ANALYSIS

_A Cool Million_ (1934)

Nathanael West

(1903-1940)

“Perhaps the first thing to be said about _A Cool Million_ is that it is not very good. By itself, it has no more claim to our attention than several dozen properly forgotten books of the thirties…. The burlesque in _A Cool Million_ is consistently heavy and only intermittently funny. Worse, it largely isolates the reader from the force of its satire. In a world so dominated by moronic gullibility, a reader can neither identify with the characters nor feel much complicity in the folly and evil they represent. West’s typical mixed vision is here entirely absent. It is replaced by an odd jumble of travesties, few of which are impressive and all of which combine to destroy even the effect of simple bitterness. The book is as crude as a political cartoon but not as coherent….

The Alger stories it travesties are so ridiculous that they defy parody; burlesque is the only way to handle them, and burlesque... did not come easily to West.... The basic strategy of _A Cool Million_ is to impose the pattern of _Candide_ upon Horatio Alger materials. The strategy is, I think, clearly a mistake. It immediately sacrifices the qualities of style upon which _Candide_ depends. It also abandons West’s own gift for parody—the condensed and suggestive summary—in favor of extended imitation....

The most distinctive feature of _A Cool Million_ is its meticulous descriptions of American décor.... The tastes of the dandy are the tastes of American vulgarity. The aesthete whose whole career is an exercise in contempt for the masses is actually indistinguishable from them. He shares their lust for illusion, for elaborate artifice and novelty, and his irritable ennui is only an attenuated form of their latent violence. His psychology, like theirs, derives from frustration, irritation, and exhaustion; and his desires, like theirs, issue forth in dreams and fitful destructive acts.”

Randall Reid

_The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land_

(U Chicago 1967) 106-08, 111, 114
West's third novel, A Cool Million (1934), utilizing the myth of the Holy Fool, is a bitterly satiric treatment of American politics. Lemuel Pitkin, who is in the Candide–Horatio Alger mold, sets forth with naive good will, only to be consistently victimized, often violently. West spent his last five years in Hollywood as a scenarist. His final novel, The Day of the Locust (1939), is based on the Mythic Dance of Death. A group of characters on the fringe of Hollywood are used as a quintessential symbol of American violence and emptiness. Especially jarring is its final scene, a grotesque,