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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

School of English

THE SECOND SEX IN THE WORKS OF NELSON ALGREN

by

CHRISTINE GUILFOYLE

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2014

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

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Christine Amanda Guilfoyle

This is the first critical study in the history of Nelson Algren criticism and scholarship to focus on Algren's representation(s) of women. The critical consensus is that his women are 'sympathetically imagined' yet Algren has a reputation for being 'no feminist.' In this thesis I unpack this dichotomy by performing radical re-readings of his four novels, *Somebody in Boots* (1935), *Never Come Morning* (1942), *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), and *A Walk on the Wild Side* (1956). In each case I demonstrate that these novels perform feminist and masculinity studies work in their documentation and problematisation of rape and prostitution. I also unpack the mythologisation of love in Algren's work which is based on out-dated readings of his protagonists' intimate relationships and on a too-close association of his life with his literature. As such, this thesis also foregrounds the role critical readings play in the construction of a writer's reputation.

The 'second sex' of the title signals a) the thesis's focus on women and b) the personal connection between Algren and Simone de Beauvoir who met on the cusp of writing *The Man with the Golden Arm* and *The Second Sex*. Re-reading archival evidence, I argue that Algren's reputation as 'no feminist' owes much to being cast as Beauvoir's 'macho' lover in the mythology of their relationship. Putting Algren's women at the centre of readings demonstrates that he brought an incisive awareness of gender issues to the table when he and Beauvoir met in 1947.

Foregrounding the women in Algren's work, the richness and sophistication of Algren's writing comes more fully to light. This thesis aims to provide a clearer sense of Algren's place in American literature and an assessment of his relevance to the international canon of work on human sexuality, prostitution, and rape.

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Christine Guilfoyle

declare that the thesis entitled

The Second Sex in the Works of Nelson Algren

and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission.

Signed:

Date:.....

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I owe a very big thank you to Rebecca Jewett and her team at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library of the Ohio State University for making my time in the archives run so smoothly and enjoyably.

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Abbreviations

- BD/OSU Bettina Drew Papers on Nelson Algren, SPEC.RARE.CMS.147, The Ohio State University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library
- NA/OSU The Nelson Algren Collection at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library of the Ohio State University

Introduction

Nelson Algren's Portraits of Women (Never Before Given)

O I think nelson shook to the image of american proletarian life street life
wanderers like walk on the wild side and portraits of women never before given...

Meridel Le Sueur¹

What did Meridel Le Sueur mean when, in a letter to Algren's biographer, Bettina Drew, in the mid-1980s, she described Algren's representations of women as 'portraits of women never before given'? Most of Algren's women are prostitutes, but it wasn't in this that they represented a new presence in literature in 1930s/40s America. As well as the attention the prostitute had received in preceding centuries at the hands of a Defoe, a Zola or a Dostoevsky, the decades preceding Algren's first novel, *Somebody in Boots* (1935), had seen an explosion of cultural attention to prostitutes in American literature, theatre, and film. Algren's portraits of women take their place in a gallery created by films such as *Anna Christie* (1930) and *Midnight Mary* (1933) and the works of predecessors including Stephen Crane, Harold Frederic, David Graham Phillips, Joaquin Miller, Edgar Fawcett, and Reginald Wright Kauffman, among others, all of whom, in the Progressive Era, wrote about women who become prostitutes and the socio-economic conditions that create, support, and maintain the institution of prostitution. So how, in contrast with all these, did Algren's women, as Le Sueur asserted, represent something new? The answer to this is provisionally answered by Laura Hapke's summary of the above writers' failings in her *Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction, 1885-1917*. Hapke writes that

Late-nineteenth-century writers sensationalized or sentimentalized and killed off the prostitute while Progressives exaggerated her exploitation or romanticized her triumph over it. The lost souls, martyrs, didactic white slaves, and armor-plated heroines these writers depicted suggest more than a failure of imagination or the influence of censorship or the genteel tradition. Rather, such characterizations

¹ Meridel Le Sueur, undated letter to Bettina Drew, Bettina Drew Papers on Nelson Algren, SPEC.RARE.CMS.147, The Ohio State University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library (BD/OSU), 'Series 1: Research', Box/Folder number unrecorded. The letter was probably written in 1985 as Le Sueur (born 22 February 1900) tells Drew she is 85 years old.

revealed a fearful denial of feminine sexuality, hired or otherwise. It was a legacy that would prove enduring.²

The question of whether or not Algren's portraits of women continue the above legacy is, to some extent, answered by the critical consensus that exists in Algren scholarship. Although this is the first critical study to focus on the women in Algren's work, critics and readers across the Algren critical canon have attested to their credibility and their complexity. Martha Heasley Cox and Wayne Chatterton single out *The Man with the Golden Arm*'s Sophie, Molly, and Violet as 'credible, complex, women.' James R. Giles suggests that 'Algren's treatment of prostitutes represents, especially in comparison to the sentimentality of a John Steinbeck, a complex experiment in narration.' Carla Cappetti, in her reading of *Never Come Morning*, identifies an important methodological component and the wider implications of this 'complex experiment' in her analysis of the relationship between Algren's fiction-writing and his undergraduate vocation as a sociologist. Carlo Rotella, like Cox and Chatterton, considers Sophie Majcinek's place in the narrative structure of *The Man with the Golden Arm* to be of paramount importance, defining her as its 'most sophisticated mythographer.' And Brooke Horvath summarises many of these points when he writes that 'Algren created female characters that often transcended stereotypes to step forth as complex, sympathetically imagined women.'³

Reading 'the second sex' in the works of Nelson Algren – where 'second sex' denotes 'women' – this thesis builds on these foundations in Algren scholarship to ask: What, precisely, was (or is) 'never before given' about Algren's portraits of women? How, apart from avoiding sentimentalism, do they transcend stereotypes? What does it mean to 'sympathetically imagine'? Where is the evidence of such an imagination

² Laura Hapke, *Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction, 1885-1917* (Bowling Green, OH: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 173.

³ Martha Heasley Cox and Wayne Chatterton, *Nelson Algren* (Twayne's United States Author Series 249. Boston: Twayne Hall, 1975), p. 121; James R. Giles, *Confronting the Horror: The Novels of Nelson Algren* (Kent; London: The Kent State University Press 1989), p. 25; Carla Cappetti, *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press 1993); Carlo Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 1998), pp. 73-90; Brooke Horvath, *Understanding Nelson Algren* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), p. 12.

inscribed in the Algren text? And if Algren's treatment of prostitutes can be shown to represent 'a complex experiment in narration', what questions or problems does the experiment investigate? What does it set out to discover, test, problematise, prove, or disprove? How is it constructed within individual texts and throughout his oeuvre? And to what overarching body of knowledge or science does the experiment contribute?

Where 'the second sex' connotes 'thesis on gender,' I will argue that Algren's fictional treatment of prostitution, rape, and dysfunctional heterosexual relationships represents an important twentieth century contribution to the problematisation and analysis of heterosexual love and sexuality in general, and masculine sexual violence in particular. Specifically, I propose that his novels, *Somebody in Boots* (1935), *Never Come Morning* (1942), *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), and *A Walk on the Wild Side* (1956) should be read as important primary texts in the twentieth century US literary canon relevant to masculinity studies – a proposal I will support with close readings that unpack the essential contribution Algren's women protagonists make to a complex experiment in narration writ large across these novels. Aspects of these readings will necessarily challenge some of the most long-standing and well-respected readings in the long history of Algren criticism.

Reading: A Complex Experiment in Narration

The success, usefulness, or application, of a narrative experiment depends first on the discrete experiments in narration that are individual acts of critical reading. If Algren's treatment of prostitutes represents a complex experiment in narration one would expect to find evidence of this complexity in the pan-twentieth century critical discussion of his work. However, reading the Algren critical canon, one is struck by the visible lack of discussion or disagreement from one reader or generation of readers to the next as to what, textually, is happening to, for, or as a result of, the women in Algren's works. A consensus has been reached: they may be 'sympathetically imagined' but in most readings they feature primarily as support-acts to the Algren 'hero.' In order to unpack the complex experiment in narration to which they contribute, then, it is necessary to understand how they ended up in the critical wings in the first place – how they have been read and not read.

Reading Women: Feminist Problems

The first problem a critical discussion of women in the Algren text poses concerns methodology: the reading of women in fiction has come to be considered a specialist job for feminist critics. The pitfalls of this delegation come to light when we consider the two kinds of feminist problem in Algren that scholarship has highlighted: Giles (1989) suggests Algren's depiction of 'women as societal victims or romantic ideals or as a combination of both' and his 'tendency to idealize selected women characters as embodiments of psychic health and momentary escape from sordid environments will possibly alienate feminist critics'; Horvath (2005) prefaces his laudatory summary, cited above, with the assertion that 'Although no feminist, Algren created female characters that ... transcended stereotypes.'⁴ In 2014, against the backdrop of feminism's long history and the contemporary abundance of feminisms, the most telling clues we have as to which feminists Algren and his work are most likely to alienate lie in the dates of Giles and Horvath's comments. Giles's feminist-sensitive radar is set to late-1980s second wave sensibilities when many feminist critics were intellectually invested in recuperating the works of, and creating positive narratives by, about, and for, women. According to Ruth Robbins, for example, Susan Coppelman Kornillon's *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (1972) came to define the meaning of feminist theory for a whole generation of American college graduates.⁵ In this context some feminist critics would indeed have been troubled by Algren's depictions of women as 'societal victims or romantic ideals ... or a combination of both.' No doubt too, in 1989, the vibrations of a particularly vocal strain of feminist criticism that overtly branded certain male writers The Enemy were still in the air. Exemplary here was Shulamith Firestone's 1979 *Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* in which she posited Algren, along with Ernest Hemingway, James Jones, Norman Mailer, and James Farrell, as members of a 'Virility School', 'a bunch of culturally deprived "tough guys" punching away to save their manhood.'⁶ But Firestone's essay sits on the cusp of a

⁴ Giles, pp. 107, 65; Horvath, p. 12.

⁵ Ruth Robbins, 'American Feminisms: Images of Women and Gynocriticism', in *Modern North American Criticism and Theory: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 70-78 (p. 73).

⁶ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1979), p. 152.

decade during which the works of 'Virility Inc.' would provide important primary readings for gender and masculinity theorists' re-thinking of patriarchy-as-hybrid and masculinities-plural. Peter Middleton maps the development of this early phase of masculinity studies in his *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture*. Middleton suggests that, in the same way that important scientific discoveries are presented as 'instruction,' so too men's texts may serve a pedagogical function.

Literary texts have much to contribute to our understandings of all the issues with which our other knowledges are engaged, if they are allowed to contribute as primary and not secondary sources. Texts are not just symptoms, but proposed cures, prefigurative arguments as well as ideology: "Works of art tend to be prospective symbols of one's personal synthesis and of men's future and not merely regressive symptoms of the artist's unresolved conflicts' (Ricoeur 1970: 521). ... We can ... read representations of consciousness, self-consciousness, articulacy and inarticulacy in men's texts as claims about men's subjectivity, and examine them for consequent aporias. To give literary texts such respect requires as detailed an attention to the workings of what they say as to any complex argument. We need to recognize that it may sometimes be possible to read men's texts as transfigurative proposals as well as exposures of ideology, because at times men's texts are trying to initiate processes which require further development.⁷

Stubs McKay, Cass McKay, Olin Jones, Nubby O'Neill, Bruno Bicek, Bonifacy 'the barber' Konstantine, Frankie Majcinek, Sparrow Saltskin, Dove Linkhorn, Achilles Schmidt: when one considers the mass of information Algren's boys and men provide about becoming and being men, it is little wonder if Nancy, Norah, Steffi, Sophie, Terasina, and Hallie are considered by many readers to play little more than 'cameo roles to his fallen leading men, dead-end heroes and good-for-nothing chumps.'⁸ In the

⁷ Peter Middleton, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 11.

⁸ Horvath and Simon, Introduction to section 4, 'Entrapment, 1951-1953' of Nelson Algren, *Entrapment and Other Writings*, ed. by Brooke Horvath and Dan Simon (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009), p. 113.

hyper-patriarchal environments Algren's work documents, women are indeed secondary to men – very secondary. Read as primary sources, then, and with detailed readerly attention to 'the workings of what they say', Algren's novels and short stories can be read as 'transfigurative proposals as well as exposures of ideology' that expose and explore the critical nexus where feminist criticism meets masculinity studies: writing about men, I suggest Algren was always-already writing about the social construction of masculinity; writing about women, he documented the high price they pay in the workings of its machinery.

So, this thesis asks, is it wholly appropriate or correct to label Algren 'no feminist' today? Indeed, the proviso strikes one as counter-intuitive, for isn't the act of creating female characters who transcend stereotypes rather more of a feminist act than not? At the very least, shouldn't the sympathetic imagining of women by a writer temper or modify critical assertions about his sexual politics? What happens, for instance, if we read Algren as if he were a feminist? How does any such assertion modify or construct the reception of his texts? And if we insist on tagging him 'no feminist' how do we reconcile this with the fact that the plots of all his most important works depend entirely on the documentation and problematisation of socio-sexual problems that have been of urgent interest to feminist critics and activists throughout modern history: the effects of pornography on masculine sexual behaviour (*Somebody in Boots*); the effects of being in love on male socio-sexual behaviour (*Somebody in Boots*, *A Walk on the Wild Side*); the entrapment of women into prostitution (every Algren text); the (more or less violent) rape of women by men (*Somebody in Boots*, *Never Come Morning* and *A Walk on the Wild Side*); and the gendered iniquities that underpin the institutionalisation of love and sex (all his novels and short stories)? How are we to understand the fact that the complex experiment to which all the prostitutes in Algren's oeuvre contribute rehearses important debates between two equally self-identifying feminist positions most publically visible in two contemporary organisations claiming to represent women who are prostitutes: the pro-prostitution COYOTE (Cast Off Your Old Tired Ethics) and the anti-prostitution WHISPER (Women Hurt In Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt), not to mention the countless organisations that today support and represent women sex-workers? Furthermore, what do we make of the fact that entering the Algren text via the stories of his women brings us face-to-face with treatments of race that were controversial when written and, arguably, remain so today? Charlotte Hallem (*Somebody in Boots*), Mama T (*Never Come Morning*)

Minnie-Mae, Mama Lucille, Hallie Breedlove (*A Walk on the Wild Side*), Dovie-Jean Hawkins (*The Devil's Stocking*): the stories of these women bear witness to socio-political issues that, over the course of Algren's writing career, would go from being framed separately as 'the woman problem,' 'the race problem' and 'the class problem,' to what Claudia Jones described in 1949 as 'the triple burden,'⁹ and Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 as 'intersectionality.'¹⁰ If the critical underestimation of the women in the Algren text has, coincidentally, de-emphasised the importance of his treatment of race, it has also sidelined his treatment of race-and-sexuality. Toni Morrison notes in her *Playing in the Dark* that 'a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as "knowledge" ... holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States.' To reveal the ways in which some of Algren's so-called 'cameos' (for example, *Somebody in Boots*' Charlotte Hallem or *A Walk on the Wild Side*'s Minnie-Mae) shape the sexual terrain of the novels in which they feature is to demonstrate that this white male writer did not intend 'the contemplation of this black presence ... to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.'¹¹

Finally, the elephant in the room when critical asides are made about feminists or feminist sensibilities in relation to Algren is, of course, that where his name resonates at all – whether in or outside academia – he is most popularly known for his love affair with arguably the most important figurehead of twentieth-century feminist criticism and theory, Simone de Beauvoir. If Giles's *apologia* gestures towards those second wave feminists for whom Beauvoir was 'mother of us all,'¹² Horvath's proviso nods to a mythology of epic proportions constructed across biographies, editorials, novels,

⁹ Claudia Jones, 'An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman', *Political Affairs*, June 1949 <<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B5zwEpvtvLW4LUpSVkpWS0JWQnc/edit?usp=sharing&pli=1>> [accessed 18 December 2014]

¹⁰ Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' <<http://philpapers.org/archive/CREDTI.pdf>> [accessed 18 December 2014]

¹¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA., and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 5.

¹² See Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 618.

documentaries, magazine and newspaper columns that have, since both writers were safely in their graves, sought to wed them *post mortem*. Indeed the dominance of Beauvoir's place in the telling and re-telling of Algren's life story was rued by Colin Hughes in his review of Bettina Drew's biography of Algren, *Nelson Algren: A Life on the Wild Side*:

It would undoubtedly have appalled and infuriated Nelson Algren that he should be remembered more for his love affair with Simone de Beauvoir than for his own writing. It should embarrass the rest of us, too, for the time is long past when Algren should have been allowed to assume his rightful, wholly self-earned place in American literary history. It is also time that he were read for his own sake, rather than out of a prurient curiosity about the man [with whom], as de Beauvoir later revealed, she experienced her first real orgasm.¹³

The mythology surrounding the Algren/Beauvoir relationship has by itself, I suggest, played a significant part in preventing Algren from assuming his proper place in American literary history. At the very least, the elevated position to which Beauvoir is typically raised in biographical commentaries eclipses the fact that Algren enjoyed close friendships with and appreciated the work of many intellectual and feminist writers during his lifetime – women such as Le Sueur, who shared the same professional fate as he and other writers whose 1930s/40s work was consigned to the critical dustbin by the potent admixture of McCarthyite blacklists and New Criticism of the 1950s. Algren was also friends with Margaret Walker – both belonged to the 1940s literary circles that included Gwendolyn Brooks, Josephine Herbst, and Ruth Herschberger, poet and author of the little-remembered feminist gem, *Adam's Rib* (1947) – and with Martha Gellhorn, wife of Ernest Hemingway. He was a regular attendee of the parties held by African American choreographer, Katherine Dunham.¹⁴ And from the mid-1970s till his death (1981) he was a close friend and correspondent with writer and political activist, Kay

¹³ Colin Hughes, 'A hell that would be heaven.' Review of Bettina Drew's *Nelson Algren: A Life on the Wild Side*, *The Independent* (London), 19 January 1991, p. 29.

¹⁴ Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (Yale University Press, 2002), p. 172. Katherine Dunham is best known for her *Ballet Nègre*, 1931.

Boyle.¹⁵ Correspondence in his archive at Ohio State University indicates he highly rated Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, and in his final year at Sag Harbor, Long Island, he was friends with Betty Friedan.¹⁶ When he visited France in 1980, he didn't stop by to see Beauvoir in Paris – having severed all contact with her in 1964 – but went straight to Marseille to be with his close friend of twenty years, Joan Ballard (Kerckhoff), author of 'Walk Pretty All the Way', the short story erroneously attributed to Algren in Horvath and Simon's *Entrapment and Other Writings*.¹⁷ These are only a few of the most traceable of Algren's associations with women intellectuals and writers: more are hinted at in documents in his archive, including Helen Englund, (a mutual friend of his and Carl Sandburg's) who studied under Adler and Freud in Vienna.¹⁸ That Algren enjoyed long-term friendships with many intellectual women begs the mundane question: if he was 'no feminist' what did so many women thinkers, including two of the twentieth century's most famous feminist theorists, value about his friendship? Is there only irony in the fact that a writer famous for loving a famous feminist is famously understood to be 'no feminist'? Or has the mythology of 'Algren, Beauvoir's American Lover' contributed to the critical abandonment of the 'second sex' in Algren's oeuvre?

¹⁵ It was Kay Boyle who first mooted the idea of the Nelson Algren Short Story Award, awarded yearly by the *Chicago Tribune* to promising new American writers.

¹⁶ Nelson Algren letters to Roger Groening, NA/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded.

¹⁷ See Nelson Algren, *Entrapment and Other Writings*, pp. 37-38. A month after his death, 'Walk Pretty All the Way' was published, attributed to Algren, in *Chicago* (June 1981), but it is from the pen of Joan Ballard (Kerckhoff), as papers in the Algren Collection clearly indicate and Joan confirmed in an interview (by telephone, 7 January 2011). (The phrase first appears in an Algren context in *A Walk on the Wild Side*, spoken by Oliver Finnerty: "'Walk Pretty,' you walk pretty all the way' (p. 183).)

¹⁸ Letter to Carl Sandburg, undated, The Nelson Algren Collection at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library of the Ohio State University (NA/OSU), Box 36, Folder 642. There are many personal letters in Algren's archive from women who either couldn't be traced by Drew or did not want to participate in the biographisation of Algren's life. Reading these, it is clear that Algren was held in high esteem by many women and was particularly appreciated for his warmth and emotional availability. Particularly touching is the evidence of his affection for his housekeeper, Mary Corley, of whom he wrote in a letter to a friend, 'I've learned more about the U.S.A. from her than she has from me.' Letter to Kathy Lepps, 7 August 1971, NA/OSU, Box 35, Folder 636 (see also BD/OSU, Box 1, Folder 13).

Structure and Methodology



Fig. 1

In 2008 and 2010, I spent several weeks researching Algren's papers housed in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library of the Ohio State University. As well as housing early manuscripts that shed new light on the critical evaluation of his portraits of women, Algren's archive provides a record of the hundreds of books he owned when he died, as well as the actual paintings, prints, and photographs that hung on his walls. Most striking among these are the collages and montages he created (probably) sometime during the 1970s.¹⁹ In her introductory essay to the catalogue of the 1988 exhibition, *Writing in the First Person: Nelson Algren, 1909-1981*, curator Catherine Ingraham writes that, for her, these collages and montages represent 'analogues' of Algren's life that seem to exhibit his 'complex, vigorous, and often troubling sensibility.'²⁰ Of these, the collage above is especially interesting because it illustrates the principal motifs in Algren's most important works, records his identification and affiliation with other writers and artists, and, both in its content and strange juxtapositions, gives visual form to his 'often troubling sensibility'.

In chapter one, then, I borrow Ingraham's notion of 'troubling sensibility' as an umbrella term under which to discuss two sets of interconnected problems that have a particular bearing on readings of Algren's women: a) the problems readers necessarily encounter when, reading scenes that challenge our ethical, sexual, and emotional sensibilities (for example, Algren's violent rape scenes), we are 'troubled' and b) the problems of representation writers must necessarily confront when their writing project is aimed quite pointedly at causing 'trouble', i.e. raising readers' consciousness.

The second item of vocabulary I extrapolate from Ingraham's essay is embedded in her interpretation of what Algren meant when he said he wrote 'in the first person':

¹⁹ For a description of Algren's home (in Paterson, New Jersey, 1975) and the importance of books and art within it, see Linda Kay, *The Reading List* (Lanham, MA: Hamilton Books, 2005), pp. 11-12. Ohio State University has sold Algren's record collection and most of his books, retaining just a few of the latter (mostly those presented to him by other famous writers) and photocopies of pages from those books he had annotated. When I first visited the archive in 2008 the pictures from the walls of his home were still in their frames but because these were becoming dangerous to handle (much of the glass having broken) all frames have now been removed. NA/OSU, Box/Folder numbers unrecorded.

²⁰ Catherine Ingraham, introduction to *Writing in the First Person: Nelson Algren, 1909-1981* (Chicago: Chicago Public Library Cultural Center), p. 5.

Most of Algren's characters exist on the margins. They have been pushed there by social, economic, and cultural forces that Algren is implicitly and explicitly critical of – the forces of capitalism, commercialism, inhumanity, lack of imagination. It was Algren's desire not only to write about these people, but also to inhabit their world. As he said, "I wrote the books I wrote, because I was living in the middle of these books when, before they were books, they were merely scenes in which human beings were involved in conflict. I was in the middle of them." Writing in the first person, is, itself, a conflictual state. In order to write about this world, Algren had to live in it and distance himself from it – one might say by the space of a word. It is this ... reportorial/novelistic ... tension in Algren's works that is critically puzzling and provocative. The exhibition has been organized with this tension in mind.²¹

Readings that focus on the women in the works of Algren require us to closely consider the most 'critically puzzling and provocative' spaces of his oeuvre – the rape scenes and the brothel scenes. Here, the 'reportorial/novelistic tension' Ingraham posits is not easily negotiated by any one particular critical theory. So, in each of my readings, having identified a key site of 'narrative tension' in the given novel, I will apply the theory Peter Brooks proposes in his *Reading for the Plot* whereby 'Most viable works of literature tell us something about how they are to be read, guide us toward the conditions of their interpretation.'²² This is not, of course, to say that in each case I identify the novel's only site of narrative tension but I think Brooks' proposition provides a simple (without being simplifying) and flexible enough framework to accommodate and trace the changing shape of Algren's praxis and poetics across his four novels from 1935 to 1956. At the same time this approach allows that Algren's novels, as Middleton proposes in relation to men's texts more generally, 'are trying to initiate processes which require further development.' As in literature so in literary theory: in each of my readings I deploy Middleton's notion of the 'inward gaze' in my reading of the principal male protagonist. That is, I 'read [Algren's] representations of

²¹ Ingraham, p. 6.

²² Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. xii.

consciousness, self-consciousness, articulacy and inarticulacy in [his] texts as claims about men's subjectivity' and men's texts.²³

The collage-as-metaphor is particularly apposite for readings that take up Brooks' proposition because the practice of recycling fragments into visual compositions has its mirror in Algren's writing-practice: across his lifetime his short stories both grew into and were harvested from his novels, and he kept fragments and scraps of writing aside for possible later use. So, too, the collage provides a metaphor for the reading process and its product: a reading. Collage encourages creative reading because '[t]he viewer must seek the hidden rhyme that connects the elements on the page.'²⁴ It confuses the eye and suggests complex narratives that depend not on the forward thrust of reading from a beginning to an end but on circular, zigzag, or asymmetric readings that leave all and any tensions produced by such readings intact. Contrasts and complementarities create competing narratives that depend, for their meaning, on the eye of the viewer or the sensibilities of the reader. So the collage as metaphorical text makes plain the obvious connections with and between reader-response theories just as it talks, too, to post-modern theories of reading and writing.

Finally, then, the collage suggests itself as a visual metaphor for this study's methodology: put most simply, 'The Second Sex in the Works of Nelson Algren' is an extended exercise in close reading and re-reading, supported by and in conversation with theoretical insights and propositions taken up from previous Algren scholars, literary critics and theorists. I have illustrated certain points I make with drawings by Algren and pictures from the walls of his home, and I have, now and then, drawn from the shelves of his personal library to support my readings. I have done so in order to contextualise Algren's writing within the broader scope of his creativity and to allow some of these gems to be appreciated beyond the reading room.

When I began carrying out my research on Algren, I felt it was important to meet or talk with as many people as possible still alive today who knew him. So in 2008 I went to Paris to meet and interview Art and the late Florence Shay at the exhibition of Art's photographs, 'Traces of a Bygone America/Traces d'une Amérique Révolue' (where he

²³ Middleton, p. 11.

²⁴ Susan Tucker, Katherine Ott, and Patricia P. Buckler, eds, *The Scrapbook in American Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), p. 17.

first exhibited the now famous dorsal nude of Simone de Beauvoir). On meeting Florence, the first thing she wanted to tell me, before we had even sat down with our drinks, was that Art had “got it all wrong!” when he recounted “the story about the murderer” in his books on Algren.²⁵ It wouldn't have occurred to me to ask about this anecdote since I had, of course, accepted it as written by Art. But here it is, with Florence's correction.

