Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and *Contempo* Magazine

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When the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin purchased the papers of *Contempo* magazine in 1979, it acquired twenty-three letters written between 1932 and 1934 by Nathanael West to *Contempo*’s editors, Milton and Minna Abernethy. Eight of the Abernethys’ replies to West are also among these papers. Because West letters and manuscripts are extremely scarce, this correspondence is of great interest. The letters assume even more significance for what they reveal about a crucial juncture in West’s career: the roles played by the Abernethys and *Contempo* in the composition, publication, and reception of *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933). ¹

Although often forgotten today among the little magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, *Contempo* was regarded in its time as an important venue. West published three pieces in *Contempo*: a trial version of chapter eight of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, a brief essay on the novel written in the form of a review; and a sixteen-line poem, “Christmas Poem,” that anticipates the apocalyptic imagery of *The Day of the Locust* (1939). In addition, a special issue of *Contempo* was devoted to *Miss Lonelyhearts* in the summer of 1933—a critical symposium on the novel with articles by William Carlos Williams, Josephine Herbst, S. J. Perelman, and others.

West’s letters to the Abernethys clarify the sequence of events that led to the most bizarre of all the events in West’s ill-fated career: three weeks after *Miss Lonelyhearts* was published on 8 April 1933, its printers, creditors of the insolvent Horace Liveright, Inc., seized the undistributed copies. As a result, the novel did not receive the exposure it otherwise would have had. By the time West was able to “relicense” *Miss Lonelyhearts* to Harcourt, Brace, who brought out a second edition, too much time had elapsed to revive interest in the novel that has since come to be regarded as West’s masterpiece.

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West met Milton Avant Abernethy in New York in the early fall of 1931 through David Moss and Martin Kamin, booksellers and publishers of the newly revived *Contact: An American Quarterly*. At that time, West was keenly interested in the little magazine as a forum for experimental writing and had come to feel that it was losing some of the force it had exerted during the 1920s. Hoping to rejuvenate this little magazine movement with *Contempo*, West signed on as associate editor, with William Carlos Williams as editor-in-chief (Martin 146, 50). Soon thereafter, in early October 1931, West read a letter from Frank Shea to the book-page editor of the New York *World Telegram* that criticized *Contempo* for not paying its contributors. West’s spirited reply appeared in the 20 October issue of the newspaper. West pointed out, among other things, that the unpaid writer for a periodical such as *Contempo* had little to complain of, since only the writer, and “literachoir,” gained anything by appearing there (17). He cited a list of notable authors—Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, Allen Tate, and Hart Crane among them—who had found their audiences through such a forum.

Clearly, West saw himself as the defender of the little magazine tradition. His high hopes for *Contact*, however, fell quickly. Yet his regard for *Contempo*, signaled by his letter of defense, would very soon rise. When we examine the history of *Contempo*, we can see why West’s interest was aroused.² The periodical began inauspiciously, in a college dorm room at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill in early 1931. Nonetheless, during its first year it numbered among its contributors such stellar figures as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Theodore Dreiser, and John Dos Passos. *Contempo* printed excerpts of works-in-progress, book reviews, political and literary essays, prose sketches, and completed stories and poems. An excerpt from Faulkner’s *Light in August* and a poem by Hart Crane, “Bacardi Spreads His Wings,” appeared in one issue. The editors were adept at conjuring original belletristic writing and social criticism. For instance, they devoted an entire issue to the Scottsboro case; the issue featured commentary and poetry by Theodore Dreiser and Langston Hughes. The magazine’s most unusual regular feature was the “Authorview,” in which authors reviewed their own works and critiqued their reviewers. While the majority of author-reviews were done by novelists, *Contempo* ran some by such figures as George Gershwin; the medical writer Paul De Kruif; and Jay de Von, editor of *The Left*.

The editors of this little magazine were Abernethy and Anthony Butitta. Both were students at the University of North Carolina, and today both occasionally receive mention in footnotes to literary history.³ Abernethy and Butitta remained in charge of *Contempo* until late 1932, when a series of quarrels prompted Butitta to leave Chapel Hill andreative the journal. After Butitta’s departure, West took over.*
Hill for Durham, North Carolina. Believing the magazine to be his literary property, Buttitta attempted to take Contempo with him. The fracas, and the consequent financial troubles for both Buttitta and Abernethy, speeded both Contemos to their ends by early 1934.

