

*Nathanael West and the mystery of feeling*

Understanding the place of satire within modernism entails, I have been arguing, attention to the ways in which modern feeling can take on surprising new guises. Every bit as much as Waugh and Gibbons, Nathanael West explicitly thematizes problems of feeling throughout his writing. Often in his work, the mere experience of particular emotions, especially in response to scenes of suffering, becomes a source of conflict for characters and readers alike. As Justus Nieland has observed, West “regularly refuses to provide the affective codes that might give his reader a clue about how to feel.”<sup>1</sup> Such conflict arises because even as West’s fiction subjects sentimental expressions of feeling to intense satiric scrutiny, it is no less searching in its scrutiny of satire itself, and of the ironic or joking postures that accompany it. In fact, the artistic quests of virtually all West’s protagonists can be seen very simply as efforts to resolve the tension between the claims of satire and those of sentiment. West’s fiction at once manifests and resists a satiric impulse, and the push and pull of this ambivalence constitute the central dynamic of his work.

At the age of nineteen, writing in the Brown University literary magazine, West already discerns this conflict: “In reading Euripides, we find ourself ready to classify him at moments as a satirist and at other moments as a man of feeling. Of course he was both. Sometimes he seems like a religious man and again like a charlatan. Of course he was neither. He was a great playwright.”<sup>2</sup> In this formulation, wry in its own tone if bland in its conclusions, satire negates feeling, and both pose risks for the writer: excessive feeling leads to religion and mysticism, while excessive satire leads to performance and charlatantry. In *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, similarly, John Gilson remarks: “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.”<sup>3</sup> Feeling for Gilson is mere ritual, empty adherence to a prescribed norm; both sentimental feelings and the bitter negation of

those feelings must be rejected. In contrast to this ever-more-ironic suppression of feeling stands “mystery,” a term that gestures at the unknowable and the authentic, and which, I will argue, is never wholly negated in West.

What follows is an exploration of this “mystery of feeling” in West’s writing, the need to burlesque this mystery, and indeed the need to burlesque the burlesque. I examine West’s extra-fictional writings and his fate among his critics, and find within them a tension between self-definition and political commitment – a tension which fundamentally structures West’s last novel, *The Day of the Locust*, producing a dominant mood that has been called grotesque. West deploys two distinct valences of the grotesque: the grotesque as the sign of tormented interiority (derived in part from Sherwood Anderson) and an externalist grotesque that depicts the human as mechanical (in the manner of Wyndham Lewis). The West that emerges in my reading is thus neither (quite) the modernist-as-expressionist who gives words to the agony of existence, nor the modernist-as-ironist who regards such agony with cold-eyed detachment. Ultimately, West’s grotesque representations provoke an uncanny dread, and paradoxically affirm the importance of the feeling they set out to negate.

#### THE TERRIBLE SINCERE STRUGGLE

In moving across the Atlantic, from Waugh and Gibbons to West, many of the dynamics of late modernist satire remain clearly recognizable. But there is no doubt that West operates on a wider social canvas than the English contemporaries I have treated, and abandons the subgenre of the comedy of manners. Consequently, a broader public – which in Waugh appears as a disembodied force of public opinion vaguely impinging on an insular upper-class world – is in the American writer addressed directly, as a massive if still often anonymous social entity. This obvious concern with working-class suffering has been crucial to the attempt of recent critics to claim West for a progressive strain of experimental literature that descends from a Continental “avant-garde,” and to attenuate his connection to a putatively more formalistic, apolitical “modernism.”<sup>4</sup> According to critics such as Rita Barnard and Jonathan Veitch, such a depoliticized, “modernist” version of West was created by a post-war liberalism that took the suffering of his angst-ridden, sexually frustrated, Dostoevskian heroes, and their withdrawal into dream, delusion, and art, as symptomatic of a vaguely existentialist human condition – a “metaphysical sense of the

helplessness of man trapped in an unstable universe.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Barnard, Veitch, and others have related West’s work to consumerism, professionalization, and mass media, resituating his novels within the historical and ideological context of 1930s America and finding in them a critique of a world permeated by simulacrum and commodity-fetishism.<sup>6</sup>

As it turns out, this politically refurbished version of West conforms well to the once-standard narrative of literary history in which the 1930s mark a return to politics from the formalistic concerns of the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the flaws in that narrative, the enormous political and economic upheavals of the decade undoubtedly registered on some of its most aloof wits, as Dorothy Parker attested in 1937:

I want to say first that I came to Spain without my ax to grind. I didn’t bring messages from anybody, nor greetings to anybody. I am not a member of any political party. The only group I have ever been affiliated with is that not especially brave little band that hid its nakedness of heart and mind under the out-of-date garment of a sense of humor. I heard someone say, and so I said it too, that ridicule is the most effective weapon. I don’t suppose I ever really believed it, but it was easy and comforting and so I said it. Well, now I know. I know that there are things that never have been funny, and never will be. And I know that ridicule may be a shield, but it is not a weapon.<sup>8</sup>

West was friendly with Parker and had familial connections to her celebrated circle of wits; his sister, Laura, married and wrote screenplays with S. J. Perelman, while his wife, Eileen McKenney, was the subject her own sister Ruth’s stories in the *New Yorker*. Yet if these biographical links suggest particular geographic or institutional locations for late modernist satire, the more fundamental similarity between West and Parker is the shared notion that satire can be outgrown, that irony can be and must be put aside when political commitment finally calls.

Yet there is a crucial difference. While Parker avers with confidence that “there are things that never have been funny, and never will be,” West struggles to make such a renunciation. Thus, even those who aim to recover a political West must concede that his is a peculiar case. His politics were progressive, and in the later 1930s he attended meetings of the Hollywood anti-Nazi League, but he had, by the spring of 1939, rejected the mode of the prominent leftist writers of the day.<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Malcolm Cowley, he describes himself as divided – committed to the cause but unable to accept its literature:

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.<sup>10</sup>

Whereas Parker self-importantly renounces her comic tendencies, West worries that he can't escape his: "I'm a comic writer and it seems impossible for me to handle any of the 'big things' without seeming to laugh or at least smile."<sup>11</sup>

His uncontrollable comic proclivities, he fears, are also hurting him commercially. To Edmund Wilson and F. Scott Fitzgerald, he voices the identical complaint:

Somehow or other I seem to have slipped in between all the "schools." My books meet no needs except my own, their circulation is practically private and I'm lucky to be published. And yet I only have a desire to remedy all that *before* sitting down to write, once begun I do it my way. I forget the broad sweep, the big canvas, the shot-gun adjectives, the important people, the significant ideas, the lessons to be taught, the epic Thomas Wolfe, the realistic James Farrell – and go on making what one critic called "private and unfunny jokes."<sup>12</sup>

A private and unfunny joke is something of an oxymoron, since, as Freud and Bergson both note, jokes are inherently social. Yet West's jokes are unshared and noncathartic, achieving no therapeutic release.<sup>13</sup> His joking style thus defeats any political impulse. He mentions to Cowley an excised scene from *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."<sup>14</sup> A Midas of irony, everything West touches turns into a joke.