In his two volumes of photographs of Algren, *Nelson Algren's Chicago* (1988) and *Chicago's Nelson Algren* (2007), Shay tells the following story:

Once, in 1952, Algren stayed over for breakfast at the northside apartment on Rosedale Avenue that I shared with my wife, Florence; our five-year-old daughter, Jane; Nelson's godson, Harmon; and our newborn, Richard.²⁶ As we sat at the table reading the morning paper, a front-page story illustrated by two pictures caught Algren's eye. Two large white coffins and three small ones were arrayed in a church. A hitchhiker had murdered a father, mother and three children. Next to this picture was a close-up of the killer, who was holding his knuckles up to the camera. On each of the eight knuckles was tattooed a letter, H-A-R-D-L-U-C-K.

Algren looked at the picture and said, “That poor S.O.B.”

My wife didn't understand him at first.

“You mean the father?” she said.

“No, the hitchhiker.”

As my wife swatted him with the paper, Algren, surprised, said, “Can you imagine what it took to make a guy do a thing like that?”²⁷

²⁵ Interview with Florence Shay, Galerie Loeb, Paris, 12 April 2008 on the occasion of Art Shay's exhibition, ‘Traces of a Bygone America/Traces d'une Amérique Révolue’, 12 April – 24 May 2008.

²⁶ In the 1988 book the story begins: ‘Once, in 1952’; and in the 2007 book, ‘Once, in 1953.’ The criminal involved was a man called William ‘Cock-eyed’ Cook and, since he was executed in December 1952, it must be the first of Shay's dates that is accurate. For an account of this murder case see Katherine M. Ramsland, *Inside the Minds of Serial Killers: Why They Kill* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), pp. 109-10.

²⁷ Art Shay, *Nelson Algren's Chicago* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. xvi, and *Chicago's Nelson Algren* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), p. xxiv.

Horvath opens his *Understanding Nelson Algren* with this same story, suggesting that to 'understand [it] is to go a long way toward understanding Nelson Algren'; it is cited too in the introduction to his and Simon's 2009 *Entrapment*.²⁸ And indeed, to the extent that Algren is celebrated for his compassion and for his identification with the criminal, this story is instructive as it stands. Readers, of course, understand the "thing like that" to be the murder of the family. But Florence insisted that the picture Art's account painted was inaccurate: when Algren said "a thing like that" he wasn't pointing to the big photograph of the coffins but to the smaller photograph of the murderer's tattooed knuckles. The question was not 'Can you imagine what it took to make a man murder an entire family?' but rather 'Can you imagine what it took to make a man have H-A-R-D-L-U-C-K tattooed on his knuckles?' Florence's account adds to the reasons Algren deserved to be swatted with the paper but the difference between the two events perceived, one by Art and one by Florence, as well as casting yet another light on the subtleties of Algren's renowned compassion, also provides a simple yet multi-purpose metaphor for the work of this thesis: What we see depends on where we are sitting, and the same event generates different but equally true stories. Florence wanted us all to know that.

²⁸ Horvath, *Understanding Nelson Algren*, p. 1; Horvath and Simon, Introduction to *Entrapment and Other Writings*, p. 8.

Chapter One

Portraits of Women Never Before Given: A Complex Experiment in Narration

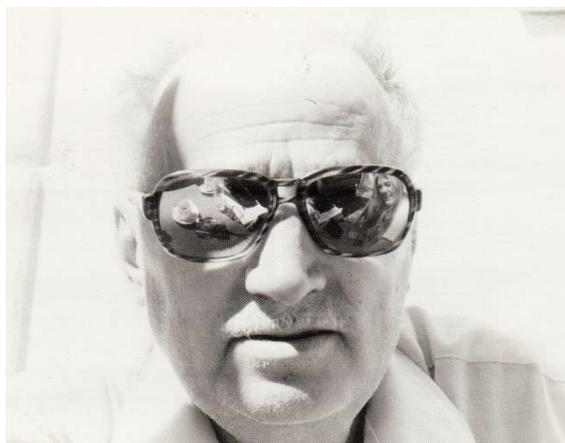


Fig. 2

There has always been genuine sympathy for women in Algren's writing. But if Algren's women characters were always finely drawn and memorable, they were also always cameo roles to his fallen leading men, dead-end heroes and good-for-nothing chumps.

Brooke Horvath and Daniel Simon

What is more absurd than to be so grown-up that the Meaning Of Man concerns you more than men and women?

Nelson Algren

All of us, readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before our eyes.

Toni Morrison¹

In this thesis I put Algren's women at the centre of my reading of his four novels, *Somebody in Boots*, *Never Come Morning*, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, and *A Walk*

¹ Horvath and Simon, Introduction to section 4, 'Entrapment, 1951-1953' of *Entrapment and Other Writings*, p. 113; Algren, *Notes from a Sea Diary & Who Lost an American? Algren at Sea. Centennial Edition 1909-2009. Travel Writings* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), p. 345; Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, p. 91.

on the Wild Side to demonstrate that they are not ‘cameos’ at all, but are central to his lifelong writing praxis and poetics. I argue that Algren’s literary treatment of feminism’s frontline issues – rape and prostitution – has been critically under-read and under-valued. Not only do Algren’s texts demonstrate important conjunctions between feminist and masculinity theories to which both broad churches his oeuvre speaks today, but equally importantly, as my readings will demonstrate, his treatment of these issues performs the supposed ‘feminist’ task of calling men (specifically Cass, Bruno, and Dove) to account for their active participation in rape at the same time as it puts rapists and johns under the microscope to unpack the constructedness of gang rape and the pitiful figure of the john. That this instrument of magnification is held by the women in Algren’s work is just one of the important processes in the ‘complex experiment in narration’ to which they are essential contributors.

Algren’s fiction has historically been subject to non-feminist readings, i.e. readings that don’t critically engage with – indeed, seem not to notice – his problematisation of the social nexus where race, gender, and class meet in scenes of sexual violence, rape, and prostitution. This lacuna is underpinned by the fact that most critical treatments of Algren’s women have been bound, when not completely circumvented, by the conceptual and contextual peculiarities of the literary genres to which his work has most often been critically attached, in particular Naturalism and Proletarianism. Historically, these genres accommodate the prostitute without problematising the sexual politics and gendered power structures that construct prostitution—which says as much about the critical inefficacies of genre classifications across time as it does about the historical critical avoidance of these subjects in Algren’s texts but goes only some of the way to accounting for the popular conception of his women as ‘cameos.’ The remaining distance has been covered by readings that over-romanticise the Algren woman, under-romanticise her or, for reasons that aren’t always fathomable, deal round her altogether. Some readings give Algren’s women such a wide berth that they mis-read their stories altogether.

The peculiar invisibility of Algren’s women in the criticism of his work can be demonstrated by comparing two summary descriptions of his short 1933 essay, ‘Within the City.’² In her *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational*

² *Entrapment and Other Writings*, pp. 37-38. First published in *The Anvil* 3 (October-November 1935),

Modernism Jessica Berman describes this essay as ‘a finely crafted, first-person response to the sight of a “mulatto girl” dancing in a “dime burlesque” on State Street in Chicago.’³ Horvath, in his *Understanding Nelson Algren*, describes it as ‘a vignette of Chicago, where “every man seems to go alone” and the army is the only use society has for its unemployed. Horvath cites the narrator’s declaration that ‘This is Chicago,’ a city that ‘will one day flame into revolt’⁴ but ignores the story’s emphasis on the important role the mulatto girl is expected to perform as part of that revolt. In fact, the principal focus of ‘Within the City’ is the mulatto girl, and the story reads as a manifesto, ending on an unmistakably revolutionary note:

And when I left her it seemed to me that this city will one day flame into revolt from the quiet ways of such beings as this mulatto girl: that all the daughters of the poor will rise, their voices no longer docile, and that day is not far.

First published in the left-wing journal *The Anvil*, this short piece imagines the mulatto girl and ‘all the daughters of the poor’ at the frontline of an anticipated Communist Revolution. ‘In four paragraphs,’ writes Berman, ‘Algren’s story moves from the isolation and quiet of the unknown and the unheard to the merging of voices in a political community by way of this encounter between the girl and the narrator.’⁵ Algren’s positioning of the mulatto girl—an unknown and unheard proletarian voice—as the revolutionary heroine of this essay not only demonstrates the importance of the ‘daughters of the poor’ in the Algren imaginary: equally importantly, it demonstrates the extent to which his early writing creatively synthesises contemporary political debates. The ‘woman question,’ the ‘race question,’ and the ‘class question’ were live, politically and intellectually conjoined issues during the 1930s, the decade of Algren’s

p. 9. Re-printed in Jack Conroy and Curt Johnson, *Writers in Revolt: The Anvil Anthology 1933-1940* (Lawrence Hill & Co., 1973), pp. 8-9.

³ Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 251.

⁴ Horvath, p. 16. I recognise, of course, that in a monograph as comprehensive as this choices have to be made about what is cited from any one text but there can be little doubt the mulatto girl is the principal subject of this essay.

⁵ Berman, p. 251.

political radicalisation.⁶ Women of mixed race in 1930s/40s America not only bore the triple burden of prejudice levelled at women, blackness, and class, but they were also discriminated against by blacks for their whiteness. The quiet, unknown, unheard ‘mulatto woman’, then, positioned as leading light of the Revolution intervenes in an argument at the cutting edge of debates among proletarian writers of the ’30s, challenging the white masculinist rhetoric of what was coming to be considered by some – in particular leftist women – as an over-dominant strand of the proletarian avant-garde (represented by figures such as Philip Rahv and Michael Gold), at the same time as contesting the then-prevalent image of the proletariat as a white, male, body of workers. For me, this isn’t the creative act of someone who should today be confidently designated ‘no feminist.’ ‘Within the City’ evidences Algren’s early political sensitisation to the triple burden of black women’s oppression and his first literary attempt to address this imbalance – as well as providing evidence that his politics were, from early in his writing career, sympathetic towards women. He would go on to include a mixed-race woman, Val, as his female lead in *Somebody in Boots* – to which Vanguard Press’s reader, James T. Farrell, objected because ‘a white man and a black woman could not live together “as if it were not an extraordinary union which would have effects different from the mating of two people from the same race.”’⁷ A decade later, when Algren wanted his 1947 short story collection to share the same title as his story about a vulnerable young woman’s entrapment and subsequent assisted-death-by-heroin, ‘Design for Departure’ – a title that would have indicated the lynchpin importance of this story to the collection’s genesis – his publisher insisted on *The Neon Wilderness*. And, like Val, *The Man with the Golden Arm*’s Molly-O, first imagined as a woman of mixed race, had to be whitened for publication. So it is that the history of

⁶ See Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) for her demonstration of important continuities between 1930s Communist women and 1960s feminism existing thematically in works such as Claudia Jones, ‘An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman’ (1949), Mary Inman, *In Woman’s Defense* (1940), and Betty Millard, “Woman Against Myth” (1947). Obviously, Algren’s continuing receipt of left-wing materials could be due to his not getting round to cancelling subscriptions – if so, such insouciance puts him a different camp to the many left-wing writers and intellectuals who positively opposed the Communist Party after the Stalin Pact and went out of their way to conceal their former allegiance to the far Left.

⁷ Bettina Drew, *Nelson Algren: A Life on the Wild Side* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), p. 83.

critics un-reading Algren's women is preceded by a history of publishers and editors un-writing by 'whiting' them.⁸

Reading Canons

If the organisation of Algren's work into genres and the critical avoidance of their contribution to the dialogic of individual texts has helped create cameos of his women protagonists, so too have recurrent attempts by critics and publishers to create room for him in the American canon. Indeed, Matthew Walter argues in his doctoral thesis, 'Nelson Algren and His Contexts: A Lost Reputation and Its Rehabilitation', that it is perhaps because of the best efforts of the cohort of critics (George Bluestone, Maxwell Geismar, Malcolm Cowley, Lawrence Lipton) who, during the 1950s, 'fought a long rear-guard action' on his behalf that 'the precise nature of Algren's value to American literary studies remains somewhat confused.'⁹ I suggest some of this confusion lies in the fact that 1950s critical readers typically lacked the self-reflexivity necessary to separate their textual from their sexual politics.

Bill Savage likewise lays some of the responsibility for Algren's non-canonical status at the feet of publishers. He argues persuasively that what he calls 'the preinterpretive field,' i.e. all the material information that tells us what kind of a book we are looking at before we read it (cover style, blurbs etc), adversely affected the reception of Algren's major works.¹⁰ As Savage points out, 1940s and '50s cover illustrations particularly mis-represented Algren's women, using sex – of which, apart from rape, there is relatively little in his texts – to sell copy.

⁸ See Drew, pp. 173, 197.

⁹ Matthew Walter, 'Nelson Algren and His Contexts: A Lost Reputation and Its Rehabilitation', PhD thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury, 2001, p. 2.

¹⁰ Bill Savage, "'It Was Dope!': The Paperback Revolution and the Literary Reputation of Nelson Algren", in *Nelson Algren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Robert Ward (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 2007), p. 153.



Fig. 3

However, I suggest that in any time or place and under any cover, Algren is a hard sell for American canonisation quite simply because of the important place prostitutes and prostitution occupy in his work from one end of his oeuvre to the other. Out of all his works, the only text that features (almost) no prostitution is *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

So this thesis presents a conundrum: on the one hand, I insist that in a gender-aware critical environment there can be no place for Algren in any canon without a more thoroughgoing critical inclusion of his women into readings of his texts – but in so doing, I demonstrate why it is unlikely he will ever become canonical in the American context. I suspect such a possibility has always been compromised by his very obvious support for women who are prostitutes which, progressively across his oeuvre, reads as a positively pro-prostitution position. Whereas in Algren's pre-1956 works his treatment of women who are prostitutes arguably conforms to recognisable literary conventions or genres that tidy prostitution into just one layer of a naturalist strata, from the *Wild Side* and beyond, it becomes impossible to identify a stable narratological footing on which to base a 'respectable' reading: are these texts suitable for High School students who, after all, are where canons are usually directed? If, as Algren's renowned arch-enemy, Leslie Fiedler suggests, 'The great works of American fiction are notoriously at home in the children's section of the library, their level of sentimentality precisely that of a pre-adolescent,' it would seem not.¹¹ Indeed, for Cox and Chatterton, *A Walk on the Wild Side* made Algren America's foremost literary spokesman for prostitutes. And in all his

¹¹ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1959) (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 24. For accounts of the conflicted (professional and personal) relationship between Algren and critics such as Fiedler, see Drew pp. 265, 275, 293-95, and Cappetti's chapter section 'Footnote Fellows', pp. 149-55.

later works, he continued to demonstrate what one reader of *Notes from a Sea Diary: Hemingway All the Way* (1965) describes as ‘a disproportionate interest in brothels and the trade of prostitution in general.’¹² Indeed, Algren’s road to canonisation is surely blocked by the well-documented fact that, over the course of his writing life, he became one of Cold War America’s most outspoken johns.

Which brings us to another problem – how do you re-Americanise an ‘Un-American’ American ready for canonisation? One way, it seems, is to minimise the sex and comedy in his work – as Algren himself implied in the title of his review of Terry Southern’s *Candy*, ‘Un-American Idea: Sex Can Be Funny’, writing that ‘Nowhere has sex been sicker than in the U.S., and sick for so long we have forgotten it is supposed to be healthy. When sex is a joyous fulfilment instead of a wasting affliction, people can see that the most hilarious event in the history of mankind was the division of the sexes.’¹³ Re-reading Algren through his women as opposed to through them as though they are invisible obliges us to acknowledge the ticklish relationship he establishes between sex and humour. Minimising the importance of comedy in Algren’s work, then, coincidentally sidelines the work his women perform because for Algren, sex and what human beings do with it and about it is funny-ha-ha, funny-peculiar, and a very serious business: the three ways of seeing mutually inform the ‘transfigurative proposal’ of his texts. In her introduction to the exhibition catalogue of ‘Writing in the First Person’ Ingraham noted that when she interviewed Algren’s friends most of them ‘emphasised how funny [he] was - as if Algren’s humor was the thing most in danger of being lost.’¹⁴ Her intuition was right: editorial attempts to make room for Algren in the American canon as a serious writer have tended to minimise the importance of his funny bones when, in fact, they form the backbone of his *corpus*.¹⁵

¹² Cox and Chatterton, p. 108; Matt Brook, ‘Nelson Algren as Book Reviewer’, MA thesis, University of South Carolina, 1985, p. 19.

¹³ Nelson Algren, ‘Un-American Idea: Sex Can Be Funny’, *Life*, 8 May 1964, p. 8.

¹⁴ Ingraham, p. 5.

¹⁵ When, for example, Daniel Simon edited Algren’s draft essay ‘A Walk on the Wild Side’, publishing it as *Nonconformity: Writing on Writing* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998), he removed the original opening comic story of Algren’s Hollywood experience with Otto Preminger because he felt that ‘both its tone and its substance set it apart from the rest of *Nonconformity*’ (p. 114). Asserting that ‘the nexus of the essay’ is ‘the bond [Algren] feels with Fitzgerald’ (p. 83), Simon opens the essay with this more sober section, including the Preminger section only as an appendix. Allying Algren with contemporary

Reading Archives

Will you send on just the 90-odd pages of the novel about the girl in jail? I left it on your table, under the Dove stuff. Thanks. N. ¹⁶

Since his death in 1981, Algren's archive has provided several documentary items of evidence for *post mortem* reconstructions of his life, his work, his motivations, and their inter-relationship(s) – some more influential than others. Allying his so-called failed relationships with women with his failure to complete the novel he began working on after *The Man with the Golden Arm*, ('Entrapment'), commentators typically downplay the fact that, after *Chicago: City on the Make*, Algren – like countless other American artists, writers, and film makers – was blacklisted: the only serious projects he completed in the 1950s were those he was already under contract (and had received advances) to complete. Despite this, the mythology that Algren's professional career as a writer was self-sabotaged by his own self-destructive personality lingers in editorials that, in aggrandizing work he didn't complete (*Entrapment*, suggest Horvath and Simon, was to be 'an epic romance, Algren's *Doctor Zhivago* if you will'), undermine the complexity and completeness of his published oeuvre.¹⁷

The principal problem Algren's archive at Ohio State University presents is its incompleteness – it falls far short of representing everything he ever wrote. There is no sign, for example, of 'the 90-odd pages of the novel about the girl in jail' he repeatedly asked his ex-wife to find for him after their final separation. Conversely, the archive contains papers that seem to have gone unnoticed. When he was negotiating the sale of his papers to OSU in 1965, he was, writes Elva Griffith, assistant curator at the time, 'trying to get enough money from the sale of the material to keep him while he was working on a new novel.'¹⁸ Readers would be forgiven for thinking Griffith refers here to an ever-lingering 'Entrapment' but archival evidence points more convincingly to a

canonical writers is a method by which his publishers have, historically, tried to raise his profile. Such attempts, however, are doomed to failure by the vagaries of academic and literary fashion: Algren has repeatedly been attached to writers on the cusp of having had their critical day.

¹⁶ Nelson Algren letters to Amanda Algren, NA/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded.

¹⁷ Horvath and Simon, p. 109.

¹⁸ Elva Griffith, 'The Nelson Algren Archive at the Ohio State University Libraries', in *Nelson Algren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 173.

novel with the working title of ‘slow suicide’. When, for example, in a 1964 letter to Algren his friend Madeleine Gobeil mentions she has heard he is writing a novel, it is most likely to this work-in-progress that she refers.¹⁹

Hidden from obvious view on versos of Algren’s papers are several pages from a long run: the first of these, page 20, is entitled ‘slow story’; by page 33 the title has become ‘slow suicide’; by page 181, ‘slow’; and the last of the pages found, numbered 285, is headed ‘slow: beyond.’ In a number of interviews Algren said he started writing his novels with only an idea or feeling in mind – never a comprehensive plan. These fragments from what was evidently a well-advanced working manuscript demonstrate this process. Their structure suggests too that Algren was considering pitching the story as a film or TV script: at first it reads as a novel; then as a script; then a novel again, with the final page, ‘slow: beyond’ sketching out the future development of the story. Written in the mid-1960s (Kennedy’s assassination features), ‘slow suicide’ is the story of James Lissner, a Chicago advertising agency art director. A divorcé with crippling alimony bills, Lissner is seeing a psychiatrist three times a week. During one of these sessions, ‘Dr. Sigmund,’ having fallen asleep, wakes up and apologises, to which Lissner replies:

What difference does it make: Listen – it’s no wonder you’re falling asleep. We’ve been raking over and over this same material for three years – my parents, my childhood, my fears, my problems. Ha! Before that – Jesus, that strange shrink in Oak Park who never spoke but wrote down every word I said for a full year. Ah-ha! What good is all this *talking*? (Lissner is alternately laughing and shouting.) Four years of psycho and I’m still waiting for the therapy to begin. I *understand* I’m supposed to love my mother and hate my father – and I do! So when does the cure start? When can I fuck again? Ha!²⁰

¹⁹ Madeleine Gobeil, letter to Algren, NA/OSU, Box 35, Folder 637.

²⁰ Nelson Algren, ‘slow suicide’, p. 131, NA/OSU, Box 20, Folder 239. Italics in original. In the guide and inventory of the Nelson Algren Collection, this manuscript is listed as ‘an unidentified piece titled “Slow Suicide”’. I have retained the title as written in the original manuscript: ‘slow suicide’ is in lower case throughout. Throughout this thesis, all italicised text in quoted materials is in the original text unless otherwise stated.

Algren didn't keep all his work carefully. There is so much missing from his archive that we should be careful what conclusions we draw about his life from draft manuscripts, but the above demonstrates his preoccupation with and desire to write about issues surrounding masculine sexuality and dysfunctional heterosexual love was alive and kicking in the mid-1960s, the decade in which the mythology surrounding him has it that he was a writer 'at sea.' Perhaps Algren's agent or publisher didn't think a book linking (the apparent failure of) psychoanalysis, male sexual impotence, and the high financial and emotional price American men typically paid for failed marriages and divorces in the 1960s would sell.

Reading Love

Love in the Algren text has, historically, posed problems for two sets of readers: those who read his textual women over-romantically, and those who don't read them romantically enough. Both sets of problems are contained, in fact, in Giles's articulation of a 'problem for feminist critics' because, in Algren's texts, women are indeed 'societal victims' (as prostituted women) and 'romantic ideals'²¹ (both in their work as prostitutes and as the lovers of Cass, Bruno, Dove): but for the prostituted women and for the men who have intercourse with them, whether romantic or sexual, this is not a contradiction in terms.

The complexities of Algren's treatment of love were first probed by George Bluestone in his 1957 essay 'Nelson Algren.' This essay has functioned as a jazz standard in Algren criticism but one of its most popular riffs is problematic. The problem lies in Bluestone's extraction of a general principle from readings of *Somebody in Boots* and *Never Come Morning* whereby

in Algren's central vision, self-destruction becomes operative only after the destruction of some loved object. The moment a central character becomes responsible for such ruin, he is irrevocably doomed.²²

This formula has since been adopted by readers to explain the downfall of a Cass or a Bruno, a Frankie or a Dove without problematising Bluestone's assessment of Algren's

²¹ Giles, p. 107.

²² George Bluestone, 'Nelson Algren', *Western Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Autumn 1957, p. 31.

‘central vision’ or the sets of heteronormative ideals that inform his notions of responsibility, agency, and ‘loved objects’. This thesis challenges this aspect of Bluestone’s reading to expose the critically dated and gendered *a priori*s that inform this and other readings published, for example, when there was no such feminist as a feminist prostitute. An equally important reason Bluestone’s reading of love in Algren’s work requires revision, however, is that it critically underpins an obstinate problem at the peculiarly vulnerable textual juncture where Algren’s fictional works meet his life.

The only biography of Algren published to date, Bettina Drew’s *Nelson Algren: A Life on the Wild Side* (1990) reads most of Algren’s fiction as psychobiography, marrying the writer’s character to that of his leading men, particularly *Never Come Morning*’s Bruno Bicek and *The Man with the Golden Arm*’s Frankie Majcinek.²³ Drew charts a distinctly downward trajectory through Algren’s life, helped along by contributions from people who had difficult relationships with him, most, if not all of which had been severed years or decades before he died. Echoing Bluestone’s description of a ‘central character ... irrevocably doomed,’ she concludes her discussion of the end of Algren’s relationship with Beauvoir and other previously close friends on the note that ‘Algren’s need to destroy love had to be accepted, finally, as a tragic but undeniable part of his personality.’²⁴ This thesis, by challenging Bluestone’s ‘love story script’ by extension challenges the narrative arc Drew draws in her biography. For if readings of Algren’s women have been performed according to worn-out literary genres, gendered *a priori*s and archaic love-scripts, so too, I believe, have readings of Algren’s life as a writer: the two problems are related.

²³ See Drew, p. 139. At the time of writing, Colin Asher is working on a new Algren biography. See Colin Asher, ‘But Never A Lovely So Real’, *The Believer*, January 2013

<http://www.believmag.com/issues/201301/?read=article_asher> [accessed 24 December 2014]

²⁴ Drew, p. 324. Two recently published books add to the ongoing mythologisation of the Algren/Beauvoir relationship: Thomas Dyja’s *The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), and Irène Frain’s *Beauvoir in Love* (Paris: Éditions Michel Lafon, 2012). Dyja’s account of the relationship, woven into his otherwise very readable history of Chicago, reproduces many of the clichés about the Algren/Beauvoir affair that have progressively passed as fact over the past three decades. Frain’s fictionalised account of the love affair adheres closely to the historical facts of the relationship and draws only from sources in the public domain, including Algren’s archive at Ohio State University.

Reading Lives

There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He is too many people, if he's any good.

F. Scott Fitzgerald²⁵

In 1993, Drew's archive, accumulated in the writing of the biography, was bought by OSU. Access to original letters, photographs, transcripts and recordings of interviews affords researchers invaluable insight into Drew's guiding principles. Listening to the interviews, one hears how questions shape responses; how, in the biography's final composition, voices find their place in a system of prioritisation determined, finally, by the biographer. Algren's twice-ex-wife, Amanda, for example, was granted a great deal of authority. Algren's gambling habit is deemed an important indication of character, so the quiet and slightly irritated voice of H. E. F. Donohue insisting that Algren 'didn't gamble that much' isn't included.²⁶ Similarly, Clancy Sigal made interesting comments about Algren's intellectuality, Beauvoir, and his attitude towards organised feminism. According to Sigal,

Algren was vastly educated, but for de Beauvoir to think that he was an intellectual would have completely gone against her conception of him as a street rebel. Rather than the equality of women, he was much more interested in what everything boiled down to. As far as he was concerned, only a born sexist would want to have that kind of conversation. ... No-one could have behaved better toward everyone, including women, but pomposity was inevitably going to trigger off the practical joking side.²⁷

Drew incorporated neither detail into her biography. And when Beauvoir, in her interview with Drew said, 'Algren was not an intellectual,' Drew emphatically agreed, asserting in her biography that 'Theory made him uncomfortable.'²⁸ Such a statement

²⁵ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-up, and Other Unpublished Notes, Pieces and Letters*, ed. by Edmund Wilson (New York: Viking, 1961), p. 117. Algren's own copy is marked in the margin next to this of Fitzgerald's notes.

²⁶ H. E. F. Donohue, interviewed by Drew, BD/OSU, Box 15, Cassette 32-33, 30 June 1984.

²⁷ Clancy Sigal, interviewed by Drew, BD/OSU, Box 15, (Cassette number unrecorded).

²⁸ Drew, p. 177. Beauvoir, interviewed by Drew, BD/OSU, Box 15, Cassette 28-29, 1985, 1987.

made in the 1990s light of Beauvoir's ever-rising star in Western scholarship is of course intellectually freighted.