Although short lived, Contempo wielded considerable power in the literary world in which West was just gaining a plane. When Abernethy showed an interest in West's work, West was gratified, and he felt that Contempo could help propel his career. His first novel, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, published by Moss & Kamin's Contact Editions in 1931, was not widely distributed and attracted only two reviews. Disappointed but undaunted, West began composing Miss Lonelyhearts that same year, after reading the lovelorn column of a New Jersey newspaper. He made very little progress on the manuscript at first, but began to circulate portions of it for commentary in early 1932. In January, he sent Abernethy an early version of chapter 8, "Miss Lonelyhearts in the Dismal Swamp." Upon reading the episode, Abernethy immediately recognized West's talent and later published the chapter, in a much different form, in the 5 July 1932 issue of Contempo.

Early letters between the two men show how West cultivated the editor by praising his magazine. On 23 February, West told Abernethy, "I'm very glad you liked the stuff I sent you. So far, I've only half finished Miss Lonelyhearts. I'll send you a copy of the MSS when it's done. . . . I became a friend of CONTEMPO when you printed practically the only review Balso got. For some reason or other . . . the newspapers refused to mention it."34

The two men exchanged a series of letters that spring, and West invited Abernethy to New York to stay for free at his family-owned hotel, the Sutton. West managed the hotel, which became famous among writers of the thirties as a place to hide from creditors, spouses, or editors asking for overdue manuscripts. At one time or another, Dashiell Hammett, Erskine Caldwell, Edmund Wilson, and James T. Farrell all roomed there for free, courtesy of West. Although West had some close friendships, he was characteristically reticent and not apt to reveal much of his personal history to others. As Jay Martin has shown, West tended to create fantasy self-images that glamorized himself in the eyes of others. The following letter to Abernethy, along with others like it, shows an unusually candid, self-effacing West:

26 April [1932]

Dear Abernethy—

Please pardon the delay.

I would like very much to visit Chapel Hill—I've never been south of Washington, Penn. — but I don't believe I can. I run hotel and business is lousy . . . . You wanted to know something about me: I'm 28 yrs. old and went to Brown. I got through Fall, went to Paris for a year in 25 and wrote Balso Snell the but didn't get a publisher until '31. When I came back from Paris I tried to get some "congenial" work, but wound up managing hotel. I'm a Sunday writer and work slowly, but I expect to finish Miss Lonelyhearts in August. The next number of Contact will have two more excerpts5 and I wish you would write me what you think of them.

I don't like Contact much. We had an idea in the beginning but it looks as though it'll drift into the old "regionalism." Yo know the Blue Denim stuff they print in Pagany and Hound an Horn. No. 1 Lem Harrington at Cross Purposes: Sally was sweating like a horse at her weeding and Lem had an erection behind the hydrangea bushes. No. 2. The Paint Horse: The Indian cam across the meadow leading a restive horse and old Mrs. Purd remembered her youth in the circus with no little regret. No. 3. The White Church: The old country church looked like a prim little girl in a starched white dress as Jesty drove by in the Ford on her way to the movies . . . . All this followed by a couple of essay entitled TOWARDS A NEW EPISTOMOLOGICAL DIALECTIC and St. Thomas vs. Irving Babbit. But I suppose anything is better than Jolas and his Anamys and Psychographs or Putnam and his An International Notebook for the Arts. We're seriously thinking of going Communist in the 3rd no. But I suppose even then we won't find anything to print except lyric stuff about yellow cornfields winding up with "And Ho for the World Revolution."

West obviously felt comfortable with Abernethy; his openness is evident in the tone of abject resignation in calling himself a "Sunday writer." West had no hesitation, either, about telling Abernethy his true opinion of Contact, which he evidently had much less faith in than has generally been believed. This letter suggests that West became disillusioned with the periodical as soon as the first issue appeared. Early on, West and Williams had envisioned Contact as a showcase for the native power of the American tradition; their purpose was to "cut a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass" (qtd. in Martin 137). However, by the second issue, in May 1932, West was completely discouraged. He complained to Abernethy that the contributions weren't anything but "lyric crap,"
hardly in the “American grain” that Williams championed (5 May 1932). Contact folded with its third issue.

West’s doubts about Contact probably led him to see Contempo, with its balance of belletristic writing and social criticism, as a thriving magazine in the vanguard of literary and political theory. West and Williams had been hampered from the start by difficulty in getting quality contributions, unlike Contempo, which seemed to get them with ease. Seeing an important outlet for his writing, West became even more open with the Abernethys and wrote to them often of his work.