West's letters, in short, articulate a rift between his ethical-political ambitions ("the terrible sincere struggle") and the aesthetic constraints of his sensibility ("private and unfunny jokes"), a rift that has been reproduced in the critical debate over the meaning of his work as political or ironic.<sup>15</sup> Could West reconcile his political beliefs and his comic mode of writing? In a letter of June 1939, West articulates a solution to his friend Jack Conroy:

As I understand it, Balzac, Marx thought, was the better writer, even revolutionist, than [Eugène] Sue, despite the fact that Sue was a confirmed radical while Balzac called himself a royalist. Balzac was the better because he kept his eye firmly fixed on the middle class and wrote with great truth and no wish-fulfillment. The superior truth alone in Balzac was sufficient to reveal the structure of middle class society and its defects.<sup>16</sup>

His own "great truth," West implies, is superior to the "wish-fulfillment" that the neonaturalists trade in. Of course, many readers have found that in West's novels the very problem with a modern, artifice-ridden culture lies in its false promise of just such an easy wish-fulfillment – what is

elsewhere named sentimentality. By implication, the neonaturalist aesthetic would be a symptom of the same sentimental culture it denounces, and the rejection of the wish-fulfillment it proffers would be necessary for any legitimate political critique.<sup>17</sup>

What is the role for satire in this formula? If one accepts the assumption that satire is a normative, moralistic mode, its function seems clear enough: comic ridicule (technique) works in the service of social criticism (content). But, as I've tried to demonstrate, satire's moral impulse can mask, even license, more primitive energies; satire, by delighting in the representation and ridicule of vice, unleashes the moral entropy it purports to decry. Even if West at times can be seen as excoriating vice, the anarchic power set free by his satire regularly exceeds the aims of moral correction. The problem is not simply that the author himself claimed to have "no particular message for a troubled world (except possibly 'beware')." <sup>18</sup> It is that West employs the same satiric method in treating causes with which he claims sympathy (like the struggle of the anti-Nazi League) as in treating ideologies he rejects.

For example, in *A Cool Million*, the simple-minded hero, Lemuel Pitkin, witnesses a didactic Communist "playlet" that shows an old grandmother defrauded of her life savings by ruthless capitalists.<sup>19</sup> But it is impossible to read West's presentation of this play as an indictment of capitalism. We laugh at the clichéd symbolism with which the salesman entices the grandmother to surrender her money, but the play itself relies on a symbolism no less inert. From the "old white-haired grandmother knitting near the fire" in "a typical American home," to the "sleek, young salesman" with the "rich melodic voice," to the "idle breeze [that] plays mischievously with the rags draping the four corpses," the entire drama is written to highlight its own predictability; it treats the reader as if she were as mentally under-equipped as Lem himself.<sup>20</sup> While it is true that Lem – to our surprise and delight – is profoundly upset by the play, this sensitivity is less a sign of his ethical convictions than of his stunning idiocy. Rather than engaging our sympathy for the grandmother's plight, the comedy disengages us. The delight the novel takes in its depiction of the Marxist morality play suggests a sensibility that puts aside political concerns for comic indulgence.

An even more tangled treatment of Marxist theory occurs in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, where the editor Shrike distributes to partygoers letters that the advice columnist Miss Lonelyhearts has received:

This one is a jim-dandy. A young boy wants a violin. It looks simple; all you have to do is get the kid one. But then you discover that he has dictated the letter to his

little sister. He is paralyzed and can't even feed himself. He has a toy violin and hugs it to his chest, imitating the sound of playing with his mouth. How pathetic! However, one can learn much from this parable. Label the boy Labor, the violin Capital and so on . . .<sup>21</sup>

What first appears as an economic problem, satisfying a wish for a commodity, becomes instead an example of brute, irremediable suffering. The boy desires not a violin, but the ability to play one, and his inability to reproduce the beauty of music renders his suffering all the more acute. Yet, with a single sentence, "How pathetic!", Shrike at once sums up and dismisses the emotional appeal of the boy's longing. Instead he reads the story as a "parable" of capitalism – a reading that, in its attempt to recover a political meaning, becomes an empty rhetorical exercise. As the "and so on . . ." suggests, the Marxist metanarrative is reduced to a predictable cliché. The very gesture of interpretation is here literally no more than a parlor game in which a case of suffering is "a jim-dandy" because and only because it offers a significant interpretive challenge.

Thus it is that despite their indifference to the boy's pain, Shrike's verbal pyrotechnics – he speaks like a "circus barker"<sup>22</sup> and fills his sentences with rhymes and rhetorical ornaments – afford the reader of *Miss Lonelyhearts* considerable pleasure. They constitute a form of verbal play that Ronald Paulson has seen as central to the comic: "the recovery of a transgressive category (imagination, ridicule) by turning it into an aesthetic object – that is taking it out of a moral discourse . . . and into an aesthetics of pleasurable response."<sup>23</sup> Shrike reduces Marxist analysis to a smug metaphor-making (or literary criticism) in which imposing a theoretical vocabulary affords aesthetic pleasure but remains sundered from experience. If his previous novels are any indication, then, West had no choice but to eliminate the meeting of the anti-Nazi League from *The Day of the Locust*. Had he left it in, it would never have withstood his own satiric powers.

