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Surrealism Gone West : from *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931) to *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933)

Frank Conesa

Nathanael West: a “surrealist” writer?

- 1 In 1950, ten years after Nathanael West died in a car accident, American publishing company New Directions reissued *The Day of the Locust*, West’s eye-catching novel about Hollywood. His literary legacy had gone relatively unnoticed since his death, but this sudden revival made him gain a fairly large body of readers who had much more curiosity and relish for his various kinds of social grotesquerie, black comedy and hysteric pessimism than their predecessors during the Depression years. Upon this growing craze for West’s resuscitated materials, American book company Farrar, Straus and Cudahy Inc. published *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* in 1957, making all four novels written by West — *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), *A Cool Million* (1934) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939) — available to a new generation of readers, commentators and scholars. Richard B. Gehman was one of them, and in the introduction he wrote to the New Directions edition of *The Day of the Locust*, he suggested that a fairly legitimate route may be established into West’s hallucinatory lands and “convulsive” imagery by means of the Surrealists’ compass.¹ He contended that even if West never identified with the French Surrealists,

The paintings and writings of their ‘official’ school affected him profoundly when he first came across them in Paris, and his feeling for their destructive derision, their preoccupation with decay and degeneracy and disintegration was indisputably empathic. (Gehman *Locust*, x)

- 2 West’s scarce paratextual elements are not helpful in that respect.² In two radically different contexts and on two specific occasions distant in time he actually used the term “surrealist” to refer to himself and his work. First, in the back-cover blurb of his first

novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, published in 1931.³ This editorial piece of disguised self-promotion written in third person presented the author of the book as a “vicious, mean, ugly, obscene and insane” comic writer whose “use of the violently dissociated, the dehumanized marvellous, the deliberately criminal and imbecilic” was comparable to that of “certain of the Surrealists” (397).⁴ This swaggering advertisement was meant to both appeal to and shock reviewers and readers alike in the true manner of both Dada and the Surrealists. For West, *Balso Snell* represented “a protest against writing books” (Liebling 11), even though he was less paying lip service to Dada⁵ than trying to join the American 1930s’ avant-garde bandwagon.

- 3 The second time West reportedly used the term “surrealist” was when he denied being one, in reaction to 1939 *New Yorker* review of *The Day of the Locust* written by Clifton Fadiman, which presented the novelist as “the ablest of our surrealist authors” (Fadiman 9). For Jay Martin—West’s often-quoted biographer—Surrealism “was popularly imagined to be the equivalent to incomprehensibility and West felt that the epithet had sunk the book” (Martin 338), all the more so because he was writing in the American social context of the Depression, when “Surrealism was disturbing [...] because its explorations of the unconscious sent reverberations throughout the social realm” (Tashjian 130).⁶
- 4 *Balso Snell* was the last book to be published by The Contact Editions, a publishing company originally based in Paris and specialized in avant-garde literature. However, it doesn’t follow that all that is Westian is *ipso facto* surrealist, all the more since West’s own position shifted over time from enthusiastic acknowledgment to adamant denial of the epithet *surrealist*, thereby contributing to cast a rather thick veil of skepticism over his real intentions towards André Breton’s movement.⁷
- 5 The alleged surrealist materials of West’s first novel combined with the absence of a readership after the relative success of his second novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, published in 1933, were a source of concern all along his short literary career. He was in search of an audience that didn’t exist, as he confided in a letter to Malcolm Cowley in 1939: “Lately, I have been feeling even more discouraged than usual [...]. Why make the continuous sacrifice necessary to produce novels for a non-existent market?” (794)
- 6 Though contemporary literary commentators have found it a challenging task to put West’s work into a satisfactory pigeonhole, they acknowledge a parallel between French Surrealism and West’s incongruities, thus tending towards the critical consensus that, despite some deviations, his pictorial style has affinities with surrealist writing and art at large.⁸
- 7 Surrealism was originally a method for unveiling hidden aspects of reality and challenging the usual ways of thinking the world by questioning sensorial perception. By the time *Balso Snell* was published, the term had entered the American art lexicon, but it had then been drained of its germinal Bretonian spirit and had been integrated into commodity culture as its most eye-catching motif, meant to startle, shock and amuse.⁹ West looked at European Surrealism “for a way to write the times” (Bradbury 153) and combined the visual powerfulness of surrealist imagery with “the tradition of American comic grotesquerie” (153) to translate the grotesqueness of American social mores.¹⁰ West’s “grotesque surrealism” (127), through its parody of European influences, also gained a photographic and camera-seeing dimension, as shows his initial project to write *Miss Lonelyhearts* “in the form of a comic strip”:

The chapters to be squares in which many things happen through one action. The speeches contained in the conventional balloons. I abandoned this idea, but

retained some of the comic strip technique: Each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture. (401)