By problematising the 'love story' script proposed by Bluestone in 1958, then, my thesis, by extension and as by-product, seeks to loosen the connections that have been drawn between Algren's life and his texts. This is not because I wish to propose any other 'Algren' to replace or flesh out the versions in current circulation, but because I suspect that the too-close conjunction of Algren-the-man with a Cass, a Bruno or a Frankie has immunised his texts against critical attention to the fact that most of his 'dead end heroes and good for nothing chumps' are rapists, thugs, pimps and panderers. Reading these men in the light that Algren's women shine on them not only more completely exposes Algren's prescient attention to the gendered mechanics that construct patriarchal masculinities, it also coincidentally lightens the load that over-burdens Algren-the-writer. However, it is also necessary to more specifically contest the grounds on which the Algren/Beauvoir mythology has been constructed. To this end, the rest of this chapter is divided into two sections: in the first I tease apart some of the layers of Algren's *réputation à la Beauvoir* in the hope that future researchers will loosen others that, due to the scope of this thesis, I can only indicate in passing. In the remainder of the chapter, I set up the 'complex experiment in narration' and get it running, ready for its demonstration in the following chapters' readings of *Somebody in Boots*, *Never Come Morning*, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, and *A Walk on the Wild Side*.

Une réputation à la Beauvoir

Send to me some unread good books if you ever meet any.

Simone de Beauvoir to Nelson Algren²⁹

Bill Savage issues a tall order when he advises readers that 'As we study Algren's works and his critical reception, we must keep in mind the complex dynamic of material

²⁹ Letter dated Sunday, 10 December 1950, *A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: New Press, 1998), p. 392; *Beloved Chicago Man: Letters to Nelson Algren 1947-64* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 399. Both editions compiled and annotated by Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir; notes and translations by Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, Sara Holloway, Vanessa Kling, Kate LeBlanc, and Ellen Gordon Reeves.

culture and textual representation that simultaneously creates and reflects that reputation'³⁰ because today, Algren's *réputation à la Beauvoir* forms an important layer of the 'preinterpretive field.' This is most economically illustrated by two photographs that have become iconic in Chicago in recent years – one with which the Nelson Algren Committee advertises its yearly celebration of Algren's birthday, the other, Art Shay's much celebrated 1950 photograph of Simone de Beauvoir, first exhibited in Paris in the spring of her centenary, 2008.³¹



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

It lies beyond the scope of this thesis to deal with all the textual representations (biographies, editorials, magazine articles and essays) that 'create and reflect' Algren's *réputation à la Beauvoir*, but important iceberg texts demonstrate the contingencies that underpin its construction.³² The most important are: Beauvoir's novel, *The Mandarins* (1956) and her biographical volume, *Force of Circumstance* (1964)³³; Deirdre Bair's

³⁰ Savage, "It Was Dope!": The Paperback Revolution and the Literary Reputation of Nelson Algren' in *Nelson Algren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 160.

³¹ Algren mugshot copied from The Nelson Algren Committee's website. See <www.nelsonalgren.org> [accessed 12 December 2014]. Art Shay photograph of Simone de Beauvoir was very kindly provided for this thesis by Shay.

³² See for example, Hazel Rowley, *Tête-à-Tête: Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), Carole Seymour-Jones, *A Dangerous Liaison: Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre* (London: Century, 2008), Irène Frain, 'La passion selon Beauvoir', *Paris Match*, 4 October 2012, pp. 82-89.

³³ Published in the original French (Paris: Gallimard) in 1954 and 1963 respectively.

Simone de Beauvoir (1990) and Bettina Drew's *Nelson Algren: A Life on the Wild Side* (1990); and the published editions of Beauvoir's letters to Algren (1997).³⁴

Algren witnessed the first stage of his own mythology-in-the-making when Beauvoir wrote 'him' into her 1954 novel, *Les mandarins*, as Lewis Brogan, 'a classic leftist writer,' American lover of Anne Dubreuilh,³⁵ and, a decade later when, in her biographical volume, *Force des choses*, she attempted to explain the place he had occupied in her life as one of her 'contingent' lovers within the terms of her 'pact' with Sartre.³⁶ Algren objected to being characterised in either book and, after the publication of the US translation of the latter, *Force of Circumstance* (1964), he severed all connections with Beauvoir, writing a scathing review of the volume in *Harpers Magazine* (May 1965). Beauvoir responded with an article in *McCall's*, 'A celebrated Frenchwoman explains What Love Is – and Isn't'. And Algren replied with another review, 'Simone à Go Go', in the left-wing magazine *Ramparts*.³⁷ The most vitriolic paragraphs from Algren's reviews have since been cited in every biographical treatment of their affair.

³⁴ The editions referred to in this thesis are *Beloved Chicago Man: Letters to Nelson Algren 1947-64* (London: Phoenix, 1999), *A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: The New Press, 1998), and *Lettres à Nelson Algren* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

³⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *Les mandarins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 14: 'D'abord, j'avais été amusée de rencontrer en chair et en os ce specimen américain classique: écrivain-de-gauche-qui-s'est-fait-lui-même.' ('In the beginning, I found it amusing to meet a real flesh and blood example of that classic American specimen: a self-made leftist writer.' Translation mine.)

³⁶ See Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance* (1964) (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 134, (with changes to the translation by myself):

There are many couples who conclude more or less the same pact as Sartre and myself: to maintain throughout all deviations from the main path a 'certain fidelity'. ... In certain cases, for one reason or another – children, common interests, the strength of the bond – the couple is impregnable. If the two allies allow themselves only passing sexual liaisons, then there is no difficulty, but it also means that the freedom they allow themselves is not worthy of the name. Sartre and I have been more ambitious; it has been our wish to experience 'contingent loves'; but there is one question we have deliberately avoided: How would the third person feel about our arrangement?

³⁷ The battle of the magazine articles: Nelson Algren, 'The Question of Simone de Beauvoir: A Review by Nelson Algren', *Harper's Magazine*, May 1965, pp. 134-36; Simone de Beauvoir, 'A celebrated Frenchwoman explains What Love Is – and Isn't', *McCall's*, August 1965, pp. 71, 133; Nelson Algren, 'Simone à Go Go', *Ramparts*, October 1965, pp. 65-67 <<http://www.unz.org/Pub/Ramparts-1965oct-00065>> [accessed 18 December 2015]

In *Force of Circumstance* Beauvoir explained the place Algren had occupied in her life on two counts: as ‘contingent’ lover, and as biographical source for Lewis Brogan:

Of all my characters, Lewis is the one who approaches closest to a living model; external to the plot, he was exempt from its necessities, I was completely free to depict him as I wished; it so happens – a rare coincidence – that Algren, in his reality, was very representative of what I wanted to represent; but I did not content myself with a mere anecdotal fidelity: I used Algren to invent a character who would exist without reference to the world of real people.

For, contrary to what has been said, it is untrue that *The Mandarins* is a *roman à clé* I loathe *romans à clé* as much as I loathe fictionalized biographies: it is impossible to sleep and dream if my senses remain awake; it is equally impossible to move into the world of fiction while still remaining anchored to the real world. If he tries to encompass both real and imaginary worlds at the same time, the reader becomes confused; and one would have to be a very cruel author indeed to inflict such a palimpsest on him.³⁸

Despite Beauvoir’s exegesis, *The Mandarins* has been widely read as a *roman à clé*, and readers have ignored (or never read) Beauvoir’s paradoxical directive concerning the Algren/Brogan interface. Equally, readers who don’t understand the importance of the self-mythologising project of Beauvoir’s novels and autobiographical texts ignore both that her autobiographical volumes are highly selective and economical with the truth about her sexual and affective life and that her novels often served as a forum in which she exacted revenge on ex-friends and ex-lovers. Whether or not, as Barbara Klaw suggests, Algren/Brogan became for Beauvoir ‘a means of expressing a traditionally acceptable range of sexual desires and animal passions when [she] could not write about other feelings and experiences,’³⁹ the problem for Algren’s reputation lies in the fact that Beauvoir’s double-account of their relationship has been unquestioningly adopted, complete with and despite its inconsistencies, by biographers ever since – despite the

³⁸ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, pp. 279-80.

³⁹ Barbara Klaw, ‘Simone de Beauvoir and Nelson Algren: Self-Creation, Self-Contradiction, and the Exotic, Erotic Feminist Other’, in *Contingent Loves, Simone de Beauvoir and Sexuality*, ed. by Melanie C. Hawthorne (Charlottesville, VA, and London: University Press of Virginia 2000), p. 119.

fact that, in her interview with Drew, Beauvoir confessed, ‘Vous savez, je ne l’ai pas très bien connu.’⁴⁰

In her biography, *Simone de Beauvoir* (1990), Deirdre Bair – the only academic researcher ever to have had permission to read any quantity of Algren’s letters to Beauvoir – puts some flesh on the bones of Beauvoir’s ‘living model’, drawing on their cross-correspondence as well as dozens of hours of interview with Beauvoir to evidence their close intellectual engagement during and beyond the two to three years they were romantically involved. According to Bair, Beauvoir’s discussions with Algren in May 1947 were part of the early genetic moments of *The Second Sex*:

It was Algren with whom [Beauvoir] first discussed her “essay on women,” and it was he who initially encouraged her to think about expanding it into a book. They had discussed the situation of women when they were in New York in May [1947] He had been fascinated to learn that French women had only just received the right to vote, and as his questions became more probing, they had settled on the topic “women’s status throughout the world” as the possible theme of, if not a book, then certainly a long article for *Les Temps Modernes*.⁴¹

Listing many of the books they discussed in their letters or which Algren sent or recommended to Beauvoir when she was writing *The Second Sex*, and evidencing their epistolary discussions and advice about their respective works-in-progress, Bair portrays two politically committed writers passionately interested in each other’s ideas and work. In particular, Bair observes that Algren was ‘mentor for all things American, especially the political and social history of the United States.’ It was he who first suggested that Beauvoir conduct her study of women in the light of the experience of black Americans in a prejudicial society and who introduced her to the contemporary literature about black Americans.⁴² He was, Bair observes, always ready to discuss Beauvoir’s work

⁴⁰ ‘You know, I didn’t know him very well.’

⁴¹ Bair, p. 353. Bair describes these letters as ‘selected at random’ by Beauvoir (see p. 648, f. n.7). Danish novelist Anastassia Arnold was given access to Algren’s letters when researching her novel *Smertefælden : Simone de Beauvoir og Nelson Algren : en kælighedens anatomi* (Politikens, 2006), on condition that she didn’t quote from them.

⁴² See Bair, p. 364. According to Bair, Algren introduced Beauvoir to the work of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, notably Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1944). He also sent her *What the Negro Wants*, ed. by R. W. Logan (Chapel Hill:

with her ‘in the fine, critical detail that she was seldom able to elicit from Sartre.’ And when their romance cooled in 1950, Algren ‘continued to listen attentively and make detailed comments on her thoughts, ideas and writings.’ Indeed, their ‘correspondence flourished on an even higher intellectual level than before.’⁴³

Drew, on the other hand, wasn’t permitted to see any of Algren’s letters. Consequently her biography provides scant information about the shared intellectual life of Beauvoir and Algren and exaggerates the literary reputation of Beauvoir in the context of 1947 America.⁴⁴ Ironically, then, Algren’s biography provides a source text from which important feminist critics such as Toril Moi have drawn to refute what they consider to be Bair’s ‘far too positive assessment of the virtues’ of the Algren/Beauvoir relationship. If Moi writes Algren off as ‘a compulsive gambler, given to excessive consumption of alcohol ... widely known for his moody and difficult personality’ whose “‘need to destroy love had to be accepted, finally, as a tragic but undeniable part of his personality’” it’s because his own biographer had done it first.⁴⁵ Consequently, for Moi and many other feminist critics, the only intellectual significance of the relationship is that Beauvoir experienced her first heterosexual orgasm, and it was this, ‘the power of

University of North Carolina Press, 1944), a collection of essays by contributors including W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes.

⁴³ Bair, pp. 445-46.

⁴⁴ Drew writes, for example, that by 1947 Beauvoir was well known and, ‘dubbed “the hope of French literature,” had published three well-received novels: *She Came to Stay*, *The Blood of Others*, and *All Men Are Mortal*.’ But Drew conflates contexts here, citing from Francis and Gontier’s 1985 biography of Beauvoir that cites a Parisian review of Beauvoir’s third novel *L’invitée*. Beauvoir was not dubbed ‘the hope of French literature’ in 1947 America and none of her novels had yet been published in English translation. *The Blood of Others* would be published in 1948, *She Came to Stay (L’invitée)* in 1949, *All Men Are Mortal* in 1955, and *The Mandarins* in 1956, the same year as Algren’s *A Walk on the Wild Side*.

⁴⁵ Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 295, f.n. 31. In the last clause Moi quotes Drew’s *Nelson Algren: A Life on the Wild Side*, p. 324. I met Bettina Drew in May 2009 and we discussed the problems of writing biography within the constraints of a limited word-count and the necessity of creating a birth-to-death narrative. I had noticed in her archive that earlier drafts of the manuscript were more speculative and open-ended and, consequently, more satisfying to read. Drew agreed, and said that to keep within her word limit she had had to sacrifice some of the ‘pleasure in the text’ for factual integrity.

her sexual passion for Algren [that] helped Beauvoir to place sexuality firmly at the centre of her agenda' in *The Second Sex*.⁴⁶

When, three years later, Beauvoir's letters to Algren were published, they conveyed proof positive of 'the power of [that] sexual passion' to a mixed feminist audience. Julia Kristeva and Ingrid Galster, for example, suggested the letters shed light on *The Second Sex*, Kristeva going so far as to suggest they should be considered its third volume.⁴⁷ However, for many readers, Beauvoir's letters posed a problem. Lillian Robinson, on the other hand, was 'astonish[ed] that Beauvoir conducted her affair with that macho know-nothing at the very time she was writing *The Second Sex*.'⁴⁸ Ursula Tidd more usefully describes this dichotomy as a site of 'tension':

Throughout Beauvoir's correspondence with Algren there is a tension deriving from the paradoxical situation in which she found herself – working on *Le Deuxième Sexe*, perhaps the most important feminist text of the century, while conducting the most highly charged sexual relationship of her life with a man who was no feminist. On 23 February, 1948, she writes that she was working in the public library learning about how men like Algren oppress women like her.⁴⁹

Beauvoir isn't critically renowned for her sense of humour, but it's never far below the surface in her letters to Algren; she often mocks him, particularly on the subject of gender roles and domestic labour, nourishing what were very obviously ongoing in-jokes. The example to which Tidd refers is typical:

I am in the public library today, learning the different ways by which you dirty men oppressed us, poor womanly creatures.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Moi, p. 190. Moi is not the first or only feminist critic to equate Beauvoir's placement of sexuality at the centre of her agenda with her personal experience of a passionate sexual experience with Algren. I cite Moi because her conclusions are based on readings of Bair and Drew's biographies and because, being a world-renowned Beauvoir critic, her opinion carries high academic capital.

⁴⁷ Ingrid Galster, *Beauvoir dans tous ses états* (Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 2007), p. 312.

⁴⁸ Lillian Robinson, 'Before the Second Sex', *The Women's Review of Books*, 7 (April 1999), 3.

⁴⁹ Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 41.

⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 174; *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 178.

The practice of taking Beauvoir seriously as feminist theorist and philosopher has perhaps over-conditioned critical responses to the epistolary remnants of her private life. But such expectations were more than met halfway by the editing process her letters to Algren underwent from archive to book which created perceptible structural ‘tensions’ between their lines.

Reading Between the Lines

In her introduction to the published editions of Beauvoir’s letters to Algren, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir writes that her decision to publish them was informed by the ‘crying need to establish a definitive authentic text once and for all, to offer an exact reading’ because researchers had, particularly since Beauvoir’s death (1986), ‘indulged in literary piracy and unauthorized use, perpetuating an endless stream of inaccuracy and distortion.’

What Simone de Beauvoir so feared came to pass: she was made to say just about anything. Problems with deciphering her difficult handwriting were worsened by misunderstanding, both deliberate and inevitable. The results of such incompetence, inexperience, or malice are amazing. When “beloved” is coldly transcribed as “blond,” who only knows what else has been done to less innocent words and phrases?⁵¹

Le Bon de Beauvoir’s introduction, then, conditions readers to expect a faithful transcription of the letters. Furthermore her assurance that she has ‘When necessary ... added whatever explanations – Algren’s responses, descriptions of daily occurrences or important milestones – are needed to ensure continuity and intelligibility’ suggests that some outline of the ‘invisible man’ in the text, Algren, will take shape between its lines.⁵² However the published letters often—whether by ‘deliberate and inevitable’ misunderstanding, or ‘incompetence, inexperience, or malice,’ it’s impossible to tell—render Algren considerably less visible than he is in the original letters. ‘Tensions’ are everywhere: in the ruptures created by the cutting and pasting of sections of text from

⁵¹ Le Bon de Beauvoir, Introduction to the New York edition of Beauvoir’s letters, *A Transatlantic Love Affair* (p. 8). The last two sentences of this paragraph are not included in the London edition, *Beloved Chicago Man*.

⁵² Le Bon de Beauvoir, Preface to *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 9, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 8.

one letter to another; deletions of sections or entire letters; the addition of punctuation, e.g. the insertion of brackets, exclamation marks etc, to import rhythm or emotionally enliven otherwise dull phraseology; translations from the French edition (re-translated) import 'Frenchisms' that aren't in the original letters: hundreds of textual alterations, major and minor, create a bumpy read.

The first type of deletion, particularly notable in Beauvoir's early letters, removes references to the permanent nature of her love – her long-term forecasts of the trajectory of their relationship. An important trope in the Algren/Beauvoir mythology figures Algren as a backward-thinking man, incapable of understanding and accommodating Beauvoir's supposedly more progressive take on love and intimate relationships. So, evidence that she shared or nourished traditional romantic expectations has often (but not always) been removed, as have many of the instances where she – often very comically and with evident lack of self-consciousness – shares her emotional and intellectual fragilities and insecurities. Many deletions remove evidence that might lead readers to suspect she was 'no feminist' after all: her anxiety about putting on weight; being desirable to Algren when they were next due to meet; her playful adoption of the role of prostitute to his pimp; her hilariously-described crash-diets and descriptions of her meals; her uncharitable attitude towards other women: many comments that might be read 'wrong' have been omitted from the published letters. Beauvoir's self-doubt is less in evidence than in the originals; likewise, her admission of jealousy of Algren's writing talent; and the question, 'Darling, what do *you* think?' (about Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence or Jean Genet, Edith Wharton, Mark Aldanov, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Edgar Alan Poe, O. Henry or Thoreau – to name only a few of the many writers Beauvoir's letters mention) is repeatedly edited out of the published letters. Many of her positive references to Algren's work have been omitted or altered, with the effect of minimising both his professional status as a writer and Beauvoir's evident deference to that status. A particularly notable mis-transcription has Beauvoir writing, 'I thought about your humour and your tenderness, such as I found it in you and in our books' when the original is written, 'you and your books'.⁵³ Considering the importance of material success in the American context, the removal of references to Algren's success

⁵³ Beauvoir, letter to Algren, Monday 18 August 1947, NA/OSU, Box 33, Folder 603. See *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 61, *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 64. The Gallimard edition is accurately translated as 'vos livres' (p. 91).

is not an insignificant gesture. Nor are those that elevate Beauvoir. In one letter she writes that she has read *Moby Dick*, but in French: in the published versions this last clause has been omitted – an important detail in the Algren/Beauvoir mythology is that Algren refused to learn French while Beauvoir was fluent in English.

An especially important omission is a letter Beauvoir wrote just before leaving the US on October 1st 1950. Le Bon de Beauvoir's explanatory note preceding the published letter of Saturday 30 September explains that Beauvoir had 'spent an unbearable summer on Lake Michigan' and, leaving America, 'thought she would never see Algren again.'⁵⁴ The published letter ends:

Well, all words seem silly. You seem so near, so near, let me come near to you, too. And let me, as in the past times, let me be in my own heart forever. Your own Simone⁵⁵

Missing from the published volumes is the next letter Beauvoir wrote from New York airport, just before leaving America, which ends on the more upbeat note:

Good bye, Nelson. This summer is very precious and sunny in my heart. I'll soon write from Paris. You are forever dearest to me than anything in the world – so dear, so dear, dear you. I kiss you. Your own Simone⁵⁶

In fact the story the published letter tells more closely matches the end of the affair as fictionalised between Anne Dubreuilh and Lewis Brogan in *The Mandarins* and as recounted in *Force of Circumstance*. Along the same lines that construct Algren's *réputation à la Beauvoir*, then, the *post mortem* extension of Beauvoir's own textual self-creation—her own *réputation à la Beauvoir*—remained a work-in-progress.⁵⁷ And it is this that seems to be at stake in a letter that references the same conversation to

⁵⁴ Le Bon de Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 369, *Beloved Chicago Man*, pp. 375-76.

⁵⁵ Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 371, *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 377.

⁵⁶ Beauvoir, letter to Algren, 'Sunday, New York airport', NA/OSU, Box 34, Folder 616.

⁵⁷ Drew makes this point in her review of the US edition of Beauvoir's letters: 'an effort to mold the De Beauvoir image, like the one Algren so hated in "Force of Circumstance," is at work in this volume.' Bettina Drew, 'Simone de Beauvoir's Letters to Nelson Algren', *Chicago Tribune*, 27 Sep 1998, p. 3.

which Bair refers, cited above, between Beauvoir and Algren in a New York hotel room in May 1947. Beauvoir writes,

I told you about a very ugly woman who was in love with me – I remember: we were in the twin beds in New York and we spoke about women and I could see your dear face, I was happy, and I spoke to you about this woman. Well. Nothing happened. But I had dinner with her.⁵⁸

The published letter reads:

I told you about a very ugly woman who was in love with me – I remember: we were in the twin beds in New York and we spoke about this woman and I could see your dear face, I was happy. I had dinner with her.⁵⁹

It seems likely that the original letter's ambiguity was excised to protect Beauvoir from an over-zealous interest in her personal sexuality – unfortunately the same excision removed documentary evidence of Algren discussing the topic of 'women' with the writer of *The Second Sex*.

Another significant excision from the original letters occurs in another early letter. Thanks for the books. I have read *Sanctuary* and the Kuprin too. I think I should like the Adorno if you think it is interesting. You are really a nice man. And do you know what is the nicest thing a nice man can do when his girl is far away? It is to write to her very often. I like your letters better than any book.⁶⁰

becomes in the published versions:

⁵⁸ Beauvoir, letter to Algren, Wednesday 4 June 1947, NA/OSU, Box 33, Folder 601.

⁵⁹ *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 24, *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 27.

⁶⁰ Beauvoir, letter to Algren, Monday 2 June 1947, NA/OSU, Box 33, Folder 601. '[T]he Adorno' could have been one of Theodor Adorno's published articles – such as 'On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' (1938) (which begins the discussion continued in 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception'), but it could also be his and Max Horkheimer's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).

Thanks for the books. I have read *Sanctuary* and the Kouprine too. You are really a nice man, but I like your letters better than any book.⁶¹

In the published letter Algren didn't send Beauvoir anything she hadn't seen before – and her liking his letters 'better than any book' dismisses the idea that she might value an intellectual discussion about the books he sent. However, to like Algren's letters 'better than any book,' when that book is one of the newest social theorists publishing out of America in 1947 is another matter. The omission of evidence of an intellectual gift from Algren is surely meant to preserve Beauvoir's reputation as the intellectually 'independent woman' of *The Second Sex*.⁶²

The fact that Algren was reading Adorno and finding him interesting in the late 1940s is an invaluable piece of information for scholars interested in the intellectual ideas that find expression in his fictional work. But Mary Evans hints at its broader significance in the context of the intellectual exchange between Algren and Beauvoir when she writes that the idea of masculinity that most informs *The Second Sex* 'is the archetypical fascist of *The Authoritarian Personality* ... the authoritarian fearful of femininity and affectivity (Adorno et al., 1969). Indeed, it is interesting,' writes Evans, 'that both de Beauvoir and members of the Frankfurt School turned to a critical

⁶¹ *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 22, *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 24. This is just one of the many instances where the English-language editions of Beauvoir's letters import traces from the French edition. Beauvoir's 'Kuprin' of the original letter becomes 'Kouprine' in the French edition (which is how the Russian is rendered in French). At the end of the previous letter dated Thursday, 29 May 1947, she also spells 'wish' correctly, as opposed to the spelling in the published version, 'whish.' Likewise, she spells 'clinic' correctly in her letter of November 1963, but in the book it is written 'clinique.' These and similar mis-transcriptions and 'un-translations' inscribe Beauvoir's Frenchness in a way that the original letters do not. The original letters, on the other hand, contain errors of syntax and grammar which have been corrected by the transcribers/translators. The overall effect in the published letters, then, is of a more fluent English speaker than the original letters convey: grammatical fluidity, understanding the 'music' of a language indicates a higher level of language fluency – lexical accuracy, achievable with the help of a dictionary, is a less reliable indicator.

⁶² There are also a couple of interesting differences between the introductions to the New York and London editions. Most notably, the New York edition includes the following paragraph that the London edition (1999) does not: 'Simone de Beauvoir with her "talent for happiness," Algren victim of a neurotic fear of failure. In the end, his "loathsome twin, "the man in the starched detachable collar like Hoover's," the inflexible and deathly automaton riddled with resentment overpowered the "nice man," the "nice local youth," lively, gay, and warm. A terrible, pitiful, and tragic end' (p. 7).

examination of conventional masculinity at exactly the same historical moment of Western awareness of the Holocaust and its implications.’⁶³ Major world events experienced and witnessed simultaneously by writers and intellectuals necessarily result in close correspondences and related observations in their work. When Beauvoir met Algren in February 1947, he had already written three works profoundly invested in a ‘critical examination of conventional masculinity’ – *Somebody in Boots* (1935), *Never Come Morning* (1942), *The Neon Wilderness* (1947) – and was working on his fourth, *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949) – in which we meet men ‘fearful of femininity and affectivity’ and all of which dramatise key problems discussed in *The Second Sex*. In *Somebody in Boots*, we will see in the next chapter, the relationship between masculinity, racism, and fascism is exactly what Algren explored in the story of Cass McKay. And central to each of Algren’s texts is the problematisation of the troubled institutions and institutionalised borderlands where politics and economics meet sexuality and romantic love in prostitution and marriage. Indeed, when the French translation of *Never Come Morning* (*Le matin se fait attendre*) was published in 1951, Beauvoir wrote to Algren that a reviewer had understood why she liked the book so much, because ‘it is a savage illustration of *The Second Sex*.’ ‘I was amazed at it,’ she wrote, ‘as you should be.’⁶⁴ Having recently translated this novel (with Sartre) – a process that requires very close reading – Beauvoir’s amazement and her expectation that Algren should be amazed are extraordinary. Because *Never Come Morning*’s demonstration of the socio-political mechanics that construct the gang and the brothel dramatises problems that are key to the thesis of *The Second Sex* – most importantly, that men and women ‘become’ according to different scripts: the gang code is patriarchy distilled, and the brothel encodes patriarchy’s very second sex. Even Beauvoir’s famous dictum, ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,’ is prefigured in Catfoot’s observation that women ‘weren’t born that way, any of them.’⁶⁵ And the fifty-four page section of *Never Come Morning* that focuses on prostitution and features first-person accounts of ‘the life’ is entitled ‘Others’ (a title it loses in the

⁶³ Mary Evans, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Sage, 1996), p. 53.

⁶⁴ Beauvoir, letter of Wednesday 11 April 1951. *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 415, *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 424. I haven’t seen the original review to which Beauvoir refers but it seems likely to me that ‘savage’ is her translation of the term ‘sauvage’ which could also be translated as ‘primitive’ or ‘crude’.