This opposition between the ironic (private, theoretical, aesthetic) and the sincere (public, experiential, ethical-political) constitutes not just an obstacle in West's search for artistic principles, but the basic conflict of his major works, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. For the two novels are in many ways versions of the same story. In both, the hero confronts widespread human suffering: Miss Lonelyhearts is psychologically overwhelmed by the tales of poverty, rape, disease, and disfigurement he encounters in the letters of his readers, while in *The Day of the Locust*, Tod Hackett is haunted by the "starers," the anonymous unfulfilled Midwesterners who "had come to California to die" (*DL*, p. 242). These heroes

both experience their own spiritual and sexual longing, an inner emptiness that had by West's day already become an emblem of the modern hero. The suffering of West's protagonists is thus amplified by or even produced from the suffering of those around them: Shrike observes that the advice columnist is himself one of the letter-writers, and Tod thinks that he might "suffer from the ingrained, morbid apathy he liked to draw in others" (*DL*, p. 336). In both novels, finally, the fulfillment of characters' ethical-political ambitions curiously resides in aesthetic solutions. Like West himself, Miss Lonelyhearts (writing columns) and Tod Hackett (painting canvases) seek rhetorical modes adequate to the task of representing or relieving the pain of the masses.

This division parallels the split between what Richard Rorty has called "private irony" and "liberal hope." Private irony, according to Rorty, is the work of breaking free from ideological constraints symbolically to forge one's identity, while liberal hope describes the ambition to create a social order in which pain and cruelty are relieved. The first aspires to maximize personal freedom, the second to minimize collective suffering. In *Lonelyhearts*, the advocate of private irony is Shrike; in a famous passage, he rewrites "The Vanity of Human Wishes" in order to demolish every set of ideals (pastoral retreat, hedonism, art, religion) that Miss Lonelyhearts might offer his readers. A Rortian ironist, Shrike is skeptical of all "final vocabularies," of all "set[s] of words which [people] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives." Shrike believes that "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed,"<sup>24</sup> and he makes Miss Lonelyhearts' beliefs look bad by ironically redescribing them. Or, to use Paulson's term, he *aestheticizes* them: by moving the question of suffering from a moral to an aesthetic register he allows pleasure in the verbal presentation of a painful situation. Miss Lonelyhearts, taught by Shrike "to handle his one escape, Christ, with a thick glove of words," has therefore become a reluctant ironist as well, doubting all final vocabularies.<sup>25</sup> Hence the novel begins with a case of writer's block, with the columnist deprived of words that he finds "sincere."<sup>26</sup> But whereas Shrike (like Rorty) seems confident, even smug, in his ironism, Miss L. longs for something pre- or extra-rhetorical; in Rorty's terms, he wishes to be a "metaphysician" again.<sup>27</sup>

Does this mean that West believed suffering could be ameliorated if only we could still take seriously the "final vocabularies" that the Shrikes of the world render untenable? Such a view would again square with the idea of satire as a conservative mode that calls for an end to practices that destabilize communal values, a reading in which the ironic Shrike becomes the primary target of the author's scorn. But it is a mistake to

read *Miss Lonelyhearts* as a lament for a bygone world of stable beliefs. Miss Lonelyhearts may think, "If only he could believe in Christ . . . then everything would be simple and the letters extremely easy to answer,"<sup>28</sup> but his final religious experience must be taken as parodic: it leads him to misconstrue the intention of the cripple Doyle, who arrives at the apartment of the delusional columnist not to receive healing but to kill him. The novel is as uncomfortable with the hero's sentimental relapse into religiosity as with Shrike's belligerent assertion of irony. This stalemate suggests a fault line within West's sensibility and his conception of his role as an artist. It is a more extensive tracing of this fissure that I undertake in turning to *The Day of the Locust*.

#### THE SUN IS A JOKE

*The Day of the Locust* differs from *Miss Lonelyhearts* in that, unlike his predecessor, Tod Hackett has relinquished the goal of *relieving* the suffering of the masses, and seeks instead only to *represent* it. If for Miss Lonelyhearts the failure to produce a successful public rhetoric becomes a private crisis in which he can neither alleviate nor forget the suffering he faces, Tod conversely begins by seeking a private, painterly rhetoric that becomes entwined with his concern for a suffering public. Approaching the problem from the other side, Tod ends up with the same dilemma: what demands to make of his art. When he contemplates his magnum opus, then, he is caught between two views of his function as a painter: "He told himself that . . . he was an artist, not a prophet. His work would not be judged by the accuracy with which it foretold a future event but by its merit as painting. Nevertheless, he refused to give up the role of Jeremiah" (*DL*, p. 308). To see the painting as prophecy is to see it as political, an insight into the destructive energies of the mob, a warning about the decline of civilization. (Such a view has become the enduring popular conception of West, a herald of the apocalyptic violence which his novel's conclusion enacts.) To judge the work on "its merit as painting," on the other hand, rejects the importance of its political insight for presumably formal concerns. And, although the prophetic role is already a curtailment of the role of savior that Miss Lonelyhearts assumes, in the internal debate over the function of Tod's art we see the same clash between public, ethical imperatives and private, aesthetic ones that structures the earlier novel.

As a modern artist, seeking to reconcile these imperatives, Tod renounces the naturalistic painting of "fat red barn[s], old stone wall[s]," and "sturdy Nantucket fisher[men]," and concludes that "neither



Winslow Homer nor Thomas [*sic*] Ryder could be his masters” (*DL*, p. 242).<sup>29</sup> The old, fat, sturdy subjects of Tod’s earlier art signify permanence, tradition, and Yankee pastoral values, but since this stability is of little use to the artist of the modern metropolis, Tod must find a new model in the satirical cartooning of Goya and Daumier. Yet Tod’s aesthetic search is hardly restricted to moments when he thinks about his painting. When he tries to persuade the aspiring starlet Faye Greener not to resort to prostitution, he is at a loss for words: “He had to say something. She wouldn’t understand the aesthetic argument and with what values could he back up the moral one? The economic one didn’t make sense either. Whoring certainly paid” (*DL*, pp. 319–20). Like Miss Lonelyhearts facing the blank page, Tod can find no final vocabulary, no “argument” or “values,” whether moral, aesthetic, or economic, to justify his desire to keep Faye from prostitution. And when he finally finds speech his words are laughable: “Suddenly he began to talk. He found an argument. Disease would destroy her beauty. He shouted at her like a Y.M.C.A. lecturer on sex hygiene” (*DL*, p. 320). Tod himself cannot believe in this language, borrowed en masse from an outworn discursive system, and the narratorial voice slides into ridicule.

