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Pictorial Frames and Textual Thresholds.

Bitextuality in Rebecca West and David Low's *The Modern Rake's Progress*

Introduction

Since its first publication in 1735, Hogarth's *Rake's Progress* has been extensively imitated in a wide range of media, from the prints, copies and 'interpretations' of his moral series in the nineteenth century, when popular culture, as well as Augustus Sala's biography, made of Hogarth a cultural icon whose work was considered morally improving and therefore worth circulating (see for example William Powell Frith's *Road to Ruin*, 1878-82), to David Hockney's twentieth-century homage, in which the idea of the rake is used to illustrate the artist's progress in the urban world of New York in the 1960s[1].

However, a quarter of a century before Hockney's series was published, another interesting rereading of Hogarth's work appeared on the British scene: *The Modern Rake's Progress* (1934), text by Rebecca West and illustrations by the caricaturist and cartoonist David Low. In this almost unique example of cooperation between a writer and an illustrator, one of the landmarks of the English visual tradition is both re-pictured and re-written, thus intensifying the role of the 'verbal' element already present in the original series in the form of verses at the bottom of each plate, emblems and other 'readable'

[1] Hockney was later invited to design the sets at Glyndebourne for Stravinsky's opera, *The Rakes' Progress*, with libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman. For further reading see D. Bindman, 1997, *Hogart and His Times: Serious Comedy*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

signs.[2] In West and Low's version, conversely, the text accompanying the plates is in prose, and it was born according to Low's explicit will, as related in his autobiography: "To my delight Rebecca West was persuaded to write a beautifully satiric commentary to go with it" (Low 1956: 289). The book was then originally published with illustrations and text, images and words produced out of a common framework and cooperating to shape reader's perception. Despite Low's definition of West's contribution as a 'commentary', in fact, an attentive analysis of The *Modern Rake* enables to consider this book a composite 'imagetext' (Mitchell 1994), in which pictures and words are 'mutual significant others', co producers of meaning "in dialogue with each other, with the larger cultural conversation in which they are embedded, and with the reader" (Kooistra: 4). In addition, and that's the main focus of this paper, *The Modern Rake* also holds an interesting dialogue with other almost contemporary works by Rebecca West, thus broadening the range of intertextuality set in motion by her 'partnership' with Low and Hogarth.

In order to understand the origin of such peculiar confrontation between 'visual' and 'verbal' and try to highlight both the correspondences and dissonances in the production of meaning, a first step could be a closer look at the 'histories' of the writers involved and at the way their joint forces combined to produce specific images and stories.

Low and 'Lynx'

West and Low's acquaintance matured in a common environment of social contacts. Since his very first years in London, Low had made friendship with H. G. Wells, one of his childhood 'heroes'[3], but also Rebecca West's lover for more than a decade and the

[2] More lengthy texts began appearing as 'textual explanations' a few weeks after *The Rake*'s publication, when Bakewell's, the printer who produced a second, smaller set of prints prepared for people who could not afford the original set, published a double-column broadside in August, presumably with Hogarth's approval: *An Explanation of the Eight Prints of the Rake's Progress.* In addition, various versified accounts accompanied piracies of the series: see for example the pamphlet titled *The Rake's Progress; or, the Human of Drury-Lane. A Poem. In Eight Canto's in Hudibrastick Verse*….(London, printed for Chettwood's, 1735); *The Rakes' Progress: or, the Humours of St. James* (publisher unknown), in six Hudibrastick Cantos. Cfr. Ronald Paulson, 1991-93, *Hogarth*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press.

[3] Their friendship led to artistic collaboration when in June 1929 the writer asked Low to illustrate one "silly topical novel about a dictator in London and what happened" (letter dated 25 June 1929). The book, a

father to her son Moreover, both West and Low had accepted the court of Lord Beaverbrook, the English press baron: the former in New York, in 1923, for a brief and disappointing affair later fictionalised in her novel *Sunflower* (written mostly between 1925 and 1927, but published posthumously, in 1986); the latter in London, four years later, when he moved from the *Star* to *The Evening Standard*, after reiterated offers from Beaverbrook.

