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This Cosmic Pawnshop We Call Life: Nathanael West, Bergson, Capitalism and Schizophrenia

by Diane Long Hoeveler

1

After three days of sleep, Miss Lonelyhearts dreams a dream. And in this dream he finds himself an object in a pawnshop window, displayed along with such fetishistic objects as diamond rings, watches, shotguns, fishing tackle, mandolins, as he puts it, "the paraphernalia of suffering." This scene causes him to meditate on the material world's "tropism for disorder, entropy," only to conclude that "All order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while." And so Miss Lonelyhearts continues this battle for order by shaping the objects in the window into various configurations—a phallus, a heart, a diamond, a circle, a triangle, a square, a swastika, a cross—only to collapse finally in futility and exhaustion (West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* 30–31). Now this strange dream mirrors the assaults that have been made on all belief systems throughout the text. But it also suggests, more subtly, the criticism of commodification and a dehumanizing capitalism that lies at the heart of West's enterprise. When one tropes life and religions and what passes for "values" as objects in a pawnshop, then one has succumbed to a powerful species of nihilism indeed. And yet the pawnshop has other connotations. It suggests that all of us are used goods, that all of us are involved in an exchange system in which we are forced to barter ourselves to the highest bidder, that all of us are rejected or extraneous objects seeking some sort of system to give us meaning and value. These are not comforting thoughts, and yet they form the core of West's vision of life as a cosmic pawnshop, a buyer's market where the only tenuous hope we have for survival lies in self-deprecating humor and mechanistic disengagement from the emotions.

In a letter to a friend, West observed about himself: "I do consider myself a comic writer, perhaps in an older and much different tradition than Benchley or Frank Sullivan. Humor is another thing; I am not a humorous writer I must admit and have no desire to be one." As several critics have noted, West's "comic" characteristics are not as close to Greek traditions—

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ridicule through comic reduction—as he would like us to believe.[1] In his two major works, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939), West clearly intended to experiment with the traditions of vaudeville comedy, burlesque, comic-strip action, and the grotesqueries associated with the dark violence of gallows humor, all modern-day adaptations of ridicule through comic reduction. But West was also attempting something much more complex. He aimed in these two texts to use a particular theory of comedy—derived from Henri Bergson—in order to make a particularly Bergsonian criticism about what passes for life in a dehumanized, mechanized, and industrialized society, that is, society as pawnshop. In depicting his characters and their lives as ludicrously machine-like, commodified, and objectified, West condemns the schizophrenia and alienation that capitalism has produced in its modern victims.[2]

West's characters are schizophrenic and alienated because they are victimized by their beliefs in two conflicting ideologies. On one hand, they embrace the humanist ideology; they believe themselves to be "totalities" and "selves" as they throw off their oedipal inheritance. But according to the "anti-oedipal" ideology to which West subscribes, they can be seen more accurately as part-objects of the machine we call life. And the disparity between these two systems produces for West and his readers the rather dark humor of both works. In laughing at his characters, West laughs specifically at the conflicts caused by their subscription to humanist beliefs, which are later contradicted by their mechanistic behavior and attitudes. And yet his characters have had no choice but to behave as machines, as comically grotesque automatons who have been programmed to deconstruct. Like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, he rejects the bourgeois notion of a "self," of human beings as "individuals" or "totalities." He sees humans instead as assemblages composed of moving parts that can either attach to other machines to make new machines or dissolve and leave behind only parts that will join with other part-objects in new productions.[3] This bleak vision—grotesque and pessimistic as it forces people into what amounts to a pawnshop window—constitutes what West would like us to recognize about modern capitalist society.

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[1]Jay Martin, "The Black Hole of Calcoolidge" (Martin 9). Other valuable studies on West's humor include those by Podheretz, Lewis, and Comachero.

[2]West often went to the vaudeville, Harlem nightclubs, burlesque, performances of Jimmy Durante, and the Marx brothers. He wrote his college thesis on Euripides and often spoke of the connection between burlesque and Greek comedy (Martin 126). West mentions Bergson only once, in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*.

[3]For a fuller discussion of the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, see their *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Interestingly, Deleuze has written a full-length study of Bergson.

