

# THE VATICAN FILM LIBRARY

## *St. Louis University Acts to Preserve the Literary Treasures of the Papacy*

By THOMAS B. SHERMAN

**M**ORE than 788,000 feet of film containing microscopic reproductions of about 10,224,000 pages of rare manuscript are now on file in a single room at St. Louis University, the university operated by the Jesuit Order at St. Louis, Mo. These microfilm copies of handwritten works, whose value cannot be estimated, were made in the Vatican Library. The process of selecting, photographing, and shipping these copies to St. Louis was begun four years ago and by the end of last year this unique project was brought to the completion of its first stage.

The collection in its entirety now represents almost three-fourths of the Vatican manuscripts in Latin, Greek, and modern languages. Thus, one of the world's greatest deposits of classical and medieval lore has been established in the center of America. A second phase, however, is still in prospect.

Under the arrangement with the Vatican whereby the manuscripts were copied the contents of printed volumes will also be photographed to the number that financing will permit. The cost of the manuscript photography has been underwritten by the Knights of Columbus. As now planned, the new undertaking will be financed by selling the microfilm copies of printed volumes to other request-

ing libraries in the United States.

The Vatican Film Library, as the St. Louis collection is now called, originated in an idea that came to Father Lowrie Daly, S.J., one day back in 1950. Father Daly, a history instructor at St. Louis University, was thinking of the Vatican's many treasures and their liability to damage and, perhaps, destruction in the uncertain state of the world's civil affairs. Moreover, all man-made documents were subject to the erosion of time. So, in considering the need for preserving the Vatican's literary treasures and extending their lifespan into an indefinite future, Fr. Daly concluded that a duplication of their contents was indicated. And he concluded further that many good ends would be served if the film could be brought to St. Louis.

Fr. Daly first broached the idea to a colleague, Fr. Joseph Donnelly, then librarian of the university, and the two then presented it for discussion to Rev. Paul C. Reinert, president of the University. Fr. Reinert gave the project his full approval and started preliminary negotiations with the Vatican.

Through the good offices of Rev. James Naughton, S.J., the first American to hold the position of Secretary of the Jesuit Order, the St. Louis petition received the blessing of the Holy See. A formal request—in Latin—was then forwarded to the Most

Rev. Anselmo M. Albareda, Prefect of the Vatican Library. On December 15, 1950, Fr. Albareda wrote an official answer—in flawless English—approving the request and making St. Louis University the sole depository of the projected film library.

Shortly thereafter Frs. Daly and Donnelly went to Vatican City to survey the situation and work out a preliminary plan of operation. Their first sight of the Vatican Library with its seemingly endless corridors and its fifteen kilometers of shelving brought them a staggering realization of its magnitude; and on closer examination of the material they reached two important conclusions. The first was that the tentative budget of \$50,000 would not be nearly enough to finance the copying of just the handwritten material. Secondly, they decided that many duplications and much material of a slight critical interest, such as the numerous copies of the Vulgate Bible, would have to be excluded.

**M**EANWHILE, Fr. Reinert applied himself to the task of raising a fund that would permit the fullest possible development of the manuscript phase of the project. Luke E. Hart, a St. Louisan and a member of the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus, became interested; and it was through his efforts that this Catholic organization, together with St. Louis University, established the Knights of Columbus Vatican Film Library at Saint Louis University. The outlay of funds amounted to about \$350,000 by the time the last manuscript was photographed.

Listing of the items to be photographed was carried on partly in Rome by Fr. Daly and partly in St. Louis after Fr. Daly returned with all available indices and inventories which could be consulted by classical authorities at the university. What remained then was largely an organizational job. This proved tedious enough as it happened. Equipment that would carry through the photographic process from start to finish was an essential requirement and as the Korean War was still in progress it was hard to come by. Obtaining a thermostatically controlled film developer was particularly difficult. Frs. Daly and Donnelly found one in California after an eighteen-month search, but it was too big for the hatches of any available commercial airplane. This crisis was finally resolved by removing the doors of a Scandinavian airlines plane and forcing the machine inside.

Photographing was started in 1952. Technicians of the Vatican Library  
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—Arteaga.

The microfilm machines at the Vatican Film Library, St. Louis University.



SR's Spotlight on Fiction:

## "COMPLETE WORKS OF NATHANAEL WEST"

By ROGER H. SMITH

**T**HE publication this week of "The Complete Works of Nathanael West" (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, \$5) provides a fine opportunity for general readers and students alike to appraise the work of a significant and unique American writer of the 1930s. For many, we hope, it will provide the occasion for discovering the world of Nathanael West, a limbo world as relevant today in all its harshness as it was when it was first conceived.