Rebecca West and David Low made their first, joint public appearance in a sketch by the caricaturist himself published on *The Evening Standard* on 18 February 1928, “Adam and Eves – New Version, in Modern Dress”, in which the writer is depicted as the new Eve together with Clemence Dane, Ellen Wilkinson, Sheila Kaye-Smith, and Sybil Thorndike. ‘Are women superior to men in the realm of controversy and wit?’ seems to ask Low himself, in the role of Adam. If the question was of course ironic, his esteem for Rebecca was real and led to a creative collaboration that gave its first brilliant fruit on the soil of a series of portrait caricatures appeared in the Twenties. The editor of the *New Statesmen*, Clifford Sharp, bought the rights from Low for the first publication of a part of them but in the end published twenty, first as inserts to the *New Statesmen*, and then singly or in a folio (Seymour-Ure: 36). Later, the publisher Jonathan Cape bought the book rights and added sixteen drawings not previously published, making thirty-six in all, and then commissioned profiles from Rebecca West to accompany them. The so-composed volume appeared in the autumn of 1928 as *Lions and Lambs*, *by Low with interpretations by ‘Lynx’*, a title in which West’s pen name makes her affiliation with Low suggestively reminiscent of that between ‘Boz’ (Charles Dickens) and ‘Phiz’ (Hablot Knight Browne) almost a century earlier.

The book was a great success, with reviewers trying to guess Lynx’s identity, and that induced West to accept a later proposal by Low for a work first serialised in *Nash*’s, and then published as a book under the title *The Modern Rake’s Progress*, *Words by Rebecca West, Paintings by David Low* (1934).

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political satire on the totalitarian tendencies of the time, came out in 1930 under the title *The Autocracy of Mr. Parham*.

The cartoonist's initial plans, as he relates in his autography, consisted in a 'pageant of London life'[4] with the Prince of Wales as the protagonist:

> In the spring of 1925 I had spent a family holiday at Biarritz. The Price of Wales was there, a beautiful piece of character in his golf-suit, getting persistently in my line of vision, set up invitingly as a model for me. Why not use me as a peg upon which to hang a pageant of London life of the time, in all its variety, with all its personalities and characters? I planned it there and then, walking under the trees. But it was not until 1933 that I got to work on a series of twelve colour plates. Unfortunately, when it came to the point, inspiration would have been cramped and publication impossible had the figures, especially the central figure, been too readily identifiable; so I had to tone down the likeness and scramble the situations. As it turned out I disguised it so well that it became almost completely unrecognisable and changed into something else, which wasn't the intention at all. Served me right. I had to abandon the original conception and pull the whole thing together again on somewhat different lines, giving it a backbone of Hogarthian morality and re-making the central character (who by now had nothing to do with the Prince) into someone coming into wealth and leading a life of fashion. Finally I called the series *The New Rake's Progress* (Low 1956: 289).

Low's account of the origin and development of his new work is echoed in the preface to the book, "Note by Low about the pictures", in which the author is eager to remark that any reference to real facts and people is unintentional. Ironically, the closure address is to his female audience, then as now, evidently, keenly interested in gossip on the Royals: "No, ladies. The Rake and his friends are most emphatically not intended to be the persons you think they are".

Low, as he goes on confessing in his diary, had great difficulties in working on the drawings, part for the complexity of their composition, but mainly since they are done in colour and, apart from a few individual works (book jackets or magazine covers), Low was exclusively a black-and-white artist (Seymour-Ure: 77). Despite the pain and difficulties faced in completing the work, he deeply enjoyed it and became so affectionate to the drawings that he later refused an offer by an American millionaire to buy them: in a way, they stood as a memory of the pre-war London, and, he hoped, they could find a more adequate home in a museum in the city itself (Low to Rosenwald, 11 April 1941).[5]

[4] Low had previously succeeded in persuading his editor to revive Phil May's idea of an illustrated book on London life (*The Parson and the Painter*, 1890), and, together with F. W. Thomas, a gifted humorous writer already on the Star, they filled a page each Monday As "Low and I". The series ran for years and continued with a new partner, after being also widely imitated and anthologised as *Low and I* (1923) and *The Low and I Holiday Book* (1925).

[5] The pictures have been exhibited quite often but remain in private hands.

