



Alive Inside the Wreck

A Biography of
NATHANAEL WEST

Joe Woodward

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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. Take this morning's paper: FATHER CUTS SON'S THROAT IN BASEBALL ARGUMENT. It appears on an inside page. To make the first page, he should have killed three sons and with a baseball bat instead of a knife. Only liberality and symmetry could have made the daily occurrence interesting.

"Some Notes on Violence"

Nathanael West

Contact, October 1932

Forget the epic, the master work. In America fortunes do not accumulate, the soil does not grow, families have no history. Leave slow growth to the book reviewers, you only have time to explode. Remember William Carlos Williams' description of the pioneer women who shot their children against the wilderness like cannonballs. Do the same with your novels.

"Some Notes on Miss L."

Nathanael West

Contempo, May 1933

PREFACE

Nathanael West worried over America: its landscape, its people, its future, its art. During the whole of the 1930s when West published his four short novels, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), *Middleton* (1932), *Lonelyhearts* (1933), *A Cool Million* (1934), and *The Day of the Locust* (1939), there was plenty to worry about. America had collapsed, caved in. Europe was in step. Yet what interested West most was how to fashion himself into a great American writer, in essence, how to write The Great American Novel. He settled, finally, on two ingredients: violence and brevity. "You only have time to explode," he said. And he did.

THE ACCIDENT

The accident happened at five minutes to three, two days before Christmas: December 22, 1940. Rain puddles stood in the dips of the road from a morning storm. Broken thunderclouds lingered over the flat California desert. Nathanael West was on his way home.

The Woody station wagon held West's new wife Eileen and their liver-colored pointer, Julie. As he crossed the intersection where Route 111 runs into U.S. Highway 80, West and Eileen collided with the Dowless family—a husband and wife and two-year old daughter. West was traveling north out of Mexico after a weekend hunting trip. His car was full of dead quail and duck, the legal limit. Four shotguns rattled loose on the back seat.

West should have stopped at that intersection and turned left, but he didn't. A notoriously bad driver, West was easily distracted by conversation and daydream. After the accident, many of West's friends recalled numerous near misses on the open road. One friend spoke about narrowly missing a group of school children crossing a street; another mentioned a wrong turn that ended with the car precariously dangling over the edge of a bridge.

The police report filed that afternoon recorded four feet of tire skids into the intersection, so West must have realized what was coming. The collision spun the Woody around, unlatching all four doors. Eileen flew out the passenger door and landed in the drainage ditch at the side of the road. West came to a rest across from her. The dog was injured, but fine. The paper reported: "The dog was cut with glass in a number of places . . . and was running around attempting to get back into the station wagon."

The Dowless' white Pontiac was more than forty feet east of the Wests, balancing on the edge of the road. Mrs. Dowless suffered a broken leg and a shattered pelvis. Mr. Dowless severed an artery in his left arm. The little girl, the Dowless' daughter, was unharmed.

It's known from the police report and the single journalist at the scene that after the initial squeal and skirr of the crash both Nathanael and Eileen remained alive for a time. In the newspaper photo, steam rises up out of the torn engine, gasoline drips, oil and water pool on the road. There is a suggestion in the photograph of a hard afternoon wind pushing sand across the desert, small funnels of dust in the distance.

The first house east of the intersection phoned the accident into the county sheriff's office. It took

over thirty minutes for a single patrol car to arrive from Calexico. It took another half-hour for an ambulance to come (without a doctor). The Imperial County Hospital was just three miles away from the scene of the accident, but in this case close proximity wasn't the same thing as good luck. No bystander acted, either.

Even after making it to Imperial County Hospital there was trouble. The hospital was hardly equipped to save lives. It was meant to bandage migrant field workers and get them back on the job.

With West, it's always best to start with the wreckage and work your way back. It's best to move quickly through the early promise, the idyllic youth, and into the complications that followed—his stumbling walk through college into manhood, how and why he returned to Hollywood again and again to write for the movies, how the withdrawn Easterner became the artist, the novelist. Paris, too. The novels. The final masterpiece outlined, but never finished. The farm in Erwinna, Pennsylvania. The cheap apartments off Sunset Boulevard. The last house. The last weekend spent hunting across the border in Mexico. The Leon d'Oro, Mexicali. Alvarez, the man who owned the Leon d'Oro, who commanded West come to Mexico in December because the hunting was good. Alvarez was the man who told West the storm would pass. It would not.

THE STRANGE AMALGAM

A writer is what a writer does, not what he means to do: the novelist makes novels, and when the work is finished it stands alone. Art is not the dream, but the dream transcribed. As the writer moves from the unconscious to the concrete, the scaffolding of dreams falls away, leaving the made thing, the built thing. This is why writers are often such errant critics of their own work—they cannot see the cathedrals through the scaffolding of dreams.