- 8 In the early 1930s, when West and William Carlos Williams initiated a co-editing partnership to revive *Contact*, a magazine which had disappeared in 1923, they predicted the need for American authors to create their own art, an art that would conform to their own social and cultural experiences. The magazine requested literary contributions moving away from influential European art standards, past and present, and re-establishing “contact” with the American ingrained experience. West contributed to the magazine with early drafts of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, which illustrated the author’s shift in focus from parody to social criticism.¹¹
- 9 Our intention is therefore to make sense of West’s artistic transition from *Balso Snell* to *Miss Lonelyhearts*, as being the expression of his desire to act as a provocative outsider—a misfit American artist—, whilst seeking literary recognition. Indeed, he uses surrealism-influenced motifs based on pessimism and black humor to infuse a particular form of critical consciousness in the story-telling.¹² West shifts from mock-surrealism, etched in the phantasmagoric partitions of Balso Snell’s subconscious, to the uncanny world of *Miss Lonelyhearts*’s agony column. In *Balso Snell*, he writes a parody of the movement’s original assault on the pretensions of art, setting aside the initial Surrealists’ creed of self-discovery through dreams and hallucinatory trances, the surrealistic imagery of which he recycles in *Miss Lonelyhearts* to dramatize the cynical indictment of individual delusion and collective neuroses in Depression-era America.

***Balso Snell* and the mock-initiation into surrealism**

- 10 The publication of West’s *Complete Works* in 1957 enabled critics to have access again to *Balso Snell*, which had been out of print since the *Contact* edition of 1931. Retrospectively, the book stood out in the 1930s’ American literary production as a sort of “late” avant-garde oddity, saturated with intertextual references to various classic art forms and texts pertaining to European culture.¹³
- 11 *Balso Snell* tells the story of a dream in which an American poet embarks on a scatological, surreal journey into the Trojan horse’s bowels—an allegory of Balso Snell’s own unconscious. The place seems to be what we might call a *vocation* resort or an art laboratory for aspiring authors, every single one of whom Balso is forced to listen to. Himself a trained poet full of prejudiced opinions, Balso Snell is confronted with a hotchpotch of nonsensical theories about art and non-conformist literary productions discharged out loud and tried on him. Balso eventually disappears further into the bowels of the horse to escape their stories, a convoluted march which climaxes with the description of his sexual intercourse with his former lover, Miss McGeeney. The framework of the novel proceeds from the dream flow of Balso’s encounters and experiences. By displacing the question of authorship onto the unreal territory of dreams and challenging Balso Snell’s authorial powers, West writes “an anti-Künstlerroman” (Cerasulo 59).
- 12 West’s late contribution to the American literary avant-garde is not *Balso Snell* as such, but *Balso Snell* understood as a mock-surrealist epic. The Trojan horse allegorically stands for the poet’s own deceptive subconscious peopled by authorial personas in search for an audience to whom they might submit their tentative prose. West was not so much paying

tribute to Dada's irreverent approach to art and to the Surrealists' liberatory exploration of the irrational, as he was trying to parody the avant-garde movement and its limitless journeys into the absurd, for which the cavernous rooms of the Trojan Horse are a gruesome metaphor.

- 13 To some extent, Balso Snell's mock-Homeric encounters with fragments of experimental literature in the Trojan horse are the offspring of West's short, initiatory trip to Paris in 1926. The incongruous authors that people Balso Snell's dream serve as milestones and trials on his artistic way to total lack of control, after the Bretonian surrealist manner. After all, Balso may well be considered the unfiltered voice granting access to "what is transpiring unbeknownst to man in the depths of his mind."¹⁴ The authors who compose this animate repository all have subconscious overflowing with extreme images loaded with scatology and blasphemy. Like the real West, Balso Snell appears a fake expatriate, a foreign author visiting exotic, far-away (in)lands.¹⁵ But unlike West, Balso's discovery of surrealism-inspired fiction within the Trojan horse is fraught with dissatisfaction and prejudiced opinions.
- 14 Balso is locked up in the labyrinth of his own mind, and his grotesque initiation through matter underscores the mock-esoteric dimension of West's narrative. Balso Snell's itinerary begins with the anal trespassing and ends in "the little death". This spatial structure points to the character's mock-symbolic progression through a series of gross exoteric thresholds marked by the different characters he meets and which originates in the encounter with the Jewish guide who greets him as if he had entered a secret fraternity.¹⁶ The scene, though very brief, has ritualistic overtones:

A man with "Tours" embroidered on his cap stalked out of the shadow. In order to prove a poet's right to trespass, Balso quoted from his own works:

"If you desire to have two parallel lines meet at once or even in the near future," he said, "it is important to make all the necessary arrangements beforehand, preferably by wireless."

The man ignored his little speech. (6)

- 15 This absurd dialogue inaugurates Balso Snell's gastric apprenticeship through chance encounters with aspiring authors who mean to put his artistic tolerance to the test. The most significant meeting is that with 12-year-old John Gilson, a young author who has written a diary in which he has invented a fictive double, John Raskolnikov Gilson — a Dostoevski-influenced murderer who discusses the subconscious in his 'Crime Journal' and compares his imagination to a "wild beast that cries always for freedom" (20). In the ensuing discussion, he dismisses the young boy's fiction as worthless literature: "Interesting psychologically, but is it art?" Balso said timidly. "I'd give you B minus and a good spanking" (22).¹⁷ West's art of self-parody cuts both ways since his disguised criticism of the schoolboy's literary pretensions is doubled by that of the critical assumptions uttered by Balso Snell whose rhetorical question "is it art?" may well mean he is truly dumbfounded by the boy's production, somehow feeling out of place and trying to get back into his intellectual comfort zone.

