Modern American Grotesque

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“Elephantine Close-Ups”
Nathanael West

Over the course of 1932 Nathanael West published four “Miss Lonelyhearts” stories in Contact, a newly revived little magazine edited by William Carlos Williams with West as an associate editor. The opening lines to the first story printed, under the title “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb” in the February 1932 issue, indicate West’s awareness of the Winesburg, Ohio antecedent and at the same time they mark a point of departure from its example: “After a cold morning and a rainy afternoon, the evening had turned warm. Thomas Matlock, the Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York Evening Hawk (Are you in trouble? Do you need advice? Write to Miss Lonelyhearts and she will help you), decided to walk from the Hawk Building across the park to Delehanty’s speakeasy.” In place of the Winesburg town newspaper the Eagle, a designation with overtones of acuity, attentiveness, and sweeping vision, West titles the city daily here the Hawk. In addition to its associations with a keen-eyed, soaring bird of prey, that name has obvious, disagreeable resonances with verb forms meaning to cough up and to utter harsh guttural sounds. And of course the verb hawk also means to vend by means of street cries, as for cheap goods and the latest or extra editions of a newspaper.

West’s choice of the name “Thomas Matlock” for his central figure is obviously caricatural and emblematic in comparison to the “George Willard” of Winesburg, Ohio. In light of events and symbols that follow, the given name suggests the predicament of a “doubting Thomas.” Within its story context, the Mat in Matlock signals a matte quality to the character’s
experiences and responses, which are by turns dull in feeling and spirit, crude, thick-witted. And the second syllable in the surname is indicative of his entrapped situation. West substantially revised the sentence in making it the lead-in to Miss Lonelyhearts, which was published in April 1933. Throughout the novel West has removed all overt acknowledgment of the example of Winesburg, Ohio. The novel’s rewritten opening (now under the chapter title “Miss Lonelyhearts, Help Me, Help Me”) reads: “The Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York Post-Dispatch (Are-you-in-trouble?—Do-you-need-advice?—Write-to-Miss Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you) sat at his desk and stared at a piece of white cardboard. On it a prayer had been printed.”2 The novel gives no individualized name to its protagonist here or at any later point. In contrast to the story’s opening, no wider world outside the newspaper offices is suggested at first. The advice columnist is confined within the medium of print, the letters penned by petitioners, and the prayer inscribed on cardboard.

Situated in the opening scene with less than fifteen minutes until deadline, Miss Lonelyhearts is still struggling at the typewriter to compose the lead paragraph to his advice column. He gets only as far as the unnerving promise of a “faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar” and then abandons the effort (Novels, 59). Tellingly, the image reverses the conventional figure-ground relationship of type to the page, and for him as a newspaperman it in effect records his defeated attempt to effect through his column a leap of faith. Unlike Sherwood Anderson, Nathanael West does not assume in his writing that oral expression possesses greater sincerity and immediacy than the printed word. For West, speech is no less liable to deformation and inauthenticity than language in the published domain. All language in his fiction ultimately falls within the purview of the print media and mass culture. Later in the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts imagines himself to have the ability of a priest at confession to soothe suffering through a power of speech, but he quickly recognizes that he “had merely written a column for his paper” in an assumed, literary voice (Novels, 115). Then, in a complete reversal Miss Lonelyhearts begins to rant of “the black Christ-fruit, the love fruit,” but he recognizes in his delivery the tone of a scripted “stage scream” (Novels, 115). Feature editor Willie Shrike converses as though he were giving dictation, no matter what the situation. The editor’s wife Mary “always talked in headlines” (Novels, 81). In all these ways, the newspaper and sensational entertainments mark the boundaries of the characters’ known world.

In the piece “Some Notes on Miss L.” published in 1933, West indicates that he had in mind the prospective subtitle “A novel in the form
of a comic strip” from early on as part of his working plan for the book (Novels, 401). Above all else, his approach was graphic in its conception of the literary text: “The chapters to be squares in which many things happen through one action. The speeches contained in the conventional balloons” (Novels, 401). During the college years West, according to his biographer, had a stronger interest in graphic art than in literature, and he devoted much time to pencil-and-ink drawings featuring facial caricatures, mythological creatures, and religious subjects, with an emphasis often on suffering and martyrdom.3 Once he became a writer and an editor West maintained professional relationships with several designers and artists. For the second and third issues of Contact West devised the cover layout himself, using a simple but bold typeface. Literary contributors to the issues included West, William Carlos Williams, James T. Farrell, S. J. Perelman, Erskine Caldwell, Yvor Winters, and Louis Zukofsky.

Contact was published without illustrations or any typographical decorations, but in the same period West became associated with Americana, a New York little magazine dedicated to humor and satire whose inaugural issues were entirely pictorial. The first three numbers of 1932 featured captioned cartoons grouped under headings like “Entertainment,” “Society,” “Fashions,” “Politics,” “Harlem,” “Sport,” and “Science.” The fourth issue (July 1932), with the cover subtitle “Indignation Number,” contained a few pages of text. At about this time West developed a close friendship with the magazine’s publisher, Alexander King. Under a new policy, revised to give substantial space to literary and opinion pieces, Americana restarted in November 1932 as a monthly; it ceased publication at the end of 1933. In all, seventeen issues of Americana appeared in the course of two years. Its contributors included the artists George Grosz, John Heartfield, Al Hirschfeld, Jose Clemente Orozco, John Sloan, William Steig, James Thurber, and the writers Kenneth Burke, e. e. cummings, Joseph Mitchell, and Gilbert Seldes. West published in its pages two brief segments from The Dream Life of Balso Snell (1931) and in the “Hollywood Number” of October 1933 “Business Deal,” a story about a movie mogul outwitted by a screenwriter. Grosz contributed many graphic pieces from the outset of publication in February 1932, and he became associate editor in November of that year. With the August 1933 issue West joined Grosz as associate editor.