As to Rebecca West, even if the reviews seem almost uniformly generous in retrospect, for some reason she was not satisfied and it is clear from much later correspondence that the sales[6] of the handsomely produced but not expensive book were disappointing to her (Rebecca West to Low, 28 December 1934).

Above and beyond its editorial fortunes and disappointments, *The Modern Rake's Progress* represents indeed a unique in both West's and Low's creative output, a perfect, though atypical, example of "bitextuality" (Kooistra), that is a book in which two looks and two hands cooperate in the creation of two different yet strictly interrelated texts, one visual and one verbal, asking the reader/viewer a complex and interactive process of reading and interpretation.

Bitextual thresholds

At a first glance, the relationship set in motion by *The Modern Rake* between text and images seems to assign the former a weaker position. The traditional illustrated book was born as an artist's response to the work of a contemporary writer, in which images are usually ancillary to texts, struggling to acquire a stronger identity and independent aesthetical status. Usually, the illustrator received a manuscript, either in its complete form or in draft, from the publisher or the author himself, and then he produced the illustrations to be added to the editorial product[7]. That happened, for example, to Low himself, when he was asked by H. G. Wells or by Peter Fleming[8] to provide images for their novels. Here, on the contrary, it's West's contribution that comes chronologically after, the text being conceived as a commentary to some previously produced images, that are thus the real pre-text. Low provided West with some sketches of the plates as a guide for her writing, along with a few written notes, consisting mostly of keys to the characters' identities (Seymour-Ure: 77-8).

However, the order itself in which text and images are positioned in the book is extremely significant since it endorses a different perspective: if we open the book, what we first meet are not Low's illustrations, followed by West's words, as it would be expected in the creative text-commentary hierarchy, but first the text, and then the plate,

[6] Low took three-quarters of the royalties and West one-quarter.
[7] Exceptions to this tradition are the Renaissance emblem books.
[8] Peter Fleming, *The Flying Visit*, London., Jonathan Cape, 1940.

and the same pattern is repeated for the second, the third and all the twelve plates. West's text is then the first crucial mediator between the plates and the reader, and what seemed to be a subsidiary role of commentary to the images is instead turned into the powerful function of first criticising them.

The issue of *The Modern Rake*'s double authorship goes then through the threshold of the "paratext", a term coined by Gérard Genette (*Seuils* 1981) to designate all those auxiliary elements that, strictly speaking, are not part of the text but nonetheless have an important role in introducing the text to the reader: titles, prefaces, author's name, epigraphs ("peritext"), but also interviews, letters, journals in which the author gives further hints about the text itself ("epitext"). On the one hand, some elements of the paratext seem to confirm Low's authorial supremacy: his account of the birth of the text in the autobiography and then his "note of the author" at the beginning of the book. On the other hand, the title(s), a crucial threshold to the book, supports the claim for a real double authorship: the general title and subtitle (*The Modern Rake's Progress. Words by Rebecca West, Paintings by David Low*), in which Low and West are put on the same level - West coming first for reason of gender politeness - but more intriguingly the single titles of the chapters. Every plate, in fact, bears its own title, and so does every chapter written by West, the same title repeated both before the text and before the plate that recount the same step in the rake's progress. Two textual productions under the same title, then, two different ways of telling the same story, two different perspectives on it, both necessary and complementary to the construction of the whole. Beyond any formal definition of West's contribution, her textual production does share with Low's illustrations an equal discursive status in the production of meaning, thus drawing attention more to the ways this partnership works than to sterile hierarchies and priorities.

Even after moving to this further stage of analysis, however, the complex and multi-layered structure of *The Modern Rake's Progress* presents a new and challenging set of questions. If Lorraine Kooistra's analysis of the relationship between text and image in English illustrated books of the Nineties may provide with some useful critical tools, the problem with our text is double: firstly, the dialogue is between a visual/creative set of images and a verbal/critique textbook and not the other way round; secondly, the participants in the dialogue itself are three, and not two, being the book a

declared – the paratext, again – reworking of Hogarth's series. This intricate tangle of visual and verbal intertextuality would then require multiple levels of analysis, taking into account both Hogarth and Low's mutual dialogue, and West and Hogarth's, as well as West and Low's.