Manufacturing the surrealist dream

- 16 The more Balso Snell descends into the bowels, the more the dissolution of his self-assertiveness as a poet and enlightened reader is complete, as if resulting from an intimate contact with subconscious *faeces*. The love scene with Miss McGeeney—"his old

sweetheart” (50)—marks the final teaching moment of his mock-journey down the Trojan horse’s hole, during which Balso Snell sets to showcase his oratory skills. Prior to the scene, he goes through a rejuvenating process and instantly recovers buried memories of his youth. But those flashes—retrieved from his subconscious twice removed—are accompanied by an unexpected scatological metaphor:

“Oh!” Balso exclaimed, carried away by these memories of his youth. “Oh!” His mouth formed an O with lips torn angry in laying duck’s eggs from a chicken’s rectum. (50)

- 17 The analogy West uses to depict Balso Snell’s exclamation is a visual reminder of the ongoing mock-surrealist experience to which the character has been subjected by his own wild imagination so far. In the next phase of the love scene, Balso Snell’s first two speeches are verbal acrobatics advocating the new language of freedom acquired through sexual activity. But, as regards the pure spirit of surrealism, they remain unconvincing because dictated by logic and rationality, and not by his subconscious. At the end of his third speech—laden with lyrical conceits about the brevity of time—, he finally throws himself on his lover. This spontaneous act triggers a chain reaction which carries both lovers away from social conventions:

No. No! Innocent, confused. Oh Balso! Oh Balso! with pictures of the old farm house, old pump, old folks at home, and the old oaken bucket—ivy over all.

Sir! Stamping her tiny foot—imperative, irate. Sir, how dare you, sir! Do you presume? Down, Rover, I say down! The prying thumbs of insolent chauffeurs. The queen chooses. Elizabeth of England, Catherine of Russia, Faustina of Rome. (53)

- 18 The audacity of his moves is conveyed through his partner’s irrational flow of verbless sentences inspired by collage and automatic writing techniques, but which West endows with a comic effect:

Allowing hot breath to escape from between moist, open lips: eyes upset, murmurs love. Tiger skin on divan. Spanish shawl on grand piano. Altar of Love. Church and Brothel. Odors of Ind and Afric. There’s Egypt in your eyes. Rich, opulent love; beautiful, tapestried love; oriental, perfumed love.

Hard-bitten. Casual. Smart. Been there before. I’ve had policemen. No trace of a feminine whimper. Decidedly revisiting well-known, well-plowed ground. No new trees, wells, or even fences. (53)

Contrary to Balso Snell’s elaborate conceits, Miss McGeeney’s chaotic and incongruous analogies transform the physical reaction into “convulsive” verbal production. In this movement of the love scene, Balso Snell is forced to surrender his literary pretensions and language:

His body broke free of the bard. It took on a life of its own; a life that knew nothing of the poet Balso. Only to death can this release be likened—to the mechanics of decay. [...]

In this activity, Home and Duty, Love and Art, were forgotten. (54)

- 19 By losing his self-control, he catapults his partner into a state of trance conducive to mental flashes similar to the effect produced by automatic writing as defined by Breton:

In this dizzying race the images appear like the only guideposts of the mind. [...] The mind becomes aware of the limitless expanses wherein its desires are made manifest, where the pros and cons are constantly consumed, where its obscurity does not betray it. It goes forward, borne by these images which enrapture it, which scarcely leave it any time to blow upon the fire in its fingers. This is the most

beautiful night of all, the lightning-filled night: day, compared to it, is night.
(Breton 37-38)

- 20 There lies West's counterfeit surrealist aesthetics: dreaming of having an orgasm within a dream might constitute the height of all surrealist dream activities, as suggested by the terms used by West to describe both Miss McGeeney's dizziness and Balso's military glorification of frenetic pleasure, and which are similar to those used by Breton himself to define the surrealist activity—in addition to the humoristic effect of the sophisticated concatenation in the conclusive images of *Balso Snell*:

An army moved in his body, an eager army of hurrying sensations. These sensations marched at first methodically and then hysterically, but always with precision. The army of his body commenced a long intricate drill, a long involved ceremony. A ceremony whose ritual unwound and manoeuvred itself with the confidence and training of chemicals acting under the stimulus of a catalytic agent.

His body screamed and shouted as it marched and uncoiled; then, with one heaving shout of triumph, it fell back quiet.