While West did not adhere strictly to his first intention, “Some Notes on Miss L.” states that the finished novel “retained some of the comic strip technique: Each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture. Violent images
are used to illustrate commonplace events” (Novels, 401). Spatial position and the dynamics of a spectator’s attention across a picture plane take priority over a reader’s impression of the passage of time. West disfavors any grand schemes of temporal or aesthetic design: “Forget the epic, the master work” (Novels, 401). He offers no careful psychological development or gradually disclosed motivation: “Leave slow growth to the book reviewers” (Novels, 401). The present-day conditions of culture mean that, for the writer, “you only have time to explode” (Novels, 401). Though he does not in fact use the word, West seems to have in mind here the *squib*, a term from the press and popular entertainments with which he would be familiar. From its origins in the sixteenth century the word has meant equally a common type of firecracker, derision, and a short satirical piece. In the newspaper world it also came to identify a small, often comical or offbeat item used to fill up space in a column of print.

The actions and encounters within each section of the book are treated in digest fashion through mock summary titles such as “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Fat Thumb,” “Miss Lonelyhearts in the Dismal Swamp,” and “Miss Lonelyhearts Pays a Visit.” In the manner of spiritual allegory, the headlined sections announce the stations along a latter-day pilgrim’s path, though in this case one of descent rather than of progress. While Bunyan’s pilgrim Christian is mired in the Slough of Despond for only a brief spell at the outset of his journey and then travels well beyond it, Miss Lonelyhearts inhabits such a region exclusively. It will be remembered that in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678, 1684) the Slough of Despond is the first major impediment in the path of Christian’s flight from the City of Destruction and in the ultimate direction of the Celestial City. The Slough is a sinkhole “whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run.” And the place has remained wretched for more than sixteen hundred years (that is, from the time of Christ) despite “Millions of wholesom Instructions, that have at all seasons been brought from all places of the Kings Dominions.”

For his part, West is specific in geography and history in the symbolic designation “the Dismal Swamp,” the name of a vast territory extending from Virginia to North Carolina. In West’s topography of the American scene it is a foundational place, meant to stand in contraposition to idealizations of the City on a Hill. Four times greater in size during colonial times than at present, on any physical map of the thirteen colonies the Great Dismal Swamp shows prominently and centrally. In the 1760s George Washington surveyed the Great Dismal Swamp as part of a commercial effort to drain it for agricultural use, an enterprise that was par-
tially undertaken during the nineteenth century but never fully achieved. And as first president, Washington surveyed and selected the exact site for the nation’s capital in a location that included expanses of marsh-land but which he deemed of great potential as a commercial center. For decades many visitors considered the locale of the new capital to be little better than a boggy wilderness.

To defend *Miss Lonelyhearts* against moralistic objections, in 1933 William Carlos Williams issued a statement entitled “Sordid? Good God!” in which he reasserts his earlier poetics of the grotesque. Williams singles out for praise the quality in West’s writing of a “downward motion” accelerated by “the teeming vulgarisms of our speech.” For the poet, it is such momentum that makes graphic and incisive West’s imaginative reach into the obscured, corrupted areas of American culture and social life. Paradoxically, these areas are often already conspicuously public, and taken for granted, in the media. Two other, recent commentators interpret West’s fiction largely as a critique of mass culture. Rita Barnard views the role of consumer goods and the media in the fiction as expressions of collective desires that result from mystification and distortion. She identifies in the work a “special obsession” on the author’s part over the loss in originality, authenticity, and presence caused by the consumer market and mass communications. Jonathan Veitch approaches West as a social artist who carries out an avant-garde, anti-aesthetic mandate of negation in order to construct a critique of political power. Veitch also traces through the fiction West’s reflexive responses to the problem of representation within a modern culture industry. In a consideration of American popular theater of the time, Mark Fearnow with his study *The American Stage and the Great Depression: A Cultural History of the Grotesque* argues the general conclusion that in times of social anxiety and conflict the grotesque in popular forms is a cultural expediency that makes unresolved dualities seem tolerable.

While critique and censure are surely motivations, only Williams among these commentators recognizes the vulgar energy that West’s fiction releases in the course of penetrating the shallow yet mythic surfaces of the American scene. In this West is much like another great mythologist of his own times, Roland Barthes. To decode any contemporary mass-produced myth, Barthes understood, the mythologist first must be capable of participation within it. The participant-interpreter “consumes the myth according to the very ends built into its structure: the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal.” Since mass-mediated myth endows commonplace persons, things, and events with meanings that far exceed their actuality, the interpreter for his or her part is “con-
denied for some time yet always to speak excessively” about the reality of the situation. A critique of the myths of one’s society involves a dialectical negation of the forces of irreality, which is to say that in advancing toward fuller comprehension the process cannot help but subsume some elements of myth and irreality. From Barthes’ perspective, this double bind is a source of writerly pleasure for the mythologist. In the case of West, at the same time that the novelist exposes the deadening grotesqueness of many myths within the culture at large, his imagination fabricates a new, spirited, patchwork grotesque from available cultural materials.

