its own evidence: the simple fact that it is funny, that *we* laugh, makes the case.

Now we can understand why Shrike is such a desperate character, insistent, shrill. He cannot make his point—the meaninglessness of it *all*—without contradicting himself. Jokes are his form of prophecy, and they betray him every time. He is the victim of his own success. He grieves, in his fashion, that he cannot have nothing.

But the fact that language is meaningful does not necessarily mean that it is significant, any more than a correct sentence is necessarily true. A philosophical idealist might disagree, of course, but West's characters are not idealists. They want some words that signify something beyond their own sound and sense, something, preferably a redemptive Absolute, that can be empirically ascertained. Miss Lonelyhearts, for example, has no quarrel with the coherence of Betty's "world view," but with its significance. Her order, as far as he is concerned, does not match reality—they are an odd pair—whereas his own disorder does (p. 183). His experience tells him so, or so he thinks. However, we cannot say whether his confusion results from or produces the confusion he perceives, nor whether the world he perceives is in fact a disorder. For it is not the relation be-

tween words and reality that West depicts, it is the disjunction: his characters cannot find out what, if anything, lies on the other side of their words. As a bridge, language breaks; as a window, it shuts out, like stained glass, and keeps his characters in. But it does not become genuinely false, actually misleading, until West's characters believe the bridge is sound, the window perfectly transparent, their words reliably significant, true. As, for instance, when Shrike insists there is nought beyond, and when Miss Lonelyhearts insists there is confusion, or Christ, the Word intact. They do not know, literally, what they are talking about.

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: "the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser. It held no angels, flaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine" (pp. 174-75). These words do not match reality, fit any empirical facts. Neither do they distort any facts or displace reality. They are not *about* something beyond themselves, an actual person's experience, a historical event. They constitute, rather, their own reality, and their only job is to be true to the structure of which they are a part, that is, to be right, self-consistent, aesthetically correct. Were it some other character than Miss Lonelyhearts sitting there, the sky might very properly contain angels, crosses, doves, wheels, a cloud that speaks, a breeze that inspires, a pulse that beats. In art, language is free of obligation to referents; it is free to be strictly itself, and it stands or falls entirely on its own. And when it stands, it satisfies the idealist and the empiricist alike, for it is simultaneously as conceptual as any law and as phenomenal as an apple falling. It is completely sensible. The poet, as Emerson happily put it, "adorns nature with a new thing."¹²

Our relationship with the novel, then, is not exactly analogous to Miss Lonelyhearts' with the letters. The language of each (even when it is the same) draws different duty. For that reason, the demonstrable error of his and his companions' ways does not necessarily compromise the validity of ours. We place our bets on a different thing, and we have demonstrably good grounds for our wager, namely, the novel's coherence. Being or non-being, it is an *order* of experience. Thus the novel's theme does not necessarily undermine its form. Still, we must recognize that the center of the analogy holds: the novel's coherence depends upon our faith. The world seems able to survive capricious gods, but a work of fiction cannot survive an unreliable third-person narrator. (First-person narrators are a different story, of course, but their implied third-person narrators are not.) Try to

imagine, for instance, the last passage I quoted as misleading, false, the sky as actually blue, bearing crosses, wheels, and so forth. The whole show stops; all bets are off. But we in fact read on because we trust the narrator. In order to read on, we must. And in reading on we find constant justification of our faith: the novel elaborates its problem without sentimental dodges or cheap solutions. True to itself, it is true to us. As for those novels that self-consciously make even their third-person reliability suspect, our willing suspension of belief amounts to a working agreement based on the same trust, that they will prove to be meaningful orders of experience. But by meaningful I do not want to suggest comfortable or reassuring. On the contrary, almost all art worth the name repays our faith by raising hell within us, with our cherished assumptions and secret illusions, with our workaday values and beliefs. For it takes us as far as words can go, and thus brings us face-to-face, finally, with silence, mystery. "Emotion" comes from *emovere*, "to move out of," "disturb." Let us momentarily suppose that West has conned us at the end. Now that we are on to it, we can easily dismiss the book, for he has given us the void *merely* as a stripper, a tease, not a real threat but a pretence of one. "Ah," we can say in relief, "he didn't mean it after all."

But West's novel does disturb us, threaten, because its form makes its theme intensely meaningful, utterly real. Here we witness words falling short of reality, and here, and here, and we watch their continual shortcomings compose an actual pattern of doom. We are unsettled because most of us are, like Dr. Johnson, rock-kickers—we ordinarily assume that our words signify something beyond themselves—and reading this story forces us to face the possibility that they do not. The story defines the issue that has become major in certain circles, "the problem of language." But West simultaneously solves the problem *in* the form, every word of the way. For unlike his characters, malpracticing empiricists all, and unlike most of us, West was, as an artist, a practicing idealist. We know that he got the idea for his novel from seeing actual letters to an advice columnist. Had he been concerned with historical-empirical fidelity, he could have used them more-or-less intact. But we also know that he changed them radically, that he in truth wrote his own letters, to make them right, aesthetically correct.¹³ All artists, of course, change things to suit their purposes, but their purposes have a single premise, that the work of art must be absolutely true to itself, self-integral, one. Then it can stand and unfold itself, an articulated body of ideas, an avatar of Being.