The army that a moment before had been thundering in his body retreated slowly—victorious, relieved. (61-62)

- 21 The orgasm is the unexpected, climactic event in the novel that aggregates then dissolves at once all the fragments of the dream gleaned so far. West has thus written a novel about a fake surrealist experience manufactured within the subconscious of a fictitious author. By putting together images of sexual intercourse, military victory, chaos and death, the ending of *Balso Snell* strangely echoes the closing paragraph of Breton's "Second Manifesto of Surrealism":

Man, who would wrongly allow himself to be intimidated by a few monstrous historical failures, is still free to believe in his freedom. He is his own master, in spite of the old clouds which pass and his blind forces which encounter obstacles. Doesn't he have any inkling of the brief beauty concealed and of the long and accessible beauty that can be revealed? Let him also look carefully for the key to love, which the poet claimed to have found: he has it. It is up to him and him alone to rise above the fleeting sentiment of living dangerously and of dying. Let him, in spite of any restrictions, use the avenging arm of the idea against the bestiality of all beings and of all things, and let him one day, vanquished-but vanquished only if the world is the world welcome the discharge of his sad rifles like a salvo fired in salute. (187)

- 22 Balso Snell's bestial desire for Miss McGeeney, followed by the literal, overwhelming discharge of body fluids, points therefore to the opposite of what Breton calls "the Surrealist endeavor" (187).
- 23 Ultimately, West's first novel remains a jigsaw puzzle for any critic who ventures beyond its dubious threshold, as is the case for Balso Snell himself when he gets submerged by the tidal waves of his own subconscious. After all, he may well be the author of his dream or just the imaginary hero in an anonymous dreamer's dream. There is no "real" dreamer, no first-hand material, and therefore no dream whatsoever; *Balso Snell* might thus be a parody of surrealist art in the form of a hocus-pocus. Forging a dream or faking one would have been a capital crime under the surrealist law, unless it was perpetrated in someone else's name. However, many Surrealists were repudiated along the way by Breton for less than that. West's choice of the Trojan Horse is symbolic of the author's intention to question literary norms and trends, to mock and to crack their codes, and eventually to hack into their system of representation of reality to implant his own.

Miss Lonelyhearts as transitional novel

- 24 Though West never rejected his stylistic kinship with the Surrealists, his adamant denial following Fadiman's literary review of *The Day of the Locust* showed that—as a true American artist—he had taken his independence not only from both the European avant-garde and the American avant-garde, but also from social realism, to grow a critical style of his own. In the words of Jay Martin,

West was an exile in America. For his slightly older contemporaries, Dadaism was a form of protest, but West needed neither Dada manifestoes nor economic crises to know that irrationality prevailed in America and that he hated its commercial life. All aspects of American life, as he saw it, touched on the grotesque and the absurd. (Martin 45)

- 25 *Balso Snell* had been West's test-tube experiment; *Miss Lonelyhearts* would become his life-size test: "Whereas in his earlier novel he used the surrealist concept of warring psychic states to probe the antinomies of Western consciousness, in *Miss Lonelyhearts* he strives to reveal the divisions and fractures of the American experience" (Briggs 133).

- 26 In the "Introduction" to the French edition of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Philippe Soupault wrote that he had met West on some occasions in New York, and that he considered West as a witness of his time, a seer—"un voyant" (Soupault 12)—, who like no other writer of his generation dived into the dark waters of America's reality and dreams to warn his contemporaries about the delusional appearances masking a profound despair.

- 27 *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West's second novel, tells the story of an anonymous journalist's shaken faith in his job as writer of an agony column in a New York newspaper. The numerous letters he receives on a daily basis have finally brought him to question his values, and what had started as a joke has now turned into serious matter as he confesses to Betty, his former lover:

[...] after several months at 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 in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator. (94)

- 28 In the novel, the real world becomes irrational, filtered and transfigured by Miss Lonelyhearts who finds himself in a recurrent state of either hallucination or paranoid delusion, for example fantasizing about the statuary of the little park he is particular fond of, and which functions as a passageway to an irrational, graphic dimension of reality:

When he reached the little park, he slumped down on a bench opposite the Mexican War obelisk. The stone shaft cast a long, rigid shadow on the walk in front of him. He sat staring at it without knowing why until he noticed that it was lengthening in rapid jerks, not as shadows usually lengthen. He grew frightened and looked up quickly at the monument. It seemed red and swollen in the dying sun, as though it were about to spout a load of granite seed. (79)

- 29 *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s distorted visions of urban despair underscore West's expressionist representation of a violent social reality in America—and even his expressionist critical method—as this other excerpt illustrates:

Crowds of people moved through the street with a dream-like violence. As he looked at their broken hands and torn mouths he was overwhelmed by the desire to

help them [...].

He saw a man who appeared to be on the verge of death stagger into a movie theater that was showing a picture called *Blonde Beauty*. He saw a ragged woman with an enormous goiter pick a love story magazine out of a garbage can and seem very excited by her find.