A comparison between Low and Hogarth's visual treatment of the rake's theme is beyond the scope of my investigation; the present paper will then focus on the analysis of West's treatment of the hogarthian theme, keeping as starting point her partnership with David Low.

Answering texts

Even in terms of a one-to-one authorial relationship, the discursive dialogue established by Low and West within the frame of the over one hundred pages of *The Modern Rake's Progress* rejects rigid categorizations. From a general viewpoint, their cooperation could be labelled under the category of 'answering',

> an approach which aims to produce a harmonious collaboration in which pictures and words maintain their independence within a cooperative relationship. Images and text do not launch their own independent discourses, but try to produce a single harmonious composition by adding their individual voice in a kind of counterpoint to the concert of the page, type, binding and picture (Kooistra: 20).

The project to which both the caricaturist and the writer dedicate their creative energies is the hogarthian tale of George's life, from the moment in which he inherits a fortune and suddenly finds himself in the turmoil of the fashionable London society of the 1930s, till his fall due to risky financial speculations and wrong investments. Around this pivotal figure, a lively and easily recognisable assemblage of politicians, actors, sportsmen and writers gather along the twelve chapters of the series, blinking, grimacing and performing out of Low's expert hand as well as West's malicious and sharp 'commentary'. Though never meeting to outline precise guidelines for the project, but simply relying on Low's brief remarks and West's insight, the authors' artistic synchronization is unmistakable: most chapters do really show a shared view on George's fate, thus constructing a real 'twice-told story' on the vices of modern capitalism.

The two authorial voices fully merge towards the end of the story, and precisely in chapter ten, when they enter the narrative frame to comment on what's happening to

George, staging an enjoyable role-play which definitively sanctions their shared authorship:

> It is a time for mourning, even for you, stern moralist, who hoped to have some fun out of George's end. You looked forward to bidding the young rake take notice and see how the spendthrift is beggared by his folly. Well, you had better do nothing of the sort. The trouble is that *neither Low nor I* can tell a lie, though Heaven knows we tried our best on this occasion. The operators on the Welbeck and Hampstead exchanges could tell how often they *have heard us cry to each other*, 'What, must we tell them? But then morality is left high and dry without a practical sanction to its name!' 'Sister, the truth's the truth and we must tell it!' (103, italics are mine)

The tone is light and the detachment from any form of rigid moralizing towards the reader is clearly asserted, also by means of a very theatrical play with the narrative voices, in the quoted passage embodied by a brother/sister pair[9]. However, the authorial tenor gets more austere in the last two chapters, when George's curse is about to lead him at the end of his tether, in a long, hopeless line of penniless and hungry men waiting for charity assistance. The shift is evident since the very beginning of the eleventh chapter, based for once on a contrasting interplay between the visual and the verbal account of the rake's life: on the one hand Low's portrayal of George as he is thrown out of the luxurious hotel Magnificent; on the other West's leap into a future of urban ruins, when people coming to London from 'the next civilisation', or from 'another star' (113), do contemplate the remnants of the hotel itself under the guide of a professor of archaeology. Those people, add West, would not for a minute imagine the painful life of poor George, therefore invited, after a few pages, to explain to the 'grey army of common men' who have lost their fortunes

> that they misconceive their lot, that they are not mere castaways, suffering by accident, in want simply because no one has taken thought to make provision for them. Tell them that there is a plan, which like everything else in this best of all possible worlds, is all for the best. Explain to them that that they are the foundation stones on which civilization is built and that even if the superstructure weights heavy it is so fair that they should think it a privilege to bear the weight. You know all about the superstructure, George. Tell them how very fair it is.

[9] Generally speaking, we could say that Low's satire on the whole is lighter than Hogarth's, also because of the use of colours, which give the plates a brighter and livelier tone very far from Hogarth's gloomy and dramatic black and white.

