

Surrealistic Emancipation or Surrealistic Emaciation
A Reading of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*

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要約

シュルレアリスム風の解放あるいはシュルレアリスム風の衰弱 *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* の読み方

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ナサニエル・ウエストの *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931) に関するモダニズム論。

この作品には、かれが若くして影響を受けたシュルレアリスムの特色が顕著に認められる。その構造からして、全編が主人公バルソ・スネルの夢から成っている。主題から見ても、社会的に認められている規範（たとえば理性や狂気）を転覆しようとする意欲が随所に溢れている。そこには、既存のリアリティから逃れて、新しいヴィジョンを開こうとする新人作家の意気込みが窺われる。しかしウエストは、シュルレアリスムの方法を駆使したことによって、その方法の孕む問題をも露呈することになった。つまり、社会的な規範のリアリティに揺さぶりをかけ、それを越えようとするほど、かえってそのリアリティの存在を強く意識せざるをえなくなるという逆説である。それはまた、新しい秩序が自らの新しさを主張するために、先行する秩序を「古いもの」として意識し続けなければならない逆説であり、さらには、新旧の秩序が反発しあいながら連動せざるをえないという逆説でもある。本稿では、この新旧の秩序による二項対立の図式にこそモダニズムの原理が集約されていることを明らかにし、ウエストがその原理から解き放たれようとして実践した表現の方法を円環のイメージに即して考察する。

Introduction

As early as June 1924, Nathanael West showed signs of his surrealistic talent in the Class Day speech he wrote for his friend at Brown, Quentin Reynolds. In this speech, he introduced a fancy flea named St. Puce which was born in the armpit of Christ and died of pneumonia at the death of the Savior. About seven years later, St. Puce returned in his first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), with an even stronger surrealistic touch. Of all the memorable events that had occurred to West by the year of 1931, his stay in France from 1926 to 1927 is most likely to have intensified his surrealistic bent. At the time when the American literary scene did not offer much encouragement, Paris in particular held a special fascination for him as the source of literary fantasy.

Throughout his stay in Paris, however, West did not produce much, but underwent an artistic initiation as an American writer of twenty three years old. As Jay Martin describes emphatically, he had "glimpses" of Jean Cocteau and André Gide, "observed" Ernest Hemingway, and "apparently saw" (84) T. S. Eliot. While he failed to establish contact with French writers, West became acquainted with several painters. Among them was Max Ernst, who later claimed to have radiated an influence on him. Just as West, the surrealistic writer, enjoyed his artistic adventure in the city of exile, Balso Snell, the surrealistic poet, had fun going through his dream adventure in the Trojan Horse. Seen as a place for imaginative flight, Paris was to West what Troy was to Balso.

Martin states that West was already writing "sketches" (73) for *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* in 1924 when André Breton published "Manifesto of Surrealism." The dream vision Balso develops throughout his journey inside the Trojan Horse aligns with the definition of surrealism which Breton presents in his manifesto: "Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought" (26). This statement affirms that surrealism initiates a new trend in arts not by totally defying traditional forms of representation but by reinstating some of the modes of association and thought which traditional aesthetics has unjustly undermined. In other words, surrealism is basically defined as a modernist project in that it cannot claim its novelty without holding up the preceding "modes" of arts to ridicule.

Far from a rupture with the past, surrealism, as Breton defines it, paradoxically reinforces the dominant modes of the immediate past while outmoding them. This also holds true when surrealism stresses in effect, while challenging, the privileged norms of society, such as coherence and integrity, which have been so thoroughly socialized that people are hardly aware of privileging them. This paradoxical reinforcement of the privileged norms sets the condition under which Balso proceeds on a journey: he shows unknowingly that his dream spotlights such social norms as reason and sanity at the moment when it spoils them. More fundamentally, his journey is beset with binary oppositions like reason vs. unreason and sanity vs. insanity. Therein lies another paradoxical trap that trammels his footstep in the Trojan Horse: although reason and sanity are supposedly prior to unreason and insanity, they cannot claim autonomous

priority because their credits depend on their discredited counterparts. Balso cannot escape from this rupture and liaison between binary oppositions unless he can come up with some revolutionary vision. In this plight, the title of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* promises him a way out, for it unifies the binary opposition of dream and life in an ideal domain where the subordination of one to the other collapses. It is no wonder that West shares Breton's belief in "the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality" (14).