To be recognized as grotesque, features of mass culture that have become commonplace must be defamiliarized, as through the pronominal declension “Miss Lonelyhearts . . . he” that functions like a refrain in the novel. The novel’s principal mode of defamiliarization is through descriptive devices that reduce appearances to tonalities of dark and light. This method fulfills a premise that the mass circulation of words and images has already abridged much of experience down into black and white. Miss Lonelyhearts occupies a room “as full of shadows as an old steel engraving” with barren walls except for an “ivory Christ” removed from its cross and renailed with large spikes directly onto one surface (Novels, 67). On his way to a speakeasy after a day at the newspaper office, Miss Lonelyhearts rests on a park bench and contemplates the heavens for a spiritual sign: “But the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser. It held no angels, gleaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine” (Novels, 64). Mundane surroundings are full of menacing configurations: “He walked into the shadow of a lamp-post that lay on the path like a spear” (Novels, 63). Seeking refuge in the countryside with his fiancée, Miss Lonelyhearts’ gloom proves a stronger force than nature’s vitality: “Although spring was well advanced, in the deep shade there was nothing but death—rotten leaves, gray and white fungi, and over everything a funereal hush” (Novels, 101). Even when a color value is mentioned its original vibrancy is obliterated: “new green leaves hung straight down and shone in the hot sun like an army of little metal shields” (Novels, 102).

The suppliant Peter Doyle, in addition to being crippled in one leg, has facial features that are completely askew. To describe this quality, the novel resorts to an unexpected analogy: “He looked like one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests” (Novels, 110). Needless to say, Doyle is in status and appearance the farthest thing from a movie star. The analogy suggests that deformity—whether actual like Doyle’s or a trick effect—is received among the gen-
eral public as a media construct for one’s passing diversion. The only answer to the misfortunes of Doyle and others that Miss Lonelyhearts can think of anymore is a spiritual one, even as he recognizes this message to be nowadays a dead letter. Seated at his office desk he lapses into writer’s block after typing the word Christ. His attention wanders to the view through his window, where “a slow spring rain was changing the dusty tar roofs below him to shiny patent leather. The water made everything slippery and he could find no support for either his eyes or his feelings” (Novels, 104). For him, the written word has proven to be an especially slippery slope. Situated at the bottom of the slippery slope in The Pilgrim’s Progress is the Valley of Humiliation, the place of degrading lessons in the costs of pride. At the bottom of Miss Lonelyhearts’ humiliations the spiritually forlorn newspaperman meets a senseless end.

Often a skeptic in such matters, contemporary novelist Don DeLillo in The Body Artist (2001) imagines a meaningful empathic consciousness through his central character’s vicarious encounters with human experience rendered in newsprint. For the body artist Lauren Hartke the daily newspaper is something of a spiritual mystery in that it can provide a full, genuine measure of humanity: “there are endless identical lines of print with people living somewhere in the words and the strange contained reality of paper and ink.” She is prone to the uncanny sensation that “an incident described in the paper seemed to rise out of the inky lines of print and gather her into it.”10 DeLillo’s own aspirations toward readers are made clear through these intimations of consubstantiation. In Miss Lonelyhearts, to the contrary, the newspaper becomes an instrument of destruction. This eventuality is broached first in West’s novel as a morbid joke, when Miss Lonelyhearts recommends suicide in the column in the hope that he will be fired from the job. His editor Shrike responds with the mild rebuke that such advice will reduce the paper’s circulation and harm business.

At the story’s climax and catastrophe Doyle arrives on the scene carrying a gun concealed inside a folded newspaper that will detonate seemingly on its own accord. In a panic Doyle seeks to escape the embrace of a wild-eyed Miss Lonelyhearts and by turning away he pulls back his hand, whereupon “the gun inside the package exploded” (Novels, 126). The “complicated bomb” lodged in the heart of this newspaperman since the beginning of the story has finally burst (Novels, 74). In “Some Notes on Violence,” published in a 1932 issue of Contact, West’s attention is directed solely toward the role of violence in print culture for the gratification of a mass-circulation readership: “In America violence is idiomatic. Read our newspapers. To make the front page a murderer has
to use his imagination, he also has to use a particularly hideous instrument” (Novels, 399). And, in turn, so has the reporter who wants the event to become a lead story, through the instrument of lurid description. Given the cultural conditioning of American audiences, West observes, there is no need to make violence personally motivated in order for it to seem convincing and thus there is no responsibility to unfold a story that explains a violent act.

Indeed, in West’s practices the grotesque mode is often a matter of hypertrophy in description and a corresponding atrophy of narrative. Soon after publication in Contact of the first Lonelyhearts story The Criterion, edited by T. S. Eliot at the time, printed a dismissive assessment of West’s literary treatment of violence. Reviewer Hugh Sykes Davies faults the story’s “attitude of impersonal observation, of scientific and photographic reproduction” but not the subject of violence per se. In Davies’ opinion the story through a nearly exclusive attention to descriptive particulars leaves the content unnarrativized, which means that the reader’s reaction of horror is not “anticipated and catered for in a proper way.”11 As we have seen, the novelist was fully aware already of the disparity between the axes of description and narration in his fiction. With a proposal for creative work that West submitted in 1934 to the Guggenheim Foundation, for support that he did not in the end receive, a chapter plan is provided but his synopses do not chart any plot line. Each chapter is cast instead in terms of intellectual reflection (“Ideas about conduct. The morals of sport”) and exposition (“A first attempt at definitions. . . . A discussion of values”). Conscious of the structural anomaly, West concludes his proposal with the following assurance: “The ideas I have briefly described will be hidden as carefully as possible in the body of my narrative” (Novels, 465–66).