⁶⁵ *Never Come Morning* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1988), p. 77.

French translation). Furthermore, as summarised by Sheldon Norman Grebstein in 1969:

The central theme of *Never Come Morning*, its whole truth, so to speak, is the refutation of what has been among the hallowed official truths of American society, a truth which Algren considers the blackest lie: the belief that the individual retains the power of choice, of deciding between alternatives, in plotting his destiny.⁶⁶

This belief, ‘the blackest lie,’ of course, is not only ‘among the hallowed official truths of American society’ integral to the American Dream, but is also a key tenet of Sartrean existentialism which Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, through its exhaustive cataloguing and analysis of the socio-politico-cultural odds stacked against women ‘plotting their destiny,’ implicitly, when not explicitly, challenges. As Beauvoir scholars have noted, it is this position that distinguishes her existentialism from Sartre’s. It also allies her more closely with Algren’s ideas of Self and Other as inscribed in *The Man with the Golden Arm* in which Captain Bednar’s existential crisis hinges on his discovery that ‘we are all members of one another’ – which, of course, also talks back to the communitarian ethics and politics that underpin all Algren’s 1930s/40s novels and short stories.⁶⁷

The irony that Algren is more famous for upsetting Beauvoir with his cutting reviews of her *Force of Circumstance* than for his own lifelong documentation of the lives of women who become prostitutes and the socio-political mechanisms that construct the institution of prostitution is equalled by the fact that within the same review that so upset Beauvoir, he asks an oft-cited question which, directed at his oeuvre, reaps rich rewards. Responding to Beauvoir’s explication of the ‘contingency pact’ between herself and Sartre, Algren asks, ‘Anybody who can experience love contingently has a mind that has recently snapped. How can love be *contingent*? Contingent upon *what*?’⁶⁸ Putting Algren’s women at the forefront of our reading takes this question back to his texts in which the problems associated with love’s contingencies loom large: think of Cass’s loyalty to Norah, Steffi’s forgiveness of

⁶⁶ Sheldon Norman Grebstein, ‘Nelson Algren and the Whole Truth’, in *The Forties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, ed. by Warren French (Deland: Everett/Edwards, 1969), p. 303.

⁶⁷ *The Man with the Golden Arm*, p. 209.

⁶⁸ Algren, ‘The Question of Simone de Beauvoir’, p. 136.

Bruno, the windows into marital situations in *The Neon Wilderness*, the questions raised by the twin love triangles (Frankie, Zosh, Mollie; Solly, Vi, Stash) of *The Man with the Golden Arm*, and Dove's return to Arroyo to find Terasina who he left lying on the ground in a torn dress, having raped her (to all of which I attend in the following chapters). If we return now to the first 'problem for feminist critics' posited by Giles, that 'Algren tended to depict women as societal victims or romantic ideals or as a combination of both,'⁶⁹ and ask 'upon what is love contingent?' we find that in the Algren imaginary there is no contradiction in treating 'societal victims' as 'romantic ideals or as a combination of both' because neither love nor romantic idealism are in themselves contingent upon social status or contractual agreement. This has caused much critical confusion, it seems, because in Algren's storyworld, men love women yet facilitate, when they themselves don't carry out, the rape of those loved ones, and prostitutes function not only (or even mostly) as sex objects, but mostly (and sometimes only) as love objects. Entertaining these contradictions is essential if we are to understand the complex terrain of love and sex on which Algren's 'experiment in narration' depends.

To summarise then, this thesis addresses the abundant problems in Algren's work commonly understood to interest feminist critics more than other critical readers – prostitution, male sexual violence, rape, bad marriages. But it also acknowledges the historical complexities that have informed the many non-feminist critical readings of these issues in Algren's work. In so doing, it foregrounds the critical overlaps or lacunae between a 'feminist critique,' a 'critical feminist,' and a critical reader/writer who is 'no feminist.' Finally, however, it must also ask: Has the 'complex experiment in narration' to which Algren's women contribute failed if three generations of Algren criticism have, almost without exception, ignored the significance of his portraits of women within the bigger picture of the Algren oeuvre?

⁶⁹ Giles, p. 107.

Troubling Sensibility: Reading/Writing the Other

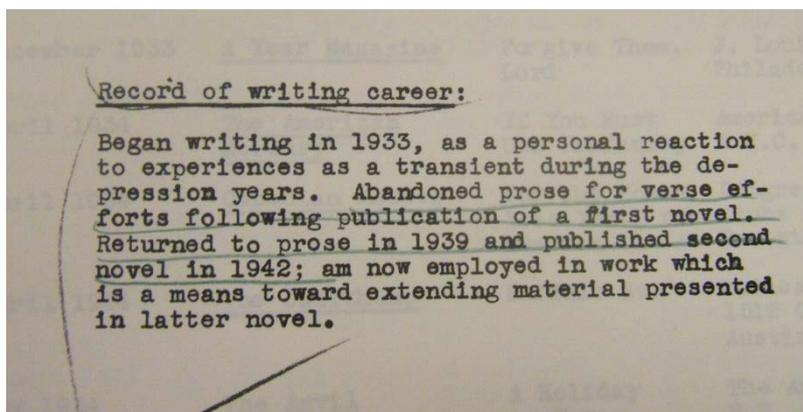


Fig. 6

Catherine Ingraham suggested a useful way to think about the textual inscription of Algren's 'personal reaction to experiences' when she observed that, for her, his collages exhibit a 'complex, vigorous, and often troubling sensibility.'⁷⁰ I suggest we can take this 'troubling' and ask it to function verbally, so that Algren's sensibility actively troubles. Adjectively, 'trouble' stays in Algren's lap; as a verb it requires the reader to note its action, its effect, on him or her. Recognising there may be trouble ahead primes us for self-reflexive readings that recognise that the troubles we experience reading texts don't necessarily mirror or reproduce the writer's troubles inscribed or encoded within them. Having made this adjustment, we can re-frame all the 'problems for feminist critics' in Algren's oeuvre as problems for 'troubled readers.' Reading Algren requires this self-reflexivity because how one feels about rape, violent sexuality, women who are prostitutes, and prostitution – whether one is morally troubled or, in French, *troublé(e)*, as in sexually or otherwise strongly physically and emotionally aroused – affects, polarises, and precedes our readings. Self-reflexivity asks that we invite a cognitive 'pause,' a suspension of a) decision-making (am I for or against), b) opinion-forming (I am for; I am against), and c) desire (sexual or textual), during which we may consider what Algren's women are actually doing and saying in his texts as opposed to what we suppose or imagine their profession dictates they do behind the doors which, not coincidentally, Algren more often than not closes between them and us.

⁷⁰ Ingraham, p. 5.

Trouble: Reading Prostitutes

‘Don’t you think it’s a sign of decay when women can be *bought*?’

Somebody in Boots

‘Is that true?’ Navy asked Mama curiously. ‘Can any woman become a whore? Any woman at all?’

‘Anyone at all,’ Mama was optimistic. ‘Aren’t we all created free and equal?’

*A Walk on the Wild Side*⁷¹

The first complexity of Algren’s ‘experiment in narration’ lies in the processes of our own readings. When we read (about) prostitutes, we project a raft of ideas based on our cumulative, gendered, and often presumptuous knowledge about them as well as our emotive and politico-moral responses to the possibility of their very existence. Do we, like Dill Doak, consider it a ‘sign of decay’ that women can be bought? Or do we, like Mama Lucille, treat prostitution as a career choice open to all ‘free and equal’ women? These are only two of the many positions we must try out if we are to ‘think sex’ in the Algren *corpus*. That reading Algren’s women asks us to recognise our first principles about prostitution and to problematise the personal (of the) schemas according to which it is understood, is the first important operation in the ‘complex experiment’ that works its way across the Algren *oeuvre*: readers are the guinea pigs on whose responses the experiment depends.⁷²

Algren’s close interest in prostitutes began in earnest when he was at college and he explored Walnut Street, one of the red light areas of Chicago with, as he said, ‘a very oppressive sense of sin.’⁷³ It was only after he graduated and was on the road looking for work that he would come to know women who were prostitutes on a personal level.

⁷¹ *Somebody in Boots*, p. 271; *A Walk on the Wild Side*, p. 212.

⁷² Pierre L. Horn and Mary Beth Pringle make this same point in their introduction to *The Image of the Prostitute in Modern Literature*, ed. by Pierre L. Horn and Beth Pringle (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984). Specifically, they advise that ‘readers who rely on criticism to explain literature should proceed with much caution. Criticism, giving us only one reader’s view of a text, is by definition “imperfect”’ (pp. 6-7).

⁷³ H. E. F. Donohue, *Conversations with Nelson Algren* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), p. 28.

Thereafter his interest in and personal involvement with them – romantic, sexual, platonic, at different times and in different places – was lifelong. Several pages of notes and draft manuscripts in his archive at OSU evidence his nascent focus on their lives but three documents in particular provide insight into how he responded to the complexities of writing about them. The first of these is a short piece, ‘Company,’ the second a poem, ‘Mary,’ the third, an autobiographical vignette, ‘The Mythical People.’

‘Company’ describes a youth’s first visit to a prostitute (Clara); the economic dynamics of the prostitute/john relationship are laid bare in their ‘dickering over a price.’ She wants seven dollars but this is a lot for the youth and, besides, he argues, he’d like to see her regularly, take her out, ‘drop over’ on his way home from work – proposals Clara refuses because her time is ‘strictly on the pay list.’⁷⁴ Interesting in this is that the reader’s sympathy lies simultaneously with each protagonist: with the boy who would like to conduct a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship with Clara, but also with Clara who needs to pay her bills.

‘Mary’ – structured as a poem – begins with several portraits of prostitutes who prefigure those of *Never Come Morning* before focusing on ‘the only one no one remembers .../... the quiet Bohemian named Mary...

Who happened to go to work a year or two too soon and who didn’t happen to be
built for “the life”
As they called it in those years,
And Mary did everything everyone asked, all her life, all the time,
Ever since something had frightened her in the year she was fourteen.⁷⁵

Mary is evidently in a sanatorium where ‘everyday, day in and day out’ she sits in a clean room ‘waiting patiently for saliva to gather’ so that she can spit out the ‘something that frightened her in her fourteenth year.’ The trauma of forced fellatio is both unstated and obvious: the pain of the young woman’s past experience is inscribed without naming – in other words repeating, restaging, recreating – the act of violation itself. In this maintenance of a balance between saying and not-saying one senses the possibility of, not an ‘othering’ distance between writing and subject, but a respectful maintenance of a distance that no stretch of the imagination can in any case bridge.

⁷⁴ ‘Company’, NA/OSU, Box 27, Folder 418.

⁷⁵ ‘Mary’, NA/OSU, Box 30, Folder 483.

Keeping one's distance from a subject is not always a symptom of distaste or avoidance but can also be a demonstration of respect or a symptom of aporia. In Algren's early drafts one senses that this is both the challenge (what to say about the unutterable?) and the balance his writing works towards (reader, feel this speechlessness). As I will show in the following chapters, much of Algren's work creates, rests on, circles round, and considers this fulcrum from various authorial distances and narrative angles: knowing/not-knowing, revealing/not revealing, saying/not saying and most importantly in all of this, not making claims to authority.

'The Mythical People' recounts in memoir form an important instance of the young narrator 'being in the room with' a prostitute – literally, in 'a cheap hotel on the outskirts of Minneapolis,' but also, for the first time, 'in the room' created by his own prejudices about prostitutes and prostitution. The narrator has been staying in the hotel for three days before he realises the many women on the floor below are working there and is then uncertain whether or not to leave. When one of them comes by to see if he will share his whisky with her – because she's 'got a cold' – she sits on his bed while he keeps his distance, and the conversation takes the following turn:

'It's a tiresome kind of game, isn't it?' I asked, and she thought I meant pinochle or whist and started to say no, she liked cards herself, and then understood.

'O – you mean downstairs. Yeh, it gets you down after a while. Well, just like everything else.'

'Does everything get you down?'

'Well, you know what I mean, what's the diff if you come to work here at seven and stay till five in the morning taking care of guys, or whether you stand on your pins from nine to five-thirty runnin a elevator? Here at least you get a chance to have [a] cigarette when you want it. You're all punched out when it's time to go home anyhow. And this pays a little better.'

'Do you go home?' I asked. For the first time she seemed affronted.

'Why of course, hon. I go home and go to bed same as you or anybody else.'

'O I didn't mean I sort of thought you were living behind barred doors and couldn't go and come like other people,' I lied, 'What I was driving at was whether a fellow could see you outside anywhere, take in a show or something.'

‘We can’t meet nobody from outside, hon. And I live home and my folks think I’m a real nice girl.’

‘Well you are – I think you’re a nice girl – I don’t have sympathy with people who just start condemning before understanding – preachers you know – ‘

The expression of her face stopped me. I’d made a bad mistake. She rose swiftly. I had been overly eager to prove I had no contempt for her, while she had never once assumed that I could be contemptuous. I had betrayed myself, and she wouldn’t be patronised.

‘You aren’t preaching at me now, are you?’ she asked from the door.

I was apologetic, but she had been hurt and there was no keeping her now.⁷⁶

This fragment sheds light on the interpersonal dynamics that inform Algren’s sympathetic imagining of prostitutes and their lives; the mythologies surrounding prostitutes and prostitution, how we read them – their reputation as such – are exposed by his ‘bad mistake,’ the dynamics of which allow us to understand an important component of his complex experiment in narration. Note that the severity of the narrator’s mistake is communicated to him by the girl’s face. The Algren reader is often asked to note such silent communicative acts; speechless faces speak and the absence of words is not equivalent to the absence of meaning. At the same time, ‘The Mythical People’ describes another important feature of the emotional as intellectual experience: the young man’s uncomfortable emotions force him to recognise the ‘prostitute’ as a ‘young woman,’ to re-cognise, to reorder his cognitive patterning, his conception of her lived life, her reality. It is this dynamic that Algren’s work seeks to construct and around which, I suggest, many of its tensions vibrate.

Algren’s creative return would forever be elastically attached to the deeper understanding of prostitutes’ lives I suggest this episode and other intimate involvements with prostitutes taught him. We see him develop the above episode in a conversation between Tookie and a John in *Never Come Morning*:

‘Do you still enjoy bein’ a prostitoot?’ He tried to take that back. Even her lips went pale. She shoved him and sat up.

⁷⁶ ‘The Mythical People’, NA/OSU, Box 30, Folder 495.

‘Prostitute! Prostitute! What a *fancy* word! What do you want for a dollar?’
Then the mascara was running beside her eyes and the artificial lashes were suddenly wet and she was pleading to be let be.

‘Can’t you say ‘girl’ just once? Just *once*?’⁷⁷

Tookie voices the emotions Algren read in the face of the girl in ‘The Mythical People’ and the Algren text expects readers to understand what he came to understand as a young man in the Depression: that the prostitute is first of all a girl or a woman and remains a girl or a woman after she decides to or is forced by the various circumstances that force anyone to trade their body as ‘a prostitute.’ The ‘mythical’ girl has a home where she really is a real nice girl, and really is not a prostitute.

As I demonstrate in all the following chapters, the women in Algren’s oeuvre perform several narrative functions: importantly, they document the conditions that lead girls and women into lives of prostitution, and at the level of plot, some of them are indeed the lovers of ‘good for nothing chumps.’⁷⁸ Their stories function synchronically – individually, each text presents self-contained case studies of prostitutes; and they function diachronically – they connect and relate forward and back to each other across poem, short story, novel, essay, and song.

One way to identify the prostitutes’ contributions to the dialogic of Algren’s texts is to begin with what is observable about the first portrait of a woman in his published work: the gentle mulatto girl of ‘Within the City’, noted earlier. If we map the presence of women in Algren’s texts according to voice, volume (auditory and spatial), docility, humour/solemnity, and colour, we observe that across the oeuvre they become progressively more numerous, vociferous, audible, funny and serious, and black. From the thick description of one woman’s journey into prostitution in *Somebody in Boots* to the multi-focal and multi-vocal case studies of the women of *Never Come Morning*; from the first-person prostitutes in *The Neon Wilderness*’s ‘Is Your Name Joe?’ and ‘Please Don’t Talk About Me When I’m Gone,’ to the brothel as comedic space and the prostitute as comedian in *A Walk on the Wild Side*; from Algren’s editorial diatribes in defence of prostitutes in his 1961 afterword to *Chicago: City on the Make* and in *Who*

⁷⁷ *Never Come Morning*, p. 206. All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁷⁸ Horvath and Simon, Introduction to section 4, ‘Entrapment, 1951-1953’ of *Entrapment*, ed. by Horvath and Simon, p. 113.

Lost an American? to the sociologically-informed case study vignettes by an ethnographer-gone-native in *Notes from a Sea Diary: Hemingway All the Way*; and finally, to *The Devil's Stocking* in which Joan, Jenny, and Jane (three 'hundred-dollar-an-hour women'⁷⁹) appear in a parody of the popular American television chat show, 'The Phil Donahue Show' and scandalise host Uriah Yipkind with their frank accounts of their profession, the final scene of which features a bar-owning black woman who has read Frantz Fanon: the Algren text-over-time makes room for women who are prostitutes in general and black women in particular. Where the primary stages of an experiment identify broad patterns, repetitions, and returns, this is the first 'big picture' Algren's women create.

If we now map the presence of women across the Algren oeuvre with an ear to what they say, the evidence for Giles' assertion that 'Algren's treatment of prostitutes represents ... a complex experiment in narration' comes more clearly to the fore.⁸⁰ Algren's stories do not only document the socio-political conditions that create and support prostitution. More specifically, his women reflect and magnify the men in the text, providing close-up documentation of the behaviours of men who pander, pimp, use, and abuse women who are prostitutes. Algren's 'portraits of women,' my readings will demonstrate, are not cameos designed to support the plots of good for nothing heroes but portraits of sexual-ethnographic informants, sex experts with loud hailer through which they exhort the reader to "Look at what these men (Cass, Bruno, Frankie, Dove) are doing!" The voices of Algren's women everywhere discuss – in narrated, reported, implied, suggested, first- and second-person voices – male sexuality, male sexual violence, and the politics of heterosexuality in love, sex, and marriage.

Central to the plots of three out of the four novels Algren published in his lifetime is the rape of a woman: in *Somebody in Boots* Charlotte Hallem is raped by a group of hobos; in *Never Come Morning* Steffi Rostenkowski is raped by her boyfriend Bruno's gang; and in *A Walk on the Wild Side*, Terasina is raped by Dove Linkhorn. In the graphically painted scenes of their sexual violation, none of these women play cameo roles.

⁷⁹ Nelson Algren, *The Devil's Stocking* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), pp. 141-47.

⁸⁰ Giles, p. 25.

Reading Rape: Health & Safety

In his *Sexual Violence and American Manhood*, Walter T. Herbert echoes Middleton's proposal when he suggests we should look to literary art for ways to talk about sexually violent manhood because

Powerful works of literature ... portray dilemmas of American masculinity in the forms given by successive historical epochs, even as they speak directly to readers in our own generation. The developing political, economic, and cultural institutions that have shaped sexually violent manhood—capitalism, marriage, law, slavery, war, race hatred, American democracy—find their way into the unfolding story of literary art. The literature we've inherited illuminates the selves we've inherited, dramatizing the conflicted traditions that our society trains us to make our own. The pathologies of contemporary American manhood continue to roil and torment our lives in patterns that have been discernable since ... the intuitions of literary artists began to seek them out.⁸¹

The pathologies of the rapists whom Algren's 'intuitions sought' out and documented do not make for easy reading. As Laura Tanner suggests, '[t]he intimacy of the reading experience ... can force our intimacy by subtly pushing us into imaginative landscapes of violation from which it is difficult to extricate ourselves.'⁸² (This speaks also, of course, to the more acute dangers of reading rape scenes for individuals who have either been raped or have raped and don't wish to make any imagined return to the scene of the crime.) Tanner summarises the predicament whereby,

⁸¹ T. Walter Herbert, *Sexual Violence and American Manhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 24-25.

⁸² Laura Tanner, *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. ix. The response of the book reviewer Beauvoir mentions in her letter to Algren demonstrates this point: he 'could not stand the rape of Steffi,' writes Beauvoir, 'it made him sick in the stomach'. Letter of 11 April 1951, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 415, *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 424. An online reader has responded similarly: 'Algren's book *Never Come Morning*, is one of my favourite books, except the opening scene of a woman being attacked makes it hard to re read.' Luke Dohner, 21 January 2013
<<http://www.facebook.com/NelsonAlgrenTheEndIsNothingTheRoadIsAll?ref=stream>> [accessed 6 March 2013]

Suspended between material and semiotic worlds, the reader in the scene of violence must negotiate a position relative not only to victim and violator but to the attitudes about violation encoded in representation and experienced through reading. The force of the narrative impulsion that aligns the reader with victim, violator, or observer and the reader's reaction to that force create an interactive power dynamic, an intimate and sometimes unsettling play of readerly response and resistance in which the reader's own sense of embodied subjectivity comes to be at risk.⁸³

So where can readers be safe in their subject position when reading the most troubling scenes in Algren's texts? Is there a reading position from which to reliably assess the 'attitudes about violation encoded in representation' if readings are (and they must be) focalized through highly individual and idiosyncratically constructed subject-positions? For a writer such as Algren whose literary reputation as 'no feminist' precedes him, the knottiest problem for readers of his rape scenes may lie in any perceived authorial 'attitudes about violation encoded in representation.' As Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver suggest, confronting the 'entanglement of rape with representation' in a writer's work, the answer to Samuel Beckett's question, "What does it matter who is speaking?" ... may be *all that matters*'.⁸⁴ But Higgins and Silver's study, indeed most contemporary studies of rape in literature, are particularly concerned with texts that treat rape obliquely, through a 'rhetoric of elision' (works such as *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Passage to India*, for example) for which the act of rereading rape 'requires restoring rape to the literal, to the body: restoring, that is, the violence—the physical, sexual violation.'⁸⁵ Rereading rape in Algren's fictions requires no such restoration work. There is little need for this study to 'reclaim the physical, material bodies of women from their status as "figures" and reveal the ways in which violence marks the female subject both physically and psychologically' because there is no textual ambiguity in Algren's narration of the ritualised misogynistic humiliation and sexual violence to which Charlotte Hallem and Steffi Rostenkowski are subject, or in Dove's

⁸³ Tanner, p. 3.

⁸⁴ Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 1.

⁸⁵ Higgins and Silver, p. 4.

rape of Terasina in *A Walk on the Wild Side*. However, equally visible are the ‘disturbing fault lines’ that Higgins and Silver suggest ‘appear within men’s texts,’ fault lines that beg the question of ‘what role male authors play in uncovering structures that brutalize women’s bodies and erase their subjectivity. Do these texts reveal traces of masculine sexual anxiety or guilt?’ they ask, ‘And are even male authors who recognize their complicity in the violence of the gender system ultimately caught in its powerful meshes?’⁸⁶ Perhaps it is ‘feminist’ problems such as these that have made readers shy from too closely reading Algren’s scenes of male sexual violence. But to the extent that answers to such questions lie principally in personal readings, I suggest that we are all, reading rape, caught in the powerful meshes of an always already violent gender system inscribed in the words and language we are obliged, railroaded even, to employ – writer and reader alike. In his *Inward Gaze*, Middleton writes of this problem in relation to the difficulties men face in order to talk about sexuality at all, as though male sexuality can be expressed as an entity ‘easily described in ready-made psychoanalytic terms waiting for expression, and only held back by self-consciousness or fear of humiliation by other men.’⁸⁷ These problems become more complex across the heterosexual interface when men and women, feminist and non-feminist, discuss the difficult issues of rape and prostitution. Even when such a discussion is about ‘fiction,’ our ‘self-consciousness or fear of humiliation’ by the Other in relation to whom we situate ourselves – the fictional ‘rapist, myself imagined’ or the fictional ‘victim, myself imagined’ – imputes added difficulty. And how to read the rapes and all those men with their ‘damned feelings’ populating his oeuvre without opening up Algren’s personal life to inspection? One way, tried, tested, and – arguably – failed, has been to adopt a ‘macho’ stance about the work: follow the masculine plot around the text, ignore the overwhelming presence of a very emotional man between the lines, and don’t pay too much attention to the women.

Reversing these modes – taking Algren seriously, paying attention to the women, noting the importance of the emotional male voice in the text, and (mostly) leaving the fictional men to talk among themselves while we take a closer look at what else is going on in the texts – is not, however, to propose the kind of feminist reading Judith Fetterley promoted in her *The Resisting Reader*. Making some key adjustments to the following short passage from this seminal feminist text most economically allows me to explain in

⁸⁶ Higgins and Silver, pp. 4-5.

⁸⁷ Middleton, p. 126.

the negative a) the principal assumptions on which my readings of Algren's novels are based and b) the key second-wave feminist ideas about reading men's texts that perhaps informed previous Algren scholars' expectations of what a feminist reading Algren might find in his work. I have italicised the section I wish to adapt:

Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects. To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature is to make the system of power embodied in the literature open not only to discussion but even to change. Such questioning and exposure can, of course, be carried on *only by a consciousness radically different from the one that informs the literature. Such a closed system cannot be opened up from within but only from without. It must be entered into from a point of view which questions its values and assumptions and which has its investment in making available to consciousness precisely that which the literature wishes to keep hidden. Feminist criticism provides that point of view and embodies that consciousness.*⁸⁸

This thesis takes as a given that Algren, in common with thousands of Popular Front writers, artists, and intellectuals across America who understood that 'consciousness is power', was intent on creating work that would instigate the discussion of the 'complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men' and, as a consequence, bring about social change. The remainder of Fetterley's formulation then unravels accordingly: such questioning does not necessarily require the intervention of a consciousness radically different from the one that informs the literature if only because readings are a co-creation; literature is not a 'closed system' – it can be, and in the case of Algren I suggest is, constructed to be opened up from within. Furthermore, the Algren text is not hiding something only a feminist reading can perceive and extract: the key to all textual extraction lies in multiple (one person re-reading and group readings and re-readings of the same text), and, most importantly, self-reflexive readings: reading is, essentially, a social science.

⁸⁸ Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. xix-xx. Italics mine.

The Social Science of Sympathy: Writing/Reading the Other

My kind of writing is just a form of reportage, you might call it emotionalized reportage, but—as you know—the data has to be there. Compassion has no use without a setting.

Algren to H. E. F. Donohue

I always draw autobiographically – I mean, emotionally, you know. Emotionally, it's all autobiographical. But chronologically, it's not at all.

Nelson Algren to Cox and Chatterton⁸⁹

Algren's description of his writing as 'emotionalized reportage' has a historical as well as a personal context. Le Sueur, in one of her letters to Drew, paints a vivid picture of the close emotional connections men and women writers and artists shared during the Depression, the years of their coming of intellectual age:

It was a certain time of the depression terrible suffering which nelson reflected so magnificently in his books his depth of compassion his passionate search for the proletarian truth of America ... he literally leaped into the pit went on that box car trip he didn't make anything up... he was a delicate middle class boy too... very delicate shy tortured in his being ... a beautiful boy and like a butterfly he flew down into the terrible pit somebody without boots ... and recorded that hell ... and saw something never before seen about the american proletariat ... his books are not valued enough by the left because he wrote about the lumpen ... I can well understand why he tried to commit suicide ...⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Donohue, p. 154; Cox and Chatterton, p. 24.