In theory, if Balso reaches the state of "absolute reality" where dream and life become undifferentiated, all the other binary oppositions implicit in his journey inside the Trojan Horse also decline. In practice, however, he needs to go a long way before he fuses dream and life. In the course of his journey, he meets several figures, all of whom retard his progress in their own ways. Most noteworthy is John Gilson, who casts doubt on the autonomous formulation of social order. This boy draws on his diary and pamphlet to show ways in which the notion of autonomy functions as a social disguise to repress antisocial factors of binary oppositions under the labels of unreason and insanity. Balso cannot do anything about these labels unless his promising fusion of dream and life can clear off the binary oppositions that have trapped John Gilson.

The first half of this essay will focus on the ways in which John Gilson dismantles the undersides of social order that would otherwise remain the potential grounds of his order. Considering that social order can stay dominant as long as it can brush aside his order as disorder, the dialectic of order and disorder will prove central to the issue of binary oppositions he faces. In the second half of this essay, the focus of discussion will be on the process through which Balso wins the ultimate state of oneness where dream and life are sublimated into a whole of peace and satisfaction. Both chapters will supplement each other in discussing how far Balso can go beyond the dilemma of order and disorder which John Gilson has challenged. The point is the degree to which Balso's surrealist vision of oneness prepares an escape route for John Gilson as well as for himself from the dialectic of order and disorder that has been deeply rooted in the discourse of modernism.¹

I The Order of Order

In *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, our attempts to enforce the control of reason on Balso's dream will surely fail. Our searches for the organizing principle of his dream can be the target of his laughter. The pursuit of truth which is in conformity with accepted practices is likely to founder. While the tangible and the imaginable retreat from the foreground, the improbable and the impossible are made to come out as if Janus turned his hidden face to the front. In proclaiming the radical transformation of realistic values through the liberation of his inmost nature, Balso ranks high as a surrealist dreamer.

On further analysis, however, Balso's dream turns out to be not as inconsistent as it first seems. Structurally, the whole of his dream can be divided into seven sections according to the figures he meets: (1) the guide of the Trojan Horse, (2) Maloney the Areopagite, (3) John Gilson, (4) a slim young girl, (5) Miss McGeeney, (6) The Lepi, and (7)

Mary McGeeney. If we regard the shortest section of the slim girl as part of the following section in which she transfigures herself in Balso's arms into "a middle aged woman" (32), each of the six sections involves a frame story narrative as a means of securing its surreality. The guide of the Trojan Horse, for instance, introduces a story, sacred and profane in one, in which a traveler in Tyana, who is looking for a sage named Apolonius, sees a snake enter the lower part of the sage's body. Equally sacred and profane is the story which Maloney the Areopagite tells about the flea Saint Puce which is born in "the armpit of our Lord" and dies after His death, "refusing to desert to lesser flesh" (12). The crux of both stories, if any, is not as nonsensical as we imagine. In the world where neither a sage nor a savior can help us, as West would say, all we can do is listen to these stories with laughter and anger.

Seen thematically as well as structurally, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is consistent in pursuing one of the major issues of surrealism, the radical subversion of socially accepted norms, such as reason and sanity. The fragmentary nature of Balso's dream is one of the devices by which these norms are tested. When Balso finds that his feet hurt and head aches after hurrying down a seemingly endless corridor, he goes to sleep within his dream and has another dream in his ongoing sleep. Whatever has happened in his initial dream loses its foundation and becomes all the more nonsensical. In addition, his new dream is now doubly dubious because it is part of his first dream that has already lost its foundation. It is also noteworthy that the border between dream and life is made obscure as he dreams of waking from his dream and seeing "Miss McGeeney, the biographer of Samuel Perkins" (56), whom he has previously met in the course of his dream.

Another device that calls such privileged norms as reason and sanity into question is the queer stories which several figures in Balso's dream present to him. The Lepi, "a beautiful hunchback" (37), is qualified as a storyteller of this type, and probably more so than guide of the Trojan Horse and Maloney the Areopagite, for her story clearly shows that one of the privileged norms, "Love" (38), is at stake. She tells Balso that a man called Beagle Darwin has betrayed her and that she carries his child in the hump of her back. In his first letter to the Lepi, Darwin defends himself by stating that she would have committed suicide if she had accompanied him there: "it is a suicide's grave that I saved you from when I refused to take you to Paris" (47). In his second letter, he sounds more pompous and threatening to the effect that he actually wishes her dead: "The clown is dead; the curtain is down. And when I say clown, I mean you" (50). When he adds, though knowing how trite his statement sounds, that "Life is a stage; and we are clowns" (51), Darwin implies that all actions of ours, however affectionate, will be deformed and end up as a butt of ridicule. This implication is more specified when he declares that a tragedy is not only the Lepi's but also "one that is the tragedy of all of us" (54). Thus he warns us that faith in "Love" (38) as embodied by the Lepi will perish from the world when she dies a symbolic death as a "clown."

