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Jonathan Veitch. *American Supperrealism: Nathaniel West and the Politics of Representation in the 1930s.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. 232 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-15704-3; $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-15700-5.

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Social Tendencies

Jonathan Veitch's new study is an ambitious attempt to rescue Nathaniel West from misinterpretation if not obscurity. Following Horace Greeley's exhortation to "go west," the author–now an administrator at the New School–deconstructs the virulent "nadaist" to reconstruct his place in American culture.

In the preface, Veitch states his three goals clearly: "to offer a fresh reading of the 1930s, a reading that puts the problem of representation at the center of the decade's concerns." Secondly, he explores the "possibilities and limitations of Dada as modes of social criticism." Finally, the author as critic seeks to explore the "the complicated presence of mass culture in America."

In the text, Veitch examines West's complete oeuvre–so to speak–for enforcement of his thesis, namely, that social tendencies in America, 1930s vintage of sour grapes, led to nihilism which in turn, serves as "a prerequisite for fascism." To reinforce his plausible thesis, the author as literary critic creates a straw-man antithesis. He targets *The Grapes of Wrath* and vilifies, by insinuation, John Steinbeck. Debunking Steinbeck's "reliance on pastoralism," Veitch locates echoes of Muley's putative innocence in the demagoguery of contemperies Father Coughlin, Huey Long, and Don Townsend.

Chapter One offers a discourse on American surrealism (Veitch prefers the dubious rubric "superrealism"). The methodology is unmasked with homage, far from Catalonia, to Michel Foucault. Mirroring reality, fiction is coded. Thus a careful reading of West requires that we decode, that is to say discover how "reality is constructed under capitalist modernity."

The subsequent chapters lead us to "Euclid's Asshole." Here, we are treated to some excremental musings issuing from *The Dream Life of Balso Snell.* While the adumbration of West's penchant for punning provides some comic relief, Veitch's tendentious–one is tempted to say constipatory–prose does not, especially the bilge on pages 36, 41, 42, and 114.

It gets worse as we move from screwball comedy to nihilistic prose. Evoking Mikhail Bakhtin, Veitch tries to illustrate the perversion of "nearly every human relationship as "being" descends into grotesquerie and to echo Umberto Eco "the cliches are having a ball." Here, Veitch shows an uncanny ability to penetrate the cliches. He provides a brilliant reading of West's version of the apocalypse: *The Day of the Locust.* But he cannot escape the cliches of decon-structionism or remove the shackles of pedantic prose.

With all its literary warts and ponderous prose, *The Grapes of Wrath* is worth more–to use the materialistic yardstick–than the collected best of West. To be sure, Nathaniel had a superior if corrosive sense of humor. But nihilism and cynicism–as Irving Howe observed in another context on Lenny Bruce–mask the masochism. "Humor of this kind bears a heavy weight of destruction, in Jewish hands, more likely self-destruction, for it proceeds from a brilliance that corrodes the world faster than, even in the imagination, it can remake it." Veitch misses the major point because he ignores the essential ingredient of West's wit: the Jewish roots. Nowhere in this brief book does the author mention the Semitic seeds.

American Surrealism bears traces of genius. The author is gifted with a fine mind and evident erudition.