III • Furious Compassions; Pity and Contempt

I am hesitant to write what follows because the experiences of some of the characters I shall be talking about could lead almost anyone to conclude that too much compassion is worse than too little, and I am not ready to believe that. It may be more terrible, more immediately injurious to the self and even to others, but it is not worse. It would not be an affliction in a world in which there was sufficient compassion. I am hesitant too because it is difficult to know what tone is appropriate for talking about such characters, especially difficult because the same problem quite obviously afflicts the authors who present them to us. Yet each of these characters must be present at any reading of Auden’s poem and any gathering of the thinly padded.

For he was difficult to dispose of, that boy. He was delicate and, in a frail way, good looking, too, except for the vacant droop of his lower lip. Under our excellent system of compulsory education he had learned to read and write, notwithstanding the unfavorable aspect of the lower lip. But as errand boy he did not turn out a great success. He forgot his messages; he was easily diverted from the straight path of duty by the attractions of stray cats and dogs, which he followed down narrow alleys into unsavory courts... or by the dramas of fallen horses whose pathos and violence induced him sometimes to shriek piercingly in a crowd, which disliked to be disturbed by sounds of distress in its quiet enjoyment of the national spectacle.1

In such a tone of voice, Conrad introduces Stevie Verloc of The Secret Agent, a young boy who is afflicted with a particularly acute sensitivity to suffering. And in this passage we can already hear behind Stevie’s ineffectual shriek a voice that seems, itself, far from immune to the “pathos and violence” in the drama of the fallen horses or pleased with the complacency of the crowd, though one that does not give much help if we are wondering what would be an appropriate response to such “quiet enjoyment” of pain. Stevie is the younger
brother of Winnie Verloc, who has married the seemingly equable and generous Mr. Verloc, whom she does not love—married him chiefly because she believes he will be able to provide a home and protection for that not very competent young man, toward whom she has maternal feelings. Winnie, who does not believe “things bear very much looking into,” helps her husband run a shop that sells pornography but does not know that he is really an undercover agent both for a repressive foreign power and the London police. In connection with that work, he pretends to belong to a group of anarchists. All of them live in a London that Conrad presents mostly as a gray, squalid, and monstrous town; and the entire story is related in a tone that Conrad has defined as combining both pity and contempt but also as one that emerged from “a mood as serious in feeling and thought as any in which I ever wrote a line” (Author’s Note, p. 12).

At the age of fourteen, before his sister’s marriage, while working as an office boy, Stevie is discovered setting off fireworks on a staircase, a matter that Conrad says “might have turned out very serious.” He goes on:

An awful panic spread through the building. Wild-eyed, choking clerks stamped through the passages full of smoke; silk hats and elderly businessmen could be seen rolling independently down the stairs. Stevie did not seem to derive any personal gratification from what he had done. His motives for this stroke of originality were difficult to discover. It was only later on that Winnie obtained from him a misty and confused confession. It seems that two other office boys in the building had worked on his feelings by tales of injustice and oppression till they had wrought his compassion to the pitch of that frenzy. (P. 22)

Again the tone invites both sympathy and distance and an odd mix of feelings about an active response to suffering. How foolish and inappropriate to fight injustice with firecrackers, but how delicious those “silk hats and elderly businessmen . . . rolling independently down the stairs.” Stevie is dismissed, of course, after what Conrad with fine scorn calls “that altruistic exploit” and is set to washing dishes and shining shoes in the lodging house of his guardians. Stevie’s
sensibilities are further inflamed by his reading of anarchist publications and overhearing of the ranting of anarchists like Karl Yundt, "who seemed to sniff the tainted air of social cruelty, to strain his ear for its atrocious sounds" (p. 51), and of whom Conrad writes further (and further mixes his and our feelings about altruistic action):

The famous terrorist had never in his life raised personally as much as a little finger against the social edifice. He was no man of action; he was not even an orator of torrential eloquence, sweeping the masses along in the rushing noise and foam of great enthusiasm. With a more subtle intention, he took the part of an insolent and venomous evoker of sinister impulses which lurk in the blind envy and exasperated vanity of ignorance, in the suffering and misery of poverty, in all the hopeful and noble illusions of righteous anger, pity, and revolt. (P. 51)

Stevie’s response to such inflammation is usually no more than an aimless, disturbed excitement, although on one occasion after reading of an officer nearly tearing off the ear of a recruit, he is discovered by his sister “shouting and stamping and sobbing” (p. 61) with a carving knife in his hand. “He can’t stand the notion of any cruelty,” she tells her husband. “He would have stuck that officer like a pig if he had seen him then” (p. 61).

The most detailed and interesting exposition of Stevie’s response to suffering (and Conrad’s too, perhaps) occurs when he and his mother and grandmother are riding in a carriage drawn by an “infirm” and underfed horse and driven by a maimed driver with a hook in place of his left hand, a man whose “enormous and unwashed countenance flamed red in the muddy stretch of the street” (p. 134). Early in the trip, with breast heaving, Stevie gets out the words “Don’t whip,” and we read:

The man turned slowly his bloated and sodden face of many colours bristling with white hairs. His little red eyes glistened with moisture. His big lips had a violet tint. They remained closed. With the dirty back of his whip-hand he rubbed the stubble sprouting on his enormous chin.

“You mustn’t,” stammered out Stevie, violently, “it hurts.”
“Mustn’t whip?” queried the other in a thoughtful whisper, and immediately whipped. He did this, not because his soul was cruel and his heart evil, but because he had to earn his fare. (P. 135)

A few moments later, Stevie frightens everyone by suddenly getting out of the cab. When questioned he can only stammer, “Too heavy. Too heavy”; and when coaxed by his mother to get back in the cab, he does so “with a face of despair.”