In his essay, "Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone," West assessed his own brand of humor by contrasting it to the English tradition of being good-natured. He goes on to note,

> This fact makes it difficult to compare N. W. West with other comic writers, as he is vicious, mean, ugly, obscene and insane . . . With the French, however, West can well be compared. In his use of the violently disassociated, the dehumanized marvelous, the deliberately criminal and imbecilic, he is much like . . . certain of the *surrealistes.* (Martin 29)

And although West tried on several occasions to align his work and vision with the more fashionable surrealists, particularly in their use of the *montage* effect, it would appear that a more important source for West's "French" vision can be found in Bergson's 1900 essay on "Laughter." Specifically, this essay will examine how Bergson's presence hovers over West's two texts, elided by West but never fully escaped. And in uncovering the presence of Bergson, we also need to recognize how Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* seems almost to serve as a metatextual commentary on West's works.

Let's begin by examining the relevant sections of Bergson's 1900 essay. First of all, Bergson states that a humorous impasse occurs whenever a human being stops behaving the way humans should behave—that is, spontaneously—and instead behaves as machines do, like clock-work mechanisms. Bergson notes that this "absence of feeling usually accompanies laughter," and it is this "anesthesia of the heart" that permits us to laugh at the plight of others. That is, we laugh at others as a form of "social 'rag-ging' " that "implies a secret or unconscious . . . unavowed intention to humiliate and consequently to correct our neighbor, if not in his will, at least in his deed."[4] Our ability to laugh at others is made possible by our ability to behold insensitively and without empathy the bumblings and puppet-like antics of our fellow beings. We laugh *at* them, not *with* them, because we do not associate ourselves with them. We read them as "machines," while we continue to read ourselves as "bodies."

2

In West's two novellas most readers can observe the actions of his main characters with the sort of detached amusement of which Bergson writes. West has, in fact, noted that none of his characters is attractive enough to

[4]Henri Bergson's *Le Rire: Essai dur la signification du comique* originally appeared in serial form in the *Revue Française*, 1900. Translated as *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, by C. Brereton and F. Rothwell. (New York: Macmillan, 1911). I use Bergson's "Laughter" in *Comedy: An Essay on Comedy, Laughter* (Bergson). All quotations will be from this edition.

merit the reader's total sympathies; thus, we are able to find the desperate melancholia and religious mania of Miss Lonelyhearts and the vacuous longings of the Californians absurdly humorous at the same time that West intended them to be read as serious expressions of the alienating dehumanization and mechanization—the schizophrenia—that have trans-formed the modern world into a grotesque pawnshop.

According to Bergson, "the fundamental law of life is the complete negation of repetition." This spontaneity, the essence of humanity, is the exact opposite of what Bergson calls "the mechanical encrusted on the living," which is, according to him, the cause of humor (81; 84). In other words, we laugh at repetition because it is unnatural, inhuman, and mechanical. West's earlier novella, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, relates in comic-strip and repetitive style the absurd events in the life of a newspaperman assigned to cover the lovelorn column. In his essay on the work, West stated that he originally intended the subtitle of the novella to be "'A novel in the form of a comic strip.' The chapters [are] to be squares in which many things happen through one action. The speeches contained in the conventional balloons" (West, "Some Notes on *Miss L*"). The notion of the novel as a comic strip explains its fragmented structure, but more importantly it clarifies the repetitive and mechanistic action of the characters as they proceed like automatons throughout the action of the text. The hero, nameless except for his mockingly ironic job title of "Miss Lonelyhearts," remains until the conclusion of the novel a repetitive victim of his own self-created and self-sustained desperation.

Bergson furthers tells us that the action of comedy relies on the gesture, "the attitudes, the movements and even the language by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching" (153). Similarly, West describes Shrike, the sadistic boss, as the epitome of the comic grotesque and a practitioner of the humorous gesture:

> Although [Shrike's] gestures were elaborate, his face was blank. He practiced a trick used much by moving-picture comedians—the dead pan. No matter how fantastic or excited his speech, he never changed his expression. Under the shining white glove of his brow, his features huddled together in a dead, gray triangle. (6)

West's description of Shrike makes clear his adoption of Bergsonian principles of humor. First, Shrike is mechanical; no matter what the situation he remains always the same, frozen in his "dead" face. Second, the use of the term "dead pan" suggests not only the comic facial technique, but the death of spontaneity, passion, and *élan vital* in the modern industrialized world. Third, the gray triangle on Shrike's forehead marks his affiliation with the steely cold mechanical form of the robot. Not only is Shrike physically similar

to a mechanism, but he also treats others as if they were mechanisms. When he introduces his date Miss Farkis, the "cow-eyed girl of great intelligence," he "mak[es] her bow as a ventriloquist does his doll" (6).