Part of West’s creative process required him to talk out his ideas with others. In early 1932, West had been blocked on Miss Lonelyhearts. That spring, after Abernethy visited him, West had an enormous burst of creative energy, and by 6 June, he was able to report that he had “started to work hard on MISS LONELYHEARTS” and that he was “making a deal of progress”: “I’ll send a complete mss to Chapel Hill I expect some time in August,” he said—which although he would not actually finish the novel until December.

West worked steadily on Miss Lonelyhearts that summer. Unable to determine West’s whereabouts during those months, Jay Martin concluded that West stayed in the city and that his hotel duties prevented him from writing (172). But two July letters from West to the Abernethys (3 and 6 July 1932) show that West fled the city for Erwina, Pennsylvania, in order to be near the novelists Josephine Herbst and John Herrmann, her husband. During this time, West wrote every day in a rented room at the Warford House in nearby Frenchtown, New Jersey. West wrote the Abernethys several sardonic accounts of hunting and fishing in Erwina. In the 6 July letter, he described a fishing trip that “resulted in about five trout and five hundred black fly bites”: “After wading about fifteen miles of an ice cold swollen river in four days of furious fun, I returned home with both eyes closed and my neck so swollen that I couldn’t button my collar.”

But just as West was going strong on Miss Lonelyhearts, his father died of a heart attack, leaving the family business in shambles. West wrote Abernethy that he was “at a dog’s end. All kinds of trouble. My father dropped dead in the street. My mother is very sick. I’m sick in the heart and head myself” ([after 5 July 1932]).

Then it seemed there was a bright spot. In the 5 July 1932 issue of Contempo, Abernethy published “Miss Lonelyhearts in the Dismal Swamp.” This version of the chapter differs considerably from its final form in the novel. In the book version, the chapter describes the three-day depression that the columnist Miss Lonelyhearts suffers after seducing Fay Doyle, a correspondent who writes him about her crippled husband. Disconsolate, the columnist ponders his inability to be a latter-day saviour or father confessor to his supplicants, the who write him under names such as “Desperate” and “Sick-of-it.” To his girlfriend, Betty, he explains the cause of his angst: the let are “profundely humble plea for moral and spiritual advice,” a for the first time in his life, the columnist is forced to examine values by which he lives. The editor and antagonist, Shrike, to “burst[s] into the room” and delivers an ironic “sermon” to his Lonelyhearts; Shrike sardonically destroys every affirmative or insistent impulse that the columnist conveys in his remarks to Betty. Chapter 17 ends with Shrike dictating a mock letter from Miss Lon

He sermon by Shrike appears as an interior monologue in the mi of Miss Lonelyhearts, who sits in the room “walled at both ends holding “a Bible in one hand and a philosophy book in the other;” the columnist’s lap are “travel, art, seed and gun catalogues.” Initially, West made his protagonist a character divided against himself pulled apart by the opposing elements of his consciousness—cynicism versus romantic fantasy.

There is no complete record of what responses the episode received from Contempo’s readers, but West thought it a failure. Son time after 5 July, when the issue appeared, West wrote Abernethy that his friend Julian Shapiro (the novelist John Sanford) thought the piece was “bad,” and West asked Abernethy why “everyone else” made the same reaction. West must have been stung by this criticism, especially since it came during a crucial point in his artistic development. West began to look to Abernethy for additional moral support, and when Abernethy became too busy with his editorial duties to prove the support, West was annoyed. In three separate letters, of 8, 11 and 12 August, West querulously asked Abernethy why “the mail is a going one way.” Swamped by the success of Contempo, the Abernethys apparently couldn’t manage the time to reply, and West continued to be frustrated by his inability to complete Miss Lonelyhearts.

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Having obtained a leave of absence from the Sutton during October and November 1932, West returned to Warford House for another stint on Miss Lonelyhearts. This time, he managed to complete the novel; by the middle of December, he happily reported to Williar
Carlos Williams, "Miss L. is finished, and being typed" (qtd. in Martin 174).