After a long, jolting ride, they arrive at their destination and the cabman is paid. And here I must summarize and quote at length both to convey the full tone and import of what follows and to provide a basis for my own commentary:

Stevie was staring at the horse, whose hind quarters [his innocent behind] appeared unduly elevated by the effect of emaciation. The little stiff tail seemed to have been fitted in for a heartless joke; and at the other end the thin, flat neck, like a plank covered with old horse-hide, dripped to the ground under the weight of an enormous bony head. The ears hung at different angles, negligently; and the macabre figure of that mute dweller on the earth steamed straight up from ribs and backbone in the muggy stillness of the air. (Pp. 141–42)

Striking Stevie lightly on the breast with his iron hook, the cabman asks the boy how he would like to “sit behind this ’oss up to two o’clock in the morning,” and as Stevie’s vacant expression turns slowly to dread, continues to lament his fate: “You may well look! Till three and four o’clock in the morning. Cold and ’ungry. Looking for fares. Drunks.” At which point Conrad interrupts:

His jovial purple cheeks bristled with white hairs; and like Virgil’s Silenus, who, his face smeared with the juice of berries, discoursed of Olympian Gods to the innocent shepherds of Sicily, he talked to Stevie of domestic matters and the affairs of men whose sufferings were great and immortality by no means assured.

“I am a night cabby, I am,” he whispered, with a sort of boastful exasperation. “I’ve got to take out what they will blooming well give me at the yard. I’ve got my missus and four kids at ’ome.”
The monstrous nature of that declaration of paternity seemed to strike the world dumb. A silence reigned, during which the flanks of the old horse, the steed of apocalyptic misery, smoked upwards in the light of the charitable gaslamp. (P. 142)

When the cabman grunts and adds “in his mysterious whisper, ‘This ain’t an easy world,’” Stevie’s feelings, we are told, finally burst out “in their usual concise form. ‘Bad! Bad!’ ” Stevie continues to stare at the emaciated ribs of the horse, “self-conscious and sombre, as though he were afraid to look about him at the badness of the world” and the cabman responds, “‘Ard on ’osses, but ’dam sight ’arder on poor chaps like me.’” After which Conrad offers this remarkable passage:

“Poor! Poor!” stammered out Stevie, pushing his hands deeper into his pockets with convulsive sympathy. He could say nothing; for the tenderness to all pain and misery, the desire to make the horse happy and the cabman happy, had reached the point of a bizarre longing to take them in bed with him. And that, he knew, was impossible. For Stevie was not mad. It was, as it were, a symbolic longing; and at the same time it was very distinct, because springing from experience, the mother of wisdom. Thus when as a child he cowered in a dark corner scared, wretched, sore, and miserable with the black, black misery of the soul, his sister Winnie used to come along, and carry him off to bed with her, as into a heaven of consoling peace. Stevie, though apt to forget mere facts, such as his name and address for instance, had a faithful memory of sensations. To be taken into a bed of compassion was the supreme remedy, with the only one disadvantage of being difficult of application on a large scale. And looking at the cabman, Stevie perceived this clearly, because he was reasonable. (P. 143)

We witness then at some length the cabman’s departure. We learn that he “made as if to hoist himself on the box, but at the last moment, from some obscure motive, perhaps merely from disgust with carriage exercise, desisted” and that he instead approached the horse, “lifted up the big, weary head to the height of his shoulder with one effort of his right arm, like a feat of strength,” and whispered, secretly, “‘Come on.’” And we watch as “limping,” he leads the cab away, “the scrunched gravel of the drive crying out under the slowly
turning wheels, the horse’s lean thighs moving with ascetic deliberation” and as “the slow cortege reappeared, lighted up for a moment, the short, thick man limping busily, with the horse’s head aloft in his fist, the lank animal walking in stiff and forlorn dignity, the dark low box on wheels rolling behind comically with an air of waddling. They turned to the left. There was a pub down the street.” Unable to share in the wonderfully intricate distancing of such description, Stevie stands alone, “his hands thrust deep into his pockets, glar[ing] with vacant sulkiness.”

At the bottom of his pockets his incapable, weak hands were clenched into a pair of angry fists. In the face of anything which affected directly or indirectly his morbid dread of pain, Stevie ended by turning vicious. A magnanimous indignation swelled his frail chest to bursting, and caused his candid eyes to squint. Supreme in knowing his own powerlessness, Stevie was not wise enough to restrain his passions. The tenderness of his universal charity had two phases as indissolubly joined and connected as the reverse and obverse sides of a medal. The anguish of immoderate compassion was succeeded by the pain of an innocent but pitiless rage. (P. 144)

I suppose it is ungrateful to complain about so brilliant a piece of writing and so sharp an indictment of that conjunction of immoderate compassion and rage which afflicts so many more people than it is comfortable to think about—so many even when one excludes the self-righteously indignant, about whose compassion one has doubts, and those who exhibit what George Eliot describes in Daniel Deronda as “that rashness of indignation or resentment which has an unpleasant likeness to the love of punishing.” Still, I find myself uneasy about Conrad’s treatment of the episode and of Stevie in particular, uneasy because Conrad here so directly inflicts those most tormenting questions we have already been taunted with—what does constitute a proper (or not “immoderate”) compassion and what can or ought one do about the suffering of human and other living creatures—and yet permits himself and his reader such a privileged relation to them.
Confronted with the actual suffering of the cabman and his horse, Stevie’s desire to ease their pain reaches the point “of a bizarre longing to take them in bed with him,” about which Conrad comments that “to be taken into a bed of compassion was the supreme remedy, with the only disadvantage of being difficult of application on a large scale.” Conrad is perfectly right, of course; and while I read the passage, I am enough seduced by its tone to smile, though wryly, at Stevie’s bizarre and hopeless wish. Not a complacent smile perhaps, but still one that helps blunt my own awareness of what Conrad has told me earlier in the paragraph about Stevie’s suffering as a child. I am seduced also into sharing with Conrad a distance that keeps me from wondering too actively what wisdoms, solutions, and conducts of my own allow me to smile at Stevie or to feel in any way superior to him. I would rather not be encouraged to put on that much armor. And I wish Conrad were not quite so skittish when in the paragraph that follows he hints at the possibility that Stevie’s compassion may, in fact, have caused the cabman to lift the horse’s head and to lead him instead of climbing into the cab. Why the so careful, he “made as if to hoist himself onto the box, but from some obscure motive, perhaps merely from disgust with carriage exercise, desisted”?