Miss Lonelyhearts recognizes that Shrike is a machine, just as he also realizes that Shrike and his newspaper friends are all "machines for making jokes; . . . They, no matter what the motivating force, death, love or God, made jokes" (5). Unfortunately, he fails to recognize that he also is a machine and that the joke is on him, as Shrike points out. West echoes Bergson's notion that we laugh when we see people behaving like machines that produce the same response no matter what the stimuli; however, the laugh that West elicits is the laugh of desperation, the dark laugh that knows it has not even begun to hide the pain. But if Miss Lonelyhearts sees others as machines, he cannot afford to see himself as a machine also. If they are predictable both on and off the job, so, alas, is he. His responses to his newspaper correspondents bear an uncanny resemblance to each other; they are, after all, only formulaic responses to real pain, just as there are only mechanistic patterns of behavior in a life that can only be alienating.

In addition to mocking the dehumanization of work, communication, and religion, West also focuses on the mechanization of sex as a topic for dark humor in both of these novels. There is something perversely mechanical about Miss Lonelyhearts's pursuit of women, particularly other men's wives. Miss Lonelyhearts's failure to achieve any meaningful connection with Betty, Mrs. Shrike, or Mrs. Doyle results because, according to the hero, all of these women are too mechanical. The humor and irony, of course, lie in the fact that Miss Lonelyhearts himself is the ultimate mechanic in regard to sexual relationships. And although he is supposedly engaged to Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts's attitude toward her is ambivalent at best. On an afternoon visit he reduces her to an unfeeling object by saying, as he tugs at her nipple, "Let me pluck this rose . . . I want to wear it in my buttonhole" (12). Now most women would not consider this line a particularly persuasive one, and they would feel demeaned by such treatment. But West's focus is on Miss L and why he would approach his fiancée in such a manner.

Miss L wants, by appealing to Betty in such words, to participate in that most persistent humanistic myth, the return to the mother, the retreat to the breast. But rather than idealize such a need, Miss L can only pose in anti-oedipal postures. We can only become what Deleuze and Guattari call a "sucking machine" (49), a consuming machine attached to a producing machine. To admit such an infantile need is threatening and so he distances the desire by transforming Betty's nipple into an object, a part-object, a detachable "rose" that he can pluck whenever he likes. With colossal conceit, Miss Lonelyhearts concludes that Betty, whom he labels a complacent "Buddha," is not "significant," while his torture and confusion have meaning that her ordered person does not have (10). He is human; she is a machine, a

part-object (in Melanie Klein's sense) to be used/abused and consumed. The relationship between these two presents West's rather bleak portrait of the forces that doom the heterosexual compulsion in his texts.

In rather more blatant oedipal fashion, Miss Lonelyhearts next turns for comfort to his boss's wife. But Mrs. Shrike, for all her seductive posturings, is also perceived by the hero in mechanistic terms. West tells us that her actions are a "series of formal, impersonal gestures." She makes the impression of an automaton, for we are told that "there was something cleanly mechanical in her pantomime." To complete the picture she is dressed in a "tight, shiny dress that was like glass-covered steel" (22). The frustrated sexual pursuit of Mrs. Shrike resembles not only a mechanistic action, but it also reminds one of a race, a contest, a cold struggle of the wills in which both characters are depicted as humorous victims of their own peculiarly grotesque needs. Mrs. Shrike confirms the agonistic imagery by wearing and tauntingly displaying a medal that she won as a girl in a running race. She styles herself a modern-day Diana, a perverse virginal tease, a tabooed object for Miss Lonelyhearts who, after all, delights in placing himself in an endless series of oedipal triangulations (mommy-daddy-me). Caught in such a game, the child can only lose to the superior power of daddy and mommy; Mrs. Shrike will always retreat to her husband after playing with her boytoy.