⁹⁰ Meridel Le Sueur, undated letter to Bettina Drew, BD/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded. I have retained Le Sueur's punctuation. (Algren attempted suicide just a few weeks after the publication of *Somebody in Boots* (1935) and again after the publication of *A Walk on the Wild Side* (1956).) Le Sueur's letters are compelling because they place Algren more centrally both in the proletarian scene and in her own personal history than he occupies in current biographical accounts. We learn, for example, that Algren (with his wife Amanda) used to babysit for Le Sueur's children and that she felt Algren greatly influenced her writing. Le Sueur's portrait also offsets the prevailing mythology of Algren as 'macho': she describes him as being 'shy ... a prairie elf waif,' 'a delicate mid-westerner,' who had 'a certain physical lyricism about him ... a purity,' 'a wonderful proletarian poet.' Le Sueur writes of the writers and

As Barbara Foley and others have documented, the debates at the heart of the 1930s proletarian writing movement were largely about the relationship between politics and form.⁹¹ The novel, some insisted, was necessarily ‘polluted’ by its historically bourgeois ideological roots. New ways to tell stories were actively and creatively sought and passionately discussed among communities of writers and artists; central to these discussions was the question of emotional intelligence. It was considered, according to William Stott, that ‘emotion, properly felt and understood, *does* engender decent seeing; *is* intelligence.’⁹² After all, it was through the stimulation of emotion in their readers that politically engaged writers hoped to raise social and political consciousness. The idea that emotion plays any important role in knowledge-production or critical and intellectual theorisation lost ground across the twentieth century, but current research on the links between psychology and narrative theory vindicates those writers of Algren’s generation who believed their stories – their emotionalised reportages – through affect, could effect real social change. As Melanie Green suggests,

Transportation is defined as an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events. Transportation, psychologically similar to flow or absorption is a form of experiential response to narratives. A transported reader suspends normal assumptions and treats the narrative as the frame of reference.

Like a literal traveler, the transported reader loses access to aspects of the world of origin In other words, the reader may consciously or unconsciously push real-world facts aside and instead engage the narrative world created by the author. Previous research has shown that individuals who are transported into a narrative world are likely to change their real-world beliefs and attitudes in response to information, claims, or events in a story.⁹³

artists of the Popular Front that ‘We were burning and close and struggling’ And her statement in more than one letter that ‘we all tried to commit suicide’ somewhat contextualises and dignifies existing published interpretations of Algren’s suicide attempts.

⁹¹ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁹² William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973) (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 12.

⁹³ Melanie C. Green, ‘Transportation Into Narrative Worlds: The Role of Prior Knowledge and Perceived Realism’, *Discourse Processes*, 38 (2004), 247-266 (p. 248).

As my readings of his novels will demonstrate, Algren's poetics evidence an experimental bent and a close and sustained connection and engagement with the shifting quicksands of the literary and artistic *zeitgeist* from the 1930s to the 1950s. As Cappetti notes, 'For each of the social worlds Algren went out to explore one can find a study on the shelves of Chicago sociology.' If his women are 'sympathetically imagined,' then, it is partly because they are not exactly imagined; a sense of sympathy is conveyed by the use of sociologically accurate information; as he said to Donohue, 'the data has to be there.' But then, too, Cappetti writes, 'Algren chose to be both the Dickens and the Baudelaire, the Dreiser and the Dostoyevsky of Chicago ... [H]e refused to give up either the empirical legacy of the realist and naturalist traditions or the poetic legacy of symbolism and surrealism.'⁹⁴ And, of course, Algren refused, too, to abandon the idea that he was a journalist and that his job was to report 'from behind the billboards.'⁹⁵ In her reading of *Never Come Morning*, however, Cappetti asks,

How can one assert that empirical sociology is a primary source of inspiration for a novel that is so far from anything one might confidently call realism? Algren's claim that his art is both "reportage" and "poetry" articulates that tension without really addressing it.⁹⁶

As noted in my introduction, Ingraham too notes 'critically puzzling and provocative' tension in Algren's work:

Writing in the first person, is, itself, a conflictual state. In order to write about this world, Algren had to live in it and distance himself from it – one might say by the space of a word. It is this ... reportorial/novelistic ... tension in Algren's works that is critically puzzling and provocative.⁹⁷

One way to view these tensions is to consider them as symptomatic of the amount of different tasks Algren set out to achieve in his work – tasks that were envisioned, in fact, by literary naturalism's founding father, Émile Zola.

⁹⁴ Cappetti, p. 156.

⁹⁵ Algren, *Nonconformity: Writing on Writing*, p. 76.

⁹⁶ Cappetti, p. 179.

⁹⁷ Ingraham, p. 6.

Narrative Tensions: Naturalism, the Modern Tool

In his essay ‘To The Young People Of France’ Zola wrote that the naturalist novel ‘touches on all subjects: writes history; treats of physiology and psychology; rises to the highest flights of poetry; studies the most diverse subjects—politics, social economy, religion, and manners.’ And in ‘Naturalism on the Stage’ he wrote:

The novel is no longer confined to one special sphere; it has invaded and taken possession of all spheres. Like science, it is the master of the world. It touches on all subjects: writes history; treats of physiology and psychology; rises to the highest flights of poetry; studies the most diverse subjects—politics, social economy, religion, and manners. ... The truth is that the masterpieces of modern fiction say more on the subject of man and nature than do the graver works of philosophy, history, and criticism. In them lies the modern tool.⁹⁸

Zola’s précis suggests both why Algren, up to and including *The Man with the Golden Arm*, saw himself as writing in the naturalist tradition at the same time as, paradoxically, it demonstrates why it is at the very least unhelpful (and at most counter-productive) for contemporary readers of Algren to so definitively designate his work as such. Giles writes that Algren ‘especially in the major phase of his career ... was engaged ... in reinventing naturalism’.⁹⁹ But according to Zola, the naturalist novel is by definition necessarily always reinventing itself. Naturalism is not identifiable by its surface (which is where naturalist criteria are most often attached to Algren in his settings, mood, grotesques and perceived resemblance to those American writers more firmly ensconced in the naturalist canon) but employs all the literary means at its disposal to explore and understand ‘man and nature.’ In fact Zola’s essays on the subject read as a manifesto for unfettered experimentalism and, according to his directives, most twentieth century literary novels could be deemed ‘naturalist.’

In his 1950 application for funding for the photographic project he carried out with Art Shay, Algren wrote that the article would begin with ‘an introductory essay

⁹⁸ Émile Zola, ‘To The Young People of France’, and ‘Naturalism on the Stage’, in *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays* (New York: The Cassell Publishing Company, 1893), pp. 102-3 and pp. 124-25 <<https://archive.org/details/cu31924027248867>> [accessed 24 December 2014]

⁹⁹ Giles, p. 4.

tracing the naturalistic novel to its source along both the backstreets of the city and the backstreets of the mind'¹⁰⁰ – from which we can conclude, I think, that the study of human psychology was intrinsic to Algren's fiction-writing and to his application of naturalism. As mentioned earlier, he didn't ascribe to any one intellectual or critical theory. However, his statement that 'the Freudian key to everything he has written' lies in the song he wrote for Achilles Schmidt in the musical of *A Walk on the Wild Side* (1960) suggests he had a more than passing interest in psychology and the unconscious. According to Drew, Algren was opposed to psychoanalysis because, she supposes, he was 'afraid of what he might find.'¹⁰¹ Similarly, in their *Entrapment*, Horvath and Simon suggest that one of the short stories Algren never published, 'The Lightless Room,' 'may well have been left out of ... *The Neon Wilderness*, only because it brushes up against his own self-destructive urges.' They suggest this story, like other materials that weren't published by Algren but which appear in *Entrapment*, 'was kept quiet by Algren because he felt, consciously or unconsciously, that this was writing that cut to the bone of his own demons.'¹⁰² These suggestions don't, however, stand up next to Algren's work – especially when critical attention is paid to his women. Not only are 'demons' in full display across the Algren oeuvre, but his attention to his protagonists' dreams and their episodes of self-reflexivity and introspection evidence his sustained interest in the workings of the human mind. Inscribed in these texts too are possible clues as to why he doubted the benefits of psychoanalysis as practised in mid-twentieth century America: the art of reading and interpreting the other that lies at the heart of psychoanalysis is everywhere in Algren's texts flagged up as the Achilles heel of human and inter-sexual understanding.

It is no accident that, in the mid-1960s, after at least two (that we know of) serious breakdowns and some albeit limited exposure to mental health professionals, Algren's analysand protagonist in his draft manuscript, 'slow suicide', is named 'Mr Lissner'. The art of listening is common to all strands of his writing practice: poetry rests on the aural reception of rhythms, the rise and fall, the music of language; sociology's ethnographer or participant-observer is non-judgmentally attentive to the linguistic and

¹⁰⁰ Nelson Algren, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Grant application, 10 October 1950, BD/OSU, Box 5, Folder 6.

¹⁰¹ Drew, p. 173.

¹⁰² Horvath and Simon, Introduction to *Entrapment*, p. 12.

cultural dynamics of an environment, to its language-patterns, colloquialisms, and idiosyncrasies, and exercises self-reflexive caution in the drawing of conclusions; oral history requires a silent listener who allows the other to ramble, uninterrupted; and good journalism, of course, depends on listening to many voices while minimising the traces of one's own in order to convey a sense of objectivity. Algren's synthesis of these writing practices and influences – poetry, sociology, journalism – if under-examined, is everywhere acknowledged, but Carla Cappetti's suggestion that, with *Never Come Morning*'s Steffi, 'Algren taps his most surreal vein to produce a vision that is at once a synthesis of and a departure from all he has expressed so far,'¹⁰³ neatly unpacks a technical idiosyncrasy that applies to all of his texts: in each, whether short story, novel, poem, or essay, Algren's synthesis of fact, fiction, and voice, and his departure from the text last-written are key mechanics of a creative process that at the same time as creating something new channels the old, processes previous texts and, I suggest, the emotions to which the texts were in the first place a response.

In her *Fiction, Intuition & Creativity: Studies in Brontë, James, Woolf, and Lessing*, Angela Hague includes Algren in a list of writers for whom a particular novel or short story would begin with a 'mental picture' or a 'feeling.' Writes Hague:

Novelists are engaged in a quest for the genesis of their fiction, for it is to this vanished moment of its beginning, its mysterious potentiality and open-ended suggestiveness, that the author endlessly attempts to return for inspiration. These indeterminate, inconclusive, intensely emotional centers of potential meaning beckon the writer and provide the touchstone for their later manifestations in fictional form.¹⁰⁴

Algren's 'experiment in narration' performs a repetitive recycling of the past, a return to and re-vision of important 'touchstones': short stories were written up into novels, fragments from novels would reappear as short stories. This feature of his work has been commented on throughout Algren criticism. Robert Ward, for example, suggests this aesthetic of recycling texts and fragments of texts 'allowed Algren to make clear the transhistorical link between human destitution and social injustice.' And Simon

¹⁰³ Cappetti, pp. 178-79.

¹⁰⁴ Angela Hague, *Fiction, Intuition & Creativity: Studies in Brontë, James, Woolf, and Lessing* (Catholic University of America Press 2003), p. 8.

observes that ‘Algren’s writing method relied on accretion. He returned, year after year, to given situations and characters, building up the surface almost more like a painter than a writer, until he found the emotion he wanted.’¹⁰⁵

I suggest the reappearance of ‘vanished moments of beginning’ are integral to Algren’s writing process, functioning as ‘process’ in its verbal form: writing (n.) processes (v.). If Algren’s work ‘troubles sensibilities’ it is at least partly, I believe, because he never forgot the violence he witnessed, and – as Le Sueur’s letters to Drew strongly suggest – probably experienced – and he never stopped ‘processing’ the ‘trouble.’¹⁰⁶ Obvious among such ‘vanished moments’ for Algren are the scenes to which his creative return took him throughout his writing career: his early encounters with prostitutes, and the time he served in jail. Algren hinted at the personal and psychological importance of his creative return to such ‘vanished moments’ when he told Cox and Chatterton that in the writing of certain stories for his 1947 anthology, *The Neon Wilderness*: ‘I made a U-turn in 1946 and ran down several memories I had been haunting before they could start haunting me.’¹⁰⁷ But the most sophisticated example of this remembering process lies in his re-vision and transformation of his first novel *Somebody in Boots* (1935) into *A Walk on the Wild Side* (1956). The genius of the latter lies in its double genesis: as a primary text, written as ‘a personal reaction to experiences as a transient during the depression years’ – ‘emotionalised reportage’ – and as the re-reading of an earlier text via the prism of memory. Reading Algren’s oeuvre from *Somebody in Boots* to *A Walk on the Wild Side*, then, as well as following a chronological trajectory, traces a loop that leads back to this ‘vanished moment of beginning.’ This thesis traces both these paths through the Algren oeuvre, one going forward, ignorant of the last, the other turning back from the last to look at the first. This switchback reading asks for an imaginative exclusion of what we know, or think we

¹⁰⁵ Robert Ward, Introduction to *Nelson Algren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 13; Daniel Simon, Afterword to *Nonconformity: Writing on Writing*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁶ One scene Algren repeatedly revisits in his work bears witness to the death of a man in jail, shot by a policeman while trying to escape. See ‘El Presidente de Méjico’ (a short story in *The Neon Wilderness*), and *A Walk on the Wild Side*, pp. 317-20. His 1960s manuscript, ‘slow suicide’, also contains a similarly framed scene in which the main protagonist, Lissner, watches in desperation as a fellow hospital intern dies.

¹⁰⁷ Nelson Algren, Preface to the American Century Series Edition of *The Neon Wilderness* (1960), cited by Cox and Chatterton, p. 41.

know, as we read forwards, in order to more clearly see what might, after all, be there in the texts when we read Algren's fictional women back into the trinity of rape, prostitution, and love, from their side of the heterotextual divide. This process, of course, necessarily risks a re-vision of their partners in crime, those 'good-for-nothing chumps,' the rapists, johns, and lovers of the Algren corpus.

Taking up Middleton's suggestion that literature might benefit from instruction, then, I end this chapter by performing a short reading of an excerpt from *Somebody in Boots*. If 'men's texts are trying to initiate processes which require further development,'¹⁰⁸ the process that develops a text, allowing its form to take a shape outside the page – the equivalent of seeing a photograph take shape in the chemical bath of the dark room – as writers everywhere know, is reading-aloud.

Reading Algren: A Performance

Imagine, if you will, the following excerpt from *Somebody in Boots* read aloud in the movie trailer voice of Don LaFontaine:

This was the tragic meeting-place of men, the brief city sprung out of the prairie and falling again into dust. This was the gathering-ground between the years, here humans bred for an hour and died. Some of these in this place wore pants, others wore dresses. Some here were hairy and some were hairless, and all went down to the beach together, talking, beneath great stars, in a tongue ten million years younger than their brains. Thus the aeons of spawning in the teeth of decay, ten million years of defeat and lusting, war and disease and conquest, had at last brought them gabbing to this place. They would eat pink pop-corn balls here, have dreams at night, ride street-cars a while, and die, and decay; and call the dreaming living, and call the decay death. Mingled with the sand of the Oak Street beach was the dust of men who had bathed in the lake ten thousand years before Eric the Red. And Cass McKay sat upon the sand, a skinny man in a blue bathrobe, reading *True Romance*.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Middleton, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Nelson Algren, *Somebody in Boots* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 224.

I propose a reading that appeals to an imagined bass voice and a reader's ear to demonstrate how 'turning up the sound' of Algren's texts correspondingly increases their volume, their critical mass, activating dialogic – and here, comic – potential and suggesting literary and theoretical applications in ways that a 'silent' reading (if there is such a thing) does not. 'Hearing' this passage intoned with the hyper-masculine voice of LaFontaine, the epic conveyed by voice and that conveyed by the words on the page at intervals fail to marry. A passage that seems to be shaping up for the mythic, ends with a 'skinny man in a blue bathrobe, reading *True Romance*.' At the same time as LaFontaine's voice imports the heroic, the text deconstructs it; the voice inflates a narrative balloon and the text holds up a pin with which to prick it. And in the interpretive space created – in the same moments of textual tension that cause my laughter (maybe not yours) – Algren is, at the very least, being deeply suggestive: these wearers of pants and dresses, the hairy and the hairless, are not gender-defined as 'men' and 'women' – they could be hairless men in dresses, hairy women in pants. As such they speak to Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* that 'When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.'¹¹⁰ These 'humans' who are 'together, talking' must do so 'in a tongue ten million years younger than their brains' – in other words lexically or grammatically deficient? What is this silent surplus in the mind? And, after 'ten million years of defeat and lusting, war and disease and conquest' (in other words, after an amount of time that typically measures stages of important eco-historical development), here is a 'skinny man' (physically ill-equipped for battle) 'in a bathrobe' (not even dressed) whose preferred reading is a 'woman's' magazine (camera to Eric the Red swivelling in his grave). As Hemingway so famously insisted of *The Man with the Golden Arm* 'this' is indeed, 'a man writing' – but this is not the 'macho' man constructed by cultural and literary criticism(s), marketing blurbs and hearsay: this is a 'skinny man in a blue bathrobe' who's gone straight from bed to typewriter to write, not of 'huntin,' shootin,' and fishin,' but of 'true romance.'

¹¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) (Routledge, 2006), p. 9.

Chapter Two

Love in the Jungle: *Somebody in Boots*



Fig. 7

In the course of my experiments I convinced myself that among the animals man is the only one that harbors insults and injuries, broods over them, waits till a chance offers, then takes revenge.

Mark Twain¹

If, as Le Sueur wrote in one of her letters to Drew, Algren ‘didn’t make anything up’ in his fictionalised account of riding the rails in *Somebody in Boots*, it must be concluded that if times were hard for all in Depression era America, gender, race, and class determined that they were harder for some than for others. The physical, emotional, and psychological deterioration of Nancy McKay, trapped in a motherless household with a homicidal father and two emotionally burdensome brothers; the Mexican girl pushed into the path of a train by ‘buccaneering’ men and boys; the gang rape of Charlotte Hallem, an African American woman riding solo in a box car; a woman and her baby *in utero* fatally injured by Cass McKay jumping from the top of a reefer; Norah Egan’s desperate and humiliating search for respectable employment and the inevitability of her prostitution and eventual social-death-by-syphilis: in the light of all the bad things that happen to the girls and women of Algren’s first novel, Giles’s proposal that its ‘worst horrors ... are Stub’s damned feeling and Nubby’s ruthless lust for power’ requires modification – not especially or necessarily by feminist critics looking for gender

¹ Mark Twain, ‘Man’s Place in the Animal World’, in *Mark Twain’s Book of Animals*, ed. by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), p. 119.

trouble in its textual sub-strata, but by critical readings that acknowledge the connections this novel draws between the ‘horrors’ inflicted on its girls and women and the ‘damned feelings’ and ‘ruthless lusts for power’ that motivate the behaviours of its men.² For if, as Giles notes, Algren ‘intended *Somebody in Boots* as a protest novel which would shock a guilty, suffering nation into Marxist economic reform,’ it is reasonable to suppose that where the novel shocks – unarguably as much in its graphic representations of the atrocities experienced by its girls and women and its documentation of hetero- and homosexual rape as in its scenes of homosocial violence – is a) where he intended his protest to arouse most guilt, and b) where he considered the need for social reform to be most urgent.

However, Le Sueur’s endorsement of the veracity of Algren’s ‘facts in fiction’ is double-edged: if it suggests Algren’s first novel can be read as the ‘emotionalized reportage’ of an eye-witness, it also reinforces biographical connections this thesis seeks to loosen. Where, if he ‘didn’t make anything up,’ do we situate a flesh-and-blood Algren in all the horrors this novel documents? The answer this thesis proposes is, quite simply, we don’t. Le Sueur’s letter to Drew is again helpful here. The imagery she conjures of Algren as a butterfly descending into a pit covers two bases: it illustrates the physical hazards young men confronted riding the rails in the southern states of 1930s America, where the greatest danger was other men, and it signals the fantastical nature of key male members of Algren’s fictional cast, his Stubby McKay, his Nubby O’Neill. For if Algren’s women have historically been read as cameos it is at least in part because his main men are so vividly drawn as to be made quite strange.

Narrative Tensions: Making Strange Me[n]

Sketches in Algren’s notebooks, correspondence with friends, and all his works demonstrate a fascination with what, after Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, we call the performativity of masculinity. Seminal works of theory have provided incisive vocabulary with which to discuss ideas that artists and writers first traced and framed in line, colour, and word. *Somebody in Boots* exhibits just such consciousness of the constructed nature of gender and problematises processes of masculine sexualisation.

² Giles, *Confronting the Horror*, pp. 44-45.

However, in order to give full critical attention to the theoretical work Algren's first novel performs, we must draw a provisional line between his work and his life.



Fig. 8

Writers of fiction typically make that task difficult because they breathe life into their storyworlds by drawing on, elaborating, de- and re-constructing their own lives: as Algren put it, 'emotionally, it's all biographical. Chronologically, it's not.'³ It's with this art-of-confusion of self and protagonist that writers (more or less smoothly) transport readers into texts at the same time as creating ideal conditions for critical confusion. As Ingraham posited, '[w]riting in the first person is ... a conflictual state.'⁴ The act of writing *in* the first person, i.e. writing one's consciousness into and putting fictional characters through the paces of one's own life-experiences leaves traces of 'me' in the 'not me' that aren't always identifiable by grammatical or narrative sign but yet are sensed or heard in *voice*. As Bakhtin observes, the text 'is not dead, it is speaking ... in it we can always hear voices (even while reading silently to ourselves)... beginning with any text—and sometimes passing through a lengthy series of mediating links—we always arrive, in the final analysis, at the human voice, which is to say we come up against the human being.'⁵ Wayne Booth devoted several decades to unpacking this conundrum and his notion of the 'implied author' – the author as

³ Cox and Chatterton, p. 24.

⁴ Ingraham, p. 6.

⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist, translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press 2000), pp. 252-53.

imagined by a reader on the basis of their reading of a text – has been adopted by narratological theorists to create models that allow us to creatively analyse the problem of the ‘real’ author insinuated in and by the text. Seymour Chatman’s 1978 model is foundational in this respect:

Real author > [Implied author > Narrator > Narratee > Implied Reader >] Real Reader.⁶

For this thesis, the most useful function of this model is its simplest: it models the idea that a reading is a product, a construct apart from the person who wrote it or reads it. The Algren with whom this chapter is primarily concerned then is the *implied author* created in and by my personal reading process. After this, the model serves my thesis for what it doesn’t contain.⁷ As James Phelan notes, the model (and later ones that adapt or develop it along similarly structuralist lines) takes no account of ‘character’. The usefulness of this absence is demonstrated by trying to imagine where in any such model we would place ‘character’ if not everywhere and nowhere, inside the brackets (i.e. within the reading) and outside the brackets (in the real author and the real reader). In the task of separating an author from an over-close relationship with his protagonists, ‘character’ shows up as a connective tissue that links and confuses the processes by which we, as critical readers, perform the task of deciding who, in the text, is ‘Cass,’ who is ‘Algren’, and who am ‘I’. In fact, this is precisely what a work of fiction doesn’t want us to do, and is designed, in the interests of readerly transportation, not to help with the task. The big problem for this thesis that tackles the most difficult areas of Algren’s work – his treatment of rape and women who are prostitutes – is that how we construct ‘character’ determines where we place the burden of responsibility for a novel’s ethical potential. Phelan argues that the fact that character is not taken into account in standard narratological models distorts our perception of the narrative communication that occurs within scenes of dialogue and other instances of what

⁶ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978), cited in James Phelan, ‘Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative Communication: Or, from Story and Discourse to Authors, Resources, and Audiences’, *Soundings*, 94 (Spring/Summer 2011), p. 58.

⁷ For an excellent overview of the history of narratology and developments in narrative theory up to 2009 see Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

narratologists call ‘mediated telling’ – all the means by which we understand the ‘story’ without being directly ‘told’ by an identifiable narrator.⁸

This argument in narratological theory has a parallel in the history of Algren criticism. If, as I suggested in chapter one, there has been insufficient discussion about the narrative functions the women in Algren’s works perform, there has been equally scant acknowledgment of the complexity of his narrative structures *tout court*. And this absence of discussion, again, as mentioned in chapter one, seems to rest on the fact that generations of readers have agreed to agree with each other about protagonists’ characters without giving too much attention to ‘characterological narration’ – i.e. not only the narratologically identifiable forms of ‘mediated’ telling that occur in any one novel and help us build a portrait of a protagonist, but also (in the text as in life) all the decisions we unconsciously make about protagonists’ behaviours according to our accrued senses of knowing them that allow us to predict, understand, and form ethical judgments about their actions in the storyworld. These mechanisms are particularly important in *Somebody in Boots* in general and especially in the characterisation of our first ‘good-for-nothing-chump’ Cass McKay because practically all its horrors are focalised through his vision and consciousness. In the context of drawing a line between Algren and his protagonists, then, discovering who Cass (or Bruno or Frankie) is to readers is an important stage in the process of discovering who Algren is not – a task, as already discussed, complicated by the stubbornness of gendered clichés surrounding him. Looking to Algren’s bookshelf for help, Paul Valéry has useful advice:

In dealing with any problem, and before attempting to consider its core, I first of all set myself to consider the words in which it is presented to the mind. I have got into the habit of behaving like a surgeon, who begins by washing his hands and preparing the area within which he is to operate. I call this process *cleansing the verbal situation*.⁹

So, ‘cleansing the verbal situation,’ we can, for example, re-read Hemingway’s over-cited encomium by considering ‘the words in which it is presented to the mind’: ‘This is

⁸ James Phelan, ‘Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative Communication: Or, from Story and Discourse to Authors, Resources, and Audiences’ in *Soundings*, 94.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2011), p. 58.

⁹ Paul Valéry, ‘Poetry and Abstract Thought’, in *Essays on Language and Literature*, ed. by J. L. Hevesi (London: Allan Wingate, 1947), pp. 69-111 (p. 71).

a man writing,' he famously wrote. And he 'can move around.'¹⁰ For a writer, to be able to 'move around' is to be able to move among, in, and through words and text, to manipulate these and the position of voices in general and the narratorial voice in particular. To stretch Hemingway's metaphor, 'fancy footwork' here would be all the narratorial devices writers employ to seduce, beguile, deceive, transport, and otherwise hook readers into taking up a particular reading position (in Booth's narrative schema, becoming the 'ideal reader'). In other words, Hemingway wasn't (only) talking about boxing: he was applauding Algren's narratorial light-footedness. He also warned readers not to read Algren if they couldn't 'take a punch.' Paradoxically, it is in *Somebody in Boots*, the novel most criticised for its overt didacticism and an intrusive editorial voice that Algren seems to have slipped one by readers. To some readers this idea will seem counter-intuitive: of all Algren's novels, *Somebody in Boots* is considered the simplest both in form and function. Algren was not, as he put it, one of 'The tough boys who feel that great art is merely a matter of splitting the infinitives and leaving out the commas.'¹¹ Neither, despite his reputation as a 'macho' writer, did he subscribe to any so-called 'masculine' writing ideal.¹² And nor, evidently, did he share other proletarian writers' anxieties about the novel being a bourgeois form. *Somebody in Boots* is structured along traditional narrative lines, here's an adolescent boy, here's his family, this is what happens to him; this is how his story begins, this is how it ends. Its closest literary relations seem to be the picaresque or the *bildungsroman*. But it's not that simple. For in this novel Algren employs a series of narratological devices designed

¹⁰ See Drew, p. 210, for full citation. In his interview with Donohue, Algren expresses his irritation at the fact that his publishers 'used and used, over and over and over again' this praise from Hemingway. See Donohue, p. 190.