The perspective is thus broadened to include not only George's life, but also the life of all those people that suffered the Great Depression: "If you want to see Knowledge well grounded and firm, just ask their wise bankers to tell you the tale of what's happened to money these last few years back" (127-8). George's fate becomes the emblem of an entire generation and the opportunity for West to sharpen her pen and lay her indictment against the modern capitalist society. The visual counterpart achieves the same goal with a skilful contrast between the luxury of the setting of the eleventh plate - the interior of the hotel Magnificent - against the discouraging and dull line of almost faceless men that crowd in the last plate, in which the heaviness and flatness of the brick wall and the apparently endlessness of the 'human wall' which extend beyond the limit of the page on both sides seem to offer no way out. Looking at these last two episodes, we can say that both the visual and the verbal sketch come closer to the aesthetic and moral landscape of Hogarth's original, in which Tom ends his life in the most sombre and desperate of all settings, a cell in Bethlem prison, in which no open doors or windows are there to offer a rescue or hope of redemption[10].

A kind of circular process is thus set in motion for the reader: first the eye takes in the text, then it looks at the plate, which is quite unconsciously but inevitably analysed under the light of the textual perspective; once readers have looked at the pictures they can – and often do – return to the text, at this point reread from the standpoint of visual knowledge, caught in a network of references, dissonances and similarities:

> At all times, reading is relational, conditioned by the action of pictures on words and words on pictures and throughout the reading process, the reader participates in a dialogue between image and text which activates the interpretation of the book as a whole. The reader then becomes part of this relay of image/word whose relations are not a linear series of correspondences, but rather a cycle of oscillations. (Kooistra: 14)

At this point, however, another intertextual relationship may easily intrude into this open and flexible process of creative and active readership, calling into question first the obvious reference to Hogarth, equally present in the reader's mind's eyes, but also West's contemporary production, which was intriguingly struggling around the same themes and visual references.

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[10] It is no coincidence that Low's last plate is constructed through a very different use of colours, more shadowed and dark then those employed in the other plates.

West's rakes

Looking at West's extensive production, the work most directly linked to the *Modern Rake* is a play she had been working on in those same years, *Goodbye Nicholas*, in which the writer dramatises a story of economical success and failure inspired by the real life of Ivar Krueger (1880-1932) and Samuel Insull (1859-1938), two businessmen that lost their fortunes in the 1929 crash. Their fabulous advancements and ability to manipulate the world economy suggested to West (even while fascinated by the personal story of some capitalists and financiers, such as Sam Hartley in "The Abiding Vision", a story in her collection, *The Harsh Voice*), to launch a harsh critique of a system that appeared fatally doomed and so problematical that even the individuals who profited from it would in the end become its victims (Rollyson 1998: 107-8). The play, after a series of contacts with a theatre manager in New York City, Lawrence Langner, was never produced and entered an endless series of revisions and rewritings.

Still, a subtler but intriguing connection can be seen with a novel published a few years earlier, *Harriet Hume, A London Phantasy* (1929), in which the story of the modern rake is once again told, but embedded in an aesthetically elegant and sophisticated narrative frame in which a typically modernist, highly experimental linguistic style blends with a multi-layered visual structure mainly built on a network of references to eighteenth-century fine arts.

The male protagonist of the novel, Arnold Condorex, is a self-made man, not born to wealth or class, who succeeds in making a brilliant political career and eventually becoming a Lord by means of some 'imperial' intrigues centred on a imaginary Far-Eastern country, Mondh. His plotting revealed, the man is rescued on the eve of ruin by his lover, Harriet Hume[11], a gifted pianist who is willing to accept him back after being abandoned in favour of a wealthy Minister's daughter (Arnold's marriage choice is very similar to the modern rake's in chapter seven). The echoes and references to Hogarth's moral series are further enriched by the narrative structure of the novel, constructed as a

[11] The character of Harriet Hume is modeled after the pianist Harriet Cohen, a close friend of Rebecca's, who had been involved in an affair of Max Beaverbrook. See Carl Rollyson, 1998, *The Literary Legacy of Rebecca West*, International Scholars Publications, Bethesda, MD, pp.67-72.

sequence of five ‘hogarthian’ scenes (HH: 105) depicting the whole vital –and political - cycle of the modern rake. Every scene is set in London, the rhythm of the narration also dictated by the changing seasons of the year(s) in which Harriet and Arnold meet, and the city is clearly divided in two parts: on the one hand Westminster, the city of politics and business, the unchallenged reign of Arnold Condorex; on the other, Kensington, the city of parks and gardens, in which Harriet lives, in a home whose only access is through a beautiful and blooming garden.