Readers, if they know West at all, probably know him only for two novels: "Miss Lonelyhearts," a bitter, poetic little book; and "The Day of the Locust," unquestionably the best novel ever written about Hollywood. In addition to these two, the present collection includes "The Dream Life of Balso Snell," West's first novel, and "A Cool Million," his third, both of which have been out of print in this country for many years. Though none of West's four novels sold well when they were first published, today, with our gift for 20-20 hindsight, there is an eerie relevance in West's portrayal of what Alan Ross, in the introduction to this collection, calls the seismographic "dead center" of a time and an emotional state.

Today, much of the American writing of the 1930s seems strangely distant. A great majority of that period's best writers were involved, in varying degrees of intensity, with a conflict which was essentially political, not artistic. At the time, no doubt, these writers had no difficulty in justifying their commitment, but one effect of their commitment has been that the books they wrote in the 1930s today seem oddly obsolete. Depression America produced very little first-rate writing, in contrast to the prolific outpourings of the 1920s immediately preceding and the 1940s immediately following. In the Twenties, the dream of art, enunciated by the American expatriate writers, seemed valid. For the artists, at least, it justified their self-imposed exile from society. "We are the laughing morticians of the present," exclaimed the manifesto of one of the period's

"little magazines" of which West was briefly an editor.

But if the Twenties were years of exile, the Thirties were years of involvement. Pressured by circumstances and their own sensibilities, the exiles who returned were compelled to choose sides in an intellectual conflict so intense and yet so self-contained that when the conflict ended, much of the art it produced became obsolete.

Nathanael West's saving grace was that, as a man and as a writer, he practiced the fine art of detachment. Although he was as concerned as his colleagues with the ills of Depression America (once he was arrested for joining a picket line in front of a New York department store), he rarely permitted the period's numerous teapot tempests to intrude on his serious writing. As a writer, his preoccupation was with the moral bankruptcy that underlay the surface ills. Specifically, he wrote of the dreams by which man attempts to live and of the violence which perverts these dreams.

West was a late recruit to the

American literary expatriate movement of the 1920s. He arrived in Paris in 1924, following his graduation from Brown University, and stayed until 1931. Surrealism was a rising, organized vogue in Paris during West's years there, and he learned much from it. Rejecting the surrealists' code that art is for art's sake, not for communication, West nevertheless assimilated much of the surrealists' methods and philosophy: dreams, the subconscious, echoalia, and the sense of the "theatric uselessness of everything," as Wallace Fowlie has characterized the movement's *esprit*. These elements West added to what he had learned from Dostoevski, his favorite author and most obvious literary ancestor, and the French medieval writers, who fascinated him at college. The first result of this fusion was "The Dream Life of Balso Snell," published in Paris in 1931.

"Balso" is the precocious work of a young writer, still groping for technique. Self-conscious, arty, full of rather undigested learning, it nevertheless contains passages that reveal the scope of West's remarkable talent and treats themes that are basic to his harsh, pessimistic philosophy. Each of West's novels is based on two polarized concepts: the dreams of men and the violence of the man-made world. In "Balso," the dream of art is swallowed up in a world of animal instincts. In "Miss Lonelyhearts," the violence of the world defeats the Christ dream. "A Cool Million," West's third book, is the Horatio Al-

**THE HAPPY MORTICIAN:** Up to now a casual dropping of the name of the ill-fated author of "Miss Lonelyhearts" has served as a splendid method for rating fellow imbibers at cocktail parties. Where it has always been simple to gauge strangers by their reaction to the name of Scott Fitzgerald, mention of the name of Nathanael West constituted a far greater test. He was the rarest of literary vintages, the property of a select few. Seventeen years have passed since his tragic death and his reputation has endured. Now with the publication of his collected work, perhaps West will enjoy a belated and deserved popularity.

Certainly during his lifetime lucky stars never shone. His brightest years might have been his Brown college days where as Nathan Wallenstein Weinstein he earned his bachelor of philosophy degree and the friendship of some other young men with literary proclivities, among them Quentin Reynolds, I. J. Kapstein, and S. J. Perelman, who later married West's sister. A journey to Paris coincided with a wildly Bohemian phase at which time West declared, "In order to be an artist one has to live like one." It was during this cafe period, in 1924, that he began to work on his curiously original first novel, "The Dream of Balso Snell." More sedate occupations followed. Back in New York, he worked as night-clerk and manager of the Hotel Sutton, a resident-club hotel, simultaneously pursuing an elusive and unsatisfactory writing career. His work accepted, the publishing firm would go bankrupt or meet some other disaster. Exasperated, West fled to Hollywood where he wrote several screen plays and obtained the background material and ideas for his "Day of the Locust." In 1940, grown more saturnine and acerbic, he married Eileen McKenney, the gay and beautiful sister of "My Sister Eileen." Seven months later—on the very day F. Scott Fitzgerald died a few miles away—he and Eileen were killed in an automobile crash.

—ARCHIBALD VAN VOORHEES.