Far more insightful storyteller than the Lepi and any other figure in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is a schoolboy, John Gilson, whose diary Balso happens to read. Titled "The

Making of a Fiend" (15), this diary is far from ordinary, adopting the style of a crime journal in which John Gilson narrates a story about John Raskolnikov Gilson plotting the murder of an idiot. Except for Balso, J. R. Gilson is the most radical surrealist and even deconstructionist in this novel, for he exposes the established canon of order from within more skillfully than any other figure as he replaces social order with his own.

In claiming that "Order is the test of sanity" (15), J. R. Gilson suggests that sanity is a human construct set up by the standing rule of mental coherence. Also he criticizes the canon of order for being measurable: "Order is vanity. I have decided to discard the nonsense of precision instruments. No more measuring. I drop the slide rule and take up the Golden Rule" (15). In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault asserts that "the use of measurement presupposes that, unlike calculation, which proceeds from elements towards a totality, one considers the whole first and then divides it up into parts" (53). Through his outburst against the force of measurement, "No more measuring," J. R. Gilson eventually unveils what Foucault terms "the whole," positing it not as natural but as artificial. Furthermore, he contends that the norm of sanity, accredited to the myth of "the whole," forms its foundation by ruling out the elements it cannot subsume: "Sanity is the absence of extremes" (15). In "The Discourse of Language," Foucault echoes the metaphysical concern of J. R. Gilson, using the term "knowledge" to designate the configuration of the power involved in practicing "the absence of extremes": "If we ask what is, in its very general form, the kind of decision governing our will to knowledge — then we may well discern something like a system of exclusion" (218).

Despite his insight into the "the absence of extremes," a variant of the "system of exclusion," J. R. Gilson is not qualified to be as contemporary a critic as Foucault. While farcing "the Golden Rule" in the Bible, he still abides by the notion of it in rebelling against the social norms, reason and sanity, which legitimate themselves with reference to the established canon of order. In other words, "the Golden Rule" is no more than his own "system of exclusion" by which he tries to justify his speech and action. If "modernity revolts against the normalizing functions of tradition" (5), as Jürgen Habermas claims in "Modernism — An Incomplete Project," then J. R. Gilson is a child of "modernity," namely an heir of the Enlightenment, who is involved, however involuntarily and ironically, in the yet "incomplete project" of human progress and social innovation.

Set against the social norm of sanity, J. R. Gilson cannot do otherwise than see himself as "insane" (15, 16). Nevertheless, he is "sane" enough to aim at regaining his sense of balance. The only way he can achieve this aim is to murder the idiot who has disturbed his sense of balance. Seen as a practice of his "Golden Rule," this murder functions as a twofold parody of socially acclaimed truth. First, he can be "sane" only by conducting the act which his society forbids and decrees as a heinous crime of insanity. As Breton lamentably enunciates as if his mouthpiece, "forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices" (10). Second, J. R. Gilson ridicules the norm of reason by introducing the motives of his murder which the police, a socially instituted guard of reason, regard as unreasonable: "Policemen are reasonable

men; they do not consider the shape and color of a man's throat, his laugh or the fact that he does not wear a collar, reasonable motives for killing him" (19).

