

ANALYSIS

The Dream Life of Balso Snell (1931)

Nathanael West

(1903-1940)

“By critical consensus, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is a juvenile and obscure attack on all art, an incoherent parody which is interesting chiefly because it foreshadows some of the themes which preoccupied West in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. It has been called ‘scatological and pretentiously wise,’ ‘a sneer in the bathroom mirror at Art,’ ‘schoolboyish,’ ‘immature...[but] the key to all his later works,’ and ‘an hysterical, obscure, disgusted, shriek against the intellect.’ None of these remarks is definitive, but only the last one is, I think, flatly wrong.... Much of *Balso* is very funny but some of it isn’t. It jumps from jokes which are leaden and obvious to parodies which are the virtuoso performances of a sophisticated stylist.... *Balso Snell*, like *Gulliver’s Travels*, begins with an ingenious device. Balso finds the Trojan horse, enters it through the anus, and goes on a picaresque journey through its bowels, encountering a variety of would-be writers and camp followers of the arts during his journey...with so many...excremental images or metaphors that it is impossible to list them.... The name ‘Balso Snell’ [B.S.] is itself, I think, a thinly disguised variant of ‘asshole smell’...

With his scatological use of the Trojan horse, West manages the simultaneous reduction of several themes: First, the journey into the past—Balso reverses the normal direction of time by reversing the normal direction of the digestive process; he journeys *up* the alimentary canal.... In West’s parody, organic time is digestive, not gestative. It produces no new births, only a fecal residue. Second, the pretentiousness of the artist—George Moore’s statement that art is not nature but nature digested yields the conclusion that art is a sublime excrement.... Third, the decadence of modern life and art—The Trojan horse is a relic of the ancient world, and the collection of modern intellectuals and writers who live just inside its anus are...derivative.... Here the artist as smeller furnishes another variation on the obscene pun of Balso’s name. The decadent aesthete becomes, in the reductive parody, a sniffer of the asshole smell of the past. Fourth, the parody of monism—Balso’s ‘Round as the anus’ song is followed by the guide’s discussion of monism versus pluralism in which a circle is offered as the perfect monistic symbol: ‘Moreover, if everything is one...then everything is a circle’...

His speech is almost wholly composed of two kinds of cliché: the Philistine and the Romantic.... ‘Stand me now as ever in good stead’ obviously parodies Joyce’s invocation in *Portrait of the Artist*.... There is no mystic revelation, only a medley of arty clichés. The Freudian dream theory is equally ridiculous and for much the same reason.... The narrator’s description of the ‘chauffeur within’ portrays sex as a dirty and joyless compulsion. He obviously resents the compulsion as much as he resents the poses he must adopt to gratify it.... The various episodes in *Balso Snell* amount to a catalogue of sexual attitudes, traditional and contemporary... All artistic poses are, in the final scene, reduced to seduction strategies.... The only purpose of art is to disguise and gratify sexual desire. Yet it is equally true that sex seems largely an excuse to indulge in arty poses.... Though in *Balso Snell* ridicule seems total, it is directed less at art in general than at certain forms of pseudo-art—at the derivative, the pretentious, the fashionable. *Balso*’s characters are would-be writers and intellectuals. They pretend to originality but succeed only in mimicking familiar stances.”

Randall Reid

The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land
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