Because of the failure of Balso Snell, West was anxious about securing a publisher who would give Miss Lonelyhearts the attention it deserved. West's letters to Abernethy show that the novelist felt the book had commercial potential. These letters also show that Abernethy, who had many contacts in New York publishing circles, informally represented West and contacted Harcourt, Brace, Smith and Haas, Knopf, and Covici-Friede. Since all these houses were for the most part financially stable, respectable, and progressive-minded, they were desirable publishers for Miss Lonelyhearts. Yet, from the start, West had set his sights on Horace Liveright, Inc.—a firm that had brought out much experimental writing, fought many censorship battles, and published books by many big names in American letters, among them Dreiser, Pound, Eliot, and Faulkner. For all his keen instincts as a publisher, however, Liveright could never hold on to money. For some time, he had been using company funds to speculate in the stock market, and his losses had eroded the firm's financial base (see Dardis). In early January 1933, Abernethy told West about Liveright's troubles, but West evidently was willing to ignore these troubles in hopes that the aggressive firm would give Miss Lonelyhearts the visibility it needed. Thus was set in motion the series of unusual events that stalled out West's career. West's letters to Abernethy tell for the first time the full story of what was, in effect, the unintended "suppression" of Miss Lonelyhearts.

When West informed Abernethy on 28 January 1933 that he had signed a contract with Liveright, Abernethy responded enthusiastically and pledged the resources of Contempo to push Miss Lonelyhearts; only later would he try to temper some of West's excitement with caution about putting too much stock in Liveright's commitment to the novel:

[Between 28 January and 17 February 1933]

Dear Pep:7 I've just called up Mina to tell her the exciting news . . . and she is as happy as I am. Congratulations . . . congratulations. I'm writing Smith8 now to see what I can learn from that end. I hope to hell they push it. I'll do all I can. I'd like very very much to run some parts of it in Contempo. Your xmas poem9 looks good in galleys . . . so don't be shocked for it is appearing Wednesday. If you get a note from Donald Freide10 about the book . . . he told me that he was asking you to see it. I didn't know that Liveright was still holding on . . . let me know all about every thing . . . and if you have had copies made of the

Abernethy asked again, "What can we do to push Miss Llyhts"? His willingness to publicize the book led to another idea. West arrange for Contempo to devote a whole issue to Miss Lonelyhearts—a critic symposium to coincide with the book's publication. West replied on 17 February that, although Liveright had not yet set a publication date, he nonetheless expected the Abernethys "to do for me what yo did for Dahlberg's Flushing. A lot of reviews to make up for the ba press I expect to get."11 In this fashion, plans were laid to enlist the help of Edmund Wilson, Erskine Caldwell, Dashiel Hammett, among others in writing about Miss Lonelyhearts and West's place in America literature. A letter of 24 March shows the great expectations that West had for his novel and reveals the extent to which he planned to use Contempo as a chorus of praise for Miss Lonelyhearts:

March 24. [1933]

Dear Minna and Ab,

I don't know whether you owe me a letter or not. You probably do, but then I'm known for my goodnature—a goodnatured sloth is the way my friends usually put it.

However, I expect you folks to get behind the event of the century and Shove. You'll have a copy of Miss L. in a few days and it is an event. Edmund Wilson said it was the best book he had read in three yrs (please don't quote—it was verbal) and wrote: "blurb ending " . . . a miniature comic epic." Erskine Caldwell said practically the same thing: he too wrote a rave blurb.

I call it THE CANDIDE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, and myself THE SAGE AND WIT OF EAST 56TH ST.

Now, I think your mag. very important because the publishers (as you love me don't mention this complaint to anyone) intend to advertise the book on a very low level, not as serious literature but as a smutty expose of the columnist racket.12 So, by doing for me what you did for Dahlberg, you can aid American letters greatly. I mean several reviews and some general noise. I can get revise for you from almost any of the following Bob Brown, W. C. Williams, S. J. Perelman, John Herrmann, Josephine Herbst, Angel Flores, N. West, possibly Dashiell Hammett.

Also in the N. West Number a half or perhaps full page add, for which I will pay myself by either cash, in kind potatoes or best
of all a big due bill of the Sutton Hotel which you can either sell or use yourself.

The book will be out by the 10 of April so keep the space open as you love me. Let me hear from you at once.