Out from under the spell of the tone, I cannot help wondering what permits Conrad to say that Stevie turns “vicious” or knows a “pitiless rage,” for these are not the appropriate terms for anything we actually observe Stevie doing or feeling. What he does, in fact, go on to do as best he can is to explore the problem of poverty and suffering, an exploration that Conrad continues to permit himself and us to enjoy mostly, though not entirely, from a distance, an exploration, that the book itself never really conducts.

When Stevie is rejoined by Winnie and they go off to seek a bus, they come upon the horse and cab in front of a public house. The appearance of the horse is “so profoundly lamentable, with such a perfection of grotesque misery and weirdness of macabre detail” that Mrs. Verloc “with that ready compassion of a woman for a horse (when she is not sitting
behind him), exclaims vaguely, 'Poor brute!' ” Without the benefit of that parenthesis which allows the narrator and reader to turn away (“quite leisurely”) from the horse to the pleasures of light mockery, and sexism as well, Stevie stops suddenly, ejaculates “ ‘Poor! Poor! . . . Cabman poor, too. He told me himself!’ ” and is overcome by the contemplation of “the infirm and lonely steed.”

Jostled but obstinate, he would remain there, trying to express the view newly opened to his sympathies of the human and equine misery in close association. But it was very difficult. “Poor brute, poor people!” was all he could repeat. It did not seem forcible enough, and he came to a stop with an angry splutter: “Shame!” Stevie was no master of phrases, and perhaps for that very reason his thoughts lacked clearness and precision. But he felt with a greater completeness and some profundity. That little word contained all his sense of indignation and horror at one sort of wretchedness having to feed upon the anguish of the other—at the poor cabman beating the poor horse in the name, as it were, of his poor kids at home. And Stevie knew what it was to be beaten. He knew it from experience. It was a bad world. Bad! Bad! (Pp. 145-46)

Stevie goes on muttering and gets out finally: “ ‘Bad world for poor people.’ ” To which his sister responds: “ ‘Nobody can help that.’ ” Pained by this information, Stevie walks along gloomily for a while and then brightens up and suggests confidently that perhaps the police can help. When his sister explains that the “police aren’t for that,” his “face lengthened considerably. He was thinking. The more intense his thinking, the slacker was the droop of his lower jaw. And it was with an aspect of hopeless vacancy that he gave up his intellectual enterprise” (p. 147). This is an extremely curious and perhaps revealing remark (it is really the narrator who has given up, who nowhere in the book ever wrestles with the question whether anybody can “help that,” who views with nearly equal scorn almost the full spectrum of those who want to change things and those who do not, and who is about to rise and run from some particularly crucial questions); for Stevie does not give up his questioning. In the very next paragraph, we are told that “unlike his sister, who put
her trust in face values, he wished to go to the bottom of the matter” and asks angrily, “What are they for, Winn? What are they for? Tell me.”

Conrad prefices her answer: “Guiltless of all irony, she answered yet in a form which was not perhaps unnatural in the wife of Mr. Verloc, Delegate of the Central Red Committee, personal friend of certain anarchists, and a votary of social revolution.” She says: “Don’t you know what the police are for, Stevie? They are there so that them as have nothing shouldn’t take anything away from them who have” (p. 147). (For those guilty of irony, what form should the answer take?)

Stevie, who “had always been easily impressed by speeches,” is “impressed and startled now,” and he asks at once, anxiously: “What? . . . Not even if they are hungry? Mustn’t they?” “Not if they were ever so,” Mrs. Verloc responds, “with the equanimity of a person untroubled by the problem of the distribution of wealth, and exploring the perspective of the roadway for an omnibus of the right colour. ‘Certainly not. But what’s the use of talking about all that, you aren’t ever hungry’ ” (p. 148).

At this point she cries out to Stevie to stop a bus, and the scene ends with Stevie “tremulous and important with his sister Winnie on his arm, [flinging] up the other high above his head at the approaching bus, with complete success.”

Stevie never progresses any further in his effort to understand the causes or solutions for suffering. Soon after this scene, he is used by Mr. Verloc to carry dynamite as part of an absurd effort to blow up the Greenwich Observatory. Stevie trips over a root and himself is blown to pieces, into such small pieces that his remains must be gathered up with a shovel.

Such is the fate and such is Conrad’s treatment of the only character in the book who seems capable of compassion for anyone beyond the limits of his own family. It provides a peculiarly depressing addition to what is in all other respects a peculiarly depressing book. Peculiarly depressing not only because of the number of despicable characters and the
generally ugly portrait of all aspects of London scenery and life and because the book suggests no remedies for the ills it dramatizes, but because the few generous impulses Conrad allows his characters lead, without exception, only to greater ugliness and pain. Still, without the presence of Stevie I would have been reading a book in which compassion was so conspicuous by its absence that I could have believed I was to see it as a possibly saving virtue. Instead I am made to regard it too as a hopeless, and even absurd and dangerous, gesture. More than this, through Stevie's perceptions my own compassion is stimulated and then cut off short. Let me give one further brief illustration that sharply outlines this dilemma.