Nathanael West was one of the great builders in American literature, a great novelist, but he did not know it. All his life his career existed as negative space. He founded no literary school, nor belonged to one. His reputation was fixed almost completely postmortem, and it grows today despite the size of his canon (barely four hundred published pages) and the scope of his influence on his contemporaries (practically nil). It is fair to say Nathanael West's stature as a great American novelist rests solely on the force of his books.

His talent as a writer, like his reputation, developed slowly, the result of perfecting his craft. All his novels but one took four years to complete; all were drafted in his own hand, in large, looping, boyish writing with just four or five words per line. He moved from pencil to yellow pad through successive typescript drafts until he exhausted himself and the story. He developed an original scheme for each book and played them out in a spare prose. He let the specific stand for the universal. We know, for example, that *The Day of the Locust* is not merely about vacuous Hollywood; it's about our universal love of glimmering facades and self-illusion. It's a book of warnings.

But beyond the qualities of the craft is the quandary of the man. West was dichotomy personified: clumsy but well-dressed, to give one example. In his favorite Brooks Brothers' suit, West was as handsome as a 1930s Hollywood movie star. With his dark hair slicked back and one hand in his pants pocket, the other casually holding a cigarette, he was Clark Gable. Quiet and generous, he was also thin-skinned—and this made him well-suited for his work. He focused his empathy not on the rich and famous, but on the powerless. West sat in opposition to his friend F. Scott Fitzgerald in his choice of subject matter, though mirrored him in temperament and worldview. West wrote to save innocents from their enemies, even as he realized he could not. It was out of this strange amalgam of person and profession that West fashioned himself into a great American novelist.

West was always a writer on the verge of breaking out, but one that never did. During his lifetime

fewer than five thousand copies of his four novels sold, and from their sale he earned less than \$1,300 dollars. Why did Nathanael West persist? Why, in the face of continuous rejection, bouts of poverty and poor health, depression, public ridicule and worse, public apathy, did he keep writing what no one wanted to read?

Nathanael West (the man) was deliciously inconsistent—courageous and weak, industrious and lazy, truth-seeking liar, a bookish outdoorsman. Nathanael West (the writer) was ambitious and clear-minded—a master craftsman, an exacting self-editor. He published each of his four short lyric novels during the whole of the 1930s. Of them, only *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939) are commonly considered classics of twentieth century American literature; his other two, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931) and *A Cool Million* (1934) are hardly considered at all.

Without the legacy of the novels there'd be no biography of the man. West wrote other work, it's true, but it remains largely inconsequential. He co-wrote two plays, one of which was produced and poorly received, a smattering of largely unpublished short stories, and contributed to twenty-nine Hollywood films, all with little effect. It was this film writing though, or the salary he made from this writing that kept him alive and connected to a community of writers which sustained him in his final years. West was a novelist, pure and simple. That was enough.

At the time of his death in the winter of 1940, West was at work on a fifth novel. A short outline of the book had convinced his editor, a still somewhat skeptical Bennett Cerf at Random House who had been his editor for *The Day of the Locust*, to surrender a \$250 advance for the work-in-progress (though West had asked for \$1,000, double what he received for *Locust*). Even as Cerf was cutting West his check, he warned him that his new premise was “one on which a dozen or more writers have already stubbed their toes badly.” West's concept focused on “a racket” often buried in the back pages of newspapers and magazines, the personal ads. These ads were written by desperate characters searching for relief—the friendless, lovelorn, life-ravaged. West knew he had found a story worth telling, and that he was the one to tell it, but he would perish before beginning the book. West was just thirty-seven at the time of his death, and Eileen just twenty-seven. While a newspaper account of his death would label him a “Hollywood scenarist,” history would not. A decade and a half later, his work would begin its slow ascent into the American canon and beyond. By the early 1950s, two of his novels would appear in nearly a dozen languages around the world.

Travesty was the essence of real life for West, and so then it must be in story—the young girl must be eaten by the wolf, the orphan-boy in velvet shorts consumed in a cape of flames, all that glitters cannot be gold. Our own Brother Grimm, West's novels are built on this foundation. A fierce

modernist soaked in the ancient, he was as drawn to the figure of Don Quixote as to the lyrical experiments of Baudelaire and Joyce. He wrote into Ezra Pound's challenge to "Make it New."

West began his apprenticeship as a writer, not unlike many writers, with reading. He was captivated by the outlandish "French men of letters—Baudelaire, Flaubert, the Goncourt brothers, and, a little later, Zola . . ." all of whom he devoured and studied in college and afterwards. Before them, West's boyish imagination first fed on Dickens, Tolstoy and Turgenev; later Conrad, Kafka and Gogol, and finally, Eliot and Pound. West's final, culminating investigation into the "American grain" was led by Poe and Hawthorne and Melville, and then by a short, though potent, literary partnership with William Carlos Williams. Each of these authors helped shape West's sensibilities as he sat down with pencil and paper and began to write.