Pep

As a postscript, West added, “Just to butter you up—your last number was very swell.” Abernethy responded quickly:

[Between 24 March and 2 April 1933]

Dear Pepman: It’s very late. We’re very tired and sleepy and have had a sorry relapse of cold weather. So just the dirt about that Miz Lonelyhearts issue . . . The best way to work such things is to have an author-review of the thing in one issue . . . Then, if somebody dislikes the book, (this, of course, is following the Dahlberg procedure) we run that anti-criticism in the following issue, which is due off the 25 of April. Along with the anti-criticalism, we run pro-reviews by the following: Bob Brown, S. J. Perelman, and your possibly Dashiell Hammet. . . . or better, if Wilson would do something on it. Like a symposium . . . We almost have to wait and see what kind of press the book gets. I think in fact we ought to move the order one issue up. You authoreview the bk for the April 25 issue, and the others come the May 15 issue. In this way, you can answer some of the critics, and it makes good stuff if there’s anything to answer . . .

If, pray heaven, some of the guys say really sinking (god my feminine) things about the book, that is, if pray heaven, from the kind of publicity Liv. is giving it, they don’t neglect it, it might even do to have more people write shorter reviews of the thing. But I don’t like little things that sound like blurb paragraphs. It’d be very impressive to have the scholarly Flores, the proletaritch Herrman, and Brown and Perelman, I think. You know, (personally) Wms. [William Carlos Williams] can’t be trusted (burn this up) on a review. We’ve had a few from the master (honest) which were so incoherent one finally caught Mencken’s Americana.

yrs,
mintab

The Miss Lonelyhearts issue did not appear until 5 July 1933, owing to the financial and editorial problems that occurred that spring with Butitta’s rival Contempo, but West pressed on with his plans.

Miss Lonelyhearts was published by Liveright on 8 April 1933. Martin has shown, the reviews were generally favorable, most of t praising West for the vividness of the book’s imagery and respons admiringly to its Dostoevskian overtones (191-92). Evidently, how there was at least one early negative review, by William Soskind in New York Evening Post. This review struck West as a sign that the w would be a critical failure, and it intensified his self-doubts:

April 11, [1933]

Dear Minnabs—

It looks now as though the only yes-saying to the damn bo can hope for is through youse. Did you see Soskind in the P. he says I write with my head in a sewer. He thinks the only Dostoevsky ever wrote is Crime and Punishment.

You didn’t write me whether you had read the book and w you thought. Please do.

I am working on an author-review—I will mail it to you few days.

Angel Flores is writing a review, so is Perelman, and I’ll n them because it looks as though your sheet will have to go d the ages as the only paper that said anything decent about Candide of our era. So there.

I think I’ll ask Mike Gold to do the proletarian angle. perhaps you’ll write to him, and I’ll call him up and ask i to do it. He didn’t like the book, but he wrote me an interest letter about it.

I really need your help.

Yours,
Pep

With these sorts of doubts about the promise of his career, V relied on Abernethy to help him as much as he could. West’s aut review, “Some Notes on Miss L” (reprinted in Wisker 157-58), is slated to appear in the 25 April issue, but was delayed until the Miss Lonelyhearts special issue of 5 July 1933. West begins the piece disclaiming his ability to judge his own work, but then goes on describe the book as “a portrait of a priest in our time.” West a speaks of the minimalist style of the novel, comparing it to the fo of nascent visual arts, such as filmmaking and cartooning.

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While waiting for reviews of Miss Lonelyhearts to appear, Aberne became worried about Liveright. His 29 April 1933 letter to W
turned out to be prescient. He implored West, "listen Pep, IF LIVERIGHT OWES YOU ANY MONEY GET IT WHILE THE GETTING IS POSSIBLE...I HAVE REAL INFORMATION THAT IT IS JUST GOING TO BE DAYS UNTIL THEY CLOSE THE DOORS...SEVERAL OF THEIR AUTHORS KNOW ABOUT IT ALREADY AND HAVE GOTTEN WHAT IS COMING TO THEM. Don't let anybody at liverights know that I told you about their going broke. Of course something might happen and they'll be able to publish your next book."

As matters turned out, the blow had already fallen, and Miss Lonelyhearts had been directly in its path. Liveright's treasurer, Arthur D. Pell, had by then gained financial control of the company and had been taking desperate measures to clear away debt; he had fired many of the staff and instituted bankruptcy proceedings to stave off creditors. This strategy worked for a while, but Liveright owed money to too many people, among them the printers of Miss Lonelyhearts. What happened next has heretofore never been completely clear. Evidently, the printers seized what remained of the current print run of the novel and refused to release it until they were paid. Thus, while demand for the book increased because of the favorable reviews, no copies were available. Martin's version of the events depicts a total loss for West. He stated that the printers seized "2,000 copies of the first edition [i.e., printing] of 2,200" and that when all royalties from this and the second edition (by Harcourt, Brace) had been tallied, West apparently had earned nothing (193-95). According to West, however, in its first printing, the novel sold two thousand copies in less than ten days in Manhattan alone, netting West four hundred dollars in royalties, which he couldn't collect.