The only other specific person, besides the cabman, who is shown as a recipient of Stevie's compassion is a Mrs. Neale. She is introduced in this way: "Mrs. Neale was the charwoman of Brett Street. Victim of her marriage with a debauched joiner, she was oppressed by the needs of many infant children. Re-armed, and aproned in coarse sacking up to the armpits, she exhaled the anguish of the poor in a breath of soap-suds and rum, in the uproar of scrubbing, in the clatter of tin pails" (p. 153). While she is scrubbing the kitchen floor of the Verloc house, Stevie enters the room, and she groans "lamentably, having observed that he could be induced easily to bestow for the benefit of her infant children the shilling his sister Winnie presented him with from time to time."

On all fours amongst the puddles, wet and begrimed, like a sort of amphibious and domestic animal living in ashbins and dirty water, she uttered the usual exordium: "It's all very well for you, kept doing nothing like a gentleman." And she followed with the everlasting plaint of the poor, pathetically mendacious, miserably authenticated by the horrible breath of cheap rum and soap-suds. She scrubbed hard, snuffing all the time, and talking volubly. And she was sincere. And on each side of her thin red nose, her bleared, misty eyes swam in tears, because she really felt the need of some stimulant in the morning. (Pp. 155–56)

Lest one still be unduly swayed by the pathos of her predicament, Conrad goes on to have Mrs. Verloc observe,
“with knowledge”: “‘There’s Mrs. Neale at it again with her harrowing tales about her little children. They can’t all be as little as she makes them out. Some of them must be big enough by now to try to do something for themselves. It only makes Stevie angry.’” Her words are confirmed by a thud as of a fist striking the kitchen table, and we are told that “in the normal evolution of his sympathy” Stevie had become angry and felt someone should be made to suffer when he discovered that he had no shilling and could not at once relieve Mrs. Neale’s “‘little un’s’ privations.” Mrs. Verloc goes into the kitchen and stops “that nonsense” firmly but gently. “She was well aware that directly Mrs. Neale received her money she went round the corner to drink ardent spirits in a mean and musty public house—the unavoidable _via dolorosa_ of her life. Mrs. Verloc’s comment upon this practise had an unexpected profundity, as coming from a person disinclined to look under the surface of things. ‘Of course, what is she to do to keep up? If I were like Mrs. Neale I expect I wouldn’t act any different’ ” (p. 156).

Here Conrad does offer the charity of his “_via dolorosa_” and his endorsement of Mrs. Verloc’s final remarks, although qualified by the distances of an allusion in a foreign language and a surrogate voice.

But again, as with his earlier insistence about Stevie’s desire to punish others when his compassion is frustrated, I am puzzled by Conrad’s report that Stevie felt someone should be made to suffer because I see no evidence of it in the scene or elsewhere. If anyone is punishing others for the suffering he is unable to ameliorate, it would seem to be Conrad, whose scorn is such a merciless whip throughout the book.

But my sharpest uneasiness is over the ease with which Stevie’s compassion is dismissed. Here, as with the horse and cab, Stevie has a clear and uncomplicated wish—to relieve the suffering. That he has no efficacious method for doing so is true, but that is hardly a great or absurd failing in a world (within the book and without) in which no one seems to have any better methods. What is Conrad’s wish?

As is true of his treatment of the cabman and the horse, he
is clearly aware of Mrs. Neale's suffering and of the unpleasantness of her work, and he takes pains to make that suffering vivid for the reader. Yet in both cases he treats himself and us to some luxurious distancing metaphors: turns the "maimed" and "sodden" faced driver into a "jovial" cheeked Silenus discoursing "of Olympian Gods to the shepherds of Sicily" (p. 142) and the overworked scurbwoman into "a sort of amphibious and domestic animal living in ashbins and dirty water" (p. 155). And in both cases, he reminds us more than twice that his characters' most pressing concern is not their little children but the solace of a drink.

In these knowledges and perspectives, we are presumably superior to Stevie, who knows only his simpleminded compassion. Why superior? How have we and the narrator earned our distance, to say nothing of our armoring scorn. A more intelligent Stevie might have become only one of us, or he might have learned, as did the boy in *Morning Watch*, to complicate his compassionate urges with intimations and circumlocutions pertaining to his own saintliness. In either case the cabman and Mrs. Neale go on with their distressing lives, finding assistance only in drink.

In an Author's Note written thirteen years after the book was published, Conrad defends himself against those critics who objected to the book because of the "sordid surroundings and the moral squalor of the tale" by saying that "the whole treatment of the tale, its inspiring indignation and underlying pity and contempt, prove my detachment from the squalor and sordidness which lie simply in the outward circumstances of the setting" (p. 8). And he goes on to say:

I had to fight hard to keep at arm's length the memories of my nocturnal walks all over London in my early days, lest they should rush in and overwhelm each page of the story as these emerged one after the other from a mood as serious in feeling and thought as any in which I ever wrote a line. . . . Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as pity. (P. 12)
In many respects, as is apparent in the passages quoted, the mixture of scorn and pity works to brilliant and powerful effect. Among other things, it implies throughout that there must be other modes of consciousness and behavior, ways of feeling and being, superior to those we are observing. But scorn is a seductive and habit-forming frame of mind, and I think it comes finally to dominate the book more than it should, especially toward the end, and especially in the treatment of Winnie Verloc after she has killed her husband. Even when the scorn and pity seem perfectly in balance, there is something evasive about the narrator, just as there is something evasive in Conrad's Author's Note, which pronounces his detachment from certain aspects of his subject but does not in any way explore the nature of the involvement (complicity?) that he is deliberately trying "to keep at arm's length." With respect to such scorn and pity, I want finally to challenge the author of *The Secret Agent* with his own demonstration in his novel *Victory* of the destructive effect of the cynical and despairing father of Axel Heyst, that old man who preaches that all hope and action are pointless and on his deathbed responds thus to his young son's quite desperate "Is there no guidance?"

"You still believe in something, then?" he said in a clear voice, which had been growing feeble of late. "You believe in flesh and blood, perhaps? A full equable contempt would soon do away with that, too. But since you have not attained to it, I advise you to cultivate that form of contempt which is called pity. It is perhaps the least difficult—always remembering that you, too, if you are anything, are as pitiful as the rest, yet never expecting any pity for yourself."