What West made out of his reading and his experience was his own thing, a new brand of lyric novel that did not exist before. What has been said of, and by, West's hero Baudelaire, "modernism's first hero," can also be said of him:

Like the modernists who came after him, he was a Realist with a difference: He detested the mind-numbing reproduction of the world in conventional poems or paintings, and at the same time, like the most sophisticated Romantics, had no patience with unchecked subjectivity. 'What is the pure art according to the modern idea?' he asked, and answered his rhetorical question: 'It is to create a suggestive magic, containing at the same time the object and the subject, the world external to the artist and the artist himself.' . . . Reviewing the Paris Salon of 1859, in his straightforward words, he wrote: 'If an assemblage of trees, mountains, rivers and houses, that is, what we call a landscape, is beautiful, it is not beautiful by itself but through me, my personal grace, through the idea or the feeling I attach to it.'

No one will argue that West's work isn't full of "suggestive magic." While such real-life figures as newspaper-advice columnists existed during West's time, his protagonist in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is something other than a portrait of such a man. West's Miss L has one foot in another world:

He fastened his eyes on the Christ that hung on the wall opposite his bed. As he stared at it, it became a bright fly, spinning with quick grace on a background of blood velvet sprinkled with tiny nerve stars.

Everything else in the room was dead—chairs, table, pencils, clothes, books. He thought of this black world of things as a fish. And he was right, for it suddenly rose to the bright bait on the wall. It rose with a splash of music and he saw its shining silver belly.

West transforms the real world, the “black world of things,” into something that vibrates and neither alive nor dead. He creates the world wholly new; a world of “nerve stars” can be imagined, but not fully understood. It is this odd quality of mind with which he transcribes the world and his dream that elevates West and his work beyond a single literary style, or era. While “art for art’s sake” is at the center of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, it is also about the primacy of story-telling. The rise of commercialism and fascism in America is at the core of *A Cool Million*, but again, there is so much more, and beyond a simple discussion of vacuous celebrity in Hollywood is the discussion of the universal longing to be loved in *The Day of the Locust*. Each of West’s novels begins in the concrete with a scheme or scaffolding of ideas, but soon goes beyond.

In the decades following West’s death, and ever since, the resurrection of West’s reputation has been slow but sure. Over the last year or so, no less than three books tackling Nathanael West have appeared in print, including this one. This does not account for the scores of dissertations and purely critical works on the man and his output. A new edition of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*, with a foreword written by Jonathan Lethem, has been published. If ever there were a time to proclaim the triumph of Nathanael West, it is here and now.

Tragically, though, as you read the life story of Nathanael West you’ll realize that such a pronouncement is nothing more than a savage and “unfunny joke,” as West himself used to say. West would be pleased to know that his work receives worldwide attention, and that his dream of becoming a great American novelist has been slowly realized. He would be most pleased to know that he has become in death what he was not in life—read.

THE LIBRARY

The library of a writer is more than a collection of books, of belongings—it's a keyhole into the mind of the craftsman. Nathanael West was a library-keeper all of his life. "He was an odd and searching reader. He knew the Russian authors as a Russian would know them. Just as he knew Stephen Crane. Just as he knew the guy who wrote *The African Queen*. Do you follow me? Books, they came alive for him," said Leonard Fields, West's former colleague at Republic Pictures in Hollywood. What began for West with gilded gift sets of the great works grew with time and age. As a young man he sent away to England for book catalogues; as a poorly performing high school student he skipped whole days of school to rummage through bookstores in New York City. He liked Gotham Book Mart and haunted Moss & Kamin. He liked Shakespeare & Company in Paris, and the Stanley Rose Book Shop in Hollywood. He read with varying ambitions as a boy, though later to feed and inform his work. Whether he may have kept copies of books written by his friends at his farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, his library in California was his writer's tool shed. Fortunately this, West's last library, was catalogued shortly after he died and before it was widely dispersed—its inventory transcribed as the caretaker's list running seven pages long and counting more than two hundred and forty volumes in all.

West's last library was filled with what fascinated him all his life: Catholicism, Jewish Mysticism, modernism, art and witchcraft, philosophy and anatomy, history and literature. His California library shelves bowed with the weight of Poe and Proust and Pound, so much Pound: *Personae: The Collected Poems of Ezra Pound*, *Instigations of Ezra Pound*, *The Spirit of Romance*, and *Poems: 1918-1921*. That so many works by Pound remained revealed his admiration for the writer's modernist leanings. Pound admired West's work as well, specifically the earliest sections of *Miss Lonelyhearts* shown to him by William Carlos Williams. Pound welcomed a short essay by Williams on West for the Italian newspaper *Il Mare*, where he was working. Williams's essay titled "A New American Writer" was translated into Italian and appeared in *Il Mare* on January 21, 1933. In it Williams claimed, with some bravado, that the single success to be celebrated at the death of "yet another little magazine," *Contact*, was that the magazine had "produced N. West. Now it can die." If one reviews the three issues of *Contact* that West and Williams co-edited and their ongoing correspondence on the subject of the magazine, it is clear that Williams is exhibiting here more than just good manners. The letters—Williams writing from New Jersey and West from The Sutton Hotel in New York City where he worked—recreate their brief but potent conversations on contemporary American literature at the

beginning of the 1930s. In one letter, West shared his thoughts about the work they should try to gather for their little magazine. West wrote:

Dear Bill—

Here's a long list of the kind of stuff I mean.