When in the 1950s W. H. Auden offered a generally favorable critical overview of the American writer, he prefaced his assessment with a caveat that “West is not, strictly speaking, a novelist.” By this statement Auden means that in West’s books the wide social world is not a significant narrative presence. That world is instead the object of a single-minded act of dissection. Auden considers it suitable to approach West only as a modern, cultural symptomatologist who specializes in the diagnosis of one disorder, namely “a disease of consciousness which renders it incapable of converting wishes into desires.” This condition condemns an individual to despairing, guilty inaction, or to impulsive attempts at escape through violence.12 For West’s own part, we should add, violence and the grotesque are both presenting symptoms of society’s disorders and the literary means through which he formulates a diagnosis.
In West’s first book The Dream Life of Balso Snell culture is examined from the position of a recessed, darkened space, specifically from inside the mythic Trojan horse, now equipped with a functioning alimentary and excretory system. From the mock canonical premise “Art is not nature, but rather nature digested” West draws a da daist conclusion: “Art is a sublime excrement” (Novels, 9). The perspective also entails a figure/ground conundrum in which the differentials of dark/light are not sufficiently distinctive. One consequence of the situation is expressed in an entry Balso Snell reads from the diary of a madman: “It is as if I were attempting to trace with the point of a pencil the shadow of the tracing pencil. I am enchanted with the shadow’s shape and want very much to outline it; but the shadow is attached to the pencil and moves with it, never allowing me to trace its tempting form” (Novels, 16–17). Dream Life’s own textuality traces the most profound grotesque within its contents. West told an interviewer that he published the novel “as a protest against writing books.” At its grossest, such protest takes the form of a revenge fantasy. The novel imagines a devoted audience that attends the latest experimental play. While spectators dutifully watch the performance onstage, which they do not comprehend in the slightest, the denouement comes from an unexpected direction: “the ceiling of the theatre will be made to open and cover the occupants with tons of loose excrement” (Novels, 28).

During his odyssey through the entrails of the Trojan horse, Balso is besieged by authors eager for an audience for their amateurish, derivative work. West renders this material mainly in a graphic, descriptive way through “elephantine close-ups of various literary positions and their technical methods” (Novels, 398). Thus, grand storytelling traditions appear within West’s small book grossly magnified beyond its confines and are left in a fragmented and scarcely recognizable state. One such instance is the Janey Davenport and Beagle Darwin episode, a modern attempt to write in the epistolary style of sentimental fiction. Literary traditions survive for West only as waste products of the consumption process, after their breakdown through the digestive acids of mass communications. The fundamental relationship of art to excrement is held to be especially true in the case of the realist movement. At the end of The Dream Life of Balso Snell all the literary techniques and story forms crudely rehearsed within its pages culminate, in a variation upon the theme and manner of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy, with a solitary man’s wet dream.

Another West piece of the early 1930s that literalizes a grotesque perspective is “The Adventurer,” an unpublished story. Its narrator is one of West’s underground men, a monomaniac who at the outset inhabits
a world of books. He burrows among their pages every spare moment, “stuffing my eyes, ears and mouth with them” (Novels, 448). In the end, he designates himself merely a talker, and not a narrator, for “a story is—and then something happened and then something else happened. This was simultaneous, like a great picture” (Novels, 455). By this point he has become a kind of anchorite, furtively inhabiting New York’s Central Park. There he has fashioned a makeshift urban grotto: “I made a nest for myself near the top of the hill . . . , a little hollow in the midst of a tangle” (Novels, 455). Whether in the library or in this hollow, his mental context remains “the same dark picture” (Novels, 455). He is unable to construct a story and he thus remains bound and static within his fixation.

West’s third novel, A Cool Million: The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin (1934), brutally parodies the mythos of a common man’s rise to importance. Another pilgrim figure, the ambitious yet innocent young Pitkin suffers many misfortunes along the path of the American way. The book’s grotesque reflexivity stems chiefly from its exaggerations of the already exaggerated stylizations that are a staple of pulp magazines, the tabloid press, radio programs, action-suspense serials, and B movies. Its short chapters are structured like episodes to a serialized adventure tale in weekly installments. In a matter of months Pitkin runs a gauntlet of dangers derived from scenarios of white slavery, crime and imprisonment, international Communist espionage, and the Wild West. Rather than triumph over adversity, however, he falls prey to each and every danger that he encounters. With a story action reminiscent of Poe’s “The Man That Was Used Up,” the novel in quick order reduces Pitkin to a one-eyed, stooped, penniless, toothless wreck.

Eventually, after having further suffered a scalping and the amputation of one leg, Pitkin is persuaded to seek his fortune as the freak attraction in a tent show, which is soon incorporated into a larger traveling exhibition called the “Chamber of American Horrors, Animate and Inanimate Hideosities” (Novels, 226). After a stint there, he takes the part of the slapstick stooge in a vaudeville comedy routine. A feature of modern life as common as newsprint has its own part to play in the brutalization and exploitation of Lemuel Pitkin: “One of Lem’s duties was to purchase newspapers and out of them fashion the clubs used to beat him. When the performance was over, he was given the papers to read. They formed his only relaxation, for his meager salary made more complicated amusements impossible” (Novels, 233). In the end, Pitkin’s true destiny is fulfilled as a martyr to the cause of the Leather Shirts, a band of street agitators within the fascist National Revolutionary Party.
Principal targets of parody in *A Cool Million*, Jay Martin has argued, include Horatio Alger books and Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, which are treated as equally perverse expressions of social faith in individual success and in personal triumph over great adversity.\textsuperscript{14} Kenneth Burke understood the grotesque to be an attitude toward history that, in the context of the 1930s, provided a means by which to account for ideological peculiarities within extremist politics, particularly those of “national absolutism” (*Attitudes*, 58). In a consideration of *Mein Kampf* upon its full translation into English in 1939, Burke weighed Hitler’s objectives in fostering a Nazi collective mythos. Burke approaches Hitler’s autobiography as the textbook of “Nazi magic; crude magic, but effective.” In the conjunct rationalizations of Aryan racial purity and worldwide Jewish conspiracy, Nazism puts forth a deformed version of “contemporary neo-positivism’s ideal of meaning, which insists upon a *material* reference,” and the movement advances irrationalism under a banner of Reason.\textsuperscript{15} Through political rhetoric and public spectacle fascist culture promotes a new primitivism.