Rather than continue to lose indefinitely—both to Shrike and his wife—Miss Lonelyhearts chooses to pursue weaker quarry: the wife of an impotent cripple. When he thinks of her before their meeting, Miss L can only image Mrs. Doyle as a "tent, hair-covered and veined," while he pictures himself as "the skeleton in a water-closet, the skull and cross-bones on a scholar's bookplate." We are reminded here of Bergson's comment that we also laugh at "a person embarrassed by his body" (93). And in an analogous manner the description of Mrs. Doyle causes one to recall what Deleuze and Guattari have called the "body-without-organs," or matter that has not yet been socialized, what we like to call "nature." In pursuing Mrs. Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts fancies that he can return to some primitive relation with woman as primeval matter. Miss Lonelyhearts does not think of Mrs. Doyle as human; she is only a "tent," a type of machine to which he can attach the machine of his body. By merging himself—a deathly and fleshless creature—with the maternal "tent," the womb, he fancies that his mind and spirit will regenerate, that he will escape the "skull and cross-bones" of his mind, dissociated as it is from his body. Ever hopeful, he again imagines that he will find some reintegration with another and within himself, but his mechanistic dehumanization of sexuality is clearly revealed as he fastens his eyes on "two disembodied genitals" drawn on the phone booth wall (26). In the bizarre seduction scene that follows, we recognize the two as sexual participants engaged in a supposedly human activity; however, they manage to conceal their humanity by assuming mechanical characteristics. Miss Lonelyhearts

assumes the role of a toy, the plaything for a massive animal. While in bed with Mrs. Doyle he hears the "wharf smack of rubber on flesh" (28). That is, the lovers are humorously described as objects caught on a shipwrecked vessel, cargo shifting aimlessly from side to side. We are reminded of Bergson's statement: "the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (79).

In a final desperate effort to recover some innocence and optimism in life, Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty retreat to a farmhouse in a sort of parody of a bucolic retreat. But this brief idyll only slightly abates the doom toward which Miss Lonelyhearts rushes. He meets Peter Doyle at the speakeasy, and again we are introduced to a human being who is less human than mechanical. But for all his mechanistic and sub-human behavior, Peter Doyle is not funny. And when he is unable to speak in the bar and instead can only silently clasp Miss Lonelyhearts's hand, we do not laugh at him. And when Mrs. Doyle rolls a newspaper into a club, strikes her husband in the mouth with it, and he responds by growling like a dog, we do not laugh (47–48). We wince. All of the mechanical imagery in these final pages of the novella painfully expresses the vacuity and futility of machines pretending to be something other than what they are. The characters, that is, know they have been alienated and dehumanized; they know they are behaving like machines, and yet they cannot stop or even control their actions.

The text concludes in a flurry of action that recapitulates the dominant issues and images of the work. In his attempt to embrace Peter Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts ironically sees his salvation. He "would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been made whole" (57). But there can be no spiritual core for machines. Machines can only attach and reattach at random. And so the consummation of cripples does occur, although it leads not to apotheosis, but instead to the final piece of grotesquely ironic mechanistic imagery in the novella. Miss Lonelyhearts, as he reaches out to Doyle, is shot by the accidental explosion of a machine. We realize at the conclusion of *Miss Lonelyhearts* that guns are simply the logical extension of hands that are attached to human beings who have become machines. And machines can only destroy or self-destruct according to the specifications of their assembly.

3

The Day of the Locust, West's final novella, is a humorous work in the same sort of Bergsonian terms that we have come to identify with West, largely because again we encounter characters for whom we feel no direct empathy or identification. There are several very humorous scenes in the text, but they are scenes that recall the comment at the beginning of the work: "It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless,

even horrible, the results of that are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous" (61). Again, however, we see the use of mechanistic imagery in conjunction with the appearance and behavior of the characters, and again in Bergsonian fashion, we respond with the cold laughter of emotional distance.

As we have seen, the mechanization of sexual relationships formed a central concern in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, as it does in *The Day of the Locust*. Tod Hackett, the Yale art student amazed and infatuated with the tinsel of Hollywood, longs to be the lover of Faye Greener, the embodiment of all that is attractive and destructive about the place. When his advance fails, he fantasizes that Faye might be a prostitute available for purchase at Mrs. Jennings's establishment for $30. When he discusses the supposed tastefulness of Mrs. Jennings's with Claude Estes, Tod remarks disparagingly, "I don't care how much cellophane she wraps it in, nautch joints are depressing, like all places for deposit, banks, mail boxes, tombs, vending machines." To which Claude responds, "Love is like a vending machine, eh? Not bad. You insert a coin and press home the lever. There's some mechanical activity inside the bowels of the device" (72). Indeed, West's not very subtly conveyed point is that there is "some mechanical activity" within the bowels of all life. The energy of the human—which we call desire—can only mimic the purely mechanical energy of the social/external/ideological realm. This introductory image prepares us for the mechanistic sexual dance that winds through the novella, a dance in which Faye leads her frustrated suitors to their own self-constructed and self-induced destruction.