Arch. McLeish—Rustic poems not intellectual.

J. Dos Passos—Non-political prose—the big city stuff [sic]

J. Herrmann—I've heard a lot about WHAT HAPPENED, how about re-printing [sic] a chapter if we can't get anything else as good as THE ENGAGEMENT—Amer. Car . . .

Caldwell

Dahlberg—Did you read Bottom Dogs—he's pretty good and right up our alley—The Middle [sic] west stuff is the best. Good Y. M. C. A. stuff, too.

Jo. Herbst (?)

Malcolm Cowley—Poetry about New England graveyards etc. not the Frenchified [sic] symbolist stuff. Prose?

Hart Crane—Like the river part in The Bridge, like the stuff in Amer. Car.—not Frenchy . . .

Hemingway

Faulkner

James T. Farrell—the best man writing for The New Review, I think. Very good Chicago business, Should be easy to get . . .

Later in the same letter, West asked Williams if he was familiar with Mexican or Spanish American literature, and whether Williams thought he might get the artist Charles Sheeler to do the cover of the magazine.

The inventory made of West's last library offers readers (and his biographers) a road map to his intellectual and creative life. In the California library were seven works of Joseph Conrad including *Typhoon*, *Chance*, *The Rescue*, *Youth, a Narrative*, and *Two Other Stories*, *The Arrow of Gold*, *The Shadow Line* and *Almayer's Folly: A Story of an Eastern River*. There was Melville's *Moby-Dick*

Omoo, and *Typee*. There was a single T. S. Eliot, his first book of essays, *The Sacred Wood*. What was missing, in addition to the work of friends, was the cadre of master writers with whom West apprenticed and out of which he forged his literary style. Absent were Joyce, Dostoevsky, Kafka and Gogol. Missing was William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (though he did have James' *Some Problems of Philosophy*) and Starbuck's *The Psychology of Religion*, the two books West admitted dipping into when writing *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

West's library in California held a light cache of the sentimental. Where were books by Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Williams and Hemingway? Where was Hammett and Hellman, Parker and Farrell, Herben and Sanford? Where was anything by his dearest friend and brother-in-law, Sid Perelman? His library still contained those multi-volume gift sets that he received as birthday presents from his mother and father and extended family: twelve volumes of Tolstoy, ten volumes of Wordsworth and fifteen of Dickens.

It's reasonable to assume the remainder of West's library was housed at his beloved farmhouse in Bucks County. After all, everything about Hollywood and California remained temporary for him. California was impermanent, a plywood movie set, a collection of two-by-fours strapped together and overlaid and painted in pink turrets. Hollywood was a desert town by the sea, a place full of backyards, swimming pools and people in tennis wear who did not play tennis. West was not at home in California. Home was always somewhere he was not.

THE LAST SUMMER

He was happiest right before he died. In the summer of 1940, West was newly married, flush with cash, and consumed with beginning a new novel. West busied himself with a collection of characters that would soon drown in the pathetic quagmire of an invented “friendship club” scam. He spent the whole summer polishing the outline and honeymooning with Eileen. Together, the two enjoyed the idylls of Oregon, which certainly reminded him of his boyhood summers spent in upstate New York. He and his new bride Eileen rented a small cabin on the McKenzie River and together spent the afternoons and evenings river fishing and hunting. They hunted deer and bear and grouse. Together they cleaned their take and cooked evening dinners. They even entertained friends who flew up to join them from Hollywood.

At that time in Hollywood, the finest constellation of movie moguls ever to rule a backlot ran the studios with bravado, men like Louis B. Mayer, Jack Warner, Darryl Zanuck and Harry Cohn. Together they pumped out celluloid candies and made money doing it: Greta Garbo’s first comedienne “Ninotchka,” appeared in 1939, surprising fans and critics alike and earning her a fourth and final Academy Award nomination. Katherine Hepburn was nominated for Best Actress for her 1940 comedic classic “The Philadelphia Story,” an unusual but beautifully timed gift from a lovesick Howard Hughes. These halcyon Hollywood days saw some of the best work and biggest box-office for our grandest movie stars: Betty Davis, Joan Crawford, Vivian Leigh, Cary Grant and Spencer Tracy. And all the while, in the span of these months between 1939 and 1940, the political situation in Europe grew grim and bloody. While premiere lights spun in front of Grauman’s Chinese Theater, Hitler invaded Poland, the USSR joined Nazi Germany in official friendship, and Mussolini pronounced in June of 1940 that Italy stood with the Third Reich.