Thus, much as Tod’s desire to do aesthetic justice to the starlets drives him toward the cartoons of Goya and Daumier, so the rhetorical poverty he faces in his exchange with Faye attracts him to the screenwriter Claude Estee’s way of sneering at the world: “Tod liked to hear him talk. He was master of an involved comic rhetoric that permitted him to express his moral indignation and still keep his reputation for worldliness and wit” (*DL*, p. 255). This description of an “involved comic rhetoric” seems to suggest a model for both Tod and West himself – a satiric mode that offers the promise of combining the two classical strains of satire, Juvenalian outrage and Horatian urbanity. If Shrike’s imitators are “machines for making jokes,”<sup>30</sup> then Claude is a machine for making metaphors. When Tod declines to attend a brothel because he finds them “depressing . . . like vending machines” (*DL*, p. 255), Claude elaborates on the “lead” Tod feeds him:

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. You receive a small sweet, frown at yourself in the dirty mirror, adjust your hat, take a firm grip on your umbrella and walk away, trying to look as though nothing had happened. (*DL*, pp. 255–56)

Claude revels in the construction of the rhetorical trope; he responds not to Tod’s expressed emotion but to the inventiveness of the

simile. Like Shrike, Claude transforms a call for sympathy into a pleasurable verbal artifact.

In his preference for play with metaphor over immersion in feeling, Claude has a long line of precursors in West's work, up through and including Shrike. (West himself, in a 1934 application for a Guggenheim fellowship, referred to "the impossibility of experiencing a genuine emotion" and to "the necessity of laughing at everything, love, death, ambition, etc."<sup>31</sup>) This kind of private joking is an under-appreciated aspect of West's own narrative style. For example, his description of Romola Martin seems more a linguistic experiment in the manner of Gertrude Stein than an effort at mimesis: "Her youthfulness was heightened by her blue button eyes, pink button nose and red button mouth" (*DL*, p. 270). Whatever shred of representational value might exist in a phrase such as "button nose" becomes merely an opportunity to explore how the figure of the button might be deployed. Like Stella Gibbons playing with the descriptions of landscape in *Cold Comfort Farm*, West forsakes mimesis and embraces a pleasure found in non-sensical jesting with words.

But before we take Claude's "involved comic rhetoric" as the author's aesthetic prescription, we should note that "worldliness and wit" themselves come under attack in *The Day of the Locust*, just as the satirist Shrike is himself satirized in *Lonelyhearts*. West mocks the fashion-following style of the sophisticates Tod meets at a party at Claude's house. Like the partygoers whom Shrike entertains with the letters in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, or like Brenda Last's coterie in *A Handful of Dust*, these celebrants take a certain moral indifference as essential to their code of sophistication. One woman, Joan Schwartzen, speaks in "a loud, stagey whisper" (*DL*, p. 253) and feigns delight at the pretensions of her hosts. When Tod meets her, she is discussing tennis:

"How silly, batting an inoffensive ball across something that ought to be used to catch fish on account of millions are starving for a bite of herring."

"Joan's a female tennis champ," Alice explained. (*DL*, p. 252)

Delighting in the silliness of her pretended radicalism, Joan pre-emptively mocks any critique of her bourgeois values. Tod and West may tell us that Claude can combine witty worldliness with moral indignation, but for Joan one comes precisely at the expense of the other. West is too thoroughly modern, too worldly, to accept any simple appeal to earnest sentiment, yet he is suspicious enough of his own ironic temperament to show worldliness at its worst.

One might surmise that in West's novels (as elsewhere) there are good ironists and bad ones, and that Joan is simply a less original and less successful wit than Claude. But even Claude is implicated in the culture of artifice and pretense that pervades Tod's universe; he lives in "an exact reproduction of the old Dupuy mansion near Biloxi, Mississippi," "teeter[s] back and forth on his heels like a Civil War colonel and [makes] believe he [has] a large belly" (*DL*, p. 252). Faye too adopts worldliness as a pose; after her father's death she and a friend start speaking in a gangsterish slang which "[makes] them feel worldly and realistic, and so more able to cope with serious things" (*DL*, p. 317). Faye's father, the aging vaudevillian Harry Greener, "down[s] continuously" because joking has become "his sole method of defense" (*DL*, p. 261). The joking persona becomes a mask one never takes off. Even the dwarf Abe Kusich seems trapped in his combative role: "Abe's pugnacity was often a joke" (*DL*, p. 248).

The very idea of the joke, in fact, associated throughout the novel with sophistication, implies a coarsening of the capacity to experience feeling that lies at the heart of the plight of the starers. For in their own way what these transplanted Midwestern hicks suffer from is – paradoxically – an excess of worldliness: "Both [the newspapers and the movies] fed them on murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, wars. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates" (*DL*, p. 381). The starers themselves endure the same fate as West's heroes. The vicarious experience of horrors with which the mass media inundate them fails to satisfy their "palates." These lowbrow "sophisticates" are like Beagle Darwin of *Balso Snell*, who has from too much reading assumed in his thought and speech a "literary coloring" that "is a protective one – like the brown of the rabbit or the checks of the quail."<sup>32</sup> Like Beagle, the characters of *The Day of the Locust* disappear into the ironic or joking roles that they enact.

For so many of West's characters, then, in *The Day of the Locust* and elsewhere, the joke, the laugh, or the "involved comic rhetoric" run the risk of trapping their user in a jaded, ironic role, shutting off the capacity for experience. To make things worse, it doesn't always work. The rhetorical play that Claude indulges in fails as a defense against pain when Tod tries it out:

[Faye's] invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love. If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper. You would do it with a scream. You couldn't expect to rise again. Your teeth would be driven into your skull like nails into a pine board and your back would be broken. You wouldn't even have time to sweat or close your eyes.

He managed to laugh at his language, but it wasn't a real laugh and nothing was destroyed by it. (*DL*, p. 251)

As Tod equates sex with a suicide leap, he begins to enjoy the excesses of his own linguistic conceit. The elaborate figure of speech spawns its own figures, as the vehicle becomes the tenor of secondary metaphor (teeth are nails, the skull a pine board – hints of a crucifixion?). But the attempt to aestheticize experience misfires; laughter fails to “destroy.” If ever there was a private and unfunny joke, this is it. Tod shares it with no one and it is too weak to destroy any authoritarian presence. Like Claude's elaboration of the love-as-vending-machine metaphor, or Shrike's elaboration of the boy-as-Labor metaphor, Tod's “joke” entails a writer's delight in the construction of analogies – only now presented as a noncathartic internal reverie that leaves his world unchanged.