"What is one to do, then?" sighed the young man, regarding his father, rigid in the high-backed chair.

"Look on—make no sound," were the last words of the man who had spent his life in blowing blasts upon a terrible trumpet which had filled heaven and earth with ruins, while mankind went on its way unheeding.²

There is a side of Conrad in that book, too, that is fascinated by the old man's position. And it is possible to see the son's tragedy as resulting from a failure to remain suffi-
ciently detached and distant and to see the viciousness of other characters in the book as a confirmation of the father’s view of the world. But it seems quite clear that the book finally shows the father’s attitudes to be responsible more than anything else for the tragedy and forces us to give nearly full assent to the last words of the son: “‘Ah, Davidson, woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love—and to put its trust in life!’”

I would like to remind Conrad also, as well as some interpreters of the story, that what saves the captain, ship, and crew in his own story “The Secret Sharer” is the captain’s hat, which he gives to Leggatt, his other self, not as a cynical onlooker and not in any mixture of scorn and pity, but as a Stevie Verloc might, from seeing himself plainly in Leggatt’s position, “wandering barefooted, bareheaded, the sun beating on my dark poll” and from “my sudden pity for his mere flesh.”

I am not sure it is fair to inflict Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts upon anyone who is not already acquainted with it. Not that it isn’t a remarkable book, perhaps even a classic of its kind; but except to those few who can find it funny, it is likely to be a peculiarly tormenting book, even among what must already look like the reading list of a literary licker of lepers or licker of literary lepers (just beginning to think about the book makes me write something like that!). But both the author and title character must be permitted their confrontation with Auden. The first chapter is titled “Miss Lonelyhearts, Help Me, Help Me,” and the book begins:

The Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York Post-Dispatch (Are you in trouble?—Do you need advice?—Write to Miss Lonelyhearts and she will help you) sat at his desk and stared at a piece of white cardboard. On it a prayer had been printed by Shrike, the feature editor.
“Soul of Miss L, glorify me.
Body of Miss L, nourish me.
Blood of Miss L, intoxicate me.
Tears of Miss L, wash me.
Oh good Miss L, excuse my plea,
And hide me in your heart,
And defend me from mine enemies.
Help me, Miss L, help me, help me.
In saecula saeculorum, Amen.”

Although the deadline was less than a quarter of an hour away, he was still working on his leader. He had gone as far as: “Life is worthwhile, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstacy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar.” But he found it impossible to continue. The letters were no longer funny. He could not go on finding the same joke funny thirty times a day for months on end. And on most days he received more than thirty letters, all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife.

On his desk were piled those he had received this morning. He started through them again, searching for some clue to a sincere answer.

The reader must immediately join him in reading three of the letters. The first, signed “Sick-of-it-all,” begins: “Dear Miss Lonelyhearts—I am in such pain I don’t know what to do sometimes I think I will kill myself my kidneys hurt so much” and goes on to explain that the writer has had seven children in twelve years and was so sick after the last two that her husband “promised no more children on the doctor’s advice as he said I might die but when I got back from the hospital he broke his promise and now I am going to have a baby and I don’t think I can stand it my kidneys hurt so much.” She cannot have an abortion “on account of being a Catholic and my husband so religious. I cry all the time it hurts so much and I don’t know what to do” (p. 2).

The second, signed “Desperate,” is from a sixteen-year-old girl who was born without a nose. “I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I can’t blame the boys for not wanting to take me out. My mother loves me, but she cries terrible when she looks at me” (p. 2).

The third is from a fifteen-year-old boy who fears his
thirteen-year-old deaf and dumb sister will have a baby because a "man came on the roof and did something dirty to her." He is afraid to tell his mother because he fears "she will beat Gracie up awfull . . . and last time when she tore her dress they locked her in the closet for 2 days" (p. 3).

Understandably, Miss Lonelyhearts has enormous difficulties in knowing how to answer such letters. In addition to what might flippantly be called the "normal" problems that anyone would experience confronted with such a task, Miss Lonelyhearts has some special ones. He is afflicted with a general feeling that both he and the world about him are cold and dead. It is "a world of doorknobs" (p. 9) and his own innermost recesses, both spiritual and sexual, are often an "icy fatness." The main thing (apart from sexual friction) that offers him a sense of life is a feeling of excitement about Christ. Even "as a boy in his father's church, he had discovered that something stirred in him when he shouted the name of Christ, something secret and enormously powerful" (p. 8). But he also, and with some reason, fears this excitement and sometimes regards it as "hysteria, a snake whose scales are tiny mirrors in which the dead world takes on a semblance of life" (p. 9). This obsession is also highly self-conscious, confused, and often theatrical. He removes an ivory figure of Christ from the cross where it had been and nails it to his bedroom wall with large spikes, but "instead of writhing, the Christ remained calmly decorative" (p. 8). When his fiancee has reacted to his anger at her innocent complacency by reaching for his brow and asking "What's the matter. . . . Are you sick?" , he shouts at her, "accompanying his shouts with gestures that were too appropriate, like those of an old-fashioned actor. 'What a kind bitch you are. As soon as anyone acts viciously, you say he's sick. Wife-torturers, rapers of small children, according to you they're all sick. No morality, only medicine. Well, I'm not sick. I don't need any of your damned aspirin. I've got a Christ complex. Humanity. . . I'm a humanity lover. All the broken bastards . . . ' He finished with a short laugh that was like a bark" (p. 13). A moment later, his anger unap-
peased, he pats her shoulder "threateningly" and asks, "What's the matter sweetheart . . . Didn't you like my performance?" (p. 13).