Beyond the specific Alger and Hitler intertexts, West’s diacritical imagination is drawn to confusions in the figure-ground relationship of idea to reality within American society. These can range from the absurdities of consumer life to atrocities motivated by political and racial fears. Modern America’s Great Awakening, West foretells, is to come from mass politics and mob violence, not from religion per se. A decade earlier William Carlos Williams voiced a similar expectation in the poem “At the Ball Game” (1923):

\[
\ldots\text{ in detail they, the crowd,} \\
\text{are beautiful} \\
\text{for this} \\
\text{to be warned against} \\
\text{saluted and defied—} \\
\text{It is alive, venomous} \\
\text{it smiles grimly} \\
\text{its words cut—} \\
\text{The flashy female with her} \\
\text{mother, gets it—} \\
\text{The Jew gets it straight—it}
\]

[84]
is deadly, terrifying—

It is the Inquisition, the Revolution.\(^{16}\)

Hollywood provides West in *The Day of the Locust* (1939) with an opportunity to explore the American grotesque on its grandest scale and in its gaudiest light. To make a screen epic on the Battle of Waterloo, for instance, the National Films studio has raised a replica of Mont St. Jean on its lot. The set, however, is built upon a substructure of mere lumber and canvas and once filming begins it collapses under the weight of movie extras. The impressive interiors and facades of other movie spectacles, “having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lath and paint,” are destined after a single use for a backlot that serves as a dump for “a gigantic pile of sets, flats and props” (*Novels*, 326). No quarter of Los Angeles described in the novel escapes the influence of Hollywood. To obtain distinction, a screenwriter with the personal features of a “postal clerk” occupies a house designed as the exact reproduction of a famous antebellum Mississippi mansion (*Novels*, 252). SunGold Market, a grocery store, features an interior as brilliantly lighted as a production set. Spotlights with color filters are trained on the counters and displays to intensify the natural hues of different items: “The oranges were bathed in red, the lemons in yellow, the fish in pale green, the steaks in rose and the eggs in ivory” (*Novels*, 274).

The book’s habits of description are in keeping with the sensibility of its central figure Tod Hackett, an art school graduate with the aspirations of a visionary painter but who in plain fact earns a living as a movie costume and set designer. Through this character West displays a deep-running anxiety, as had Sherwood Anderson before him, that hackwork can become the grotesque professional fate of the aspiring artist. In the novel’s account of Tod’s creative efforts emphasis falls upon the graphic basis of his medium, the planar and contour forms his imagination takes, and the techniques that he uses with light/dark tonalities to produce histrionic contrasts in mood and theme. For the novel as a whole, the perspective upon people and objects is presented as two-dimensional in almost every respect. Whatever impression of depth and substance that an appearance possesses proves to be a temporary illusion attained through optical effects.

In actuality, for example, the old vaudevillian Harry Greener, has “very little back or top to his head. It was almost all face, like a mask, with
deep furrows... plowed there by years of broad grinning and heavy frowning. Because of them, he could never express anything either subtly or exactly. They wouldn’t permit degrees of feeling, only the furthest degree” (Novels, 311). The physical features of Earle Shoop, a bit player in Westerns, are so geometric that they could be all copied by ruler and compass. Faye Greener, Tod’s lust-interest, is introduced by way of a photograph chapters before she appears in person. The photograph is a publicity still from a screen farce in which Faye had one line of speech. Two dimensions suffice for a rendering of Faye’s physique (“a tall girl with wide, straight shoulders and long, swordlike legs”) and the same holds true for her personality once Tod comes to know her (Novels, 250). Faye is devoid of emotional or erotic depth. Tod learns to recognize that her customary come-hither look “seemed to promise all sorts of undefined intimacies, yet it was really as simple and automatic as the word thanks. She used it to reward anyone for anything, no matter how unimportant” (Novels, 355).

West’s early literary technique of “elephantine close-ups” further evolves in The Day of the Locust. One manifestation registers in the form of verbal gigantism, as when Homer Simpson, overwhelmed by confused feelings, releases a torrent of speech in which what sounded like “long strings were really one thick word and not a sentence. In the same way several sentences were simultaneous and not a paragraph” (Novels, 368). The disorder is recognizable as an “elephantine” condition in the paradigmatic functions of language and a “dwarfish” one in the syntagmatic ones.

Language also becomes disproportioned whenever Harry Greener launches into a sales spiel or a show business reminiscence. Another manifestation occurs reflexively, through the novel’s own hyperdetail in description. The book’s second paragraph offers an enumeration of distinctive features of the uniforms to cavalry and foot soldiers from different armies involved in the Napoleonic Wars. The description, in part, details “The dolmans of the hussars, the heavy shakos of the guards, [and] Hanoverian light horse, with their flat leather caps and flowing red plumes” (Novels, 241). These features are noted in passing as Tod is said to look out from an office window upon troops of extras marching off to a sound stage. Irrespective of the specificity in descriptive vocabulary, from Tod’s vantage such details are visually “all jumbled together in bobbing disorder” (Novels, 241). The hodgepodge of residential architecture along one of the city’s canyon streets is succinctly noted in a paragraph that heaps together diverse cultural terms for period, style, and region. In a later scene Faye Greener recounts her ideas for movie stories in the
hope that Tod will serve her and write scripts from them. Her ideas are a stockpile of utter clichés; each predictable scene is synopsized with a well-worn phrase.