Personal contentment would have seemed unattainable during these months. So, once ensconced in the quiet beauty of nature and in the company of your true love, who would have wanted to leave it? But West was broke. Just months earlier he had spent nearly all of his savings buoying the production of a failed play, a bad play really, a play depicting the absurdity of war just as America was readying itself to stand up to a vicious and out-of-control German Empire. West’s play “Good Hunting,” written with the successful theater writer Joseph Schrank, opened and closed in the span of two days at the Hudson Theater on Broadway. So, after a carefree summer spent in the woods with his new bride, West went back to work.

On his return to Hollywood in early September 1940, West hit the proverbial jackpot. With the help of a new writing partner Boris Ingster, West finished and sold two different film treatments to two different studios for the combined sum of \$35,000—approximately half a million in 2011 dollars. This was by far, West's most lucrative writing payday, and all for just twenty-six pages of film treatment. Even with the daily pressures of working on the new novel at night and pumping out film scripts during the day, these months were good ones for West—so much better than the desperate decade of the 1930s that had finally just come to a close.

By December 1940, with money from the sale of his two film properties, West and Eileen (and her young son from her first marriage) searched for and found a new and bigger house. They moved out of their small quarters on Cahuenga Terrace where West had lived for some time as a bachelor—out of Hollywood and over the hills into the valley suburbs. West's new house, unlike his previous rental, was set down among walnut and pear trees in the quiet countryside of North Hollywood. The house at 12706 Magnolia Avenue, a California-style hacienda, was surrounded by two acres of orchards and bounded on its edges by small farms. It had been built by the British actor and film director Clyde Cook just four years earlier, in 1936. Certainly, it was grand compared to the string of small apartments West had endured during the last five years he had lived in Hollywood. But it was still not his beloved country farm in Erwinna, Pennsylvania, the only property West ever owned—the farm he purchased with his sister Laura and brother-in-law Sid Perelman. In Erwinna, West had been happy though alone. There in the quiet of Bucks County, West anguished over and completed his two middle novels of which he was proud: *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *A Cool Million*. So while the new house on Magnolia was beautiful and represented a fresh start for his new marriage to Eileen, it also must have felt temporary. He and Eileen had already spoken of putting an end to their Hollywood days as soon as possible, so they could settle down permanently in Erwinna. All they needed was the money to do it.

West and Eileen waited just days before hosting their first lavish dinner party at their new house. Scott Fitzgerald and his constant companion, noted gossip columnist Sheila Graham, were among the first guests. The Wests were regularly guests of Fitzgerald's at his home nearby in Encino—though Eileen didn't care much for Fitzgerald, apparently accusing him to his face of pandering in his work to the rich. Fitzgerald saw West as much as anyone else in Hollywood it seems. The two of them became close friends and more importantly over the years, Fitzgerald became a serious literary mentor to West. They spoke frequently of their work and of others'. It is a happy coincidence that during the last months of 1940, while West had just published his own Hollywood satire, a novel which Fitzgerald liked and praised, Fitzgerald himself was working on his own Hollywood story, *The Last Tycoon*. And Fitzgerald was then also publishing his Pat Hobby stories to some success—stories built around the misadventures of a hapless screen writer stuck in the metaphorical meat grinder of the

Fitzgerald and Graham joined other studio friends and the Wests for dinner at the new house on Magnolia on Friday, December 13. Dorothy Parker and her husband Alan Campbell were expected. West had known Parker for a long time, since New York. Albert and Frances Goodrich Hackett and Hilaire Hiler came, too. The Hacketts hailed from New York City and had come to Hollywood to write an adaptation of their successful play, “Up Pops the Devil” for Paramount Pictures. In 1934, they had written the screenplay for “The Thin Man,” which earned them one of four Academy Award nominations. Together they won a Pulitzer Prize in 1956 for their original drama based on *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Hilaire Hiler was a friend West made in Paris—an abstract painter who in the late 1920s ran the Jockey Club, an artist’s hangout on the Left Bank. That night, they ate and drank and sang “The Last Time I Saw Paris” long into the evening. They likely reminisced about the decade and distant Twenties, of what it looked like to them now through the lens of current affairs—after the decade-long debacle of the Great Depression and the coming Second World War.

Of all his guests at the party that night, West was among the least successful, rich, and famous. It was not that he had squandered his time and talent, or fame and fortune, as some have suggested Fitzgerald and Parker did. West’s talents were slowly and steadily maturing. *The Day of the Locust* was critically well-received, at least. He was finally finding success writing for pictures, with a string of recent writing credits and the sale of those two original projects. West’s financial future looked bright and well. Coupled with his recent marriage, there was a great deal for West to celebrate that night.