As may be clear even from this brief passage, the confusion and theatricality do not entirely invalidate Miss Lonelyhearts' point of view, and whenever we are tempted to see his obsession entirely as illness, we are stopped by the extent to which this allies us with the second of Miss Lonelyhearts' special afflictions, his editor, the brutally cynical and sterile Shrike. Totally lacking in any sympathy either for Miss Lonelyhearts or the letter-writers, he is little more than a "machine for making jokes." For him Miss Lonelyhearts is a "leper licker," Christ is "Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts" or "Christ Dentist . . . Preventer of Decay," and the letters only something upon which to exercise his wit. He goes so far as to invent a party game called "Everyman his own Miss Lonelyhearts" in which he passes out the letters to his drunken guests who are to try to answer them and relishes reading parts of them aloud as he passes them out. His cynicism helps drive Miss Lonelyhearts toward a mad religious fanaticism, and he accelerates "his sickness by teaching him to handle his one escape, Christ, with a thick glove of words" (p. 33). He has advised Miss Lonelyhearts to give his readers stones. "When they ask for bread don't give them crackers as does the Church, and don't like the State, tell them to eat cake. Explain that man can not live by bread alone and give them stones. Teach them to pray each morning: "Give us this day our daily stone"." (p. 5).

Miss Lonelyhearts, however, can no longer bear to go on giving his readers stones, has given them "so many, in fact, that he had only one left—the stone that had formed in his gut" (p. 5). Or as he tries to explain to Betty when she suggests he give up the job and "work in an advertising agency or something":

“You don't understand, Betty, I can't quit. And even if I were to quit, it wouldn't make any difference. I wouldn't be able to forget the letters, no matter what I did. . . . Perhaps I can make you understand. Let's start from the beginning. A man is hired to give
advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he’s tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator.” (P. 32)

Here and elsewhere West seems to attach some value to the sincerity of Miss Lonelyhearts’ compassion and pain, and he keeps reminding the reader of the world’s suffering in various ways, including the reproduction of further agonizing letters. As does Miss Lonelyhearts, we must find Shrike’s and Betty’s obtuseness nearly intolerable and must share his anguish and sense that something ought to be done. So it is with the weight of some stone in our own gut that we must witness the way Miss Lonelyhearts botches up everything he touches, even in his dreams.

In one of his dreams he and two college roommates drunk- enly try to sacrifice a lamb to God. While the roommates hold the animal, Miss Lonelyhearts chants, “Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ” and tries to kill it with a butcher knife. He botches the job so badly that the knife breaks and the mutilated lamb crawls off into the underbrush, at which the boys flee. After a while Miss Lonelyhearts begs them to go back to put the lamb out of its misery. When they refuse, he goes back alone, crushes its head with a stone, and leaves “the carcass to the flies that swarmed around the bloody altar flowers” (p. 10).

In an equally dreamlike and drunken but waking episode, Miss Lonelyhearts and another reporter stumble upon an old homosexual sitting on the toilet in the comfort station of a little park and force him to accompany them to a bar where they try to elicit his life story. When they first take hold of him and he goes soft in their arms and begins to giggle, Miss Lonelyhearts has to resist a desire to hit him. When he refuses to tell them his story and begins to cough violently, Miss Lone-
lyhearts feels as “he had felt years before, when he had accidently stepped on a small frog. Its spilled guts had filled him with pity, but when its suffering had become real to his senses, his pity had turned to rage and he had beaten it frantically until it was dead” (p. 17). Finally, when the old man continues to insist that he has no story and begins to sob, Miss Lonelyhearts cries out, “Tell it, damn you, tell it” and begins to twist the old man’s arm. When the other reporter tries to tear him away, he refuses to let go. “He was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-Tubercular-husband.” The old man begins to scream, and somebody hits Miss Lonelyhearts from behind with a chair.

Toward the end of the book, while seeking to cultivate humility, he becomes involved with two of the people who have written him letters: a Mrs. Doyle, with “legs like Indian clubs, breasts like balloons and a brow like a pigeon” who virtually rapes him, and her husband, a cripple whom she despises and mistreats. One consequence of his efforts to help them is a scene in which Mrs. Doyle sends her husband out for some gin and sits on his lap. He tries to fend her off, but she keeps pressing her mouth against his, making him feel “like an empty bottle that is slowly being filled with warm, dirty water.” When she opens her dress and tries to force his head between her breasts, “he parted his knees with a quick jerk that slipped her to the floor. She tried to pull him down on top of her. He struck out blindly and hit her in the face. She screamed and he hit her again and again. He kept hitting her until she stopped trying to hold him, then he ran out of the house” (p. 50.).

The other consequence is that Mr. Doyle believes his wife when she tells him that Miss Lonelyhearts tried to rape her and determines to take vengeance. By the time he seeks to execute it, however, Miss Lonelyhearts has gone through a period of rock-like calm that nothing, including Shrike and Betty, can disturb, into a state of fever in which the rock has
become a furnace. Here with some deletions is the way West offers the reader his final stone:

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, tables, 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.

"Christ! Christ!" This shout echoed through the innermost cells of his body.

He moved his head to a cooler spot on the pillow and the vein in his forehead became less swollen. He felt clean and fresh.

The room was full of grace. A sweet, clean grace, not washed clean, but clean as the innersides of the inner petals of a newly forced rosebud.

He was conscious of two rhythms that were slowly becoming one. When they became one, his identification with God was complete. His heart was the one heart, the heart of God.

Suddenly the doorbell rang. He climbed out of bed and went into the hall to see who was coming. It was Doyle, the cripple, and he was slowly working his way up the stairs.

God had sent him so that Miss Lonelyhearts could perform a miracle and be certain of his conversion. It was a sign. He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been made whole.

He rushed down the stairs to meet Doyle with his arms spread for the miracle.

Doyle was carrying something wrapped in a newspaper. When he saw Miss Lonelyhearts, he put his hand inside the package and stopped. He shouted some kind of warning, but Miss Lonelyhearts continued his charge. He did not understand the cripple's shout and heard it as a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S., Catholic-mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-Shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband. He was running to succor them with love.