Prodded by his conscience, he began to generalize. Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst. (103)

- 30 In West's literary production, *Miss Lonelyhearts* serves as a transitional novel. The shift in critical tone from *Balso Snell* to *Miss Lonelyhearts* accounts for West's darkened and more sardonic grasp of 1930s' social reality translated into the dysfunctional features of his characters and his recurrent "dream beds" sessions similar to ancient Egyptians' practices of incubation and dream therapy. *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s modern version of incubation only leads him to further delusion and estrangement, and this seems to be West's critical bottom-line as regards the totalitarian and inescapable solicitations that the average American receives from the outside media world.
- 31 Earlier drafts of *Miss Lonelyhearts* were published in the first issues of the magazine *Contact*, and when it definitively disappeared, in October 1932, Williams wrote in the literary page of *Il Mare*, edited by Ezra Pound, that *Contact* had produced Nathanael West, and that now it could die. Williams considered West a new type of American writer. In "Some Notes On Violence," published in the last issue of *Contact*, West precisely argued that both naturalism and social realism were unfit to represent the "idiomatic" violence of American society. According to him, the American novelist needed to adapt his art of writing and invent more appropriate ways to "handle" the ever-increasing, violent pace of reality. West's asynchronous response to reality has made him a true "contemporary" in Giorgio Agamben's sense of the term. For the Italian philosopher,
- [Those] (who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. [...] But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. (Agamben 45)

West's explosive art of writing

- 32 West's radicalized depiction of American society highlighted underlying tensions within familiar dreams. Reality had become a schizophrenic, staged dystopia shaken by masochistic drives and mass hysteria tremors; West needed a character as delusional as reality itself to register and express a world that seemed on the verge of breaking up or down—the Westian time being both that of despair and euphoria, an interval of time that disrupts the linearity of the narrative, identified by Frank Kermode as "the *kairos* of farce" that he opposes to "the *chronos* of reality" (Kermode 51): "*kairos* is the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with meaning derived from its relation to the end" (47). West's novelistic aphorism "you only have time to explode"¹⁸ has been the hallmark of his entire work, from Balso Snell's anal orgasm to Tod Hackett's feverish painting—"The Burning of Los Angeles"—in *The Day of the Locust*. Though West's work shared the explosiveness of art that the Surrealists aimed at, little was revealed by the explosion, apart from the void that it left, and which marked West's pessimistic take on social mores:

In the street again, Miss Lonelyhearts wondered what to do next. He was too excited to eat and afraid to go home. He felt as though his heart were a bomb, a complicated bomb that would result in a simple explosion, wrecking the world without rocking it. (74)

- 33 Explosion is experienced as both effective and illusory, thereby exposing an utterly incoherent reality within reality, which contradicts the Surrealists' attempt at expanding man's knowledge of the universe and deeper self-understanding. Surrealism was devised as an all-in-one magical key to unlock all doors to alternate interpretations of reality; but for West, reality emerged from the friction between irrational forces of the mind and rational perception of real events. He set out to reproduce his character's subconscious in sensory terms—the semantic field of the five senses is pervasive throughout his entire work. West makes that which was not graspable to the senses real through art, thereby putting his reader in a position to see rather than understand the irrational. Balso Snell's fascination for the “convulsive beauty” produced by his subconscious has given way to Miss Lonelyhearts's nightmarish hallucinations and overwhelmingly obsessive patterns:

Miss Lonelyhearts found himself developing an almost insane sensitiveness to order. Everything had to form a pattern: the shoes under the bed, the ties in the holder, the pencils on the table. When he looked out of a window, he composed the skyline by balancing one building against another. If a bird flew across this arrangement, he closed his eyes angrily until it had gone. (70)

- 34 As much as West's iconoclasm has to do with the subversion of literary trodden paths and conventional avenues—as suggested in *Balso Snell*—, Miss Lonelyhearts's desire to transgress the editorial code and supply his readers with something new is based on the rising tension between the joke and the serious matter which he has identified. This marks the starting point of the whole transformation undergone by the character, a turning point West decided to focus on rather than write a lengthy biographical account. It is because his readers take him seriously that something breaks down within Miss Lonelyhearts.
- 35 The thriving business of suffering entices Miss Lonelyhearts's ethical failure, which in turn induces his nervous breakdown and schizophrenia. The increasing business demand puts pressure on Miss Lonelyhearts, whose dysfunctional language of growing Christian atonement and hope is accompanied by unexpected outbursts of violence, as in the episode where he pays a visit to the Doyles to whom he tries to deliver his phony message of love, but ends up beating up Mrs Doyle—whom he has had an affair with—as she is making further sexual advances to him.
- 36 By getting closer to his readers, Miss Lonelyhearts hopes to make contact with what he thinks is the real mission hidden underneath the veneer of his hypocritical column; but he gradually loses critical hindsight as he constantly indulges in irrational translations of reality.

Enhanced representation of delusional reality

- 37 West's images are cosmetically surrealistic, yet drained of the original surrealist intent. They only aim at underpinning Miss Lonelyhearts's enhanced representation of reality, as in this extract from the chapter “Miss Lonelyhearts and the cripple” in which Miss Lonelyhearts meets Peter Doyle for the first time :

He used a cane and dragged one of his feet behind him in a box-shaped shoe with a four-inch sole. As he hobbled along, he made many waste motions, like those of a partially destroyed insect. (109)

- 38 The more Miss Lonelyhearts exposes himself directly to the people who write the letters, the more his overflowing subconscious merges with his sensorial perception of reality. The physical description that follows is an illustration of Miss Lonelyhearts's hallucinatory state:

The cripple had a very strange face. His eyes failed to balance; his mouth was not under his nose; his forehead was square and bony; and his round chin was like a forehead in miniature. He looked like one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests. (110)