#### THE BOOK OF THE GROTESQUE

Having displayed its suspicion of worldliness and wit, it is not surprising that *The Day of the Locust* periodically attempts to affirm the value of sentiment against irony, to transpose aesthetic judgments back into ethical terms. Early in the novel, Tod passes two houses with incongruous architectural styles, “a miniature Rhine castle with tarpaper turrets pierced for archers” and “a little highly colored shack with domes and minarets out of the Arabian Nights” (*DL*, p. 243). But although just a moment before Tod has considered destruction by dynamite as the only recourse against such ugliness, he responds differently here:

Both houses were comic, but he didn't laugh. Their desire to startle was so eager and guileless.

It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous. (*DL*, p. 243)

Instead of destroying or deriding, Tod finds pathos in the “guileless” sincerity of the houses. The homeowners have money; their struggles are not material, but aesthetic or spiritual – a “need for beauty and romance” that recalls the paralyzed boy in *Miss Lonelyhearts* who simply wishes to play the violin. Of course these houses, in their eclectic appropriation of historical styles, have exemplified for critics the disfiguring of reality by simulacrum rife throughout West's fiction – what Alvin Kernan has called

“a grotesquely phony and pitifully illusory world.”<sup>33</sup> But the apprehension of the discordant forms that Kernan calls grotesque and that West calls monstrous inspires compassion in Tod.

Tod shares this need for beauty and romance. Just before noticing the houses, he has observed the environment around him, with his characteristic painter’s eye: “The edges of the trees burned with a pale violet light and their centers gradually turned from deep purple to black. The same violet piping, like a Neon tube, outlined the tops of the ugly, hump-backed hills and they were almost beautiful” (*DL*, p. 243). The “almost” here is telling; nature (seen as it is through comparison to the technologies of advertising) aspires yet fails to achieve beauty. But, because Tod’s eye seeks out beauty amid the ugliness of nature he can recognize the aspiration toward beauty even in the hideous melange of architectural styles. The desire of the houses to satisfy a need for beauty and romance is touching in its innocence and nearly tragic in its failure – as if the gulf between the ethical urge to recognize this need and the aesthetic urge to reject its results is unbridgeable.

The same affective pattern emerges when Tod considers Faye’s mannerisms:

Being with her was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play. From in front, the stupid lines and grotesque situations would have made him squirm with annoyance, but because he saw the perspiring stagehands and the wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper flowers, he accepted everything and was anxious for it to succeed. (*DL*, p. 292)

In going “backstage,” Tod recognizes the labor (“the perspiring stagehands”) behind the performance and surrenders his critical stance for a sympathetic one. What would from an aesthetic standpoint appear “ridiculous” instead stirs compassion. Again, a grotesque situation – here it is West’s own word – no longer provokes ridicule because aesthetic terms are translated into ethical ones.

Although this oscillation between the claims of satire and feeling tends, as in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, to produce a frustrated stand-off, as the novel progresses Tod begins to apprehend a third option for his art: “He had lately begun to think not only of Goya and Daumier but also of certain Italian artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of Salvator Rosa, Francisco Guardi and Monsu Desiderio, the painters of Decay and Mystery” (*DL*, p. 325). Attending a meeting of one of California’s many religious cults, Tod sees in the masses he will paint the exaggeration, decadence and disorder typical of a grotesque aesthetic.<sup>34</sup>

As he watched these people writhe on the hard seats of their churches, he thought of how well Alessandro Magasco would dramatize the contrast between their drained-out, feeble bodies and their wild, disordered minds. He would not satirize them as Hogarth or Daumier might, nor would he pity them. He would paint their fury with respect, appreciating its raw, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization. (*DL*, p. 337)

One night a man stands up and spews “a crazy jumble of dietary rules, economics, and Biblical threats” (*DL*, p. 337). In representing the scene, Tod rejects both satire and sentimentality: “Tod didn’t laugh at the man’s rhetoric. He knew it was unimportant. What mattered were his messianic rage and the emotional response of his hearers” (*DL*, p. 338). The man’s rhetoric may be laughable, but his emotion, and that of his audience, is not. Tod can now recognize a value in the “emotional response” – the mystery of feeling – that a “crazy jumble” of rhetoric can provoke. He finds in the emotion of the cultists a cathartic capacity to “destroy” that his private, ironic metaphor-making lacks. And, by acknowledging rather than ridiculing this emotional response, he moves away from John Gilson’s impulse to “burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source.” Mystery, rather, is precisely what he values in his new artistic masters. He recognizes feeling, not in the form of pity, but in the form of anger and terror. These aversive feelings offer an alternative to both sentimental pity and satiric ridicule – a grotesque aesthetic that reinstates feeling as a guarantee of authenticity.

No doubt, such a reading is at least partly assimilable to a common view of *The Day of the Locust* that sees West as rehearsing a familiar, if extreme, version of a basic modernist narrative: the corroded pillars supporting civilization finally crumble to expose the fundamental barbarism of humanity. If this violence is not endorsed, it is recognized as inevitable, and somehow more real than the illusions of modernity. The novel’s most famous scenes – the bloody cockfight and the concluding riot – are thus only eruptions of a simmering violence, eruptions that result from repeated frustrations of desire. West is hardly subtle in punctuating the novel with scenes of imitated violence as well – carnage on the studio lot when a movie set collapses, the “mock riot” that Claude’s friends stage when their “dirty film” is interrupted – that suggest a capacity for violent play to spill over into something more threatening. But while I would hardly deny that in West frustration often gives way to violence, neither am I content to rest with this (relatively obvious) recognition. What is perhaps less obvious, and more telling, is the underlying pattern of frustration and eruption, and the way in which that

pattern itself emerges from the stalemate of contradictory imperatives – the imperative to articulate sympathy for suffering masses, and the imperative to aestheticize suffering through satire.

Moreover, if a violence born of frustration is the only catharsis available in West's fiction, it is hardly one with great political promise. To be sure, the pessimism of this relatively widespread "regressive" reading of West can be countered by the claim that Tod's art offers a more positive model – the grotesque aesthetic – for managing the violence he perceives. Yet before upholding "The Burning of Los Angeles" as a triumph of modern art, we must first observe that Tod's aesthetic ambitions are only realized in (a description of) an unfinished painting that no real reader ever sees. Whatever power or success one wants to grant the artist who finds a visual form to represent modernity, the question as to how, or whether, West *himself* realizes a grotesque aesthetic remains more or less unanswered.