In his mind’s eye, Tod views the world in the light and dark of divine judgment and retribution. It is worth remembering that the biblical plague of locusts is, before all else, a force that darkens the earth. The darkness that comes when, in the Book of Exodus, the Lord causes locusts to cover the land of Egypt is a prelude to a time of “darkness which may be felt” (Exodus 10:21). And the spread of locusts upon the earth in Revelation issues from the dark smoke of the bottomless pit. As for the iconography of West’s own times, from the depth of the Great Depression Franklin D. Roosevelt acknowledged in his first inaugural address, delivered in March 1933, that “only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment.” The overall tone of the new president’s speech, however, promises that “we are stricken by no plague of locusts” and that “our common difficulties . . . concern, thank God, only material things.”

Some six years later, with the worst of the Depression behind for many Americans, The Day of the Locust nevertheless insists that society’s difficulties, pity the common individual, are precisely the material promises and illusions promoted through its media culture.

Not surprisingly Homer Simpson, the novel’s commonest of common humanity, has been limited in experience to a world rendered mainly in black and white. Homer’s occupation for twenty years in the Midwest had been as a bookkeeper, and his horizons reached little beyond ink and ledger: “he had worked mechanically, totaling figures and making entries with the same impersonal detachment” (Novels, 275). Now that he has come to Southern California with not even this little to do, he feels besieged by his surroundings. The bright profusion of color in sunlight paralyzes Homer in daytime. His sole comfort is that “sleep was at the far end of it, a soft bit of shadow in the hard glare” (Novels, 290). Tod, as an artist, is also paralyzed. Work on his projected, visionary canvas “The Burning of Los Angeles” remains arrested at the stage of preparatory sketches of single figures or small groups and a preliminary cartoon of the massive, chaotic scene blocked out “in rough charcoal strokes” on one large canvas (Novels, 387). So far, the painter has been able only to imagine, through an inner eye, colors appropriate to the scene. He has not yet applied color to canvas.

One challenge Tod faces in regard to color selection is the brightly hued, pellucid tonality of American life in the public sphere, perpetuated through advertising illustrations, Hollywood screen fantasies, and sunny optimism in the rhetoric of political figures and spiritual promoters.
Looked at generally in America of the 1930s, colors that enhance the mass media are often saturated and intensely primary in value, from market displays and billboards to picture magazines and big-budget releases in Technicolor like *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), which was advertised with the claim “Only the rainbow can duplicate its brilliance!” A technological irony of Technicolor, introduced by studios in 1922 and perfected in 1932, is that the process is based upon black and white film. To produce a color image, dyes are transferred to three black and white film prints separated by sensitivity to different portions of the spectrum and then the dyed prints are laminated together. In other words, color in motion picture and still photography is not in the least intrinsic to the medium, it is an artificial additive.

Occasionally the world Tod occupies is colored in an alternative manner, as with the Fauvist juxtapositions in this landscape scene: “The path was silver, grained with streaks of rose-gray, and the walls of the canyon were turquoise, mauve, chocolate and lavender. The air itself was vibrant pink” (Novels, 303). But Tod’s aesthetic preferences are for Goya, Daumier, and “Salvator Rosa, Francesco Guardi and Monsu Desiderio, the painters of Decay and Mystery” (Novels, 325). Goya and Daumier, both masters of the grotesque, are of course as well known for their work in the black and white medium of prints as for their paintings. A favorite Goya etching for West was *El sueño de la razon produce monstruos* (1799; “The sleep of reason produces monsters”), a theme whose relevance to his fiction is immediately apparent (fig. 5.1). In this connection we can also think of the enthusiastic response by Baudelaire to Goya’s etchings for their “modern attitude of mind [and] feeling for violent contrasts” and for the somber and cruel temper of their grotesque inventions (Art and Artists, 236).

In the case of paintings by Salvator Rosa (1615–1673), several of his canvases in oils are deeply shaded to a point where the color range is contracted into darks and lights. The prolific Francesco Guardi (1712–1793) is famous for his view paintings of Venice, some of which show deterioration to the city’s architectural features. As for Monsu Desiderio, there were in point of fact three different artists working in Naples during the first half of the seventeenth century who were known by that name. Attributed to one painter by this name are many scenes of ruins, several of which feature the process of destruction itself in massive scale and by a full spectrum of forces—man-made, natural, mythological, and divine. Tod in *The Day of the Locust*, in envisioning “The Burning of Los Angeles” as a prophecy of final destruction, sets the event at high noon on a clear day so that the conflagration is nearly outshone by the desert
sun, with the result that the scene seems perversely celebratory. While this prophecy is blindingly bright, for the most part Tod’s sensibility is preoccupied by the soul’s night thoughts.

As a variant to the principle advanced by Kenneth Burke that “incongruity without the laughter” produces the grotesque, laughter itself in *The Day of the Locust* can operate as a cruel psychological weapon. When quarrels between Harry Greener and his daughter Faye turn bitter he resorts to stage laughter, she to crudely delivered popular song. In these situations his “masterpiece” laugh is a horrifying effect that evokes “an insane asylum or a haunted castle” (*Novels*, 284). Under other circumstances the grotesque in West’s novel involves a fierce transformation in personality “from apathy to action without the usual transition” (*Novels*, 284).
301). Such an unexpected shift into action is enough to prompt involuntary laughter among observers. With violent conduct the response among observers can be mercilessly good-humored, as among people at the movie premiere in the novel’s last chapter when talk spreads of the vicious rape of a child.