- 39 West's pictorialization of reality gives volume to Miss Lonelyhearts's disordered emotions and distorted perception of external reality. In a sense, West's pictorial project for *Miss Lonelyhearts* pointed to a synthetic path resolving the duality of perception and representation similar to that which the Surrealists hoped to generate.¹⁹ While surrealism seeks to break into limitations of reality by encouraging a liberating art form of self-knowledge through dreams, West uses images to unearth fractures hidden in the American psyche, projecting them outwards and using them to imprison his character in a transfigured reality:

Suddenly tired, he sat down on a bench. If he could only throw the stone. He searched the sky for a target. But the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser. It held no angels, flaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine. He got up and started again for the speakeasy. (64)

- 40 West's images show all signs of nature to be infected and invested by deadness and cultural wasteland; this sinister imagery does not respond to the surrealist exigency to transcend and redeem the material and social world. Miss Lonelyhearts's decision to stop answering the letters has led him to further delusion and frustration, and eventually to improvised predication sessions by which he hopes to save the victims of both the Depression and mass media sedative entertainment culture. His inner crisis appears in transitional states of hypnagogic hallucination, in which he experiences bizarre and vivid sensory perceptions. But, contrary to the Surrealists, West doesn't consider presomnal states as a possible way to free oneself from logic and give voice to a new reality; they provide no satisfactory explanation to a crushing reality once the character is awake, as this extract suggests:

He went back to his desk and finished his column, then started for the park. He sat down on a bench near the obelisk to wait for Mrs. Doyle. Still thinking of tents, he examined the sky and saw that it was canvas-colored and ill-stretched. He examined it like a stupid detective who is searching for a clue to his own exhaustion. (88)

- 41 The Surrealists further argued that exhaustion followed by derangement led to discover strange inner regions of the mind where the marvelous lay. Aragon declared that

[I]n the grip of a tremendous momentum, we spent more and more time on the practices which led us into our strange inner lands. We delighted in observing the curve of our own exhaustion, and the derangement which followed. For then the marvellous would appear. [...] It was as if the mind, having reached a turning point in the subconscious, lost all control over where it was drifting. Images which existed in the mind took physical forms, became tangible reality. Once we were in touch with them they expressed themselves in a perceptible form, taking on the characteristics of visual, auditory and tactile hallucinations. (Aragon 4)

42 By contrast, Miss Lonelyhearts's cenesthetic hallucinations do not reveal the marvelous, but the morbid and the mundane. His exhaustion and growing madness is not conducive to any surrealist experience—but to a mock-religious experience: “Christ! Christ!” This shout echoed through the innermost cells of his body (125).

43 Both Breton and West point to the necessity to rethink the way reality is represented in literary works. Breton's criticism of the literary context of his time shares common threads with West's two short essays, “Some Notes on Violence” and “Some Notes on *Miss L.*”²⁰ Breton, for his part, shows sheer disgust at any literature that “feeds on and derives strength from the newspapers and stultifies both science and art assiduously flattering the lowest of tastes; clarity bordering on stupidity, a dog's life” (6). Breton continues and denounces what he has identified as the shortcomings of the novel form, that is, the use of pointless descriptions:

They are nothing but so many superimposed images taken from some stock catalogue, which the author utilizes more and more whenever he chooses; he seizes the opportunity to slip me his postcards, he tries to make me agree with him about the clichés [...]. (7)

West and the Bretonian ethics of writing

44 In the light of Breton's loathing for journalism, Miss Lonelyhearts's late awakening to the true reality of his job is consistent with his efforts to quit.²¹ West's character is not a surrealist revolutionary, but his rejection of journalism is nonetheless concomitant with a surge of repressed violence, symbolic dreams and disturbing hallucinations and delusions, making him the perpetrator then the victim of what Breton designated as “the petty system of debasement and cretinization” (125). In the wake of Breton's uncompromising assessment of the novelistic form and of his harsh condemnation of journalism, West expressed a somewhat similar *caveat* which rounds off his essay: “A novelist can afford to be everything but dull.”²² By avoiding what Breton calls “the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable” (9), West's cartoonish characterization and unconventional images resembled those of the Surrealists. West used Surrealism as a springboard for his own ethics of writing; he retained the non-conformist and rebellious stance of the Surrealists—in particular their rebellion against the “grand tradition” of literature and press media brainwashing—, while adapting it to American mores.

45 Far from reconciling dream and reality, in the Surrealists' manner, West's art of writing intensifies the rupture between these two realms.²³ He has identified violence as the idiom of the American society, fuelled by inarticulate feelings of betrayal and frustration.²⁴ What is more, West's presentation of dream states are not to be read as actual representation of an individual's real-life dreams, but rather as abstract figurations of collectivized phony dreams generated by consumer culture and fostered by the mass media.