The cripple turned to escape, but he was too close and Miss Lonelyhearts caught him.

While they were struggling, Betty came in through the street door. She called to him to stop and started up the stairs. The cripple saw her cutting off his escape and tried to get rid of the package. He pulled his hand out. The gun inside the package exploded and Miss Lonelyhearts fell, dragging the cripple with him. They both fell part of the way down the stairs.
Upon finishing the book one wishes one could feel one had read merely the case history of a peculiarly incompetent Christ, of a man with a peculiar coldness of body and soul, a peculiar susceptibility to rage, and a peculiar inability to set things right. Then, at least, one might comfort oneself by imagining a more effective savior. But West allows us no such luxury. Miss Lonelyhearts is a peculiarly disabled and disabling hero, but West neither suggests how he could have done better nor gives any clear indication that a less neurotic Miss Lonelyhearts could, in fact, have been more effective. Moreover, he is the only character with any nobility at all, and his feeling of compassion is the only thing in the book not made to look ugly or ridiculous. And even if there is enough tonal distance, at times even scorn, toward Miss Lonelyhearts to keep us from identifying with him, we are drawn into some kind of complicity with him because the story is told more from his point of view than anyone else’s and because we too have been forced to read the letters. What does one say to Desperate, Broken-hearted, and Sick-of-it-all? How does one live a life without ignoring the letters? The Marxist in me notes that most of the letter-writers are ignorant and poor and that a more decent economic order might provide the crippled Mr. Doyle with a job that did not require him to drag his crippled leg around all day “with it all the time hurting fit to burst so that near quitting time I am crazy with pain” (p. 46). But it is hard to feel that political or social change would ease much of the pain experienced in the book. Or how it would improve either the body or character of Mrs. Doyle, to say nothing of the misery of no-nose.

In some respects the experience of reading the book is comparable to Miss Lonelyhearts’ when he keeps reading and rereading the letters: “for the same reason that an animal tears at a wounded foot: to hurt the pain” (p. 39). But finally, I think, I feel injured by the book in another way, as though I were the victim of some violence, a controlled violence, more like that of Shrike, perhaps, than of Miss Lonelyhearts. And though it would not be accurate to say that Shrike is the narrator of the book, I think its ultimate tone and meaning more
nearly resembles the furious despair of a Shrike than the incompetent thrashing about of Miss Lonelyhearts.

It is true that West presents Shrike in his full ugliness. His face is “a dead, gray triangle” (p. 6). His method of seducing a woman is to alternate between raising his fist at her and caressing her, and finally he buries “his triangular face like the blade of a hatchet in her neck” (p. 8). Like the reporters who imitate him, he is a machine for making jokes, jokes that are frequently sophomoric or hysterical. On one occasion Miss Lonelyhearts regards him as “a gull trying to lay an egg in the smooth flank of a rock, a screaming, clumsy gull”; and sometimes we must see him so, as well as in the more predatory form his name suggests (that hawklike shape which seems so drawn toward this book). And yet West is clearly fascinated by his cynicism and destructive wit. One hears his assent as Shrike mocks, one after the other, the various escapes of writers and artists that Miss Lonelyhearts might try: return to the soil, the South Sea islands, hedonism, art, suicide, and drugs. Here is the beginning of his fun with the South Seas: “You live in a thatch hut with the daughter of the king, a slim young maiden in whose eyes is an ancient wisdom. Her breasts are golden speckled pears, her belly a melon, and her odor is like nothing so much as a jungle fern. In the evening, on the blue lagoon, under the silvery moon, to your love you croon in the soft sylabelew and vocabelew of the labgorour tangorour” (p. 33). And here is the way he takes on Wordsworth, Lawrence, Thoreau, and perhaps some others I do not recognize:

“You are fed up with the city and its teeming millions. The ways and means of men, as getting and lending and spending you lay waste your inner world, are too much with you. The bus takes too long, while the subway is always crowded. So what do you do? So you buy a farm and walk behind your horse’s moist behind, no collar or tie, plowing your broad swift acres. As you turn up the rich black soil, the wind carries the smell of pine and dung across the fields and the rhythm of an old, old work enters your soul. To this rhythm, you sow and weep and chivy your kine, not kin or kind, between the pregnant rows of corn and taters. Your step becomes the heavy sexual step of a dance-drunk
Indian and you tread the seed down into the female earth. You plant, not dragon's teeth, but beans and greens. . . . " (P. 33; author's ellipsis)

In the chapter "Miss Lonelyhearts in the Country," West's own examination of the rural scene is perhaps a bit more complex but, finally, equally if not more cynical and cruel.

But the alignment is deeper and scarier than this because the book in its entirety is Shrike-like in its insistent emphasis on the absurdities of Miss Lonelyhearts at the same time that it demolishes all alternatives; Shrike-like in the icy chapter titles such as "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Clean Old Man," and "Miss Lonelyhearts Has a Religious Experience"; and Shrike-like in its cruelty, for there is cruelty as well as humor in West's treatment of nearly all the characters. It is the cruelty of bitter disappointment, perhaps, but cruelty nevertheless. I still have not satisfactorily explained, though, what I mean by saying that I feel injured by the book, as though I had received an insufficiently earned blow. It is partly the sense of encountering the Shrike-like part of West, the broken-backed idealist biting all and sundry and himself with his tongue. But there is something more, which I can only get at indirectly. Early in the book, after being sent away by Betty, feeling as if "his heart were a bomb, a complicated bomb that would result in a simple explosion, wrecking the world without rocking it" (p. 13), Miss Lonelyhearts goes to Delehanty's speakeasy and drinks until he feels "warm and sure." It is the first time since we have met him that Miss Lonelyhearts seems out of pain, and we are glad about that. What follows is this:

He forgot that his heart was a bomb to remember an incident of his childhood. One winter evening, he had been waiting with his little sister for their father to come home from church. She was eight years old then, and he was twelve. Made sad by the pause between playing and eating, he had gone to the piano and had begun a piece by Mozart. It was the first time he had ever voluntarily gone to the piano. His sister left her picture book to dance to his music. She had never danced before. She danced gravely and carefully, a simple dance yet formal. . . . As Miss Lonelyhearts stood at the bar, swaying slightly to the remembered music, he thought of children dancing. Square replacing oblong and being replaced by circle. Every child, everywhere; in the world there
was not one child who was not gravely, sweetly dancing.