¹¹ Algren, review of Meridel Le Sueur's *Annunciation* (1935), 'Strength and Beauty', *New Masses*, 20 August 1935, p. 25. Such 'tough boys', Algren suggested, 'would do well to read more of Meridel Le Sueur. She is one of the very few revolutionary writers who combine a powerful realism with a deep sense of beauty.'

¹² On this subject, Algren would later share his insight on the role criticism plays in the construction of a writer's reputation in his *Notes from a Sea Diary: Hemingway All the Way* in which he writes: 'The reason that the critics failed Hemingway is simple; they didn't read Hemingway. They read, instead, other critics of Hemingway.' See *Algren at Sea. Who Lost an American? & Notes from a Sea Diary: Travel Writings* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), p. 399. (All references to *Who Lost an American?* and *Notes from a Sea Diary* throughout this thesis refer to this volume.)

to allow a thesis to unobtrusively speak through his characters, to take shape between the lines they speak. Most important is his use of two dialogically opposed narrators – an omniscient one with a tendency towards the epic (as demonstrated in Reading Exercise no.1 at the end of chapter one), and an unreliable one with a love of hide-and-seek: an excess of trust in the former leaves the reader vulnerable to the devices (Hemingway’s punch) of the latter. Whether or not one falls foul of the devices of this narrative double-act depends on how one reads and constructs the character of Cass McKay. And how one performs that task depends on how one negotiates this novel’s most audible but critically glossed narrator: the editor.

Hemingway’s praise was for *The Man with the Golden Arm*, not *Somebody in Boots*. In the latter an editorial voice regularly muddies the ‘literary’ waters; even the most positive readings have winced at its stridency in the final chapter’s diatribe against the evils of rampant corporate Capitalism. However, in these so-called novelistic ‘failings’ we have an excellent tool to help separate out an ‘implied author,’ an ‘Algren’ from his ‘good for nothing heroes.’ Indeed, the extravagant editorial voice in *Somebody in Boots* makes plain what his later novels more successfully conceal: the Algren text is always a narrative framework constructed to support an editorial, a news story, or a thesis. Rather than seeing this as a novelistic failing, we can ask what Algren protagonists bring to his works by way of editorial input. If, as Brooks suggests, ‘viable works of literature tell us something about how they are to be read, guide us toward the conditions of their interpretation’,¹³ then the editorial voice can be asked to work for a critical praxis. Dignifying it with critical attention as opposed to side-lining its presence because it fails to meet a particular literary standard, it provides a tool with which to distinguish between the narrative functions protagonists perform in the storyworld and their didactic work in the intellectual *zeitgeist* (past and present) this novel addresses.

This reading of *Somebody in Boots*, then, proceeds from short character studies of its principal protagonists. In each case I will identify the didactic work they perform ‘outside the text’ in their function as dramatists of, or mouthpieces for, the editor as well as the narrative construction work they perform ‘inside the text’ as members of the storyworld. The result will be a brand new reading of this, Algren’s most critically unpopular novel.

¹³ Brooks, p. xii

Myths of Damned Men

'Cause there's lots bigger things ... a man got to learn before he's a *real* white man; I've told you that before.

Nubby O'Neill¹⁴

Somebody in Boots opens with a long description of Stub McKay's inward gaze, a consciousness-of-self distorted by 'a dim feeling as of daily loss and daily defeat; of having, somehow, been tricked. A feeling of having been cheated' by 'someone behind him or someone above' to which he gives a 'secret name ... The Damned Feeling' (13). Some readers see in Stubby's 'Damned Feeling' an autobiographical reflection of Algren's personal psychology.¹⁵ I find it more useful to read it as the particularised expression of a malaise suffered by all the men and, to a less pronounced degree, some of the women, in the Algren oeuvre: it seems to express something peculiar to the fact (or act) of being men (and certain women), not necessarily or only 'being me, Nelson.' The fact that other male writers have described a similarly oppressed consciousness supports this argument. Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf*, a 1929 copy of which sits on Algren's bookshelf, likewise opens with a description of Biberkopf's 'real fight against something that comes at him from outside, something unpredictable, a force like Doom' that 'rushes at him, using trickery and deceit. ... The Doom bashes and punches him below the belt.'¹⁶ Stubby's 'Damned Feeling' also resonates with Mark Twain's notion of a 'Damned Human Race', one feature of which is described in the epigraph that opens this chapter: Stubby does indeed 'harbor insults and injuries, brood over them, waits till a chance offers, then takes revenge' but, as my reading will demonstrate, the trope of revenge is played out with considerable sophistication in the deeper structures of this novel.

¹⁴ *Somebody in Boots* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 189. All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁵ Irène Frain, for example, folds this 'damned feeling' (albeit very gracefully) into her fictionalised 'Nelson Algren' in her novel, *Beauvoir in Love* (Paris: Éditions Michel Lafon, 2012).

¹⁶ Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf*, translated by Anne Thompson, (Charleston SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), p. xi. What Thompson translates as 'Doom', Eugene Jolas translates as 'fate' in Continuum's 2004 edition of the novel (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 1.

That the novel's opening lines dwell so thoroughly on describing 'The Damned Feeling' from the outset announces its structural relationship to older forms than the novel. The lyric poem, for example, traditionally opens by setting the emotional scene from which the human drama of the poem, or here the novel, unfolds. Note too that the novel's opening 'Why' poses a riddle, a proposition, a challenge to the reader: it is for us to discover what Stubby cannot know about himself. For, as important as 'The Damned Feeling' itself is the fact, stated in the first line of the novel, that Stubs 'himself did not understand what thing had embittered him' (13). This absence of self-reflexivity is a central trope of *Somebody in Boots*' storyworld: masculine ignorance, not-knowing and self-blindness. In the story of Cass McKay, we will see, these forms of ignorance are implicated in the emergence and development of 'The Damned Feeling.' By the novel's end, Cass too will feel that he has 'been cheated: ... cheated' and that 'someone behind him [is] cheating him all the time' (258-59). From Stubby then, through Bryan and Cass, to the Barber, Bruno Bicek (*Never Come Morning*), Frankie Machine (*The Man with the Golden Arm*), Fitz Linkhorn (*A Walk on the Wild Side*) and on: the baton of this 'The Damned Feeling' is passed along the male line in the Algren oeuvre.

Stubby and Nubby

Writers usually give protagonists rhyming names to indicate they are connected in other ways. Stubby and Nubby are most obviously connected by their patriarchal function: Stubby, 'hated, damned, and respected in Great-Snake Mountain' governs his family with a volatile combination of violence and its silent threat; Nubby, Stubby's exuberant and queerly likeable alter-ego, rules the El Paso jail with the threat of violence and rape and is bound to Stubby by his later surrogate fathering of Cass. But both men also perform important narrative duties outside the storyworld. In these earliest of Algren's portraits of men we discern, for example, all nine of the traits underlying a predisposition to fascism as identified by Adorno et al in *The Authoritarian Personality*, here summarised by Lynne Segal:

... rigid adherence to conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, opposition to subjective and imaginative reflection, superstition and rigid stereotyping, preoccupation with power and toughness/dominance and

submission, generalised destructiveness and cynicism, projection of dangerous impulses onto others, and an exaggerated concern with sex.¹⁷

After Stubby's exit, Nubby takes on the role of Chief Patriarch. Distinguished from all Algren's other alpha males by his predatory sexuality, it can only be Nubby to whom John Preston refers when he writes that 'A simple passage of a Nelson Algren novel that acknowledged a gay character's sexuality, no matter how sordid the context,' was important to him in his youth.¹⁸ The implications of Nubby's perceived homosexuality are twofold: in *Somebody in Boots*' storyworld his domination of the psycho-sexual circuitry queers received wisdoms about the heteronormative basis of Algren's treatment of love and sexuality and their gendered circulation(s) throughout his *corpus*; outside the storyworld Nubby enters the history of American literature at a time when, according to Todd Depastino, folklore and picaresque narratives of hobo life of 1920s popular culture had 'domesticated, rather than demythologised hobohemia ... stripping [it] of its erotic associations and radical political meanings.'¹⁹ In the same decade, Chicago sociologists Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Roderick McKenzie were asking 'What is the matter with the hobo's mind?'²⁰ In the stories of Nubby (and Stubby) and Cass – and Olin Jones and friends – Algren both reasserted a social realist documentation of hobohemia that restored its 'erotic associations' and, most

¹⁷ Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (1997) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p 115. Of these traits, it's not obvious that either Stubby or Nubby have a tendency towards 'authoritarian submission' but note that Stubby submits to the authority of God every Sunday morning and, after his arrest for the murder of Luke Gulliday – much to the bewilderment of Cass – submits to penal authority, indeed he becomes curiously docile.

¹⁸ John Preston, *Flesh and the Word: An Anthology of Gay Erotic Writing* (Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 4-5. Apart from its portrait of Nubby-as-wolf in the jail context, *Somebody in Boots* contains many sexual double-entendres and more or less codified references to masculine homosexuality. When, for example, Cass and Nubby, having had a cigarette together, 'flick their butts' in unison, it isn't only the reference to 'their butts' that resonates sexually – in 1930s slang a 'flicker' was a stereotypically effeminate homosexual.

¹⁹ Todd Depastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 174.

²⁰ Cited in Depastino, p. 128. Robert E. Park, 'The Mind of the Hobo: Reflections upon the Relation between Mentality and Locomotion,' in *The City*, ed. by Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie (1925) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 158-60.

exhaustively in the story of Cass McKay, addressed the socio-psychological relationship between being ‘on the rails’, i.e. homeless, jobless, loveless – and ‘off the rails’, i.e. psychologically dysfunctional. Last but not least, Nubby’s story explicitly documents the existence of sexual violence and rape in prison.

Elements from the jail scenes in *Somebody in Boots* are carried forward into all Algren’s novels but only here does he so explicitly and unambiguously document the homosocial codification of sexualised violence and its role in the creation and maintenance of the hyper-patriarchal environment of the prison. Through rape, prisoners such as Nubby assert power and masculinity. As one informant puts it: “A male who fucks another male another male is a double male.”²¹ Reading Algren’s treatment of sexual politics in the prison system as contained patriarchy or hyper-patriarchy, the heterosexual mask behind which patriarchy masquerades as bi-gendered falls away. Because in Algren’s jail scenes ‘men without women’ create ‘women’ among themselves. In other words, hyper-patriarchy doesn’t need actual women in order to function: it needs scapegoats. Algren’s fictional treatment of the violent and coercive nature of relationships between ‘wolves’ and ‘punks’ in prisons was ground-breaking. In the same year (1935) prison governor and inspector Joseph F. Fishman published his own study, *Sex in Prison. Revealing Sex Conditions in American Prisons* which, according to Joanna Bourke failed to incite the extensive public debate Fishman had hoped it would initiate. Indeed, it would take another fifteen years for a book that candidly discusses coerced and non-coerced sex in American prisons to be published in the US.²² This context more than any other demonstrates the burden of political and cultural work Nubby carried on his fictional shoulders in 1935. For the most useful work he performs in 2014 we must look to his relationship to and with Cass McKay. If, as William Maxwell observes, Nubby is the novel’s ‘itinerant professor of whiteness’ he is also, as the epigraph to this section indicates, its professor of masculinity.²³

²¹ A. M. Scacco Jr, *Rape in Prison* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1975), p. 86. Cited in Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 247.

²² Joanna Bourke, *Rape: Sex, Violence, History* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2007), p. 332. That book was Haywood Patterson’s *Scottsboro Boys* (1950), an autobiographical account of the time he served in prison, falsely accused of rape on two counts.

²³ William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 198.

A first clue about the narrative work Stubby performs in this novel lies in the detailed portrait Algren paints of him; in spite of the revulsion his vicious racism inevitably inspires in us, Algren also seems to be encouraging us to laugh at him:

From the shoulders up he looked much like one of those fake cow-punchers first brought into popularity ... by William S. Hart astride a pinto pony. ... a man who had seen too many Western movies in adolescence' (144-45).

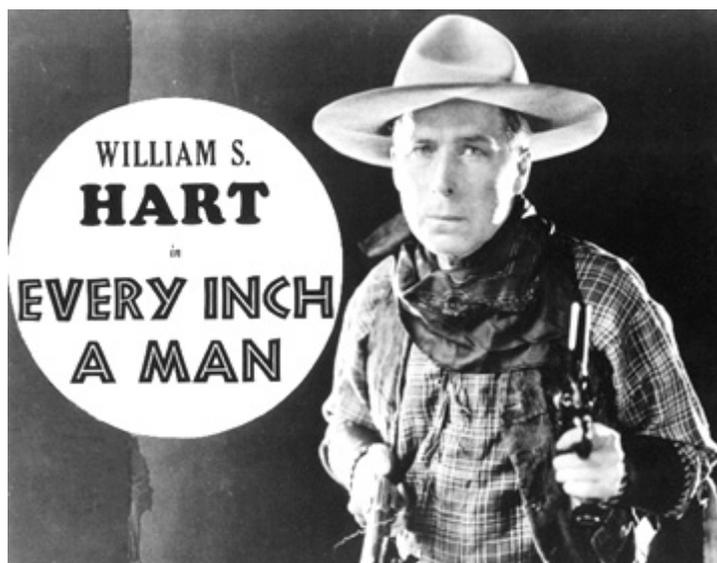


Fig. 9

As his name suggests, Nubby (Dickens, one of Algren's literary heroes, also typically used names to describe function) is the nub of two of the most important relationships in *Somebody in Boots*: first, the 'friendly father' relationship with Cass, but also the structural relationship between his, Cass's, and Charlotte Hallem's stories. As my reading demonstrates, Nubby's characterisation also forms the nub for a re-drafting of the mythology of love in Algren's work. This, as outlined in chapter one, is constructed on George Bluestone's 1957 hero-centric reading of the novel's two heterosexual relationships in which Nancy McKay and Norah Egan are read entirely for what they contribute to the *bildungsroman* of Cass McKay. Bluestone proposes that 'Nancy offers innocent love; Norah profane love' and that the 'two climactic movements of the book center around the destruction of both relationships.'²⁴ In keeping with the critical conventions of its day, Bluestone's reading over-romanticises the relationship between Cass and Nancy, under-reads the sublime of Cass's love for Norah, and under-values

²⁴ Bluestone, 'Nelson Algren', p. 29.

two significant narratives that shape this novel: the gang rape of Charlotte Hallem, and the traditionally climactic moment of any novel – the ending that sees Cass ride into the sunset with Nubby O’Neill.²⁵ Both separately and in chronological relationship to each other, these narrative threads are key to more fully appreciating the literary, political, and historical importance of *Somebody in Boots*. That their stories unfold as discreet episodes perhaps explains why their structural relationship has escaped critical attention, but these seemingly unrelated protagonists set in motion two important strands of narrative my reading follows to *dénouement* at the novel’s end.

The Inward Gaze: Cass McKay

They all wanted me to become a man. I found it hard to grasp what exactly this entailed.

Jennifer Johnston²⁶

Algren’s portrait of Cass McKay includes an abstract from an unpublished short story in his archive entitled ‘Portrait of a Boy.’

Cass could feel his body growing. It was groaning and straining and stretching. There was a great travail within him, a great toiling and laboring, as though an oak were sprouting in his vitals.

Sometimes strength would surge through him in a tide, and then he would run aimlessly and shout at nothing at all.

In his mind, too, was a growing. A sudden light would flash within his brain illuminating earth and sky – a common bush would become a glory, a careless sparrow on a swinging bough a wonder to behold; and then the light would fade and fade, like a slow gray curtain dropping.

Some moments were irretrievable.

²⁵ The generational differences in readings of Algren are interesting in themselves. Would anybody reading *Somebody in Boots* today write, as Bluestone did in 1957, that ‘Cass meets Norah, and makes her his mistress...?’ (p. 29).

²⁶ Words spoken by Alexander Moore, the principal protagonist of Jennifer Johnston’s *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1974), p. 124. In Algren’s own copy of this novel there is a mark in the margin next to this sentence. He reviewed this novel very positively in *The Critic*, January-February 1975, pp. 63-66.

One day in March he raised his eyes from play and saw a solitary sapling on a hill, bending before the wind against a solid wall of blue; and it seemed to him that it had not been there before he had looked up and would vanish as soon as he turned. Many times after that time Cass looked at the same slender shoot; never again did he see it so truly.

In a sense it had vanished.

At times he could catch Nancy in one of these strange life-glimpses. One second she would be moving about the kitchen, his sister about her familiar tasks, and the next she would be a total stranger, doing he knew not what. There would be a picture of her in his head then – not moving, but rigid, tensed with life and still as death. He would be afraid and bewildered. (22-23)²⁷

In contrast to Beauvoir's later assertion that 'For man, the passage from childhood sexuality to maturity is relatively simple,'²⁸ this phenomenological portrait of pubescent self-awareness and consciousness (and their lapses) describes the advent of masculine puberty as a process that induces unanticipated and alarming alterations in cognitive processing as well as in the 'vitals.' This portrait begins a cataloguing of phenomenological data about male sexual response that continues throughout the first half of *Somebody in Boots*: sexuality is everywhere Cass goes. We see it when he notices how 'perty' the ill-fated Mexican girl 'do look tho – My!' (28); when in the Market Street burlesque house Cass is 'overcome with wonder when 'the air rocked with beauty, and angel-voices sang ... He was lifted wholly out of himself' (113); and when, walking down Wells Street, Cass 'heard a young boy offering himself to a pervert in front of a cheap hotel. He saw a Negro girl on a doorstep who shot out her tongue like a snake as they passed; and he saw an aged white woman who tapped her lips and smiled horribly, in an unnatural invitation' (189). And the narrator everywhere draws

²⁷ This passage is extracted from one of Algren's early unpublished essays, 'Portrait of a Boy', written while he was still exploring pen-names, signed by N. A. Abraham with 'Nelson Ben Algren' crossed out, and written from the family home, 4834 N. Troy St. Chicago, Ill., NA/OSU, Box 31, Folder 521. In the original essay the boy sees his mother in a 'strange life-glimpse' and in *A Walk on the Wild Side* Dove sees his brother, Byron.

²⁸ See Simone de Beauvoir's chapter on sexual initiation in *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 394. All further references to *The Second Sex* throughout this thesis are to this edition.

our attention to connections and disconnections between violence, consciousness, emotion, and sexuality. We are made privy to the physical effect of Nubby's racist hatred on his genitalia: his left testicle tightens (141). When Cass regains consciousness after being savagely beaten by Jack Gaines and the prostitute, the narrator suggests nodes in this electric circuitry in which the paths of pain and pleasure cross:

Pain wakened Cass. A long slow-starting, zig-zag pain that began in his viscera and ran jaggedly upward with gathering speed until it flashed like an orgasm beneath his heart, and left him sick and sweating. Twice it went through him like an electric bolt, leaving him each time sicker, number. (56)

In a box car, 'men crowded the doorways, shoulders brushed, hands touched, electrically a pleasant current passed from man to man. Cass ceased to be afraid for a moment; behind him someone began singing "*Casey Jones*"' (97). This 'pleasant current' – what the narrator earlier calls the "'we"-feeling' (20) that circulates silently between the men of hobohemia, passed along from one to the other when hands touch, shoulders brush – generates an electricity that make Cass feel safe. In the context of being 'one ragged bum among ten thousand ragged bums,' begging off the streets, 'always half-hungry,' ashamed, cold, afraid (93), this 'pleasant current' (97) is powerful medicine – and currency.

In its own time *Somebody in Boots* contributed (invisibly since it sold so few copies²⁹) to a discussion taking place among sociologists and governmental policy makers about the corrosive effect on American society of the vast populations of men wandering the country without familial attachment.³⁰ The 'wild side' here as far as governmental agencies were concerned was that men appeared to be too-happily accepting lives without women and families. Cass's story and that of his relationship with Nubby O'Neill documents what, for Chicago sociologist A. Wayne McMillen in 1932, was "The least tangible but perhaps the most devastating hazard that roving boys

²⁹ In its first year *Somebody in Boots* sold only 762 copies (Drew, p. 87).

³⁰ See Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), especially Chapter 3, 'Most Fags Are Floaters' The Problem of "Unattached Persons" during the Early New Deal, 1933-1935', pp. 91-173.

encounter' in hobohemia – 'the infectious attitude of the seasoned hobo.'³¹ If earlier writers such as Nels Anderson in his chapter 'Sex Life of the Homeless Man' noted that boys do 'not need to remain long in hobo society to learn of homosexual practices,'³² *Somebody in Boots* not only documents those practices but, in the long story of Cass and Nubby that ends with them looking to the future together, it tells of how 'wolves,' set out to trap 'lambs.' And, again, elements of this narrative seem to be intended to inspire laughter. When a man sits next to Cass on a Chicago park bench and, stroking Cass's thigh, shows him 'a bill' is it possible Algren did not know he was playing with another of his literary heroes, Shakespeare, master of the double-entendre?³³

Cass had never seen a bill that big before. He stared at it, all dumbyokel curiosity.... Then he took the bill in his hand the better to see it (though the man held tightly the other end all the while). (93)³⁴

Joking aside, we can begin to appreciate how Cass and the other men of *Somebody in Boots* put narrative flesh on the bones of contemporary masculinity theory if we take as a starting point the formula Michael Kimmel presents in his *History of Men* whereby 'Masculinities are constructed in a field of power: 1) the power of men over women; 2) the power of some men over other men.'³⁵ In the Algren *mythos*, masculine sexuality is a central force in this field of power, circulating both as current and currency: as current, discreetly through the private nervous system of individual men, overtly in the publically shared verbally and physically encoded languages of homosocially grouped men (in jail or hobo/urban jungle); as currency, in the bargaining system that allows men to claim ownership of the bodies of women or feminised men and other 'frails' through the use of violence, sexual violence, prostitution, and rape. Of all Algren's

³¹ Depastino, p. 205, citing A. Wayne McMillen, "An Army of Boys on the Loose", *Survey* 78 (September 1932).

³² Nels Anderson, *The Hobo*, p. 144. Algren's own annotated copy is in his archive at OSU – most of the notes are illegible.

³³ There are photocopies of pages from Algren's own volumes of Shakespeare (annotated by his young hand) in his archive at OSU.

³⁴ 'Bill' – penis. Gordon Williams, *Shakespeare's Sexual Language: A Glossary* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 43.

³⁵ Michael Kimmel, *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 6.

works *Somebody in Boots* and *Never Come Morning* are especially important in this respect because in their treatment of rape they make explicit the terms of the social contract that renders ‘the battle of the sexes’ a battle of sex *per se* in which rape – male-on-female and male-on-male – is the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of a hyper-patriarchal society. As we see in the El Paso jail, it is largely through fear of Nubby’s violence and sexual bullying that Cass becomes an A-grade student. When Nubby is busy at night with one of his ‘punks’ Cass is terrified, ‘remembering the man in the park in Chicago, fearing Nubby as he had feared that man.’ And when Nubby is bullying Creepy, though Cass is ‘sick with pity’, he laughs as ‘loud as any’ because he is ‘afraid not to’ (150).

Nubby’s influence over Cass doesn’t wane when they part company – indeed, it seems to become more pronounced. Cass frequently remembers the lessons Nubby taught him: ‘Nubby had shown him how to do many things’ (201); ‘he wouldn’t spend all his money at once; he’d spend it just a mite at a time. Like Nubby’ (215). When planning his first solo hold-up, Nubby’s ‘counsel’ is recalled (216). Later when Cass has to stand up to a fellow prisoner to prove to the whole tier [that he is] a man ... he closes one eye, as Nubby would have done’ (239). In the story of Cass’s apprenticeship to Nubby, *Somebody in Boots* demonstrates the point many masculinity theorists and historians have since made so that today we understand it as a commonplace: the construction of masculinity, as John Pettegrew notes in his *Brutes in Suits*, relies heavily on the ‘the masculinist culture of *mimicry*,’ on boys and men acting like other men.³⁶ Some of the traditionally masculine ‘customs’ men are required to adopt are stranger than others. According to Jungle Law, for example, ‘real white men’ like to sit around in dimly-lit rooms watching women undress to music.

Pornography: Threat or Menace

Cass’s visit to the burlesque with Olin Jones within a day or two of their rape of Charlotte Hallem rehearses long-running feminist debates about the potential of burlesque or strip-tease to encourage abusive sexuality, and the ‘ayes’ – yes, sex shows are bad for the psycho-sexual health of young men – win the day. Cass leaves the burlesque ‘as in a dream; he could not waken. Women in vision raced his brain’ (113).

³⁶ John Pettegrew, *Brutes in Suits: Male Sensibility in America, 1890-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 18.

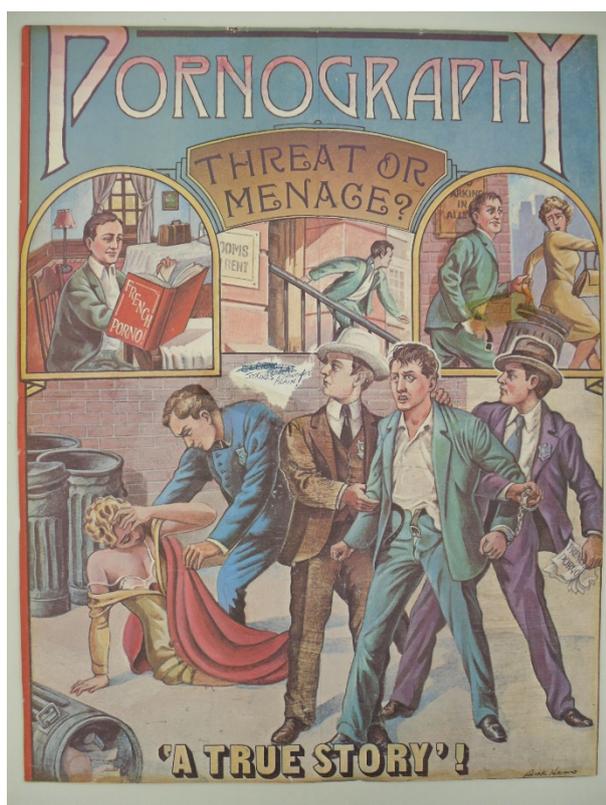


Fig. 10

The debate, however, is complicated by the fact that Cass's sexual imaginary has a new sexual experience on which to draw: leaving the burlesque, the memory of 'the fierce frenzy' of the gang rape of Charlotte Hallem returns 'blazing afresh in his blood'. He remembers Charlotte and 'how the brown girl's arms had fought him fiercely' (113). Not wanting to practice 'the secret vice Bryan had often practiced' (114), i.e. masturbation, but lacking money to pay for the prostitute he follows on leaving the burlesque, and having spent his last pennies in an arcade looking at pictures of girls, Cass follows a girl with a view to raping her. He grabs her, stifles her scream,

But he did not know he had struck her till he saw her lower lip bleeding. He did not know where he was till he saw they were no longer on a street; somehow, they were in an alley, and she was beneath him. 'Why'nt she pick up an' run off from me?' he wondered, unaware of his knees that pinned her.