In the pamphlet which John Gilson later sells to Balso for a dollar, he presents "a brief outline of [his] position" (24), still elaborating on the issue of sanity raised by J. R. Gilson. This pamphlet consists of a story about a man and his girl friend named Saniette. Having lived with her for almost two years, the man dislikes her largely because she causes him the "natural anipathy felt by the performer for his audience" (25). Saniette prompts him to perform theatrical action until he becomes all the more desperate in his performance because her "casualness" (26) excites him. In short, no matter how hard he may try, his performing output dose not satisfy her tacit demand.³

As the name of Saniette implies, this story can be read as an allegory in which the man has been obsessed by the tyranny of sanity until he becomes almost insane. Given the allegorical reading, each time he watches carefully to see how Saniette receives his performance, he is equally carefully placed under the surveillance of sanity. Just as faith in love will perish if the Lepi commits suicide, sanity will also symbolically fade away if Saniette dies. In fact, the man long wishes for the death of Saniette, and consequently of sanity: "The inevitability of death has always given me pleasure, not because I am eager to die, but because all the Saniettes must die" (25). It is therefore easy to see that news of Saniette's death sets him free of the control of sanity. And yet he cannot do anything about his being "a tragic clown" (26), partly because he has symbolically lost his sanity when Saniette has died, and partly because he has acquired the habit of turning everything into performance. Now that "the extraordinary has become an obsession" (27), he is forced to try laughing at himself. If this laugh is "bitter," he has no other choice but to "laugh at the laugh" (27). For him, and and virtually for John Gilson, playing out a series of sardonic laughs is the only "position" available.

It is yet unfair to say that, through the crime journal and the pamphlet, John Gilson cannot do more than reject the primacy of order against which the degrees of reason and sanity are measured. More fundamentally, he attempts to annul the binary oppositions of reason and unreason, and of sanity and insanity, so that he can lay new stress on the responsibility of social agreement for the order accorded to them. This is why he stands for revolt against the social force that impairs his desire for liberation in the cause of order.

Essentially, however, his revolt is doomed to failure. His assault on the normalizing force of society only allows him to reconfirm the privileged canon of order as he strives to invalidate it. This paradoxical reinforcement of order is worth emphasizing, for it discloses the inescapable relationship he has with social tradition. It requires the surrealistic vision Balso achieves at the end of the novel to break through this dilemma. Different from the notion of "the whole" which society has imposed on J. R. Gilson as the matrix of measurement, Balso's final vision of oneness manifests the ultimate state of being in which he goes beyond the barrier of binary oppositions into a whole yet to be divided. Throughout his journey inside the Trojan Horse, one image recurs, symbolizing this ideal vision of oneness: a circle — a symbol of perfection. When a sequence of

circular images leads us from the beginning to the end of this novel, we see Balso hold out the prospect for revolutionary emancipation in carrying us beyond John Gilson's impasse.

II The Dream of Oneness

At the outset of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, a series of images of a circle emerges. First, examining the Trojan Horse, Balso finds that there are three openings, "the mouth, the navel, and the posterior opening of the alimentary canal" (3). Each of the openings forms a circle, the image of which carries us further to Balso's favorite exclamation fraught with the circular letter "O": "O Anus Mirabilis!" (3); "O Byss! O Abyss! O Anon! O Anan!"; "O Beer! O Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach!" (4); "O the Rose Gate! O the Mosit Garden! O Well O Fountain! O Sticky Flower! O Mucous Membrane!" (5). While these phrases, partly charged with sexual connotations, pave the way to the climax of his dream, Balso makes a nonsense song, whose undertone is also determined by the image of a circle, ranging from scatological through mock-religious to pseudo-artistic: "Round as the Anus/ Of a Bronze Horse/ Or the Tender Buttons/ Used by Horses for Ani/ On the Wheels of His Car/ Ringed Round with Brass/ Clamour the Seraphim/ Tongues of Our Lord/ Full Ringing Round/ As the Belly of Silenus/ Giotto Painter of Perfect Circles/ Goes . . . One Motion Round" (4). Here, the shape of a circle is represented by "the Anus," "the Tender Buttons," "the Wheels," and "Perfect Circles," while the movement of a circle by "Ringed Round with Brass," "Full Ringing Round," and "One Motion Round." Both the round shape and the circular movement, put together in one song, amplify the image of a circle.

In the sequel, the guide of the Trojan Horse carries on the image of a circle, referring to nature as a circle: "A circle has neither a beginning nor an end. A circle has no feet. If we believe that nature is a circle, then we must also believe that there are no feet in nature" (9). This image of a circle reminds us of the snake which the guide introduced in his first story — one which the traveler in Tyana saw enter the lower part of the sage's body. It is likely that the guide pushes the image of the snake further to the image of an ouroboros-like circle, which has "neither a beginning nor an end," and which has "no feet." Elusive as his rhetoric may seem, he assumes that nature is as circular as ouroboros, the ancient symbol of the snake biting its own tail, signifying the unity of opposing forces and the eternal cycle of life. In other words, he associates nature with a complete whole ready to be divided as "things take the shapes of eaches, everys, anys, eithers" (9), all of which he calls nature's "feet." Furthermore, through his parody of a well-known French artist, he stresses his faith in the unifying force of nature: "Cézanne said, 'Everything tends toward the globular'" (9). It is especially important that he projects the image of a yet undivided and even growing whole onto nature, because this image will unify binary oppositions and culminate in Balso's vision of "One" at the denouement of the novel.