[Between 29 April and 26 May 1933]

Dear Minnab—

By now I suppose you've heard about the deal I got from Liveright.

Despite the fact that they are bankrupt, that they have no books to sell, and that I never received a cent from them and I am willing to give up the $400 in royalties that they owe me, they refuse to give me back the copyright to the book. I've been running from lawyer to lawyer, but my contract has no bankruptcy clause and there is nothing that I can do about it.

The book surprised everyone including me—it got swell reviews and even more it started to sell very well, making Macy's bestseller list and selling 2000 copies in less than 10 days right in Manhattan without salesmen or promotion of any kind. Liveright has not been functioning as a publishing house for the past weeks and the book had to make its way by itself.

Everybody, Knopf, Harrison Smith, etc. says that with no exploitation it might have sold 15,000 copies. I've been hearing over the thing as you can imagine, and I'm still sick.

Abernethy was evidently so angered over these additional blows the fates had dealt to West's career that he suggested desperate sures by which West could get control of his book:

[After 29 April 1

Could you approach the printer, maybe under another publisher's contract, to release those copies? He [the printer] tells me that he'll only get part of his money back from the remair Liv and the whole sum might be an inducement...of course that's pirating, I suppose, but ask a lawyer. If all that can happen is Liv will sue you—let them sue...

You know I really think the risk is worth taking. Even means a prison term. If there isn't a single publisher willing to do it, why not on your own? It'd require some money of course. I'll tell you what—if you decide there's something doing that, we'll gladly come up and help in distribution or gratis. Manual labor and the getting of free publicity...

What's the penalty for breaking a contract (with Liveright)? Just now we're remembering our talks about advertising. Why the back end of a Ford an a lotta balloons...GIDDY! book must not die, Pep...and think of all the shit-ton wr we'd vindicate by saving that book...

Don't know when we're coming up except immediately if L. needs us...]

No release came until two weeks later. On 5 June, Harcourt, B secured the plates of the book, and a second edition soon appeared under its imprint.

West's anxieties about the reception of Miss Lonelyhearts had creased with the Liveright debacle. Now more than ever he cou on Contempo to return the book to the public eye, but the Aberne were fighting a copyright battle with Butitta and could not get issues to press. West apparently did not know the extent of problems because he again fired off a terse note to the Aberne on 2 June 1933, asking angrily why they hadn't written him at the status of the special West number of Contempo. Finally, on 19 J West cabled them: "IS THERE TO BE A LONELY HEARTS NUMI
QUESTION MARK AND WHEN STOP WIRE COLLECT." West then received word from Minna that an issue was due that week, but that they couldn’t "get up the money to put it out." She told West not to "think we’re being lax about it—we’re straining every which way to get the thing right away, because we know its important to get started at about the same time Harcourt does." She added that they had a "swell issue lined up for the Lonelyhearts number" and asked, "Do you know whether Harcourt is going to advertise the book? It'll need some (I don’t mean here) to start up again...Please write what kind of scheme for the Resurrection is planned."

Harcourt was not willing to lay out much advertising money, and so the only "Resurrection scheme" that West had in the works was the Contempo special issue, which finally appeared on 25 July 1933. It contained essays by Angel Flores, S. J. Perelman, Josephine Herbst, Bob Brown, and William Carlos Williams. Williams focused on the art of West’s use of "American": "West possesses [the] taste...to be able to select from among the teeming vulgarism of our speech the personal and telling vocabulary which he needs to put over his effects." Flores placed the novel in the company of Dostoevsky, Dali, and Giorgio di Chirico. Herbst analyzed West’s theme of distress and discussed the "modern insanity" of the daily newspapers. Perelman claimed in "Nathanael West: A Portrait" that there were really two Wests—an exterior, romantic self, and an inner man who was "very sensitive [and] somewhat savage."

