



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-

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**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.

ger rags-to-riches dream in reverse, the breakdown of the American dream. "The Day of the Locust," West's fourth—and last—novel, anatomizes the Dream Factory itself—Hollywood, where West spent the last five years of his life earning a living writing movie scripts. With his bride Eileen McKenney, West died in California in an auto accident in December 1940 at the age of thirty-six.

"Miss Lonelyhearts" is about a man who writes a newspaper "agony column," who finds that confession is neither good nor effective for the souls of his readers and that it ultimately comes to jeopardize the soul of the confessor himself. As Miss Lonelyhearts (he is given no other name in the book) states the problem:

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

"Miss Lonelyhearts," with its dissection of the confessor, is a vibrantly bitter little book. The structure and the writing are flawless. The successive negation of the incomplete dreams of modern life—incomplete because each of them denies a part of reality—and the final negation of the

Christ dream itself are put forward in episode after highly charged episode. The plot—crusading newspaperman against a backdrop of sex and speak-easies—has been done in hundreds of grade-B movies. But in West's hands, the plot takes on a high-speed intensity that makes "Miss Lonelyhearts" a small classic.

WEST wrote his third book, "A Cool Million," hurriedly, to meet a publisher's deadline. West was a slow, meticulous writer, and this rush job was his worst book. A slapstick account of Depression America, it also was his least detached effort, and this, too, detracts from its quality. Nevertheless, it is funny. Dedicated to West's brother-in-law, S. J. Perelman, the book displays much of that humorist's free-swinging style. It is acid in its delineation of the decaying Horatio Alger American dream. Taken as that, "A Cool Million" is superior to most of the similar work produced during the period.

It was five years before West produced another book—"The Day of the Locust." This novel shows the full maturity which West's talents had attained in the interim between books. West was one writer who was inspired, not prostituted, by Hollywood. The marginal Hollywood of the has-beens and the would-bes fascinated him. Describing the artistic development of Tod Hackett, the graduate of the Yale School of Fine Arts who is one of the principals of "The Day of the Locust," West is writing autobiographically when he describes Tod's reaction to the crowd that inhabits the Hollywood limbo:

From the moment he had seen them, he had known that despite his race, training, and heritage, neither Winslow Homer nor Thomas Ryder could be his masters and he turned to Goya and Daumier. He had learned this lesson just in

time. During his last year in art school, he had begun to think that he might give up painting completely. The pleasures he received from the problems of composition and color had decreased as his facility had increased and he realized that he was going the way of all his classmates, toward illustration or mere handsomeness. When the Hollywood job had come along, he had grabbed it despite the arguments of his friends who were certain that he was selling out and would never paint again.

In going to Hollywood, West was not selling out. There he found a graveyard of dreams which served perfectly as a setting for exposition of his basic attitudes and philosophy.

"The Day of the Locust" is West's richest and yet most pessimistic book. In his earlier books, the dreamers of the big dreams—art, Christ, America—seemed justified in their dreaming, even though, in the end, they are defeated by the violence of the world and the obsolescence of their own dreams. But in "The Day of the Locust," the dreamers of the big dreams—Tod (objectivity) and Homer Simpson, a retired hotel clerk from Iowa (innocence)—are defeated utterly, for their dreams are based on the incomplete picture. In the world of the Dream Factory, objectivity is assailed and innocence is corrupted. Success in this book comes only to those who have the complete picture, who can key their aspirations to the gimcrack dreams produced by the Dream Factory. The dreams raised in defiance of the Dream Factory are defeated by the Factory's violent end-product—a riot at a movie premiere.

West's pessimism comes from his examination of the basic motivating force behind human action—dreams. Man dreams himself a pose and seeks to realize that pose. Noble dreams conduce to noble actions, ignoble dreams to ignoble actions. Perverted dreams produce a sensation of having been cheated, and the cheat leads to violence. In the gimcrack, materialistic civilization which cripples West's grotesques, the norm of dreams is the violent scenes played up by the tabloids and the movies. But direct access to these heroics is denied to the crowd. Instead, it must settle for tawdry facsimiles—rioting at a movie premiere, shooting Miss Lonelyhearts in a hallway, parading in the coonskin caps and leather shirts of America-First. And the crowd settles only momentarily for these substitutes. The urge to violence goes on without end, creating an age which is incapable of sustaining—or even understanding—the noble dream.