The grotesque in Sherwood Anderson’s fiction is often handled as an outward sign of redemptive truths concealed within the individual and as a medium through which the authentic poetry of life can be expressed. Regularly among West’s characters, by contrast, there is no inner self. The superficiality of Faye, for instance, is consummate, “uncontaminated by thought” or conscience (Novels, 336). This condition can reveal a self possessed of brutality at heart or it can provoke others to violence, as in the cock-fighting episode. Faye’s placid self-absorption provokes in Tod, who seems otherwise docile, an urge “to break its smooth surface with a blow” (Novels, 336). Early on, the characterization of Homer Simpson seems closest in spirit to one of Anderson’s grotesques. In an incident from his past in the Midwest, Homer becomes smitten with Romola Martin, a hotel guest. Infatuated, Homer refuses to acknowledge the plain fact that she is a drunken prostitute. In their one direct encounter Homer impulsively embraces her: “His suddenness frightened her and she tried to pull away, but he held on and began awkwardly to caress her. He was completely unconscious of what he was doing. He knew only that what he felt was marvelously sweet and that he had to make the sweetness carry through to the poor, sobbing woman” (Novels, 271). The embrace goes no further and, as impulsively, he leaves the room, never to see her again.

In the end, West’s portrayal of Homer constitutes a rebuttal of sorts to the sentimentality of the tale in Winesburg, Ohio of Wing Biddelbaum. Where Wing’s hands are revealed to be the true organ of his genius as a teacher of the young, Homer’s hands are always alien, seeming to him “like a pair of strange aquatic animals” (Novels, 267). Clearly evoked here are the “ragged claws” from T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915). When Homer is agitated his hands compulsively repeat the child’s game “here’s the church,” a habit Tod finds “particularly horrible [in] its precision” (Novels, 359). With this characterization there is no promise of innocence redeemed and indeed in the novel’s closing chapter Homer stomps to death the child actor Adore Loomis. For his part, Adore is the troubled, ill-tempered creature of a stage mother’s relentless ambitions.
A unique instance when West claims authentic emotion and genuine innocence from within the grotesque arises not from reality but from total illusion. The occasion is a nightclub act by a female impersonator dressed in a tight, red silk evening gown and singing a lullaby. The prose depiction claims great credibility for the performance: “What he was doing was in no sense parody; it was too simple and too restrained. It wasn’t even theatrical” (Novels, 342). Faye reacts to his performance as an indecent offense against motherhood and she declares a hatred for homosexuals. For its part, the novel fully honors the event: “This dark young man with his thin, hairless arms and soft, rounded shoulders, who rocked an imaginary cradle as he crooned, was really a woman” (Novels, 342). Circumstances here are quite different from the storyline in Anderson’s “The Man Who Became a Woman,” which is told by a man now married and adamantly heterosexual who for a limited period of his youth imagined himself to resemble a woman in respect to facial features and some emotions but who never voluntarily acted out such a role. What proves “awkward and obscene” in the episode from The Day of the Locust comes after the song, when the performer exits with a showy “imitation of a man” who has just played the role of a woman (Novels, 342). In concession to the paying, conventional-minded audience, he provides a drag-show curtain routine by tripping on his dress and revealing a pair of garters.

Despite the perfection of the impersonator’s lullaby, the most powerful impressions of authenticity in the novel are inharmonious, often literally so. The book’s very first paragraph conveys the sounds Tod hears coming from the studio grounds. The “groan of leather” combines with “the jangle of iron” and a percussive “tattoo of a thousand hooves” to make “a great din” (Novels, 241). These opening notes achieve prophetic fulfillment in the concluding chapter with the bedlam roar of shouts, laughter, screams, and catcalls from the premiere crowd outside Kahn’s movie palace. Louder still, as the crowd turns to riot, are the piercing sirens of police cars, the wailing signal from an ambulance, and the sobs and howls of suffering from victims in the melee. At the very last Tod emits a primal cry which is born from physical pain and spiritual anguish but that takes audible form as laughter twisted into an imitation of an emergency siren. By ending with an inarticulate, confused howl, West’s novel gives the lie to any confidence in spoken language, held by Sherwood Anderson for one, as the medium closest to humane, liberating truth. What a reader encounters at the conclusion to The Day of the Locust
is the comedy Baudelaire explained as absolute and grotesque, as an aggrieved outcry that rises from lost innocence and joy.

The visual artist of the contemporary scene with a sensibility close to West’s in several respects is George Grosz, who during the 1920s created in his Berlin studio a number of graphics and paintings that fiercely caricatured postwar German society, from top to bottom, and that denounced the rising Nazi campaigns of militarism and social hatred. His drawing *Maul halten und weiter dienen* (“Shut your mouth and keep on serving”), published in 1928, shows a crucified Christ wearing combat boots and a gas-mask and perched on the cross in a posture that, given the circumstances, approximates a soldier’s stance at attention (fig. 5.2). By the early 1930s West was familiar with this particular image as well as with Grosz’s book of lithographs and watercolors *Ecce Homo* (1923), a panorama of moral decay in German life.¹⁹

Several images in the Grosz book had been judged to be pornographic by a German court. The “Christ with a Gas-Mask” drawing, as *Maul halten* is commonly known, was one among three images the state additionally used as grounds for the prosecution of Grosz and his publisher on charges of blasphemy. The trial, one of the most elaborate of its kind in the nation’s legal history to that time, became a *cause célèbre*. Started in 1928, the court action led to an initial acquittal, but the state restarted pro-

![Figure 5.2. George Grosz, *Maul halten und weiter dienen* (1928). Art © Estate of George Grosz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.](image-url)
ceedings that ended finally in 1931 with a guilty verdict against Grosz, a fine, and destruction of the original plate for the image. He later created several variations upon this theme and image. Grosz’s earliest contributions to the little magazine *Americana* consisted of images drawn in Germany and for which the editor composed captions in English, at times adding an Americanized context. Grosz spent four months of 1932 in the United States, from June until October, teaching at the Art Students League in New York City. In letters he wrote of the American scene as an odd, stimulating mixture of brutality and laughter. At the end of 1932 the
artist returned to Germany, but only for a few months. In January 1933, shortly before Hitler’s seizure of power, Grosz left with his family permanently for the United States; in 1938 he became a naturalized American citizen.20