How then might West more usefully be understood as a writer of the grotesque? Theoretical formulations of the mode overlap significantly with Fredric Jameson's famous description of modernism (indebted to Lukács) as characterized by a discord between inner and outer worlds. For Jameson, such discord is evident in a work like Edvard Munch's *Scream*, whose depiction of a disfigured, agonized human face constitutes "a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation and isolation."<sup>35</sup> Munch's "expressionist" aesthetic "presupposes," in Jameson's analysis, a view of the subject as divided, a view on which rests "a whole metaphysics of the inside and outside, of the wordless pain within the monad and the moment in which, often cathartically, that 'emotion' is then projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling."<sup>36</sup> West undoubtedly draws on such "modernist" deployments of the grotesque as "wordless pain" and "inward feeling"; however, I want to argue that, arriving to modernism a generation late, he also refashions these paradigms in ways that question Jameson's expressivist model.

West's novel features an abundance of grotesque representations of physically and comically malformed bodies – a funeral director with "a face like a baked apple, soft and blotched" (*DL*, p. 315), an "old woman with a face pulled out of shape by badly fitting store teeth" (*DL*, p. 321), and many other satirical cartoons worthy of Hogarth, Goya, or Daumier. Yet in other cases the cause of grotesquerie seems harder to locate. Homer Simpson's body, for example, is first described as something closer to the Bakhtinian classical

ideal; he is “well proportioned,” “his muscles [are] large and round,” and “he has a full heavy chest” (*DL*, p. 268). Nonetheless, his physical appearance induces unease: “Yet there was something wrong. For all his size and shape, he looked neither strong nor fertile. He was like one of Picasso’s great sterile athletes, who brood hopelessly on pink sand, staring at veined marble waves” (*DL*, p. 268). The outlandish metaphors that render the secondary characters grotesque give way in Homer’s case to a more vague intimation of “something wrong.”

Significantly, that same phrase is also used in *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson’s own “Book of the Grotesque,” to describe his character Wing Biddlebaum. When George Willard looks at Wing, he thinks: “There’s something wrong, but I don’t want to know what it is. His hands have something to do with his fear of me and of everyone.”<sup>37</sup> The comparison between Wing and Homer has been made before, but the points of contact are worth examining.<sup>38</sup> Both men possess nervous, overactive hands; Homer comes from Wayneville, Iowa while Wing lives in Winesburg, Ohio; both men lose their shyness when shown sympathy. More generally, *The Day of the Locust*, like *Winesburg, Ohio*, is a series of character sketches, verbal correlatives of the “set of lithographs” which Tod works on in preparation for his grand canvas.

Anderson’s use of the grotesque, in which the grotesque body is viewed as a symptom of a crippled or deformed psyche, clearly conforms to Jameson’s description of a depth-oriented “expressivist” modernism. The stories of *Winesburg, Ohio* in general, and “Hands” in particular, offer a narrative about the psychic costs of repression. Biddlebaum, as “the town mystery,” desires to keep “hidden away” his hands, which, we are told, “made more grotesque an already grotesque and elusive individuality.”<sup>39</sup> Ultimately we learn the story of the hands: the schoolteacher Wing used to “[caress] the shoulders of the boys, playing about the tousled heads” with his active hands, but when he is falsely accused of “unspeakable things” and driven from town by an angry mob, he must live out his life in fear of human contact.<sup>40</sup> The hands are the physical manifestation of a repressed, transgressive, and ultimately tragic sexuality. Like the other grotesques of *Winesburg*, Wing struggles with what Jameson calls “wordless pain,” which results in this case from the confining codes of a small-town Victorian morality. Most crucially, Wing is not primarily rendered in satiric terms: in presenting his characters’ psychic deformities Anderson seeks to elicit not laughter but pity or sympathy.

Twenty years later, West still relies to a degree on this “depth” model of a “modernist grotesque” character whose outward features are only



symptoms of a damaged interior state. Like his precursor Wing, Homer is, in his experience of “wordless pain,” a modernist paradigm; we are told he experiences an “anguish” that “is basic and permanent” (*DL*, p. 291). Homer’s overactive hands, like Wing’s, are a classic illustration of the Freudian idea that a somatic symptom inevitably reveals the illness of the psyche; we easily surmise that Homer’s “anguish” stems from repressed lust – at one point Homer’s “fingers twined like a tangle of thighs in miniature” (*DL*, p. 290). Like Wing too, Homer is mistaken for a pedophile and attacked by an angry mob, and, like Wing, he has been traumatized by his own sexual desires. In his compulsive symptomatology and his tormented struggle with his memories, then, Homer seems a textbook case of repressed sexuality, and it is only fitting that when Tod sees Homer curled up asleep he is reminded precisely of “a book of abnormal psychology” (*DL*, p. 372). *The Day of the Locust* too is “a book of abnormal psychology,” offering, like *Winesburg, Ohio*, a series of case studies. Indeed, Tod himself is introduced as a contrast between inner and outer, between an “almost doltish” appearance and a complex interior, with many “personalities” stacked up “like a nest of Chinese boxes” (*DL*, p. 242), and his deep, irrational lust for Faye is depicted as the modernist *angst* that Jameson finds in Munch’s painting: “He shouted to her, a deep, agonized bellow, like that a hound makes when it strikes a fresh line after hours of cold trailing” (*DL*, p. 308). And of course the novel ends with another famous scream, as Tod, carried off from the riot in a police car, “began to imitate the siren as loud as he could” (*DL*, p. 389).