In contrast to West, of course, Fitzgerald’s situation was quite different. He continued to work his way out of financial ruin; his earnings had fallen from a height of \$37,599 in 1931 (his wealthiest year) to a debt of more than \$40,000 by 1937 (approximately \$626,000 in 2011 dollars). Fitzgerald’s agent Harold Ober, tried without success to sell even a single story over the course of a year. All this led Fitzgerald, in 1937, to return to Hollywood to work for MGM for \$1,000 a week—a generous sum considering that before 1937 he still lacked a single writing credit after nearly two decades of trying. At this same time Dorothy Parker, who was nominated for an Academy Award for “A Star is Born” and who had more than a dozen writing credits to her name, earned between \$1,750 and \$2,500 a week. West was paid just \$350 a week. It was a well-worn (and not unfunny) rumor at the time that Scott Fitzgerald had actually been dead for years by this time; his star having faded as quickly as the high times of the 1920s themselves.

Parker’s place in Hollywood was not constant. While critics have said she did some of her best work writing for film, others have said she wasted herself and her talent there. Wasn’t there more literature in her? Once a well-regarded short story writer and savagely-funny critic for *Vanity Fair* and *The New*

Yorker, Parker's promise by the start of the 1940's seemed to quickly dissolve. She attended to her studio work. She championed, with West, the success of the Screen Writers Guild. And again on occasion, with her husband Robert Benchley as a writing partner sometimes made \$5,000 a month in Hollywood. Parker was well paid partly because she was famous and partly because she could write good scripts and fix bad ones. She was good business. Still, like many of her friends and colleagues she was at odds with the movie business. Parker wrote in *The New Yorker* in November 1927 that "to attend no movies, for any motion-picture theater is as an enlarged lethal chamber to me."

On the whole, though, their salaries were outrageous and they all lived lavishly. They told themselves that they would save their salaries and leave Hollywood to work on their literary projects. And for some it worked this way, but for many it did not. Did Hollywood ruin them, Fitzgerald, Parker, West? Did Hollywood and its many distractions keep them from their more important work of writing literature? This is a well-worn complaint, particularly concerning Fitzgerald and West. But as critic Tom Cerasulo has recently suggested in his book *Authors Out Here*, it was writing for Hollywood that sustained them. There is no definitive answer to this question because the making of art is a mysterious endeavor. Art is as much about obstacle as it is opportunity, isn't it? Art making is born out of people, people who are changing, changeable, and among shifting circumstances. This is not the answer anyone wants to hear, including and specifically artists themselves. But it is true.

Tragically, though no one at the party that night could have known it, this was the last time any of them would see Fitzgerald or West alive. What each writer had begun would finally be left undone. Fitzgerald would never finish *The Last Tycoon*, never see the whole of the Pat Hobby story cycle published. West would never get beyond the start of his fifth novel. Both men would be gone by the following weekend. Fitzgerald would die the following Saturday of a heart attack while reading the Princeton alumni magazine, and West and his new wife Eileen would die in that car accident in the middle of the California desert.

A FAIR DAY

Nathanael West was born on a “fair” and “fresh” fall day in New York City on October 17, 1903. Born Nathan Weinstein, a name he would abandon as too Jewish for a writer seeking broad success—he was the first child, and only son, of two young Russian Jews who had fled Europe less than 15 years earlier for America. He joined that day an already large, extended family, one that was financially prosperous, cultured, and educated. The entire clan on both sides of the family lived, not in the immigrant tenements on the Lower East Side of New York, but rather on the Upper East Side, in grand houses and new apartment buildings built with their own hands.

Though the weather was good that fall day, all the news was not. The *New York Times* was filled with tragedy, violence, turns of bad luck. West’s parents, Max and Anna Weinstein, knew the world was a difficult and complicated place—knew this from the history of their own family. What they could not have known, though, was the irony of one particular *Times* story printed the day of their son’s birth.

News of a horrific traffic accident led page one. A crowd of a few hundred had gathered at the corner of Eighth Avenue and 14th Street to listen to a “campaigner” lecture from the back of a truck. The crowd grew large and spilled from the sidewalk into the street. As men in their coats and hats and women in their long dresses stood enraptured, listening, an electric car traveling at full speed barreled into the side of a horse drawn car passing over its tracks—cutting it in two and throwing it into the crowd, “. . . every one of the fifty passengers on the Eighth Avenue car thrown to the floor.” Several passengers were severely hurt and “scores of others . . . cut with broken glass.” People screamed and scurried to find safety; it was the “wildest scene of disorder.”

Elsewhere in the paper that October 17 was more troubling news—a new graft game in Chicago, a young hunchback’s suicide by drowning in Catskill, New York, a million dollar fire in Aberdeen, Washington, that “practically wiped out the main business district.” Buried in the copy of each of these new stories were details that begged a question: Why is tragedy the fate of some and not others? Certainly, Nathanael West obsessed over this question in his own life and in each of his novels. Just as the Brothers Grimm folktales visit tragedy on the helpless and naïve, West spares no one—not even children. Each of West’s protagonists is bludgeoned, bewildered, made to suffer. In *A Cool Million* West’s young Lemuel Pitkin is literally pulled limb from limb—maimed in a fight, attacked by a dog, blinded, all the while attempting to stay the bank’s foreclosure on his widowed mother’s home.