Before we examine Faye's suitors, however, it is necessary to understand her father, Harry Greener, the failed vaudevillian and the most blatantly mechanistic character in the novella. He possesses the mask-like face of a toy. In fact, Tod observes that Harry,

> like most actors, had very little back or top to his head. It was almost all face, like a mask, with deep furrows between the eyes, across the forehead and on either side of the nose and mouth, plowed there by years of broad grinning and heavy frowning. (119)

Harry's behavior also reveals that his mechanistic antics are a defense mechanism against the assaults of life. He "clowns continuously" because "most people, he had discovered, won't go out of their way to punish a clown" (77). When Harry arrives at Homer Simpson's door selling silver polish, Harry goes into his vaudeville act as a wind-up doll would. He speaks in a "sing-song" voice; goes into mechanical bows, drops his hat, feigns receiving a kick, and rubs the seat of his pants. Harry himself is not aware of whether he is acting or is actually sick, for air escapes him continually like a deflating toy balloon (90).

Harry's automated vaudevillian routine suggests Bergson's comment that we find humor in the figure of the Jack-in-the-box, which Bergson claims is humorous because it "gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement" (195; 105–10). We see Harry, like the dehumanized machine that he has become, go through one final spin before he is effectively turned off: "suddenly, like a mechanical toy that had been overwound, something snapped inside him and he began to spin through his entire repertoire. The effort was purely muscular, like the dance of a paralytic" (92). Later, after Harry is in his coffin, we see him "wheeled out for exhibition," looking like "the interlocutor in a minstrel show" (125). He has quite literally become Bergson's darkly humorous Jack-in-the-box. West implies that death can be the only reward for the human who allows his energy—his desire—to be subsumed into the purely mechanistic routines that his economy demands of him.[5]

Like her father, Faye Greener, although only 17, has already put on the mechanistic armor that will sustain her against the onslaughts of life. The photograph she gives Tod shows her wearing a "breastplate," while Tod remarks that her legs looked "swordlike" (67). To Homer she looks "as shiny as a new spoon," with "odd mannerisms and artificial voice," while "her elaborate gestures, like all her others, were so completely meaningless, almost formal, that she seemed a dancer rather than an affected actress" (94). Bergson has analyzed the role of gesture in humor, and concludes that "instead of concentrating our attention on actions, comedy directs it rather to gestures" (153). This is a woman pantomiming being a woman, a woman masquerading as a caricature of a woman. All surface, she has no depth. Like her father, she has become the mask she has assumed to confront the world. And what is it that Faye is protecting? If her father knew that men would not hurt a clown, Faye knows that men will not assault a woman they read as "swordlike." Faye has, of course, translated her body into an effective castrating machine. She is the Amazon, the woman as fetishistic commodity who will turn on her unsuspecting consumer and consume him.

We may only find Faye pathetic, but the same cannot be said about two of her suitors, Homer Simpson and Earle Shoop. Homer, who is compared to "one of Picasso's great sterile athletes," represents a man who has been dehumanized by a lifetime of deadening labor: "the forty years of his life had been entirely without variety or excitement. As a bookkeeper, he had worked mechanically" (88). This labor has alienated Homer's mind from his body, or rather from parts of his body. When he awakens he gets out of bed "in

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[5]The reader of West's *A Cool Million* is reminded of Lemuel Pitkin in this context. Also like a machine, he loses his teeth, his eye, a leg, and his hair during a performance on the New York stage. The audience roars as Pitkin is gradually disembodied in public view.

sections, like a poorly made automaton," and then he "carries his hands into the bathroom" (82). Capitalism has alienated Homer from his body; or rather, capitalism has made it abundantly clear that Homer is not a unified entity, but an alienated series of part-objects. He has been constructed, that is, much like an object on an assembly-line.