In the fourth section, Balso meets a middle-aged woman, Miss McGeeney, who is a biographer of Samuel Perkins. As he listens to her story, Balso becomes aware that

Samuel Perkins is the biographer of E. F. Fitzgerald, who is the biographer of D. B. Hobson, who is the biographer of James Boswell, and that "ad infinitum, we will all go rattling down the halls of time, each one in his or her turn a tin can on the tail of Doctor Johnson" (33). In forming the "brilliant literary chain" (33) of biographers, Miss McGeeney presents one of the modified images of a circle. Also she states that Samuel Perkins has the magnificent sense of smell, which leads us from one object to another until the circuit of his smell is complete: "He went [speaking in Perkinsesque] from the smell of new-mown hay to that of musk and vervain [from the romantic to the realistic]; and, finally, to complete the circuit, from excrement he returned to new-mown hay" (35-36). Despite its slightly offensive smell, this "circuit" may well offer another image of a circle.

All these images of a circle stream to the surrealistic vision of a perfect whole which Balso calls up during his intercourse with Mary McGeeney, his old sweetheart, in the final section. As an heir of the surrealistic tradition of eroticism, Balso invites Mary to bed: "Come, Mary McGeeney, to bed and a new world" (59). Immediately, his favorite exclamation with the circle-shaped letter "O" recurs here with obvious sexual keynote, from "O rose!" through "O love!" (59) and "Oh, no" (60) to "Oh, I'm melting" (60). As he reaches ecstasy, his symbolization of a circle becomes more active: "Harmony. Order. Breasts. The apple of my eye, the pear of my abdomen" (60). At this point, the images of a circle, "breasts," "the apple of my eye," and "the pear of my abdomen," start to be merged with the images of perfection, "harmony" and "order." Finally, in the midst of orgasm, Balso has become one with her, just when he overrides the binary opposition of sexes into an unknown whole: "The miracle was made manifest. The Two became One. The One that is all things and yet no one of them" (61).

This "miracle" involves one of the most surrealistic visions Balso has ever achieved in his dream — the vision on which the images of a circle throughout the novel have converged, and also the vision which Breton in "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" describes as a domain where "life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low cease to be perceived as contradictions" (123). Balso backs up Breton's unification of "life and death" as he declares in the infinite sphere of "One" that his body has taken on "a life of its own" and that "only to death can this release be likened" (61). Also adding that "in this activity, Home and Duty, Love and Art, were forgotten" (61), Balso shows playfully that he has intuited the integration of binary oppositions which J. R. Gilson has never undergone.

Although several critics have paid attention to Balso's newly acquired vision of "One," few of them successfully define its nature. Rendall Reid evasively states that "the three main themes of the novel — art, dreams, sex — are here united in simultaneous and triumphant parody" (35). John M. Brand bluntly asserts that "the circular encloses" (71). Gerald Locklin simplifies the essential nature of Balso's vision to the effect that "it would appear that the Unity of which Balso sang has prevailed" (47). All these critics emphasize the monistic nature of Balso's vision so exclusively that the essence of "the One that is all things and yet no one of them" eludes them. In other words, this phrase contains more

than what their monistic reduction of "One" can elicit. When the "Two" have become "One," the "One" is "all things" because the "One" has now turned into the omnipresent abiding nature of all objects, and yet the "One" is "no one of them" because the "One" loses the nature of a whole once reduced to any single object. Therefore, "the One that is all things" does not contradict "the One" that is "no one of them." As mentioned earlier, this vision of "One" in the last section coincides with the vision of "nature" which the guide of the Trojan Horse nonchalantly referred to as "a circle" in the first section. Just as "One" is "all things and yet no one of them," the "circle" of nature is all "the shapes of eaches, everys, anys, eithers" and yet no one of the "feet".