Cans and ashes lay strewn about them; he saw all things standing out in sharp detail, as though roundhouse floodlights were shining down from directly above him. (116)

In this one scene the novel goes to the crux of a problem that has historically stalled both the theorisation of rape and the prosecution of men who rape. Cass repeatedly fails to acknowledge his agency, let alone his responsibility. Likewise, when he jumps onto the pregnant woman in the boxcar his first thought is, ‘Whyn’t she git out o’ mah way, ’stead o’ layin’ stretched out right in mah way?’ (126). But worse than this, Cass’s surest alibi is that he has no working memory of his actions because his mind goes ‘black and blank’ (40). ‘As always when violently excited, Cass heard no sound; he saw, and understood, and heard nothing at all’ (197). Our attention is persistently drawn to the lacuna that exists between how Cass perceives his surroundings, how he physically and mentally processes – or, rather, doesn’t process – information; how he literally loses consciousness during moments of violence, high sexual tension or arousal. What, for instance, is the relationship between lapses of consciousness such as above and that described in the ‘portrait of a boy’? And why does Cass’s consciousness hark back to ‘the roundhouse floodlights’ by which his father, Stubby, murdered Luke Gulliday if not so that readers connect his psyche with his father’s and ‘The Damned Feeling’?

Strange Life Glimpses

Returning, then, to the ‘portrait of a boy,’ what are the ‘strange life-glimpses’ that seem to stall Cass’s consciousness? At first, the passage speaks the language of the Romantic poet: earth and sky illuminated; a bush, a glory; a sparrow, ‘a wonder to behold.’ But when the poetry fades, it suggests too that Cass’s cognitive processing of his surroundings – especially where people are concerned – is faulty: the boy exhibits the symptoms of some kind of dissociative disorder. Later, we will come to understand he has no capacity for intellectual abstraction. When, for instance, Matches tells him a joke that can be recycled for an audience with different racial prejudices simply by changing the name of the cigarettes in question, Cass cannot ‘turn it around’ in his mind, the thought will ‘blur oddly and skip away’ (132). Later again when a cell-mate, in the space of one conversation, goes from being vehemently racist to anti-racist (after hearing Cass talk), Cass will sense there’s ‘something wrong’ but will be unable to ‘think clearly’ to work out what it is (240).

Cass’s lack of basic comprehension skills and the lapses he experiences that momentarily obscure his vision are of particular importance to identifying what is most complex about Algren’s ‘experiment in narration.’ Matthew Walter summarises why

when he observes that the novel is ‘dominated by a classically bildungsroman omniscient narration which gives way at the most important explanatory moments to a narrative focalized directly through the protagonist.’³⁷ If, at precisely those moments when narratological help is needed, we turn to Cass, we’ve failed to successfully negotiate the first stage of Algren’s ‘complex experiment in narration.’ The first instance that signals the danger of trusting Cass’s narratorial authority occurs when the young Mexican girl is crushed by a train. The narration, focalised through Cass, confidently declares that ‘No one was getting very far ahead of *this* girl on *this* trip, that was plain enough to be seen.’ But the ‘buccaneers swarming over the sides’ of the train tracks do get ahead of her: literally, they ‘get a head,’ she is decapitated (30). Cass’s ignorance is in direct proportion to the confidence with which he makes claims to knowledge. Luther Gulliday’s explanation, “‘She must of got anxious an’ got up too close ... she must of just slipped a little’” (32), is, as Horvath notes, decidedly ‘wan’ because wrong.³⁸ There is no textual evidence that the girl slipped but there is evidence that suggests that she was pushed. Just before all the men start ‘bustling about’ Cass sees the girl ‘step back just an inch’ (in other words, *contra* Gulliday’s theory, she was moving away from the tracks, not getting ‘too close’). Cass sees she is afraid but does nothing: he too is swept along with all the other ‘buccaneers.’ Cass’s unreliability extends to his physicality; even his bodily movements have important narratorial effects in the storyworld. Attempting to protect the family cat from Bryan’s sadistic cruelty he instead precipitates its horrific death (27). When Nancy asks him to go and head off Bryan so he doesn’t come home drunk, Cass dawdles, playing with his water and the crumbs on his plate, so Bryan is not saved from near-emasculatation by Stubby (37-8). (Note, here, that the narrator mentions the pattern of crumbs again just as the row between Stubby and Bryan kicks off.) When, ‘[o]beying a passing impulse’, Cass nudges Claude Burrus, he is responsible for preventing Charlotte Hallem’s escape from the five men who rape her (104). When he pokes Mister Bastard ‘to make him be still’ so he isn’t beaten, Cass induces, instead, the opposite result (162). His unreliability as eye-witness and narrator is absolute.

In other words on almost every occasion when Cass seems to be reflecting in a rational, intelligent manner, we can be pretty sure these are not ‘Cass’s’ ideas and

³⁷ Walter, ‘Nelson Algren and His Contexts’, p. 59.

³⁸ Horvath, p. 23.

thoughts but ‘Algren’s.’ Do we, for example, really think it is ‘Cass’ who ‘wonders how it would feel to be Bryan just for one day?’ (36) – when he demonstrates in all his relationships that he doesn’t possess even the most basic instinct that potentially leads to empathic thinking: curiosity. To my eye and ear there are detectable differences between the character of Cass – painted by Algren in the early chapters of the novel – and an interjecting consciousness that speaks as though trying to be Cass, interpreting Cass, helping Cass, befriending Cass, representing Cass, but definitely not Cass. When there is any self-reflexive thought happening in the text, this is not Cass but Algren. Cass cannot ‘think it out’. He is intellectually incapable of reflecting with the sophistication necessary to wonder ‘Did everyone, everything, cats and hawks and men and women – did all of these live only to eat, fight and die ...?’ And it is surely not to Cass – whose highest aspiration is get himself a tattoo – that ‘It seemed ... that in being a man there might be something more’ (37). These are, rather, the questions of a novelist.³⁹ Because one thing all Algren’s protagonists have in common, male and female: they are all riding piggyback on the consciousness of Algren. It’s in this confusion, I suspect, that some of the critical timidity concerning Cass is rooted. Because, like Nubby, he is likeable; we believe in his innocence – perhaps too much.

In any case, for all the reasons above, it is inadvisable to situate ourselves too closely to Cass’s point of view in any situation, either in the storyworld or in the narratorial devices his voice, vision, or consciousness informs. We have to follow Hemingway’s advice and keep on our toes. This is particularly important when it comes to unpacking the mythology that surrounds Cass’s relationships with his sister, Nancy and his lover, Norah to whose stories I now turn.

The Family Romance: Nancy McKay

As already noted, in order to unpack the ‘complex experiment in narration’ to which Algren’s women contribute we have to recognise that experimentation carries risks – to do justice to which we have to take a few ourselves. For example, we can infer from the difference between Algren’s narrative technique in *Somebody in Boots* and that of his

³⁹ For Kurt Vonnegut, for example, ‘[r]eporting on what he saw of dehumanized Americans with his own eyes day after day, year after year, Algren said in effect, “Hey—an awful lot of these people your hearts are bleeding for are really mean and stupid. That’s just a fact. Did you know that?” See Vonnegut’s ‘Introduction’ to Fourth Estate’s 1988 edition of *Never Come Morning*, p. xx.

next novel *Never Come Morning* (and *ainsi de suite*) that the former contains writing lessons from which the latter benefits. I think it's safe to do this without condescending to writer, text, or histories with value judgments about 'good', 'bad', or 'dated' literature. Indeed, as I've suggested in respect of the editorial voice in *Somebody in Boots*, some instances of what others identify as the worst of Algren's writing demonstrate important stages of a 'complex experiment' in progress. The novel contains, for instance, two striking examples of what feminist theorist Laura Mulvey termed (in 1975) 'the male gaze', the first in a scene depicting the sexual awakening of Nancy, the second in the scene of Charlotte Hallem's rape. Each showcases the 'male gaze' as a gaze in and through which the desire of a man or men actively constructs the sexuality of a woman or women.⁴⁰ We will come to Charlotte later. Here, first, is Nancy:

Sometimes after supper, while undressing for bed, she would press her hands slowly down the white bow of her loins. A great wonder would fill her, she would stand looking down. She would lie still in the darkness, her breasts like twin spears; and she would feel then as though she lay on a pyre whose flames were already beginning beneath her. The girl would be afraid, though she did not know of what. And her face in the dark would change to that of a woman. (17)

We can see that the final line of this paragraph is trying to underline the idea of Nancy's sexual awakening, her transition from girlhood to womanhood. However, it also abruptly introduces a third-party perspective into the reading experience so that what begins as a description (however clumsily rendered) of a young woman experiencing sexual feelings (a situation into which we may or may not be successfully transported) ends with her lying in darkness with a face 'change[d] to that of a woman.' Problems of spectatorship announce themselves: who, in the dark, shines a light on Nancy's face to perceive this change? First we were inner ('in her') then we were outer ('out of her'). I suggest the extent to which the younger Algren successfully imagines the subject position of a young woman experiencing sexual feelings is measurable by the moment an impossibly positioned spectator/narrator appears in the text to notice 'her face in the dark ... change[s] to that of a woman.' The text is evidently trying to say: 'Here is a girl

⁴⁰ See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16 (Autumn 1975), 6-18.

alone in her bed, in the dark, discovering and immersed in her own sensuality.’ But up pops a narrator (with a torch), pointing – “woman”: the writerly desire to psychologically inhabit and represent the other collapses and fails. Indeed, this passage – knowingly or not – demonstrates the social mechanism whereby a girl’s sexual awakening makes her, in the eyes of the sexually desirous onlooker, a ‘woman’ i.e. fuckable. And if we step back a sentence, there is another question: what is Nancy afraid of? Are we supposed to imagine she is afraid of her nascent sexuality? Or is it not as likely that she senses one of her sneaking brothers or her father on the other side of the strip of dark cheesecloth that separates her ‘windowless cavern ... from her men’? (15).

The question of narrative position and authority in relation to Nancy is important because a) as noted above, most of what we come to know about her is communicated by Cass’s experience of her and, most importantly, b) because the mythology of love in Algren’s oeuvre is based on readings that romanticise their sibling relationship. Even without all the indications noted above that Cass is an unreliable narrator where his sister’s story is concerned, this point is made explicit by the omniscient narrator:

Nancy and Cass.

They did not know each other very well, this brother and sister. (76)

And neither do we if we read Nancy as ‘a pure maiden’ and Cass as a ‘pure knight of the lumpenproletariat, setting forth in quest of the grail of economic justice and freedom.’⁴¹ Algren’s portrait of Nancy begins when she was ‘a small girl’ who ‘made herself crowns of lilac and rose’ but it continues through the years she was ‘always fighting with street urchins, chasing the chickens, or stealing white grapes off honest folks’ vines,’ including a day when,

... she coveted a great white blossom growing in the yard of neighbour Luther Gulliday. It was a wild chrysanthemum, she had not seen one before in her life; so she begged Luther for it, and he gave her instead – an apple. Nancy went off quite humbly – an excellent actress. But when dark came she strolled again toward her flower, saw no one watching, plucked it and ran. (17)

⁴¹ Giles, p. 40.

That Nancy conceals her disappointment with fake-humility and takes what she wants anyway makes her yet another Algren-girl with ‘spirit.’ But the girl child is not magically preserved from the socio-psychological conditions that rots these ‘descendants of pioneer woodsmen.’ Indeed, for Nancy, the rottenness of her environment presses closer to home than for Cass because it begins and ends within the walls of the home – no pimping, whisky-drinking, carousing with the lads for her. The fact that Cass ‘did not ... know his sister very well’ becomes obvious if we observe him closely in the weeks following his return home after his first flight. He senses Nancy is ‘ashamed of their father’ but the only event with which he is able to associate that shame is his father’s brutal near-castration of Bryan. Cass has neither the emotional imagination nor the capacity for intellectual abstraction to understand what other things may have happened to his sister in the week of his absence. He does not know why, ‘in the weeks that followed ... Nancy never once looked directly at him; she seemed to be for ever shifting her eyes or turning her head or walking abruptly away. He could not understand how the week of his absence could have wrought such an irreparable change. ... Cass had no inkling of the conflict in her heart’ (65).

With the text suggesting we cannot rely on Cass, we must look for other clues to understand the ‘irreparable change’ in Nancy that has ‘split life in two’ (65). We may take the narrator’s explanation at face-value: she cries in her bed at night ‘for the utter joylessness of her life’ (77). But this doesn’t seem to be equivalent to the ‘irreparable change’ that, leading up to their father’s murder of Luke Gulliday, so frightens Cass. What is the significance of Nancy’s withdrawal from Cass to the other side of the large covers of the family Bible? And of all the hymns, why does she sing ‘Are you washed in the blood of the lamb’?

When the bridegroom cometh will your robes be white?

Pure and white in the blood of the lamb?

...

Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow?

Are you washed in the blood of the lamb? (78)

What are we to make of the scene, when Cass goes to Nancy to comfort her, and after several minutes of sitting beside her with ‘his hand on her naked shoulder ... strok[ing] the silken carpet of her hair,’ she tells him (and her voice is ‘strange’) to get back to his bed: “Caint yo’ see ah’m ’most *nekkid*? ... Go awn now – ah know what your aimin’ at

well enough,” stunning Cass ‘as though ... struck between the eyes’ (79)? Why else would Nancy think Cass was ‘aimin’ at’ something if not because others had aimed there previously? Cass, of course, lacks the emotional imagination to make any such connections; the insistence of the narrator in this scene should raise readers’ suspicions.

... He could not understand. For hours he lay awake, trying to understand. ... But what was it then she murmured into the night as though to speak between clenched teeth? Every night now he heard her. Low, troubled words; confused pleadings, and a half-told despair.

He had heard her, and he had not understood. He was too hungry to think it all out into a clear understanding.

He was too hungry to understand what hunger wrought in his sister’s mind. (79-80)

The narrator wants us to know that Cass understands nothing – he ‘cannot think it all out,’ but the narrator’s own explanation doesn’t take up the slack to help us understand how or why Nancy has become ‘as catawampus’ as their father either (79). There is textual insinuation here, some other mysterious reason surplus to the beating of Bryan, in play. Giles accepts the narrator’s directive, concluding that ‘Nancy ... has surrendered her purity to the harsh insistence of poverty.’⁴² But I sense rumours of incest in the substrata of these scenes, and I suspect Nancy’s corruption in Cass and Bryan’s absence has more to do with ‘the harsh insistence’ (114) of her father, a suspicion given voice by ‘Mob-Mouth’: ‘He been actin’ bad-hat-about-town goin’ on fifteen year, an’ the Jesus-God hisself don’t know what’s gone on behind them walls’ (83-84).

Whatever has happened to Nancy – and none of us can know for sure – the mythology surrounding the breakdown of sibling love between Cass and herself is founded on a basic mis-reading of their last exchange, during the night before Cass leaves home. Cass’s last words are the source of the most important fault line first inscribed in Algren criticism by Bluestone, here articulated by Cox and Chatterton that,

Crucial to the character of all Algren’s non-heroic heroes is the yearning for a love which, once attained, is destroyed by the hero himself. Henceforth, he cannot

⁴² Giles, p. 40.

forget that by a careless act or thoughtless word he has destroyed the only person who has really cared.⁴³

The problems with this assessment are self-evident: first, Cass's love for Nancy is not a love 'attained': he has done nothing to win the love of his sister. And his love for Norah, which is a love 'attained' is not 'destroyed' by Cass: when he finds Norah after almost a year of looking for her she rejects him. Apart from these obvious flaws in the above proposition, there is the fact that, in the year before their father's murder of Luke Gulliday, Nancy has withdrawn emotionally from Cass, abandoning the mothering role she has sustained for most of his life. We know that, during this year, he finds her coldness towards him progressively more frightening. 'The wall between them was too high' (for sincere, authentic communication). Certainly, to the extent that Cass never apologises to Nancy, he does, as Horvath observes, 'irreparably' insult her when he tells her she can 'go ... get [herself] a job in a spik whorehouse' (87).⁴⁴ But while Cass periodically thinks back to this episode with something like regret, his comment responds to Nancy's no less vicious taunting him, with 'a sly little laugh to herself', that a vengeful mob will be gunning for him ('pussyfaht') and Bryan to avenge the murder of Luke Gulliday (87). Cass periodically says to himself, 'Ah shouldn't of said such words to sister that time' (79), but it is a fatalistic reading that concludes that because he feels sorry for what he said (which is not self-evident), he feels responsible for Nancy's supposed 'destruction.' As for that 'destruction,' in contrast to the 'strangely helpless' woman he last saw three years ago, Cass sees, striding towards him, 'A woman, a girl – then it was Nancy ... How firmly his sister walked! How strong her stride! (172). The scene ends with Nancy soliciting him (it's dark, she can't see him), him doing an about-turn, and there the chapter ends. The next we see of Cass he is leaving 'a two-bit flop on Wells street,' arm in arm with Nubby, 'scurry[ing] toward a dime dance-hall ... two amorous terriers ... trott[ing] to where women [a]re' (187). There is no textual evidence for Cox and Chatterton's assertion that when he returns to the McKay house after three years and sees that Nancy is a prostitute, the 'psychological shock of this discovery transcends that of the physical violence which motivated [his] previous escape.'⁴⁵

⁴³ Cox and Chatterton, p. 68.

⁴⁴ Horvath, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Cox and Chatterton, pp. 67-68.

If literary criticism always necessarily begins with reader-response, the difference between the Cox and Chatterton reading which reads psychological shock where I read none highlights the complex relationship between the narrative processes that document a fictional character's emotional life and the processing of a text's emotional cargo by necessarily already-emotional-readers. Whereas Cox and Chatterton (and most other published readers) read the above moment in this novel as a pivotal moment in the unfolding of the love mythology in the Algren oeuvre, for me, a prior and more important moment occurs when Cass returns home after one week riding the rails to find his sister has become emotionally distant – no longer available to him in her prior role as 'mother.' Indeed, the most sentimentally charged instances of Cass's longings for Nancy occur during this first week he is away from home when, thinking of her, 'his heart pain[s]' (42) and when he is badly beaten by Jack Gaines, he imagines that she will 'tend him out of love' (57).⁴⁶ Readings that, to my mind, over-stress the importance of Cass's post-garden-gate-mantra and its foundational part in the construction of a love mythology in the Algren oeuvre seem to demonstrate what narratologists call the 'primacy effect' whereby information occurring early in a narrative sets up a framework into which later information is inserted.⁴⁷ Early Algren critics, for example, seem not to take into account the emotional, life-changing, character-forming ruptures that occur between the moment of Cass's first return and his second, a period of over three years. During these three years Cass undergoes several life-changing experiences, not least the gang rape of Charlotte Hallem. Remember that, before their father's murder of Gulliday he had come to fear and mistrust his sister who did not, when he returned home the first time, deliver the care he had been anticipating and who had, most frighteningly of all, come to resemble their father. When we bracket the desire to make a romance out of Algren's heterosexual landscape, the most important point demonstrated by both instances of Cass's return home is that no 'return home' was in either case possible. Why? Because when he left home the first time, he abandoned Nancy to her fate in a household with two dangerously volatile men. If Nancy was no longer mother to Cass on his return, it is surely because he had demonstrated he was in the first place nobody's

⁴⁶ For Cass's references to Nancy during the week of his first departure from home, see pp. 42, 48, 55, 57, 60. For all references to Nancy after his definitive departure in 1929 see pp. 100, 208, 211, 212, 220-21, 235, 271-72, 283.

⁴⁷ Fludernik, p. 19.

son. Readings that underestimate the significance of the mother/child nature of Cass and Nancy's relationship miss one of this novel's most important transfigurative proposals. *Somebody in Boots* proposes an American 'mythical people' unrelated to Greek mythology and defined first of all by the absence of a mother. Indeed, readers must look hard to find any mothers at all in the Algren oeuvre. Those who read in his work reflections of his own demons might interpret their absence as a mark of the writer's purportedly difficult relationship with his own mother.⁴⁸ However, it can also be argued that in (mostly) keeping mothers out of his work, Algren protected it (and himself) from amateur psychoanalysis: as Cass's closest textual relative, Dove Linkhorn says, 'I'm a-talkin' sense, mister, 'n you leave mothers out of this.'⁴⁹ Indeed, it is more useful to examine what, in the language of mythology, the evacuation of Cass and Nancy's mother from *Somebody in Boots*' storyworld achieves. For instance, it allows the psychological importance of the brother/sister relationship to be explored without the theoretical distractions of a King Oedipus.

For the purposes of un-reading the mythology of love in Algren, the most important thing about Cass and Nancy's relationship is its sustained treatment of the communicative lacunas that exist between brother and sister. The dynamics of their communication foreshadow and set the psychological scene for the communication gaps that will exist in his relationship with Norah Egan (and with his other 'significant other,' Nubby O'Neill). The 'mythical people' of *Somebody in Boots* rehearse the idea that sexual-socialisation begins at home, that important lessons in 'how to be heterosexual' are worked out in the relationship between brother and sister.⁵⁰

It is possible, with closer textual analysis than has been accorded these scenes, to more precisely weigh Cass's burden of guilt.

⁴⁸ See Drew, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁹ *A Walk on the Wild Side*, p. 98

⁵⁰ In this, Algren's treatment of the sibling relationship resonates with the psychological theories of feminist psychologist, Juliet Mitchell. See her *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004) and *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

Remembering Nancy

The first time Cass thinks of Nancy is some weeks after leaving home when, asleep in a box car with several other men (and unbeknownst to them, Charlotte Hallem, whom they will later rape), he wakes up feeling

... as though he were caught somewhere, deep down. Then he remembered: he was lying on a creaking nightfloor with his cap for a pillow and straw for his bed, and Nancy was nowhere near at all.

‘Ah shouldn’t of said such words to sister that time,’ he thought.

And he slept once more, and he dreamed. (100)

Cass dreams of a ‘wheeling hawk’ that had ‘it seemed ... been searching for long, over the whole dark prairie for him’ (100): the emotion that surfaces in this dream is fear. Alone and afraid, Nancy is nowhere near to keep him safe. The next time he thinks about her (several months later) is two or three days after he has been hiding out in Norah Egan’s room when she comes to mind because Cass ‘don’t like bein’ alone’ (208). Thereafter he thinks of Nancy when Norah reminds him of her (sometimes she talks like her, but she’s neither as tall nor as handsome) and when, feeling contented, Cass remembers more peaceful times in the McKay house. It is only when Cass is next in trouble, in prison for the failed robbery of the drugstore, that his thoughts of Nancy resume the regretful pre-Norah tone but they do so within the broader context of regret for the past and in happy anticipation of a future categorically without her:

‘Ah shouldn’t of spoke so to sister that time,’ Cass thought.

There was no desire in Cass to return. It was Norah Egan he wanted now.

Where she was was peace, and home, and all things that meant well to him. (235)

The next time Cass thinks of Nancy is when Dill Doak, the African American Communist who works at the burlesque, is lecturing him on the capitalist evils of prostitution while he, ‘thinking of Norah Egan ... grow[s] sicker every minute,’ and, again says to himself, ‘Ah wish ah hadn’t spoke so to sister that time’ (272). And, finally, as his luck totally bottoms out, Norah having rejected him after he has searched months to find her, he says ‘half-aloud,’ ‘Ah guess ah shouldn’t of said that to sister that time’ (283). What has historically been read as a mantra of regret is as much an incantation that Cass repeats at times when he is afraid, sad, and lonely; the last time he

mutters it under his breath it reveals itself, as Horvath observes, as ‘a memory he revisits obsessively as though one personal mistake might explain all that has since happened to him.’⁵¹ In other words, it’s a superstition.

The Rape of Charlotte Hallem

The voice checked itself abruptly. It had sounded much like a woman’s voice. Men sucked in breath in an indrawn silence.

‘Say! That sounds like a woman back there!’ (99)

The importance of Charlotte Hallem’s contribution to *Somebody in Boots* cannot be overstated. If, as Giles asserts, Algren intended this, his first novel, to ‘shock a guilty, suffering nation into Marxist economic reform,’ Charlotte’s story forcefully reminds us that Marxism was as much concerned with social reform as it was economic reform and the greatest obstruction to egalitarianism in 1930s America was racism. The particularities of African American women’s oppression was well-documented in Communist literature – in particular their vulnerability, especially in the southern states, to rape by white men. ‘Communist publications,’ writes Kate Weigand ‘regularly used the terms “triple burden” and “triple oppression” to describe the status of black women who were exploited because of their race, class, and gender. Among most other predominantly white organizations in the United States before the late 1940s, the Communist Party was the foremost defender of African American women’s rights and the chief advocate of their equality.’⁵² Written when the case of the Scottsboro Boys was alive in public consciousness, *Somebody in Boots* reverses its colour-codification: these are white men raping a black woman – no ‘crime’ is committed; there will be no trial.

The rape of Charlotte Hallem, from beginning to end, extends over the course of seven pages and ends at the chapter’s end when the reader is left with the image of five men moving slowly and silently towards her.

We hear Charlotte’s voice before we see her.

⁵¹ Horvath, *Understanding Nelson Algren*, p. 27.

⁵² Weigand, *Red Feminism*, p. 99.

... “What a bunch of punks – to let Pugh git away with a stunt like that. Lawd, they aint ’nuf guts in this whole gang to stuff a ...”

The voice checked itself abruptly. It had sounded much like a woman’s voice. Men sucked in breath in an indrawn silence.

“Say! That sounds like a woman back there!”

In the darkness Cass heard an eager forward-jostling; then came silence again, till the car seemed rocking with its silence.

“Damned if it *ain’t*, boys! Say – whyn’t you tell us afore, nigger gal? What y’all got in them pants anyhow, nigger gal?”

“Nigger gal, fellas! Say, nigger gal, where’d y’all come from anyhow? How long you been ridin’, eh? Where y’all think yer goin’ to? What’s yore nasty name, nigger gal, anyhow?”

The girl’s voice was a hung thing, oblique with thin fear.

“Charlotte Hallem. Goin’ t’ Noo Awlins. Comin’ f’om ...”

“Whoops! She’s a-goin’ to Noo Awlins to work on *Franklin* Street – Step right up, gen’lmen, meet Charlotte, the little travelin’ girrul. Which way y’all taken it t’night, gen’lmen?”

Simultaneously, two voices from different parts of the car struck up the same tune, wailing it out until others joined in,

Oh Charlotte the harlot

The queen of the whores,

Scum of the east side

Covered in sores

They sang this jeeringly over and over again; they all knew the tune of *Long, Long Ago*, – till a voice spoke out strongly to bring them back to realization of their predicament. (99-100)

The predicament in question, shared by all the occupants of the box car, is they are locked in and must find a way to extricate themselves before they reach Waskom. The predicament for Charlotte is that she is already in a dangerous situation by virtue of being an African American woman in the southern states of 1930s America: when she gets out of the box car she will still be in a predicament. It is, of course, unlikely that a black woman would have openly brought into question the masculinity of a group of

white men in such a situation, but this is fiction: Charlotte speaks the first words in the horrible narrative of her own rape.

The only person in ‘the whole ragged crew’ who has a knife – a jack-knife (pen knife) – is Charlotte. Having handed it over to the men, their baiting of her ‘cease[s] for a time. Yet something of lust unquelled remain[s] in the air’ (100). When the men’s whittling of the wood makes no headway and they decide to set fire to the wagon, Charlotte’s ‘frizzly hair, brushing Cass’s cheek’ as she helps to beat flames back with her cap ‘excite[s] him a little’, and the narrator’s observation that when ‘[t]he black girl opened her collar ... her throat seemed darker than the night about them’ becomes focalized through Cass who ‘could see its outline in the dimness, black as a pillar of black baleen’ (101). The male gaze, the desirous gaze, Cass’s gaze, our own gaze: we’re all looking. And maybe some of us are distracted when some man or boy or other – (is it Cass, Burrus, Olin Jones, or Algren? we don’t know) – tells us that Charlotte’s ‘breasts under her overalls rolled hugely [and] appeared to weigh perhaps four pounds apiece’ (103).