#### THE REFUSE OF FEELING

Both Tod and Homer thus exemplify a kind of grotesque character that, often explicitly, illustrates the modernist story of latent internal struggle finding its way to the body’s surface. But if in this deployment of a depth-psychological model West works within a “high” modernist world view, it is crucial to note that he not only borrows but also reworks Anderson’s material. For West’s is a world in which modernism itself is already a too-familiar story, where the Hollywood madam Audrey Jenning displays her impeccable “refinement” by “discussing Gertrude Stein and Juan Gris” (*DL*, p. 257) with her clients. The transgressive sexuality so fundamental to Lawrence or Joyce is for West already – like everything else – a joke. The “dirty film” with which West replaced the meeting of the anti-Nazi League arouses in its viewers not desire but a parody of desire; when the cameraman fails to focus the projector, the crowd “imitated a rowdy

audience in the days of the nickelodeon" (*DL*, p. 258), whistling and stomping. The film itself is described as a series of clichés as banal as the Communist stage play in *A Cool Million*:

After some low comedy with the father's beard and the soup, the actors settled down seriously to their theme. It was evident that while the whole family desired Marie, she only desired the young girl. Using his napkin to hide his activities, the old man pinched Marie, the son tried to look down the neck of her dress and the mother patted her knee. Marie, for her part, surreptitiously fondled the child. (*DL*, p. 259)

The film plods along in an equally deliberate manner until, as it nears its dramatic climax, the machine jams, in a moment reminiscent of the film screening in *Vile Bodies*: "there was a flash of light and the film whizzed through the apparatus until it all had run out" (*DL*, p. 239). The "theme" that the "actors" treat "seriously" is of course not an iota more serious than the lame beard-in-the-soup gag, and the depiction of incest, lesbianism, and pedophilia hardly even ruffles the audience of sophisticates.

Similarly, in the final riot, members of the mob, on hearing that "a pervert attacked a child," seem amused and make jokes about another "pervert" who "ripped up a girl with a pair of scissors." One man asks, "What kind of fun is that?", while another jokes that a pair of scissors is "the wrong tool" (*DL*, p. 386). West refuses to exalt sexual transgression to a status of authenticity and deprives it of its capacity to shock. Thus even as his novel leans on an idea of alienated man, warped by lust, defined by an inner experience of pain, it elsewhere questions these very modernist assumptions. West layers onto his tormented grotesques an involved comic rhetoric utterly lacking from Anderson's sketches. (Susan Hegeman calls Homer "a caricature of a Sherwood Anderson character."<sup>41</sup>) Even as he deploys Anderson's still affectively powerful techniques to evoke a wordless pain, West indulges a satiric tendency in which the grotesque is less about inwardness than about adherence to the external. The grotesque, the violent, the regressive: these categories, it turns out, are subject to the same dialectical shuttling – are they cause for compassion or cause for laughter? – as everything else in West's work.

In contrast to Anderson's "internalist" grotesque, then, *The Day of the Locust* also deploys Lewis's "externalist" one. As Tim Armstrong observes, "throughout the text, bodies are mechanical, with a matching artificiality of voice."<sup>42</sup> Such a pattern of "human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata" is, as Wolfgang Kayser observes in his seminal study, "among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque."<sup>43</sup> Indeed,

West repeatedly describes human bodies as robotic or puppet-like: Abe “look[s] like a ventriloquist’s dummy” (*DL*, p. 354); Earle Shoop resembles “a mechanical drawing” (*DL*, p. 299); Homer is compared to “a poorly made automaton” or a “badly made automaton” (*DL*, pp. 267, 381); Harry Greener acts like a “mechanical toy which had been overwound” (*DL*, p. 279). Clearly, West is drawing on the association of the comic and the mechanical that had been already postulated by both Bergson and Lewis. For Lewis, as we have seen, the resemblance of the human to the machine does not result in Bergson’s affirmation of human adaptability, but in an antihumanism. Writes Lewis: “Men’ are undoubtedly, to a greater or less extent, machines. And there are those amongst us who are revolted by this reflection, and there are those who are not.”<sup>44</sup> West, in his repeated evocation of the puppet and the machine, is (to use Kayser’s term) *reducing* the human, tacking away from Anderson to a more Lewisian aesthetic.<sup>45</sup>

Even when explicit comparisons between people and machines are absent from the novel, bodies still behave with a strange independence from the minds that inhabit them. The eight-year-old Adore Loomis performs a popular song, which he accompanies with “a little strut” and an “extremely suggestive” (*DL*, p. 335) bit of pantomime: “He seemed to know what the words meant, or at least his body and his voice seemed to know. When he came to the final chorus his buttocks writhed and his voice carried a top-heavy load of sexual pain” (*DL*, p. 336). The uncanny suggestion is that the sexualized body and voice are somehow more knowing than the innocent boy.<sup>46</sup> Faye Greener’s body exhibits the same unconscious knowledge. As she chats with Claude, he and Faye’s other admirers sit enraptured:

None of them really heard her. They were all too busy watching her smile, laugh, shiver, grow indignant, cross and uncross her legs, stick out her tongue, widen and narrow her eyes, toss her head so that her platinum hair splashed against the red plush of the chair back. The strange thing about her gestures and expressions was that they didn’t really illustrate what she was saying. They were almost pure. It was as though her body recognized how foolish her words were and tried to excite her hearers into being uncritical. (*DL*, p. 357)

The extended recitation of Faye’s various gestures highlights the mechanistic nature of her movements; there is indeed something “strange” – something uncanny – in the suggestion that her body might be operating on its own agenda.

Of course this convergence of the human and mechanical can be understood as a variation on the phenomenon, characteristic of theories

of the postmodern, whereby experience disappears into representation, and performed roles overwhelm any possibility of an authentic self. *The Day of the Locust*, however, shows little postmodern comfort with such a loss of authenticity, but rather represents it as a fear – a fear that emerges in the reactions of characters to the uncanny prospect of a body reduced to automatism. When Homer witnesses Harry's seizure, "He was terrified and wondered whether to phone the police. But he did nothing" (*DL*, p. 279). The disturbing effect of Harry's "purely muscular" (*DL*, p. 279) behavior is enhanced by the continuity of the seizure with his "normal" conduct, as he slips undetectably from his clownish sales pitch into his mechanistic spasm. In the same scene, he uses a stage laugh, another muscular spasm, to frighten Faye: "This new laugh was not critical; it was horrible. When she was a child, he used to punish her with it. It was his masterpiece. There was a director who always called on him to give it when he was shooting a scene in an insane asylum or a haunted castle" (*DL*, p. 284). Harry's laugh is horrible rather than critical, prompting not ironic distance but visceral fear.