Similarly, Earle Shoop, a man who makes a very poor living pretending to be a cowboy in Hollywood, has also become mechanized. He possesses a "two-dimensional face that a talented child might have drawn with a ruler and a compass; . . . [he resembled] a mechanical drawing" (109). Earle's behavior is also mechanical, and we, like his friends, laugh at him for it. When his friends tease Earle about a number of trivial matters, Earle remains stoic, without expression, until he suddenly explodes in a rage and we are told "this was the real point of the joke. They were delighted by Earle's fury. Tod also laughed. The way Earle had gone from apathy to action without the usual transition was funny. The seriousness of his violence was even funnier" (110–11). Earle as "stoic" is one sort of machine, while Earle as violently angry is simply another sort of machine. The fact that there is no transitional period between these two machines, that a sort of switch was flipped in him, makes the joke even funnier. Earle as dehumanized "cowboy," mechanized in his bogus "Return to Nature" pose, stands as a sort of double to the urban Homer Simpson; both of them are absurd because they are so thoroughly alienated from their bodies.

During the final party at Homer's house, following the literal cock fight, we witness a symbolic one, a primitive vying for the favors of the Lady Faye. And as if she were the heroine of one of her own trite scripts, Faye is pursued by all of the men present, only to invite the economically dispossessed Miguel to her bed. In a sense, however, it makes perfect sense for Faye to be attracted to Miguel. He still possesses a real human body, unlike her other suitors. When he discovers Faye with Miguel, Homer is quite literally compared to a mechanism:

> [a] steel spring which has been freed of its function in a machine and allowed to use all its strength centripetally. While part of a machine the pull of the spring has been used against other and stronger forces, but now, free at last, it was striving to attain the shape of its original coil. (171)

The original shape that Homer resumes, of course, is the position of a fetus in the womb, and the madness into which Homer sinks expresses his total retreat from a world that has proved too painful for him to endure. The mechanization of characters in both of West's novellas reveals the need for victims of industrialization to escape the pain and humiliation inherent in human relationships, not to mention dehumanized work.

The mob at the conclusion of the novella, also dehumanized by its years of dull, soulless labor, reminds the reader of Marx's notion that the proletariat have lost their uniqueness because they have allowed themselves to become appendages to the industrial machine. West says about the mob: "they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields, and at tedious machines of all sorts," only to learn during retirement that "sunshine isn't enough" (177). Homer, the ultimate victim of dehumanizing labor and the falsity of the Hollywood dream as embodied in Faye, precipitates the riot by stomping on Adore Loomis, the monster child. The last glimpse we have of Homer is of "a badly made automaton [with] his features set in a rigid mechanical grin" (178). And like a machine, Tod is taken from the scene of the riot in a police van, "imitating the siren as loud as he could" (178). Tod, the spokesman for West in the novella, concludes the work as a literal, machine-like warning to others who would seek to find in their dreams and illusions anything but the realization that capitalism has mechanized the humanistic fantasies we have constructed about ourselves.

4

> The Clown is dead; the curtain is down. And when I say clown, I mean you. After all, aren't we all . . . aren't we all clowns? Of course, I know it's old stuff; but what difference does that make? Life *is* a stage; and *we* are all clowns. What is more tragic than the role of a clown? What more filled with all the essentials of great art?—pity and irony. (West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*)

West himself described his style of humor as a "particular kind of joking." That humor, he remarked, was close to the tradition of Euripides, the French surrealists, the American burlesque and vaudeville, but even closer to the dark humor of the clown in *Hamlet* or the fool in *Lear*. It was a particular need to turn the cruelty and suffering of human existence into a sort of joke. West went on to clarify:

> An intelligent man finds it easy to laugh at himself but his laughter is not sincere if it is thorough. If I could be Hamlet 'neath this jester's motley, the role would be tolerable. But I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laugh is "bitter," I must laugh at the laugh. The ritual of feeling demands burlesque and, whether the burlesque is successful or not, a laugh. (qtd. in Galloway 32)

The grotesque and dark humor in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* reveals West's fullest expression of the terrible consequences of alienating dehumanization, mechanization, and soulless labor. Although he chooses to

"laugh" at the mechanization of love, sex, religion, and work, West clearly is no transparent "comic" writer. He clearly intends to be some sort of social and economic critic of capitalism, both in its effects and in its ideological manipulation of a media system that it controls. When Miss Lonelyhearts shaped those pawnshop objects he was simply reifying his culture's crude grapplings with the hearts and minds of its rather limited citizens. By using Bergson's theory of humor and by choosing to laugh at the depraved and aberrant antics of his machine like characters, West leads his readers into a strange new territory, where one can only wince or smirk in recognition, or, as he would say, feel pity and irony.

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