46 In a sense, West's emphasis on collective neuroses illustrates the shift operated by some American avant-garde artists who substituted Carl G. Jung's notions of collective unconscious and the production of modern myths to the Freudian discourse tapped by French Surrealism: “Jung described the artist as a ‘collective man,’ who plumbs ‘the primal experience, the dark nature of which requires mythological figures.’ The result is ‘a creative act which concerns the entire contemporaneous epoch’” (Tashjian 33). By the

time West wrote his two essays, Jung had been introduced to American avant-garde artists by literary columnist Eugene Jolas in the magazine *transition* in 1930.²⁵ West may have been interested in Jung's analysis of the collective unconscious, as shown by the novelist's advocacy of a reshaping of psychology and a departure from Freud:

Psychology has nothing to do with reality nor should it be used as motivation. The novelist is no longer a psychologist. Psychology can become something much more important. The great body of case histories can be used in the way the ancient writers used their myths. Freud is your Bullfinch; you cannot learn from him²⁶.

47 A debate for or against a Freudian reading of West's work has been going on for many decades, and even contemporary literary critics hardly agree on how to interpret his cryptic remarks.²⁷ West felt the need to make the novelistic form evolve, in the wake of both Jung's nascent influential writings and of Salvador Dalí's outstanding surrealist paintings. For West, Freud's case histories played the same role as Greek myths and could prevent the novelist from devoting too much time on any detailed analysis of a particular character's psychology. As West had fittingly reminded his readership, "you only have time to explode" (401).

48 West and Breton shared the same desire "to avoid psychoanalyzing their characters" (Briggs 73):

The desire for analysis wins out over the sentiments. The result is statements of undue length whose persuasive power is attributable solely to their strangeness and which impress the reader only by the abstract quality of their vocabulary, which, moreover is ill-defined. (Breton 9)

49 His iconoclastic imagery made of grotesque metaphors aesthetically influenced by French symbolism and surrealism, matured in defiance of psychological portraits, and suggesting a pictorialized and cinematic representation of social issues: "*Miss Lonelyhearts* is a surrealist work that proceeds at breakneck speed, flashing cinematically, from one scene to the next" (Scheurich 572).

50 West's interest in myths and archetypes urged him to find "literary ways of presenting the secret life of the crowds who 'moved through the streets with a dreamlike violence'; and, thereby, he pushed close to the archetypal experiences (as Jung put it) of 'modern man in search of a soul'" (Martin 185). Although West never considered himself as a myth-maker, his fiction nonetheless accounts for a "mythmaking mission" (Tashjian 33), pointing to the dark shadows of "a new mythological reality" (35).

Conclusion

51 West's surrealist art of writing was developed into a deceptive art of make-believe, as shows the reference to the Trojan Horse in *Balso Snell*, and was then transplanted in the more familiar American urban scene of *Miss Lonelyhearts* in which he alerted his contemporaries to the potentially apocalyptic violence of the American reality he considered to be fraught with misleading illusions and distorted dreams. Instead of searching for a lost unity—as many American modernist authors (Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos for example) had endeavored to do in their own way in the 1920s—, West adopted a strictly detached attitude while dramatizing the perverted masquerade of America's culture of dreams and pictorializing the explosive mixture of suffering and frustration he witnessed throughout the Depression years. His unpalatable but lucid observations of the mass neurosis of the 1930s were to shape his work.²⁸

- 52 In his later fiction—*A Cool Million* in 1934 and *The Day of the Locust* in 1939—, West moved further away from both the “dream life” of Balso Snell’s subconscious and from Miss Lonelyhearts’s hallucinatory world. He viewed American reality as a non-stop staged act selling cheap, manufactured dreams to a desperate audience. Through his fiction, he prophesied that men would soon substitute the physical for the imagined, and external actions for internal thoughts. In *The Day of the Locust*, his last novel, West sustained his politics of revelation and his critique of the American dream in the form of an apocalyptic wasteland of movie-goers whose sole craving is for something “violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies” (381). He also showed to what extent Hollywood could produce its own celluloid surreal compositions.
- 53 For West, chaos was the actual reality and not a posture to question logical realism, as the Surrealists contended. He never imagined that Breton’s didactic criticism of reality could ever work out the same in America where reality was already shattered by dreams and illusions.
- 54 In his fiction, West seems to have been in search of a character that could grasp the big picture and perform a magical act to transform a “truly monstrous” (West 243) American reality into a pure form of “convulsive beauty.” Neither Balso Snell nor Miss Lonelyhearts manage to redeem the convoluted monstrosity of illusions which directs both the individual and the masses. In *The Day of the Locust*, the dumping ground that painter Tod Hackett discovers by chance in the hills symbolizes the resting place of Hollywood studio junk.²⁹ Before getting to this “dream dump,” Tod literally walks through a maze of cinema sets—the ultimate form of macabre ready-made ecosystem. The surreality of his vision of the American cultural landscape comes full circle when, among the sets, he is faced with the Trojan horse, as in an act of authorial self-parody, like the final mock-surrealist image and ready-made object encapsulating the reader’s as well as the character’s journey inside West’s dramatized subconscious. West’s Trojan (hobby-)horse rests like a life-size metatextual bookmark across the page—yet another hoax of his own design.