At a few crucial moments, moreover, *The Day of the Locust* explicitly suggests that this reduction of the human to an automatic bodily mechanism implies a disappearance of the interiority so central to (Jameson's version of) modernist aesthetics. By deliberately questioning characters' capacity for feeling, the novel dramatizes the uncanny anxiety latent in the representation of them as mere bodies. For example, when Homer sits on his shabby patio, dumbly watching a lizard catch flies, the narrator struggles to characterize his condition: "Between the sun, the lizard and the house, he was fairly well occupied. But whether he was happy or not is hard to say. Probably he was neither, just as a plant is neither" (*DL*, p. 276). The narrator's doubt about Homer's capacity for feeling is particularly striking because the narrator has confidently assumed omniscience at other moments in the novel; he has told us when Homer experiences fear, excitement, and lust. But he remains oddly tentative about whether to call Homer happy. The narrator's problem is not whether he can know Homer's mind – we have seen that he can – but whether Homer's condition can at all be described by conventional categories. We are told that Homer possesses "emotions," but that there is something odd about them:

He felt even more stupid and washed out than usual. It was always like that. His emotions curved up in an enormous wave, surging and rearing, higher and higher, until it seemed as though the wave must carry everything before it. But the crash never came. Something always happened at the very top of the crest and

the wave collapsed to run back like water down a drain, leaving, at most, only the refuse of feeling. (*DL*, p. 273)

Like the elusive “something wrong” (*DL*, p. 268) in Homer’s appearance, the “something” that “always happen[s]” to Homer, the failure of catharsis, defies naming. Despite Homer’s deep anguish, what he feels is the *absence* of feeling, or “at most, only the refuse of feeling.”

Tod entertains the same anxiety when he observes Harry suffering from chest pains. Even the man’s physical agony, he notes, has become an antic performance:

Tod began to wonder if it might not be true that actors suffer less than other people. He thought about this for a while, then decided that he was wrong. Feeling is of the heart and nerves and the crudeness of its expression has nothing to do with its intensity. Harry suffered as keenly as anyone, despite the theatricality of his groans and grimaces. (*DL*, p. 311)

Here again is the problem of feeling and expression so ubiquitous in modernist treatment of affect: Tod’s inability to find a correlation between *experience* and *expression* leads him to doubt the very existence of Harry’s pain. Yet he steps back from this radical possibility and concludes that suffering retains a material, biological basis in “the heart and nerves” that is independent of the artfulness with which the sufferer communicates it. Just as the ugly houses in the foothills communicate a need for beauty and romance in spite of their outlandish architecture, so Harry’s theatricality still (just) manages to convey his pain.

But Tod’s doubt is as important as his conclusion. Indeed, he is not the only one to question the reality of Harry’s pain. In a review of a vaudeville performance Harry had given years back, a critic wrote: “The pain that almost, not quite, thank God, crumples his stiff little figure would be unbearable if it were not obviously make-believe. It is gloriously funny” (*DL*, p. 263). Knowledge of the fictionality of Harry’s suffering transforms the audience’s potential pity and horror into laughter. But the performance goes right up to the edge of the “unbearable,” the power of its comedy deriving precisely from the magnitude of the pain that it ultimately assures us is unreal. In other words, comic laughter, infused with sadism, depends upon a point of view that confines the suffering to a fictional space. But since the reader has already been told that Harry’s clowning is a deliberate attempt to hide real-life pain – “It was his sole method of defense” (*DL*, p. 261) – she cannot be as confident about the “make-believe” nature of Harry’s pain as is the reviewer. Thus the inescapable *mediation* of all feeling through expression, whether onstage or off,

renders indeterminate the nature of Harry's suffering and creates the perception that his capacity for experience hovers uneasily – uncannily – between fiction and reality. For the reviewer, Harry's aesthetic triumph causes make-believe pain to appear real, while for Tod, Harry's aesthetic failure causes real-life pain to appear make-believe. In both cases, however, an ethical judgment must be suspended so that an aesthetic one can be rendered.

In this surrender of ethical standards of judgment for aesthetic ones lies the very dynamic of the satirical impulse – at least as formulated by Lewis in his valorization of the mechanical and the inhuman. West – or that part of his sensibility that finds expression in Shrike and Claude, his machines for making jokes – can reduce his characters to automata and reject the experiential appeal of suffering in favor of the pleasures of metaphor-making. But for West, unlike the brasher Lewis, this automatism brings an uncanny fear. The idea that the characters of *The Day of the Locust* have no feelings to be sympathized with but only bodies to be laughed at reveals itself as a fear of the consequences of satire. Ironic aloofness collapses into uncanny dread when satire recoils in the face of its own dehumanizing representations.

The novel contains at least one other crucial moment where it denies the capacity of its characters to suffer pain. Just before the final riot, Tod speculates on what will become of Faye:

Tod wondered if she had gone with Miguel. He thought it more likely that she would go back to work for Mrs. Jennings. But either way she would come out all right. Nothing could hurt her. She was like a cork. No matter how rough the sea got, she would go dancing over the same waves that sank iron ships and tore away piers of reinforced concrete. (*DL*, p. 375)

In assuring himself that “nothing could hurt” Faye, Tod is defending himself against the fear – also a fantasy – that Faye will become a prostitute. Again, Tod lets his metaphorical imagination carry him away, delighting in the conceit of Faye as an object impervious and insensate:

It was a very pretty cork, gilt with a glittering fragment of mirror set in its top. The sea in which it danced was beautiful, green in the trough of the waves and silver at their tips. But for all their moon-driven power, they could do no more than net the bright cork for a moment in a spume of intricate lace. Finally it was set down on a strange shore where a savage with pork-sausage fingers and a pimpled butt picked it up and hugged it to his sagging belly. Tod recognized the fortunate man; he was one of Mrs. Jennings's customers. (*DL*, pp. 375–76)

The free-associative linguistic play – reveling in its own powers of invention, keeping at bay an anxious compassion – literally runs aground with one of the novel’s most arresting images of the grotesque. As Tod’s painterly progress culminated in a grotesque aesthetic, so his personal internal language comes to rest in imagery that evokes neither irony nor pity but rather revulsion. The primitive “savage” returns us to an uncanny space (“a strange shore”) that turns out to be the whorehouse, this novel’s familiar and unfamiliar space of sexuality; the savage’s corporeality – his “pork-sausage fingers” and “pimpled butt” and “sagging belly” – remind Tod of Faye’s own corporeality, and render the prospect of her prostitution horrifying. Unlike Lewis, Tod indeed is revolted by the idea of regarding Faye as merely a body. As when he imagined sex with Faye as a suicide leap, Tod’s language again fails to destroy. The ethical claims of Faye’s humanity remain. A grotesque image of the human body – meaty, pock-marked, excessive – serves to reaffirm, through the revulsion it elicits, Tod’s human relation to Faye.