The novel is an order of being, finally, because in it West shows us that words realize our possibilities as well as define our limits. Miss Lonelyhearts looks at a gray sky and, empiricist that he is, sees only a dirty *tabula rasa*. Against that he sees the most referential and hence ephemeral

of all literature, a newspaper, failing (naturally) to soar. But West's words lift nicely, bearing for the space of our imagination all the significance Miss Lonelyhearts misses in his, not in the form of crosses and doves, to be sure, but in the form of figures, of ideas, of words touched with life and touching us with the same.¹⁴

West's other three stories suffer to varying degrees in comparison with *Miss Lonelyhearts*. They demonstrate a precise but simplistic satire, a sentimental obsession with easy pickings: in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, the contrived labyrinths of literary journeys, in *A Cool Million*, the Horatio Alger myth, in *The Day of the Locust*, the Hollywood motif.¹⁵ The unreality of West's marks is patent, their exposure therefore, funny or not, perfunctory: "The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office . . ." (p. 2). They expose bills of fraudulent goods that we, his readers, declined to buy in the first place; hence they do not disturb, they merely confirm our glib assumptions. *Miss Lonelyhearts*, on the other hand, makes us reconsider.

Here is the difference I mean:

It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous. (*The Day of the Locust*, p. 4)

. . . I would like to have boy friends like other girls and go out on Saturday nites, but no boy will take me because I was born without a nose—although I am a good dancer and have a nice shape and my father buys me pretty clothes. (*Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 171)

A girl without a nose is monstrous, truly, yet it is hard not to laugh, particularly when she expresses her need for beauty and romance. A nice shape does not compensate for a noseless face. Perhaps it should, but it does not. Perhaps we should not laugh, either, but we do. Perhaps words should not take precedence over persons, but here (pretending for the moment the girl is real) they do. On the other hand, West does not permit us to indulge in cant. The letter's words spell out a troublesome truth, that this girl, however unfortunate, has tacky values. She would give a great deal to be Homecoming Queen. Victims can be insufferably vain, no less than Presidents, and pity can be primarily self-gratifying. My point is that in the first passage West is keeping certain suppositions intact—the value, for instance, of pity—while in the second he orders his words so that we have to recognize ourselves as we truly are, not as we might prefer to suppose we are. It is recognizing this difference that makes us laugh,

and our laughter implies a major admission: that the idealist's absolute may finally be more significant, more real, than we mere mortals are.

We regard West loosely as a writer ahead of his time. I would say that it is specifically *Miss Lonelyhearts* that warrants this reputation, and that it anticipates in particular the work of Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Elkin, Gardner, Pynchon, of all those writers loosely bunched as comic whose humor, by trying its own limits, examines how language does and undoes us, what it gives and what it takes, what it may mean and what it may not, and if we are at last full of fear and wonder, we should be: Being is finally awful, no matter how we look at it.

NOTES

¹ *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* (1933, rpt. New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 211. Hereafter cited in parentheses within the text.

² *The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 49. Reid quotes Williams on the same page.

³ Jay Martin makes the same point. *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1970), p. 179.

⁴ On this point see also Thomas H. Jackson, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Miss Lonelyhearts: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 7. The best account of the shape of West's characters is W. H. Auden's "West's Disease" in *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jay Martin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), pp. 147-53.

⁵ For a different interpretation of this point, see Irving Malin, *Nathanael West's Novels* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), pp. 32-3.

⁶ See also Reid, pp. 9-10.

⁷ For a good psychological account of the significance of violence in West, see James W. Hickey's "Freudian Criticism and *Miss Lonelyhearts*" in *Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated; A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. David Madden (Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1973), p. 142.

⁸ See also James F. Light, *Nathanael West: An Interpretive Study*, 2nd. ed. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1971), p. 57.

⁹ A point also made by Martin, pp. 189-90.

¹⁰ The best account of the religious theme is Reid's—see especially p. 84. Robert J. Andreach has dealt admirably with the mythic patterns in the novel; see "Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*: Between the Dead Pan and the Unborn Christ," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Miss Lonelyhearts*, ed. Jackson, pp. 49-60. For a different interpretation of the ending, see Arthur Cohen's "Nathanael West's Holy Fool," *Commonweal*, 64 (1956), pp. 277-78.

¹¹ For a different interpretation of the same point, see Reid, p. 44.

¹² "The Poet," in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman (New York: New American Library, 1965), p. 310. The most important spokesman for this position is William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Random House, 1971); see especially "The Medium of Fiction," pp. 27-33.

¹³ See, for example, Martin, pp. 186-87.

¹⁴ A point made by Josephine Herbst: "Nathanael West," in *Nathanael West*, ed. Martin, p. 14.

¹⁵ For interpretations of these three works I particularly recommend three essays in Madden's *The Cheaters and the Cheated*: on *Balso Snell*, John M. Brand's "A Word Is a Word Is a Word," pp. 57-75; on *Cool Million*, T. R. Steiner's "West's Lemuel and the American Dream," pp. 157-70; and on *Day of the Locust*, Kingsley Widmer's "The Last Masquerade: *The Day of the Locust*," pp. 179-93.

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