West and his family lived through some of the most violent times of the twentieth century—as Jews in Europe and as new Americans. They survived the chaotic dissolution of their Russia, brought on in part by the tyranny of Germany, through one world war and the start of a second, which for them and their families would be more devastating still. The chaotic outer world that West took up in his fiction, though, was always balanced by the harmony offered by family and friends.

West's family was headed by a stern but attentive father. Max Weinstein, who remained an iconic figure to West all of his life, was a slight man of thirty when his son was born. Just 5'7 and 140 pounds, Max was known for his “carpenter's handshake,” for a certain firmness of character and a “wiry” and “aggressive” spirit—a spirit that would serve him well both as an entrepreneur, and sometimes as a speculator. West's mother was something else entirely. Anna Weinstein, whose maiden name was Wallenstein, was round faced and twenty-eight at the birth of her first child, and possessed in the few surviving photographs an old-world beauty of sorts, pearl skin and dark eyes framed by rolls of dark hair.

Wells Root, a friend and writing colleague in Hollywood remembered, “Although he respected his father and mother, he did so distantly. There seemed to be little understanding or affection in the relationship, though no rancor either . . . I think N.'s attitude toward his father was typical of his attitude toward many things—a sort of passive philosophical acceptance.” Root expanded on this observation:

Many a young artist, misunderstood and probably underrated by his father, has generated a frenzied hatred of the parent. That kind of hatred, though present in N., was rare. He saved it for arrogant, unjust, pretentious people. Like a lot of his reactions his hatred seemed a little lazy. It took a good deal to stir it up. But once stirred it was intense and unforgetting [sic].

Max and Anna Weinstein were members of two closely intertwined families that together had immigrated to America in the late 1800s. It wasn't uncommon during these times for children of closely connected families to marry; sometimes even for two sets of siblings (or more) from the same two families to marry. This was true in West's family. Not only did Max and Anna marry, but before them, Max's older brother, Charles, had married Anna's older sister Pauline—and later both young families settled just blocks apart from each other on the Upper East Side.

Both extended families, the Weinstains and the Wallensteins, knew each other well before coming to America. They had lived in close proximity in Kovno and in Dunaburg, Lithuania. The Weinstains had worked for the Wallensteins in the building trade. Their circumstances shifted, however, after the assassination of Czar Alexander II in March 1881. Just as Alexander III ascended the throne, law

governing Jews in Russia began to choke many lives and livelihoods. Jewish families that had once prospered found themselves bankrupt. Educational quotas were enacted that restricted the education of Jewish children. And, finally, with the threat of conscription into military service hanging over the sons both families began to immigrate to the United States. Jews, at this time, were required by law to serve for three years and to retain “reserve status” for twenty-five years longer. Jews could also be offered up as substitutes for Russians who did not wish to serve. This fate was unacceptable to both families and plans were made to come to America.

This revival of Russian nationalism expressed itself long before West’s parents were born, though; it grew out of the era of 1812, or the time of West’s grandparents and as counteraction to Napoleon’s failed invasion of Russia, which crested in the summer of 1812. Then, for the first time in its long history, Russian officers of high birth were made to address and understand and finally count on the peasant class, the peasant soldier. These officers were surprised to learn that in reality, “. . . the peasants were the nation’s patriots.” This small understanding grew and later broke apart an entire cultural order—some have argued leading to the emancipation of some forty million Russian serfs in 1861 and finally creating a chasm between the “children of 1812” and their parents that would never be bridged.

This new condition of mind burrowed deep into the work of the nation’s artists and writers—into the writings of Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Gogol—that would later shape the life and work of Nathanael West. Before the age of ten, West would brag, he had read all of Tolstoy. But it would be Turgenev’s romantic and egalitarian view of nature and hunting in his *Sketches from a Hunter’s Album* that West would most love. Quoting historian Orlando Figes from his masterwork *Natasha’s Dance: A Culture History of Russia*, it would be Turgenev’s empathy for the peasant, for the man on the fringe of society, that would later also mark West and his writing, “. . . for the first time in Russian literature readers were confronted with the image of the peasant as a rational human being . . . as a person capable of both practical administration and lofty dreams.” West would forever see the act of hunting as Turgenev did, as the forging of a deep connection with nature and with companions of different classes, and as antidote to the falseness of the city.