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NOTES

1. The adjective “convulsive” appears in André Breton’s novel *Nadja* (1928) combined with the term “beauty.”
2. Angel Flores was the first to draw a parallel between surrealism and West’s early work in a short essay published in *Contempo* (1933) and reprinted in Siegel (1994, 58-9).
3. Subsequent references to the book will appear under the form “*Balso Snell*.”
4. All references to West’s novels, letters and essays are taken from *Novels and Other Writings*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. New York: The Library of America, 1997.
5. In *Exile’s Return*, Malcolm Cowley quotes the Dada Manifesto which declared: “[t]he new artist protests” (149). West’s choice of the Trojan horse as setting for his narrative may be an allusion to the literal meaning of *dada* or ‘hobby-horse.’
6. Tashjian explains the difference between European Surrealism—deemed as deviant and chaotic—and America’s Post-Surrealism movement of the 1930s led by California painters such as Helen Lundeborg and Lorser Feitelson, which aimed at more aesthetic order on the canvas, corresponding to America’s “desire for normalcy” (130) in a period of social and economic chaos.
7. West always had a taste for double-play, posturing and masks, as when he “conned his way into Brown University” (Kingsley 6) in 1922.
8. West had been under the influence of surrealist painters such as Max Ernst since his trip to Paris in 1926. According to Westian early critic Josephine Herbst, “West’s deviations from the surrealists are significant. He was with them in pursuing the reality which lies beyond what we call real. He shared—with limitations—the revolutionary element in surrealism which was twofold: it was a revolt of the psyche, against the authority of reason; it was also an appeal to reason to liberate man from his oppressors—family, church, fatherland, and boss” (Herbst 620).
9. For a discussion on the impact of Surrealism on American culture, see for instance Tashjian (11-36) and (36-65).
10. West was influenced by Sherwood Anderson. For a comparative study of West and Anderson, see Taylor (154-199) and Berkovitz (129-200).
11. For an insightful analysis of this point, see Veitch. West was already dubbed “a kind of superrealist” in Gehman 1950, 69.
12. For J. Eburne, West implemented a new form of pessimism by means of discouraging unfunny jokes and “gruesome slapstick” (Eburne 527).
13. For an overview of West’s literary influences, see Reid 1967.
14. “Second Manifesto of Surrealism” (Breton 159).
15. West’s stay in Paris only lasted two months, though early critics took for granted rumours of his spending two years there.
16. “Fraternity” is a term that Breton uses in his *Manifestoes* to refer to the society formed by Surrealists.
17. For insight into West’s use of parody, see Reid (1967, 12-40).
18. “Some Notes on *Miss L.*” (401).
19. For further development, see Krauss (1986, 107-18).
20. “Some Notes on Violence” was published in the October issue of the magazine *Contact* in 1932 and “Some Notes on *Miss Lonelyhearts*” was published in *Contempo* on 15 May 1933.
21. In his “Second Manifesto of Surrealism”, Breton contends that journalism is “one of the most dangerous activities that exists” (Breton 165).
22. “Some Notes on *Miss Lonelyhearts*” (West 402).
23. Veitch underlines West’s interest for “‘excessive realism’ that aspires to turn its particular kind of joking into a distinct mode of social criticism” (Veitch 15).

24. In “Some Notes on Violence” West writes that “[in] America violence is idiomatic. Read our newspapers. To make the front page a murderer has to use his imagination, he also has to use a particularly hideous instrument” (West 399).

25. See Tashjian 33.

26. “Some Notes on *Miss L.*” (West 401).

27. For instance, whereas Stanley Edgar Hyman and Victor Comerchero were two early defenders of Freudian readings of West’s work, Randall Reid and Irving Malin firmly defended the opposite view.

28. The time spent by West as hotel manager in the Depression-era New York allowed him to collect raw materials to build most of his memorable characters.

29. Tod Hackett followed an academic training in painting on the East coast, but agrees to be hired as a set designer by a Hollywood studio.

ABSTRACTS

American modernist Nathanael West’s relationship to surrealism has been a classic topic of discussion among literary scholars. Though West is not considered to be a Surrealist, the term “surrealist” is often used to describe his writing. In order to overcome this critical double bind, this paper argues that West’s hallmark lies precisely in his departure from surrealism as well as in his ability to recombine it to produce his own aesthetics of reality, as illustrated by the transition from his first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), in which West parodies the surrealist tenets, to his second one, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), in which André Breton’s call to rethink reality has been changed into a cynical criticism of self-delusion in the American context of the Depression.

La relation qui lie l’écrivain américain Nathanael West et le surréalisme a longtemps constitué un objet d’étude chez les spécialistes de la littérature moderniste. Bien que West ne soit pas considéré comme un Surréaliste, on qualifie souvent son écriture de « surréaliste ». Afin de sortir de cette impasse critique, cet article défend l’idée que la marque de fabrique de West réside à la fois dans sa mise à distance du surréalisme et dans sa capacité à le reconfigurer pour l’amalgamer à sa propre esthétique de la réalité, ce que montre la transition entre son premier roman, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), dans lequel West fait une parodie du surréalisme, et son second roman, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), où l’appel à repenser la réalité qu’avait lancé André Breton est définitivement évacué au profit d’une critique cynique de l’illusion dans le contexte américain de la Dépression.

INDEX

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