Unfortunately, the lavish praise came too late to boost sales of the Harcourt edition. But Miss Lonelyhearts did get reborn in a different way, one that earned West some much-needed money. Twentieth-Century Pictures paid four thousand dollars for the screen rights to the novel, and, in early July, West moved to Los Angeles to undertake a new career as a screenwriter for Columbia Pictures, the first of his three stints in the Hollywood dream factories. West usually affected a bemused air when he spoke of resorting to hack work, as when he wrote to Bob Brown that, if one’s books didn’t sell, the higher the pay for the screenwriting, the better. Privately, however, he regarded the work as a sellout. His comments about Hollywood to the Abernethys on 27 July make this clear:

This place is not at all what I expected. It isn’t very fantastic, just a desert got up to look like Asbury Park. And so far I’ve bumped into none of the things I expected and was prepared for by reports and plays like Once in a Life Time. The studio I am working [for], Columbia, is a highly organized and very practical business place. Five minutes after I arrived I was given an assignment[,] a picture called BLIND DATE and I have been working nine hours a day since then with a full day on Saturday...There’s no fooling. All the writers sit in cells in a row and the minute a typewriter sounds someone pokes his head in the door to see if you are thinking. Otherwise, it’s like the hotel business.

Later, West reported that he wanted to return East in August, when his contract expired, but he was not finished with his story, "and can’t leave in the middle of a picture if you ever want to come back. There is a producers agreement to that affect, and the writer’s union acknowledges the obligation." He asked the Abernethys at Contempo and the "belles-lettres business," clearly wistful, and still console over the loss of Miss Lonelyhearts: "How about yours and your journal. Are things a little better. Did you ever get any letters on your West Number—I mean complaints, jeers, etc. Let know" ([After 27 July 1933]).

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Apparently no jeers, complaints, or further critical praise for Miss Lonelyhearts was to follow anytime soon after the special West num

of Contempo that summer. West went on to write two more novels: A Cool Million (1934) and The Day of the Locust (1939). But, with the movie sale of the former book, by the time of his premature death in 1940, West was no closer than he had been in 1914 to earning a living by his pen. Minna and Minna Abernethy were more fortunate; they turned their Chapel Hill bookstore, the Intim Bookshop, into a money-maker and later moved to New York, where Abernethy became a successful stockbroker.

West’s life was a series of professional disappointments. Success eluded him in ironic ways, as the debacle of Miss Lonelyhearts made clear. Upon the publication of The Day of the Locust and its embarrassingly poor promotion by Random House, West complained bitterly that few of the people who published his work had ever taken him seriously. That few must have included the Abernethys. Driven by genuine interest, the Abernethys, through Contempo, undertook painting efforts to promote "the Candidate of the Twentieth Century" a to find for West the audience he deserved.14

NOTES

1. Although Martin apparently interviewed Abernethy for his biography (he is acknowledged in the preface), Martin evidently did not see these letters. A letter from Martin...
by The Estate of Nathanael West. Quotations from letters by Nathanael West print permission of Harold Ober Associates.

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The Borg Writes History

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THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE. V
UME I: 1590–1820. Edited by Sacvan Bercovitch. Cambridge, UK,

E Pluribus Unum. That is the central theme and question of this
of a projected eight volumes. Can one collective nation come fi
many individuals? What are the costs—political, social, and artist
of surrendering individual values to group interests? What are
consequences of allowing uncontrolled individual license or lib
to gain ascendency against the good and safety of the commu
Will we favor the glorious anarchy of Natural Liberty or restra
harmonious Civil Liberty? That was the prime issue of the Cons
ional Convention of 1787 and a central concern from the beginn
encounter of Europe with America, and it is reflected everywh
in our writing. With varying degrees of commitment, all five of
writers featured in this volume would agree that the issue is on
great delicacy, subtlety, and complexity for nation framers and
historians.

Persistent and recurrent themes or attitudes run through the b
deeply influencing its character. First, individualism is bad; group
is much preferred, both in art and in life. Second, America is
place or a polity or a culture; it is “constructed,” itself a work
literature. Be it Columbus’s first voyage or the Salem witchcraft tr
or the American Revolution, events are as much texts as books, a
they are subject to the same modes of criticism. Everything is tu
everything is literature. Third, print culture, the tool of greedy, in
idualistic Europeans, is used to dominate and silence oral cultu
which is generalized to mean the voice of silence or of disenfr
ched groups: Indians, African slaves, the young, the poor, wom
One frequently picks up the sense that the five writers morally ap
prove of literature and would be more comfortable talking ab
something else, probably politics. Fourth, for the most part, gro
thought, voiced and unvoiced, in its most mundane forms—lete
laws, handbills, advertisements, proclamations, religious and poli