Balzo's associations erupting in ecstasy give us further clues, both esoteric and satiric, for the definition of "One": "the sacrificial egg, the altar, the ego and the alter ego, as well as the father, the child, and the grandfather of the universe, the mystic doctrine, the purification, the syllable 'Om,' the path, the master, the witness, the receptacle, the Spirit of Public School 186" (61). The definition of "One" can be either serious or playful, or both, or neither, depending on the way in which we interpret these associations.

At the mystic level, the "egg," "the grandfather of the universe," "the master," and "the phrase 'Om'" all help us to define "One" as the source of the universe. The "egg" can be seen as a germ of life, and both the "grandfather of the universe" and "the master" as modified figures of the Creator, while "the phrase 'Om'" is one of the mantras in Tantra and Tibetan Buddhism, which implies the beginning of the cosmos — a sacred word which the faithful use on inhaling at the outset of their prayer. Besides, "the sacrificial egg" symbolizes the resurrection of Christ, while "the receptacle" the Holy Grail. Both of these symbols help to highlight the union of "the father" and "the child" in the Christian orthodoxy. At the farcical level, the preceding sacred implications of "One" are reduced to a parody of the Trinitarian unity.⁴ Supported by a couple of puns, "egg" vs. "ego" and "altar" vs. "alter," both "the father" and "the child" are united with "the Spirit of Public School" as "One." Thus secularized, the tradition of Trinity is impaired in its authority. Accordingly, Balzo's surrealistic vision of "One" loses its emancipatory effects both on himself and on J. R. Gilson.

When Balzo has paradoxically made fun of his ultimate vision of "absolute reality," *The Dream Life of Balzo Snell* turns into a self-parody of surrealistic experimentation. Equally paradoxical is the compensating postmodern potential which this self-parody adds to the novel. This does not deny the fact, however, that the dominant mode of representation in Balzo's dream is parody. Among its targets are Charles Darwin, Feodor Dostoevski, and Paul Cézanne, to name some. Parody can be creative only by undermining the established norms, whether social or linguistic, on which it bases its formation. Therefore, parody rhetorically embodies the spirit of "creative destruction" (16) which David Harvey ascribes to modernity. It is easy to see that the ideals of human progress and social innovation, which J. R. Gilson has involuntarily and ironically set up, also derive from the spirit of "creative destruction." This indicates at the same time that parody ceases to be creatively destructive when a new cultural impulse starts fragmenting the established norms on which parody has drawn. Fredric Jameson endorses this

view when he defines parody as a mode of modernism representing the "conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists" (17).

In contrast, self-parody, if not so much as pastiche, assumes the nature of post-modern rhetoric which Linda Hutcheon characterizes as "the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement" (1). More precisely, we could place self-parody among the nascent forms of postmodern parody which Hutcheon defines as "both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation" (98). Balso's self-parody of "One" can be "both deconstructively critical and constructively creative," for it becomes both self-subversive and self-transcendent as it sets us free of any absolute interpretation of "One." In this sense, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* anticipates a new cultural climate, like New York in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and Hollywood in *The Day of the Locust*, where desperate belief in established standards, whether religious or artistic, can be only a joke.

After all, John Gilson has rightly foretold in his diary that there is no point in searching for ultimate reality: "But, alas! when searching for the Real I throw a stone into a pool whose ripples become of advancing less importance until they are too large for connection with, or even memory of, the stone agent" (14). The image of a circle spreads all over this pool too, as we see the ripples form a succession of circles of "the Real." When we bring ourselves to believe in the self-proliferating effects of "the Real," John Gilson suggests that all these circles are only the traces of "the Real" which he can now hardly recall. More paradoxically, just like any other circle in the novel, these traces of "the Real" become all the more illusionary because we can reduce them at any moment to part of Balso's dream. Hence, the epitome of self-parody: there is no point even in asserting that there is no point in searching for "the Real." When all traces of "the Real" are thus dispersed into our laughter, we find the boundless sphere of Balso's "One" on the point of bursting open into void.