He stepped away from the bar and accidently collided with a man holding a glass of beer. When he turned to beg the man's pardon, he received a punch in the mouth. (P. 15)

Apparently knocked out by the blow, Miss Lonelyhearts comes to in another room with a loose tooth and a lump on the back of his head, at which point "his anger swung in large drunken circles" and he thinks: "What in Christ's name was this Christ business? And children gravely dancing? He would ask Shrike to be transferred to the sports department" (p. 16). It is immediately after this that he goes out and finds the Clean Old Man whose arm he so painfully twists.

That punch in the mouth is a piece of gratuitous brutality to inflict on Miss Lonelyhearts and on the reader as well. The image of the children gravely dancing is without question the loveliest in the book, and it is the only pleasant image that West does not undercut in the very act of creating it. The language in which the scene is developed is like the sister's dancing, grave and careful, simple yet formal. Then the punch in the mouth. That punch in the mouth feels like it comes from West, and even if it also feels like self-laceration, a blow he is inflicting on himself, it hurts this reader. In a way the whole book is like that. The style and organization are exquisitely controlled, grave and careful, simple yet formal, but the content comes through with all the rage that accompanies a punch in the mouth.

In some respects the book works similarly to *The Secret Agent*. Just as he is by that book, the reader is mercilessly exposed to a world in which suffering is one of the chief occupations. He is made to feel that something ought to be done to alleviate the pain, made to feel so not only by the depiction of the suffering itself but by the fact that the most sympathetically drawn figure in each book is obsessed with that very same feeling. He is made to view the failures of that figure with an odd mixture of sympathy and amusement and to stand at some distance from him. Neither author makes any suggestions as to what might be alternative actions or reactions, and neither leaves the reader with a sense of guilt
(unless he goes out of his way to supply it himself). And yet I do not feel with West that sense of being unduly protected and immunized that I experienced with Conrad, that sense of being forced into a distance I did not want to occupy. I am not entirely sure why. I think it has to do with that punch in the mouth and with the precise degree of pain immanent in West's pity and scorn. Conrad seems more comfortable with his, though even he is by no means rubbing his innocent behind against a tree.

In saying this I am aware that I am back with Ivan Ivanovich again, distrustful of comfort, wanting everyone—characters, authors, readers, myself—to suffer because others suffer. And yet I do not really think we should all wear hair shirts. But neither do I want to settle yet for one more happy medium—in this case a cotton shirt and only a slight tap from Ivan's man with a hammer.

The books are alike in another respect. Both authors are unhappy about how easily their thin-skinned characters move from "immoderate compassion" to rage, a rage that in Miss Lonelyhearts' case can lead him to injure the very objects of his compassion. But neither author seems aware that he himself is a victim of a similar affliction. Both, I believe, would have assented eagerly to the notions expressed by Agee when he writes to Father Flye that "irony and savage anger and even certain planes of cynicism are, used right, nearly as good instruments and weapons as love, and not by any means incompatible with it; good lens-wipers and good auxiliaries. In plenty of ways I care most for those who lack the easing and comfort of direct love, Swift above any; and a lot for smaller, sharp intelligent soreheads like Bierce." I do not think either West or Conrad would have troubled himself sufficiently over the conjunction of "weapons" and "love" or wondered at all whether his own rage had anything to do with the killings off of Stevie and Miss Lonelyhearts. Nor do I think either would have worried how close his scorn toward the majority of humankind had taken him toward a Robin­son Jeffer-like condition of wishing not so much for man's redemption as for his extermination. None of this would be
so troublesome if most of us, writers and nonwriters alike, did not have such a remarkable aptitude for moving from righteous indignation to self-righteous indignation, a condition we obviously find easier than “direct love,” just as we have usually found it easier to punish victimizers than to care for victims.

Both books compel me toward some further atrocious questions: To what extent can Stevie and Miss Lonelyhearts be viewed as incomplete or failed saints? Insofar as they are such, to what extent is their failure to attain a fuller stature the result of their own inadequacies and to what extent of their creators’ inability to conceive of sainthood in the modern world? It is so easy to mock impulses toward sainthood. West is critical of such facility when he has the cynical newsmen who imitate Shrike call Miss Lonelyhearts “a leper licker” and say that even if he were to have a genuine religious experience, it would be personal and so meaningless, except to a psychologist” (p. 15). And yet West himself cannot quite bring himself to view Miss Lonelyhearts’ conversion at the end as other than a personal and meaningless event.

In weighing the characters’ own inadequacies, it may be helpful to notice that while Miss Lonelyhearts has tried to live up to one ideal—to become his brother’s keeper—he has not followed another: to do unto others as he would have done unto himself. Despite his sincerity and despite his exercises in humility, he sees himself as a savior, not one of those feeding to be saved. Stevie is more humble. Although he lacks the language to conceptualize either, he tries to realize both ideals, the second of them with precise fidelity when his “tenderness to all pain and to all misery” and his “desire to make the horse happy and the cabman happy, had reached the point of a bizarre longing to take them in bed with him” just as he had been taken into his sister’s bed when as a young child he was most miserable.

A final observation about these two books: although Stevie and Miss Lonelyhearts suffer from their immoderate compassion and are immobilized by it, it is not that which destroys them. What does destroy them is a concentration of people with peculiarly deafened hearts.