As the story unfolds, the emotional but also physical centre of Arnold’s life is more and more attracted towards Kensington, where the spell of Harriet’s grace and beauty has the power to annul the anxieties of the great metropolis (HH: 83). In the second scene, Arnold follows her in a stroll through Kensington gardens, in which Hogarth’s serpentine Line of Beauty match with the landscape theory of “Capability” Brown’, the garden’s creator: in Arnold’s fantasies, the park is turned into the picturesque setting of his love story with Harriet, whether they are the King of the garden and the nymph seeking refuge there (83-4), or the protagonists of an Italian opera (87). The image of Harriet as a pastoral nymph, a bucolic little princess, is very recurrent in the novel: it’s the image Arnold has built in his own mind, but it is also the image Harriet herself contributes to outline when she recites for her lover some verses from Andrew Marvell’s ‘The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn’.[12]Later, she also describes herself as a china shepherdess on a mantelpiece, shaped like an elegant doll-like figure whose scrolls and curves contrast with the neoclassical and polished beauty of Arnold’s wife, Ginevra. The insistence on such imagery is more and more marked in the second and third scenes, where a visual tangle of flourishing and extravagant curving lines enclose Harriet’s body, from her first appearance as “a small figure at the end of the broad elm walk that leads down to the Serpentine” (80), immediately associated by Arnold to the stony nymphs decorating the curved balustrade at the beginning of the Serpentine itself, until her entrance into Arnold’s house, where the intricacy of arches, banisters and plaster decoration of Robert Adam’s style frame her little silhouette, the

[12] “I have a garden of my own,/But so with roses overgrown/And lilies, that you would it guess/To be a little wilderness;/And all the springtime of the year…”, HH, p.33.

perfect embodiment of Hogarth's aesthetical idea of the many Lines of Beauty conflating in the female body.

The intricacy of waving and serpentine lines[13]weaved around Harriet's figure finds a perfect match in West's style, which, in Virginia Woolf's words, "help her to manufacture some pretty little China ornaments for the mantelpiece" [14] through the extensive use of images of grace, littleness and frailty. The brightness of the dialogues, whose theatrical quality display all West's irony at its best, alternate with complex and often unusually long sentences shaped out of the flow of Arnold's thoughts or the wandering paths of both the protagonists through the streets and gardens of London. In addition, the linearity of the narrative sequence is often interrupted by Harriet's fairy tales, in which most sentences "carry the rhythm of a fantasy, a self-enclosed world" (Rollyson 1998: 71) and blur the boundaries between novel and romance by crowding the streets of the modern metropolis with sphinxes, ladies turned into trees and headless sheep.

The system of visual/narrative frames build up in the novel is too complex to be fully analysed here, involving not only the stylistic and thematic variations on the hogarthian leitmotiv, but also a fascinating sub-text plotted on Sir Joshua Reynolds's painting "The Three Graces Decorating the Statue of Hymen**" (**not to mention references to Canova, David**,** Turner**),** as well as the dialogue between the architecture of contemporary London and Adam brothers' eighteenth-century London. What is relevant to our discourse, instead, is that the formal complexity of the novel is even further enriched and understood if its intertextual/intervisual network is stretched to encompass other texts with which it shares not only themes but also formal strategies of meaning production – namely, the interplay between visual and textual. The interest of establishing such intertextual bridges lay in West's peculiar identity as a writer whose versatility and heterogeneous production had for a long time puzzled critics and scholars,

[13] "The eye hath this sort of enjoyment in winding walks, and serpentine rivers, and all sort of objects, whose forms, as we shall see hereafter, are composed principally of what I call the *waving* and *serpentine* lines" (W. Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, edited by Ronald Paulson, Yale University Press, New Haven 1997, p.33).
[14] Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1929-1931*, Vol. IV, New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979, p.88.

who often did pay attention only to a small part of her work, mostly on the basis of genre selection. The focus on the powerful visual vocation of her writing could be then an interesting starting-point for a new appreciation of West's texts in terms of a more coherent and consciously constructed investigation of some crucial aesthetic and cultural issues: much is still to be done, and in the present paper I could just mention some of the many challenging questions at stake, but for the future I do hope to go on working in this direction, mainly by extending my analysis to other novels and essays as well as to the other book co-produced by West and Low (*Lions and Lambs*).

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