At the finale of the novel, Balso's body jerks at the acme of joy "as it march[es] and uncoil[s]" (62), until it falls back still. As the term "uncoil" indicates, Balso is about to lose the mythical power of the coiling ouroboros. Also, as his stretched body signifies, the circle of "One" begins to be unbound, loose enough to initiate a linear phase of the world along which the passage of time spreads, prompting him to remember the past and to look into the future. When he regains the sense of time in due course, both the memory of the past and the anticipation of the future will join in his mind, intensifying a sense of suspense of the present. Frank Kermode argues that "[a]pocalypse depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain 'in the midst'" (8). To rephrase his idea, when we find ourselves suspended between past and future and held in the stalemate of being, we are in the midst of "Joachite 'transition'" (28), where apocalyptic thought, coupled with a sense of ending and an anxiety of crisis, emerges. This tension of apocalypse is immediately applicable to *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. And yet a sense of ending never

gains its imminence in the novel because we see Balso sleeping with his comfortably retreating sensual joy to the end.

Emaciated rather than emancipated by Balso's impossible dream of a new life, we suspect that a sense of a return from a nirvanic state of bliss to a secular state of disillusionment will follow in his wake. From this sense of a return will ensue his nostalgia for the lost whole, which is in itself a sign of apocalyptic "transition." True, in his dream, reason topples over, and love and sanity threaten to taper away, but an anxiety of crisis never becomes dominant because the notion of a whole is still intact. This lingering faith in the hold of totality over disordering impetus features the modernist discourse of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. In his first novel, West shows that the shadow of apocalypse remains immanent, if not imminent, ready to lie heavy on the crises of other characters⁵ in his later novels. In *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), *A Cool Million* (1934), and *The Day of the Locust* (1939), we find all major characters out of the domain of dream, wide awake, dying, whether physically or psychically, in the world where the notion of a whole is burst into pieces, and where dreams are warped into nightmares.

Notes

1. Critics in the Western nations often claim that the modernist mode of creation proceeds from the rupture and liaison between the preceding order and the newly introduced order. This shows that their notion of modernism derives from the dialectic of order and disorder, since either order, whether old or new, can be seen as disorder with a shift of perspective. Fredric Jameson draws on this notion of modernism: "features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that had been dominant again become secondary. In this sense, everything we have described here can be found in earlier periods and most notably within modernism proper" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 123). David Harvey characterizes modernity as destruction for creation: "the image of 'creative destruction' is very important to understanding modernity precisely because it derived from the practical dilemmas that faced the implementation of the modernist project. How could a new world be created, after all, without destroying much that had gone before?" (16). Paul de Man asserts that "the continuous appeal of modernity, the desire to break out of literature toward the reality of the moment, prevails and, in its turn, folding back upon itself, engenders the repetition and the continuation of literature" (162).
2. The combination of laughter and anger is one of the literary features of West's grotesque. In *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, the idiot in the criminal journal embodies this feature best. Unable to stop laughing, he looks like laughing to himself. When his laughter makes J. R. Gilson laugh, the idiot thinks he is made fun of, and becomes infuriated, "struggling with his laughter and his anger" (19).
3. The input and output equation of performance is one of the most crucial issues in *The Day of the Locust*. Hollywood assimilates whatever performing output Harry Greener, a vaudeville performer, produces so that the city can create all the greater demand for performance. He feels compelled to produce more performing output than he can until he undergoes the crisis of output and dies.
4. West carries on his parody of Christ and Trinity in *Miss Lonelyhearts*: "The church is our only hope, the First Church of Christ Dentist, where He is worshipped as Preventer of Decay. The church whose symbol is the trinity new-style: Father, Son and Wirehaired Fox Terrier" (36).

5. In New York of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, where marketability is the name of the game, Miss Lonelyhearts gets nowhere in his profession as a lovelorn columnist. No matter how hard he may try to show the significance of life under the aegis of Christ, his advice sounds like a joke. In the end, his belief in religious order causes frustration and less directly but more seriously his own death. In *A Cool Million*, Lemuel Pitkin goes off from a small town in Vermont to seek fortune in the faith that America is "the land of opportunity" (74). In the course of his journey from New York through Southern California and Detroit back to New York during the Great Depression, he has his money stolen, loses his eye and teeth, has the scalp of his head torn by an Indian chief, and becomes amputated before he is shot dead as a clown at a freak show, "the Chamber of American Horror, Animate and Inanimate Hideousities" (166). In Hollywood of *The Day of the Locust*, where "love is like a vending machine" (27), Tod Hackett tries to make his way as an artist in the belief that human interaction can still make sense. All he can find for his artistic motif there, however, is a crowd of people whose boredom and anger are trembling on the verge of violence. When he draws their sterile outcry in his painting, he portrays himself as one of the infuriated mob and embodies their rage as a mock-Jeremiah.

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