The false city. The municipal façade. This was the most important motif introduced to West through his reading of the Russian writers. For Gogol and Dostoevsky it was the wobbly dream city of St. Petersburg—a place imagined and then built by Peter the Great. For West it would be Hollywood—the dream-factory to the world! West’s special kinship with Gogol can be explained by looking at the Russian writer’s best work, his short, fantastical, lyrical tales as “The Overcoat” and “The Nose.” In these stories one can see a special brand of realism, a super realism really, that results from Gogol’s ability to throw a modern tragedy over the bones of a brutal fairytale. In “The Overcoat,” what son

have called “the most famous story in Russian literature,” protagonist Akaky Akakievich appears as a down-trodden civil servant, an invisible man in a sense, in need of a repaired overcoat. His tailor complains, however, that Akaky’s overcoat is nothing but rags and that it can’t be repaired. Instead, the tailor insists Akaky purchase a new one. Akaky is so mild-mannered he can’t even bring himself to argue with his tailor, and instead leaves wondering how he will afford it. Akaky gathers himself and realizes that through a series of drastic measures, including his foregoing candles and food in the evenings, he will be able to save enough money to pay for the coat. As a result of the growing sacrifice, the overcoat takes on the life and spirit of a real character, of a new and exotic friend who might just change Akaky’s whole life. Tragically, it does. After a robbery and series of humiliations, Gogol’s protagonist dies a senseless death—though finally not an anonymous one. Gogol brings his invisible man back as a ghost who haunts the wicked.

The two eldest Weinstein sons came from Russia. Soon after their arrival, Julius and Charles began working in that standby of new immigrants then and now, the construction trade in New York City. Max Weinstein, West’s father, came next, followed by his brothers Abe and Jacob. By the turn of the century, all five Weinstein boys were in America as were a number of Wallensteins. Together, the two families amassed enough money and manpower to start their own construction companies. The timing could not have been better. New York City was booming. According to the U. S. Census, between 1900 and 1920, the immigrant population in New York City exploded from just over six hundred thousand to almost two million in 1920. What these new immigrants needed were not homes to purchase, because they couldn’t yet afford them—they needed cheap apartments and hotel rooms to rent. This was exactly what the Wallensteins and Weinstains would provide. The two families, their fates now interdependent, would ride out the economic highs and lows of their new country for years to come.

As the century turned and the two families found themselves settled and on firm financial ground in America, their futures indeed looked good and bright. “The Century is dead. Long live the Century,” read the headlines in the *Times* on January 1, 1900. Depictions of the grand celebration were breathless. New York City became a wild fairground lit up by “brilliant illuminations” and “everywhere shimmering gleaming electric lights.” Overhead, “bombs thundered and rockets blazed skyward.” City Hall, the center of the city’s celebration, was decked out in flags and “strings of bunting in red, white and blue.” “Scores of thousands” heard John Phillip Sousa’s band play. Randolph Guggenheim, then president of the New York City Council, offered the crowds a benediction of booster rhetoric—words that would closely resemble some written later by West in his political novel of America, *A Cool Million*. Guggenheim offered, “The advance of the human race during the past one hundred years has not been equaled by the progress of man within any of the preceding ages . . . The

possibilities of the future for mankind are the subjects of hope and imagination.” Certainly an argument could be made to substantiate Guggenheim’s bold claim. It was true for Guggenheim, at the very least.

Even though West later focused his art on what he saw as a national obsession with boosterism, Americans en masse wanted to believe the rhetoric and many did. Certainly Guggenheim and Ford and their brethren were right about one thing—the hope of the new century would be built on the back of advancing commerce, out of the spasm of the Industrial Revolution. Novelist William Dean Howells wrote about this long before the turn of the century, in July 1876, in the *Atlantic Monthly*: “It [is] in engineering, rather than in art, that the national genius most freely speaks . . . the present America is voluble in the strong metals and their infinite uses.”

With this new focus on business success and commercial wizardry America’s slate of national heroes began to shift as well—from Civil War veterans and westward pioneers, to titans of commerce. The last Civil War veteran to serve as president was William McKinley who was shot on September 6, 1901 at the Pan-American Exposition Buffalo, New York. As McKinley was touring the Temple of Music, bending down to offer a girl a flower, “. . . he was shot in the stomach by an unemployed artisan and anarchist Leon Czolgosz.” Artisan and anarchist were seen by many as linked occupations they still are. Wells Root remembered:

A man’s hatreds are often an interesting index of his character, particularly, as in N.’s case when they are few and far between . . . N. . . Hated Hitler, Franco, Herbert Hoover and the conventional villains of progressive thought. But these hatreds were abstract, aimed chiefly at what the men stood for. He could mow them down, too, with a phrase, but had he come on any of them starving, I believe N. would have offered them half of his last ham sandwich.

The rise of the anarchist and his philosophy of disunion accompanied an accelerating national expansion. West himself explored this paradigm in his novels—particularly in his two most uniformly well-regarded novels—*Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. In *The Day of the Locust*, in its last scene, West captures the anarchist’s dream of oblivion with perfection:

He was carried through the exit to the back street and lifted into a police car. The siren began to scream and at first he thought he was making the noise himself. He felt his lips with his hands. They were clamped tight. He knew then it was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could.

While West was drawn to the outcast, to a romantic view of the anarchist who represented, to him as well, the poet, the painter, the prose writer, the artist and artisan—the popular fascination lay with the

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