While Grosz and West can each imagine a distinctly modern martyrdom for Christ, there is a deep political grain within Grosz’s social views, whereas politics are not definitive in West’s work. The artist came of age personally and professionally within a progressive political culture, and he was a member of the German Communist Party for a period of years as a young man. For all the savagery in his attacks against contemporary society Grosz at times would voice also a strong note of utopian promise, though far more often in words than in pictures. In an autobiographical statement for the pages of Americana in 1932 he wrote: “I still believe in certain forbidden metaphysical concepts like Truth, Justice and Humanity.”21 When Grosz left the ideological and class conflicts of Germany and established himself in the United States, his work lost its urgent sense of conscience and spirited tone of resistance to established power. Of the transition Grosz later commented: “In Germany, I had poured forth venom in the form of pen-and-ink caricatures. Hate and proselytizing rancor seemed out of place here.”22 The change is evident in early graphic work Grosz prepared in contexts specific to the United States, as in several Americana cartoons published in 1932 and 1933 (fig. 5.3). Events in Europe later in the decade, however, would provoke a return to previous themes and attitudes.

Nathanael West, though sympathetic with many causes within the American Left, remained as skeptical of Communist promises and programs as of those issued by other ideological factions. He rarely relinquished his inclinations as a disengaged, caustic observer to serve in any common political purpose. The two principal exceptions in which West took limited part in the 1930s were the Screen Writers Guild and the anti-fascist movement based in Hollywood.23 Even so, West explained in a letter to Malcolm Cowley that he had failed in an attempt to include any serious political material in The Day of the Locust: “I tried to describe a meeting of the Anti-Nazi League, but it didn’t fit and I had to substitute a whorehouse and a dirty film. The terrible sincere struggle of the League came out comic when I touched it and even libelous” (Novels, 795). The persuasive political impact The Grapes of Wrath achieved immediately upon its publication in 1939 caused West to reflect on the absolute separation of art from politics in his own life: “Take the ‘mother’ in Steinbeck’s swell novel—I want to believe in her and yet inside myself I honestly can’t. When not writing a novel—say at a meeting of a committee we
have out here to help the migratory worker—I do believe it and try to act on that belief. But at the typewriter by myself I can’t” (Novels, 795).

The other two American writers most often associated with the grotesque in the 1930s are William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell. Faulkner adopts the mode masterfully for the dramatic arc of an epic, burlesque funeral journey in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and for plot incidents in it like the early augury of events to follow when the boy Vardaman bores holes in his mother’s coffin and mutilates her face in the process. The book unfolds mainly, however, as an exploration into the varieties of human consciousness of mortality through its multiplicity of interior monologues, from family members, neighbors, spectators, and the deceased herself. The novel’s attitude toward the story material, in the end, is not in essence grotesque, nor is that of *Sanctuary* (1931), even for all its sensational, macabre incongruities in situation and characterization. In reaction to Caldwell’s commitment to a grotesque vision Faulkner confided in a letter he wrote in December 1932, after receiving a copy of *God’s Little Acre* (1933) in galleys from Caldwell’s editor at Viking Press: “I read it with a good deal of interest, but I still think the guy is pulling [Viking editor] George Oppenheimer’s leg.”

Many years later Faulkner, in the preliminary draft of his acceptance speech for the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature, named Caldwell, Hemingway, and himself as “all of us children of Sherwood Anderson.” The assertion was not retained in the final text of his speech, nor did Faulkner ever claim any definitive literary kinship with an American tradition of the grotesque. In truth, Anderson’s sensibility and style had been the object of an early parody by Faulkner, in the foreword he contributed to the collection of sketches by William Spratling *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles* (1926).

Stories by Erskine Caldwell appeared in the pages of *Contact*. Upon a request from West, and for the purpose of a brief statement to be cited on the dust jacket to *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Caldwell said in praise of West’s book: “I can easily imagine that the bulk of its audience will applaud it for being a clever and amusing novel, and I believe it will have a large audience; but to me it is a tragic story.” This last remark, which I think misjudges the novel’s tone and final effect, is indicative of the strain of high earnestness in Caldwell’s literary persona, which is quite at odds with the popular response to his work. His book *Tobacco Road* (1932) and the immense commercial success of its stage production on Broadway, which opened in late 1933 and which would run continuously until May 1941, established for the public mind a grotesque vision of the American South that interbreeds lurid sex, crude dialect humor, and social documentation on rural idiocy.
CHAPTER 5

Adaptation of the book for the stage was handled by writer Jack Kirkland with the approval of Caldwell. In publicity and interviews the novelist praised the play as an effective dramatization of his book and he insisted that the production—beyond its sensational, humorous, and crowd-pleasing elements—presented a serious, documentary portrait of America’s Southern poor. The drama scholar Mark Farnow, on the other hand, attributes the box-office success of the stage production of *Tobacco Road* to a cultural process of overcoming social fears through mockery.²⁷

In an assessment of Caldwell’s popularity during the 1930s, Kenneth Burke is of the opinion that his work consistently performs “an astounding trick of oversimplification” by placing characters possessed of “the scant, crude tropisms of an insect” into complex social situations. Burke estimates that Caldwell’s underlying intentions are “to blaspheme and profane for our enjoyment” and that consequently his characters can never amount to more than “subnormal mannikins.” Burke places the fiction of Caldwell within the lowest, crudest ranks of comedy, and he considers it thus incapable of achieving the incisive critique of one’s own time possible through the grotesque.²⁸ Burke additionally remarks upon a quality of “balked religiosity” within the fiction, and in this one respect we can place Caldwell meaningfully in the company of Nathanael West and Flannery O’Connor.