Two pages later, the men and Charlotte have escaped from the burning box car and, having covered some distance from the rail tracks, are feeling ‘a degree safer’ (103); Charlotte shares a bar of chocolate and a pack of cigarettes with the men, laughing and joking with them all as they walk, and she tells them where she’s from, about the lynching of her husband, and that she’s going to New Orleans to work in her brother-in-law’s laundry.

Jones thwacked her on the rump with the flat of his palm.

“Say, if y’jest lost yer husband, you’d best to marry me now, black gal. I’m a good pervider, I am. Come on out in the scrub wid me an’ I’ll pervide y’ some right now.” He glanced at the others for approval, and Claude Burrus laughed. (103)

Charlotte ‘cease[s] to joke and to chatter’ and tries to drop back to escape the men but Jones takes her by one arm,

“Ain’t time fer no divorce yet, Coconut-Tits – wait’ll we gets married first.”
Claude Burrus took up the joke immediately.

“Ain’t time fer no divorce yet, Coconut-tits – You’n me is gonna git married t’gether in Waskom.” He took her other arm. (104)

The reader is perhaps by now afraid for Charlotte – or maybe sexually excited that the rape script is warming up. Either way, we need to pause at this point to look at how Charlotte’s story is unfolding: at every stage of its development there are moments – pauses in the ‘gang rape script’ – during which civilised codes of behaviour are textually summoned. According to these, some readers may foresee (or hope for) an escape for Charlotte. After all, she has contributed in no small way to the group’s escape from the train; she had the knife; she fought the fire; she shared her chocolate and cigarettes – she has behaved in ways that, among men, earn gratitude and respect. So, even at this point where I have paused the narrative, where we most fear for her – as she walks along with two men holding her on either side, each bent on ‘marrying’ her – it is still possible to hope she will escape unharmed. Conversely, for readers titillated by the idea of gang rape, such pauses perhaps crank up the sexual desire that looks forward to textual release. Finally, when the hoboes stop to rest, Charlotte has the opportunity to escape (we can hardly believe it – they’re going to sleep first, rape later) when Cass, ‘[o]beying a passing impulse’ (105), nudges Burrus, who shouts out, which wakes Jones. Scene and chapter end with the men moving ‘slowly, in silence, toward the black woman’ and the narrator ends with – what? An explanation? An excuse? A rationale?

They were all of them men; they were men without women. (106)

According to mythologies of rape these may be ‘men without women’ with whom to have sex, men who, burdened by animal energies (such as the excess we saw figured in the image of an oak sprouting in Cass’s groin) must offload them, must discharge a surplus. Or they may be men without women who exert a ‘civilising’ influence over them, men who haven’t been ‘domesticated,’ ‘trained,’ not to rape. Perhaps this is a response to the question posed by Nels Anderson in his 1923 book, *The Hobo*: ‘How does the absence of women and children affect the fantasy and the reveries and eventually the behavior of the homeless man?’⁵³ And then, for us, how does reading Charlotte’s rape affect us? The hope that I suggest brings some respite from the threat of rape could for another reader be the hope for a violent conclusion, the gratification of a sexually desiring reading. In any case, the fact remains, these are men who outnumber this one woman, Charlotte Hallem, on her way to restart her life, and the most

⁵³ Anderson, p. 137.

disturbing reading is one that concludes that being ‘men without women’ explains or justifies the act of gang rape. If, as noted above, *Somebody in Boots* has historically been castigated for its too-obvious editorial presence, in this scene the editor absconds altogether. Indeed the lack of editorial guidance in this and other passages describing sexual violence was in no small way responsible for the novel’s failure with critics in 1935. For Edmund Fuller in 1958, Algren was one of a school who ‘would probe for the limits of the law in spelling out the action of ... rape,’ dropping the reading-experience of it ‘into our laps unevaluated, for us to grope for some meaning in it.’⁵⁴ Precisely. What else did Hemingway mean when he wrote that Algren ‘will kill you if you are not awfully careful?’ Was he not referring to the transportation process whereby readers travel through works of fiction in somebody else’s boots? The transfigurative proposal Charlotte’s rape puts out across its 7 pages is ‘whose boots are you wearing?’

Notwithstanding the potential of Charlotte’s rape to excite sexual passion as much as incite political protest, this novel documents the historical fact that the ‘sexual access of white men to black women was a cornerstone of patriarchal power in the South.’⁵⁵ It was a given: African American women were considered by white men to be public property. Charlotte’s rape not only dramatises the real and present danger of travelling solo for a woman, it is the centrepiece of the political protest that drives this novel. It is well-documented that its original title ‘Native Son’ was rejected because William Gibbs McAdoo was running for President on a “native son” candidacy.⁵⁶ So Algren let his friend Richard Wright have the title. If, as Maxwell notes, several generations’ worth of criticism has ignored the political relationship between these two novels, it is little

⁵⁴ Edmund Fuller, *Man in Modern Fiction: Some Minority Opinions on Contemporary American Writing* (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 77. The others of the same ‘schools’ according to Fuller: ‘Messrs. [Tennessee] Williams, [Norman] Mailer, Algren, [Gerald] Tesch, and [probably Paul] Bowles, et al.’ See Cappetti p. 152, for Algren’s response to Fuller in his review of the book for the *Nation*, an excerpt from which is irresistible here: ‘... if Fuller walked in the bar where Frankie and his friends once drank, with his beard, his degree and his true or false questionnaire, he’d be easily the most sinister party in the joint.’

⁵⁵ See Jacqueline Hall, “The Mind that Burns in Each Body”: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 328-49. Cited by Sharon Stockton in the Introduction to her *The Economics of Fantasy: Rape in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 16.

⁵⁶ Drew, p. 83.

wonder because the political implications of Algren's account of the gang rape of Charlotte have been sidestepped by readings that under-read race, sex and politics in a novel that Maxwell posits as 'one of the most thoroughly antiracist texts in the proletarian inventory.'⁵⁷

'White! White! Mah Joe you burnt!' are the last words reliably uttered by Charlotte. Less reliably, 'somebody's' two syllables hang in the air: 'Ah – ah' (106). That we cannot be sure whether these are Charlotte's muffled shouts or the noise of one of her rapist's pleasure is not, I suggest, a coincidence.

Charlotte Hallem's rape vies only with Steffi Rostenkowski's (*Never Come Morning*) as the most disturbing scene in all of Algren's work. But Charlotte more than Steffi has suffered from critical under-reading or genre-confinement. Horvath omits this episode altogether from his reading of the novel, and Giles refers to it as 'a gang rape of a black woman by male vagrants,' neglecting to mention that one of those vagrants – indeed the vagrant whose actions prevent Charlotte from escaping and who actually triggers the rape – is none other than our 'hero' Cass McKay.⁵⁸ Maxwell, despite his otherwise perceptive analysis, describes Charlotte as 'a black woman drifter' when, as noted above, she clearly states the reason for and purpose of her journey.⁵⁹ Matthew Walter likewise doesn't accept Charlotte's account of why she is on the train: for him she is an 'itinerant prostitute' whose identity is constructed by the group of hoboes who taunt her with the song 'Charlotte the Harlot.'⁶⁰ Walter supports this reading with the thesis that the novel's songs function as one of the experimental literary features typical of 'collective literature' so that the song (sung 'jeeringly, over and over again') by the group of hoboes in their protracted warm-up to raping her, functions at the level of discourse, controlling and guiding the story.⁶¹ In fact, it is Walter's reading that is

⁵⁷ Maxwell, p. 192.

⁵⁸ Giles, p. 41.

⁵⁹ Maxwell, p. 193.

⁶⁰ Walter, 'Nelson Algren and His Contexts', pp. 66-67.

⁶¹ See Barbara Foley's discussion of proletarian literature in *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Political Fiction 1929-1941* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005). Foley provides useful frameworks for thinking about proletarian literature: 'the proletarian fictional autobiography,' the proletarian bildungsroman,' 'the proletarian social novel' and 'the collective novel.' Although, as Foley states, Algren's (and many other proletarian writers) work doesn't fit into her schemas, her definition of the 'proletarian project,' – the telling of a life as a form of protest, or testimony – and the ways in which

controlled and guided: by the discourse of a group of unreliable narrators (their actions in the storyworld render them criminally unreliable) whose voices interrupt Charlotte's; and by the project of making this scene conform to a theory of proletarian writing that forgets that proletarian writing had political protest, not literary form, at its heart.

Charlotte's story, however, is not only important because it addresses the problem of violent, sexualised, racism in early twentieth-century America. From the time of the rape until Cass next thinks, 'Ah shouldn't have said that to sister', 135 pages later, all of the guilt he feels about his treatment of a woman relates not to his sister Nancy, but to Charlotte – for whom, of course, there is no possibility of romance in this novel. Romantic, depoliticised readings trace the roots of Cass's guilt – his 'destruction' of a woman – back to his sister; close reading traces them, first, to Charlotte Hallem. The next time Cass stops, with Olin Jones, to look at the pictures outside a burlesque house it is Charlotte he thinks of, 'the black girl violated on the prairie.' Feeling guilty, he speaks to Olin 'in bravado, to drown secret shame' (109). Later, when he jumps into a box car and lands on the pregnant woman he will think 'of the black girl left alone on the prairie' and conclude that he's 'always doin' wrong. ... Sometimes ah mean it an' sometimes ah don't' (127). As it is obvious, even to Cass, that jumping on the pregnant woman was an accident, it is clear that his 'Sometimes ah mean it' refers to his rape of Charlotte. And finally, however guilty he feels in the short-term, in the long run of his 'inward gaze', he stores the experience as totem or fetish: his participation in gang rape functions as rite of passage from boy to 'real man.' Hanging out with Olin Jones after the rape, 'For the first time in many months Cass did not feel alone in the world. He had a friend...' (107) who, in reply to Cass's 'bravado' replies 'That's how I like to hear you talkin', Red. Like you got some life in you, like you was a real man' (109).

A Social(ist) History of Prostitution: Norah Egan

You got to be friendly: Norah knew now what that meant. It meant that to earn more than expenses you had to sell more than shaving soap. (184)

such work has been suppressed (most obviously in the US by the marriage of McCarthyism and New Criticism), speaks very pertinently both to Algren's work and the problem of unearthing the protest that drives it across generic boundaries.

If the Marxist agenda of Algren's first novel is most obviously advertised in epigraphs taken from *The Communist Manifesto*, it is in the *grand finale* of parallel voices opening its final chapter that it most noisily announces its socialist-feminist agenda: the city mayor's voice issuing forth from a street-radio competes with Cass McKay's barking through a loud hailer; the former sells the Chicago World Fair – 'an event to be remembered as the climax of man's ideals'; the latter touts for business outside a strip club, selling the promise of sexual titillation to all who would enter 'the hottest woman-show off the [World Fair] grounds' (264). The final chapter makes plain that for Algren, the plight of the 'dollar-woman' was higher on his Marxist agenda than the traditionally proletarian protagonist, the white male worker. While some of the more lurid metaphors in this section have invited criticism (describing the World Fair as a 'great Century-of-Progress slut stretched out on a six-mile bed along the lake with Buicks for breasts and a mayor standing up to his neck in her navel making a squib-like noise' (267) is surely asking for trouble), Algren's position could not be clearer.

The women who walked the World's Fair streets lived with two dark fears: the fear of disease, and the fear of the police. Of these the latter was often the larger, for illness gives warning where police do not. And the police beat the women as well as the men; the police-women beat them.

Fear of hunger, fear of cold, fear of blows, fear of men; fear of health officers, fear of jail, fear of hospitals, fear of sudden raids in the night. 'But *say* – ain't the enchanted eye-lund pertier this year than last, dearie?' (267)

A classic Marxist tenet: the same system that forces women to sell their bodies provides twinkling lights to distract them from their condition.⁶²

The story of Norah Egan begins several months before joining narrative forces with Cass McKay's. Before then it documents one constellation of social circumstances that typically funnel women into prostitution. Over the course of twelve pages, an omniscient narrator describes all the 'hitches' Norah must overcome working in a dress factory: endless thirst due to lack of access to water; being given the fiddliest work to

⁶² If we had to identify a contemporary equivalent to the 'twinkling lights' of the World's Fair, we might look to the ubiquitous and compensatory power of the highly polished, high-heeled shoe.

do; not being tough enough. But the biggest hitch is that she complains about working conditions, she ‘kicks,’ and in so doing makes herself unpopular with the foreman.

Ed Sheely didn’t like Norah very well. Norah kicked too much, from the start. She kicked when he gave her organdie to sew, instead of being a little grateful to him for giving her something to do. (177)

In short, Norah continues to kick against hitches till she has worked her way, rung by rung, down the employment-ladder from full-time employment on poor wages, through window cleaning, to dancing in the ‘Little Rialto’ owned by Herman Hauser. Here, Norah’s kick eventually propels her to pavement-level where she ekes out a living doing what is known in the vocabulary of this storyworld as ‘haybagging’ (203): she picks up men, as she will pick up Cass, blind drunk, and take him to her room where, when he comes round from his stupor, she will claim he picked *her* up and now owes her money.

Readings of Norah’s story, even when they acknowledge its documentary importance, have a tendency to reproduce one of the most obstinate myths about prostitution by referring to her as ‘fallen.’ In so doing, they ignore the fictionalised evidence she (and many other women in the Algren oeuvre) provides of the simple fact (so simple it is almost embarrassing to be writing about it) that women never ‘fall’ into prostitution but are often pushed. Sociologist and feminist researchers worldwide have deconstructed the myth of the fallen woman but it survives in readings of Algren – especially when he is read as one link in a chain of literary lineage or genre. The only published reading of Norah of any critical depth is Laura Hapke’s in her *Daughters of the Great Depression* which reads Algren in the ‘Bottom Dogs’ tradition with the works of Edward Anderson (*Hungry Men*) and Tom Kromer (*Waiting for Nothing*) both published in the same year as *Somebody in Boots*. For Hapke, ‘In her fall to the street, Norah is the spiritual descendant of those starving but virtuous sewing girls of mid-Victorian penny weeklies.’ The charge sheet is lengthy:

Algren writes as if W. I. Thomas had never produced *The Unadjusted Girl* (1923) or the social hygienists had never conducted a survey of women arrested for soliciting. Algren’s Norah fills out the formulaic mold of her innocent but fallen literary predecessors. He completely ignores prostitutes’ sexual impulses, much less the possibility that their sadomasochistic recklessness is born of childhood incest or ... the absence of constructive communal values during adolescence, and

that, last but not least, perhaps they yearn for better things. All these post-Freudian theories of prostitution had been available to social psychologists and artists alike from the 1910s.⁶³

Hapke's critique is interesting on two counts: one, for the amount of sociological work it expects *Somebody in Boots* to perform, as though it were a book about prostitution that fails its remit by providing just one full case history; and two, for the confidence with which it identifies authorial intentions in the text, as evidenced in references to an Algren who 'pays lip service to the view that ...', 'castigates the woman ...', is 'embittered ...' etc – all without textual evidence that would allow us to agree or disagree about where any lip service, castigation, or embitterment circulates in the grain of the text.⁶⁴ In fact, the evidence for this reading of Norah seems to lie outside the novel's storyworld and within Hapke's larger project of reading Algren as one of a group of proletarian writers whose work explored the problem of male economic anxiety. Thus for Hapke,

Despite a surface verisimilitude, Algren's tolerance for the prostitute's "work" is complicated by opposite impulses. Placed within the context of male economic anxiety, this chastising vision of female sexual waywardness indicts women as flawed comforters, failed spiritual rescuers.⁶⁵

This reading of Norah, Algren, and *Somebody in Boots* ignores an important detail that Norah's narrative spells out in the text: the history of her initiation into prostitution is at one and the same time the history of her humiliation, her resistance to and revulsion towards the idea of having to have sex with strange men at all. There is neither 'male economic anxiety' nor 'female sexual waywardness' in the novel for any Algren or implied author to chastise.

Norah's negotiation of the descending rungs of the employment-ladder that lead to the pavement is characterised by reluctance, fear, and horror at how few and feebly

⁶³ Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 53-54.

⁶⁴ As outlined in chapter one and as the following chapters will demonstrate, Algren creates story and editorial space for all the circumstances outlined in Hapke's critique in his collection of short stories, *The Neon Wilderness* and in the brothels of *Never Come Morning* and *A Walk on the Wild Side*.

⁶⁵ Hapke, p. 55.

constructed those rungs are. Desperate to find work, it is in her interviews with the woman at the County Free Employment Bureau that she eventually comes to understand that she is, in the absence of other paid employment, expected to sell sex. When she tells Black Bombazine why she had quit the job selling shaving soap door-to-door on discovering she had to sell more than soap to make any money, ‘the woman was horrified’ – not, as we (and Norah) might expect because the humiliation to which Norah had been subjected is an outrage, but because ‘some jobs were that way, in these times, and men were all devils anyhow.’ Bombazine spells it out:

‘I really don’t think a young woman like yourself, Miss Egan, with no one to help you as you say you haven’t, a girl without even a college education even – do you really think you can afford to be quite so demanding in the type of work you prefer?’ (184)⁶⁶

At this point, readers ‘transported’ into Norah’s story might have a sense of the peculiarly humiliating nature of the impasse in which she finds herself. Because it is, in fact, because of her ‘demands’ – for healthy working conditions, fair payment, and the right not to be groped by the boss – that she is in such dire straits. Horvath notes she cannot find honest work ‘despite’ having spirit.⁶⁷ In fact *Somebody in Boots* unpacks the mythology that having ‘spirit’ is any use to girls and women at all. It is precisely because Norah has spirit that she loses her factory job; the Mexican girl’s spirit doesn’t protect her from the forward sweep of the ‘buccaneering’ men; Charlotte Hallem’s spirited response to the stupidity of the men around her does nothing but alert them to her rapable presence. And if Norah is sitting in front of Bombazine at all it is because she demanded respect from her employer and when it wasn’t forthcoming, she kicked. When Hauser enters the girls’ dressing room at the end of a show without knocking,

Norah tossed a towel across her shoulders, but he had caught the wavering sheen of the light on her breasts. She felt the flare that resentment was lighting in her eyes – and then, because she saw that that flare was pleasing his eyes and mouth,

⁶⁶ ‘Black Bombazine’ is the name the narrator gives to the woman at the Employment Bureau because she is wearing black bombazine which suggests she is middle-aged; bombazine was out of fashion in the 1930s.

⁶⁷ Horvath, p. 26.

resentment flared to anger. Spirit – that was it. Norah Egan had spirit. How Herman loved a spirited woman!

Norah is not the first woman in literary or other history to see her anger hijacked before her eyes for the purposes of sexual titillation, condescension and intimidation. She ‘gather[s] into one word her whole indignation.

“*Schwein!*” (181)

Hauser’s reply is to reach out and put his ‘stubby finger ... under the towel’ but he is stopped when Norah punches him in the face (cracking his upper lip) (181).

This scene is particularly important for its staging of the social scenario in which a woman’s spirit becomes vulnerable to appropriation by masculine patronisation and ‘patronage’ i.e. ownership. The moment in which Norah sees Hauser getting a kick out of her anger dramatises the phenomenon whereby a woman’s emotional agency is appropriated by the imperious and definitely ‘male gaze’. It is also key to understanding the character of Norah and her ongoing part in the narrative play of *Somebody in Boots* after she meets Cass because it demonstrates that Norah will, at any cost, protect her human dignity. Finally, of course, it requires us to understand that she wants neither to be ogled nor palmed by lecherous men. An essential feature of ‘haybagging’ is that soliciting drunken men reduces the chances of a woman having to provide any sexual services at all. That such a woman should be reviled by all and sundry in the storyworld is in keeping with the social mores of hobohemia. But outside the storyworld we have been sufficiently informed from the beginning of Norah’s story to understand that her revulsion at the prospect of having sex with strange men renders ‘hay-bagging’ a rational means of survival.

Critical readings that adopt a fixed position towards the moral texture of *Somebody in Boots*’ storyworld or towards individual characters’ involvement in prostitution miss the important ‘transfigurative proposals’ this novel puts forward. Dill Doak and Cass McKay start the ball rolling when Doak, voicing the Communist Party position, says to Cass:

‘Wherever you go, in any large city, there are thousands of stalls with women and girls in them,’ he glared accusingly at Cass, and it was in that glare that Cass read his anger – ‘Don’t *you* think it’s a sign of decay when women can be *bought*?’

Cass said, ‘‘Course it ain’t *right*, Dill. But it’s that way *all* over, North an’ South. An’ ah reck’n there al’ays was stalls everywhere an’ likely al’ays will be.’

Dill spoke confidently. ‘It hasn’t always been, and it won’t always be, and it isn’t all over. In Russia this is already a thing of the past. We must change the order of things here too.’ (271)⁶⁸

If, as Middleton suggests, ‘men’s texts are trying to initiate processes which require further development,’ the process *Somebody in Boots* wishes to initiate is a comprehensive discussion about the moral, social, and political implications of prostitution for the health and well-being of women and men.⁶⁹ Such a conversation is forestalled when we critically confuse Algren’s women’s perceived roles as sex objects with their perceived roles as love objects.

True Romance: Cass and Norah

‘First he called me Hay-Bag, but now he says, ‘‘Blondie’’,’ Norah thought suddenly, waking in the night. ‘That means he’s gettin’ ready to put over a fast one.’ (208)

The foundation of the mythology of love in Algren’s oeuvre lies in published readings of three key scenes: Cass and Norah’s meeting; the night of the failed robbery that sees Norah escape and Cass caught by the police; and their final separation when, after ten months in jail and months of looking for her, Cass finds Norah but she gives him the slip. My re-reading of these scenes continues the recalibration of ‘true romance’ in Algren’s work begun by my readings of Nancy and Charlotte’s stories.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Doak’s assertion iterates Communist Party propaganda of 1935 but is inaccurate – despite legal reforms aimed at curbing its practice, prostitution persisted in Russia after the Revolution.

⁶⁹ Middleton, p. 11. See also R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). Connell suggests that in modern writing about gender it is in fiction and autobiography that we are most likely to find ‘a form of social theory that gives some grip on the interweaving of personal life and social structure without collapsing towards voluntarism and pluralism on one side, or categoricalism and biological determinism on the other’ (p. 61).

⁷⁰ Bluestone, p. 30: ‘he realizes that her love for him has died. She has been unable to maintain her identity without him.’ Giles, p. 44: ‘she rejects his proposal of marriage, confessing that she has a venereal disease.’ Horvath, p. 29: ‘found, she is immediately lost again because she feels her venereal

Scene 1

He realized now that heretofore he had been ill. He had been ill and he had not known. His head had been clogged with darkness, and now it was clear.
(214)

For Cass, his love for Norah arrives as a revelation: there is nothing ‘profane’ (Bluestone) about it at all. She ‘gives him strength’, her affection melts ‘the shadow of shame, and the shadow of fear.’ Love is an elixir, a balm, a palliative, security. Under its influence he ‘shrug[s] off self-consciousness like an unclean hood’ (213). If Cass’s bliss advertises the power of love to aid in the recovery of trauma, for Nancy no such emotional euphoria is attainable with him or any other man: her experiences have taught her no man is trustworthy.⁷¹ And Cass’s behaviour in the first few days of their alliance does nothing to persuade her that he is different to any other man. For one, he doesn’t listen to her. He talks constantly: ‘From morning to night he wag[s] on and on,’ non-stop, and ‘Since he seemed to require no answers save those himself supplied, Norah soon came to pay little heed to the streaming of his tongue’ (213-14).

From the beginning of their alliance Norah, unbeknownst to him but known to the reader, maintains her own take on Cass. When he tells her that he has ‘ridden box-cars East and West, North and South so many times’ that it is ‘all kind of mixed up in his head’ but ‘his name was Bad-Hat wherever he went, and he treated his women right’, Norah’s reply goes unheard:

“Horseguts, I’ll call you Hick. An’ you aint been west of Whiting”; but she didn’t say that very loud, and he didn’t seem to hear. ... [H]e wouldn’t be interrupted for a second.

He just kept spooshing his line all over her. (208)

Cass will forever be unaware that, for Norah, his ‘spoosh’ is transparent. Understanding the emotional and psychological asymmetries and inequalities on which this relationship is based is essential to understanding the premise on which Algren’s fictional work on

sickness makes a life together impossible, although what Norah may find impossible at this point is believing in anything but defeat.’

⁷¹ On the potency of love in the recovery of trauma in young people – see Camila Batmanghelidjh and Kids Company, *Mind the Child* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

heterosexual relationships is founded. In the same way that readers have historically presumed Cass's sibling love for his sister is reciprocated – when the text documents a definite and irreparable rupture, and an un-loving (which in Cass's orbit is equivalent to an un-mothering) young woman – similarly, the love between Norah and Cass is not reciprocal. While Norah comes to mean 'everything' to Cass, the equivalent is never true for Norah. On the contrary, her expectations are built on 'the hope that this man might not try to possess her.' When she sees the scars on Cass's back from his father's beatings and 'pity [holds] her like love' she struggles free. She will not be held because 'She feared that which held her lest she be pinned by it' (212).

Scene 2

The 'boots' of *Somebody in Boots* are emblematic of power and that power is typically wielded by men: Stubby McKay, the recruiting sergeant, the bulls, the law, Nubby. However, Norah too, on the night of the failed robbery, sits on the edge of the bed, 'tugging away at high black galoshes': big black boots. And as Cass kneels before her helping her pull them on, she, running her fingers through his hair, begins a conversation that remains topical in many a heterosexual homestead today.⁷²

'How about the dishes, Lunky?' ... 'You aint gonna leave 'em all dirty like that I hope.'

'Hell with the dishes, hon. Mebbe Lon or Stir-Nuts'll do 'em.' And they went.

Norah drove slower than usual that night, because of the rain. Despite the swift little wiper the windshield kept clouding up every few minutes.

'Goddamn,' Cass swore, 'Looks jest like a second deluge.' He pronounced 'deluge' 'de-loog.'

'Ol' floodgates jest opened an' let down a deloog. Goddamn.'

'Coming down too hard to last very long.' Norah spoke curtly. (225)

'Curtly' is not an innocent word for describing shortened vowel sounds: it denotes the effect of suppressed anger on the human voice. The problem of who will do the dishes in this scene reflects the position of women Communist activists who asked, as women

⁷² See, for example, BBC Radio 4 'Woman's Hour' feature on the 'Chore Wars' <<http://www.bbc.co/programmes/b0410gd6>> aired Monday 13 October 2014.

activists have across the ages: when the revolution comes, who will do the washing-up? Readings that ignore the fact that from the first moments of their final robbery, Norah is angry with Cass, miss one of Algren's most finely observed sketches of life in the heterosexual lane. The narrator's insertion of a comma between 'Norah drove slower than usual that night' and 'because,' invites a pause that renders everything after that pause narratologically suspect. Of course, it's perfectly feasible that the rain is slowing Norah's driving but close readers aware of the symbolic weight of 'the washing up' left undone (and Norah knows it will still be there when they return) are already likely, before having reached that 'because,' to have understood that Norah is driving slowly because she is annoyed with Cass. The scene continues and we witness further indications that she is irritated. Cass has 'developed a habit of reading street-signs aloud' which he does when they pull up at a red traffic-light, all the while 'plucking at his scar', which we know she also doesn't like, and speaking 'into the windshield,' adding to the condensation (226).⁷³ Norah then floods the engine, so they have to wait twenty minutes for the it to dry out, after which she drives 'without speaking all the way to Cicero,' a distance of about seven miles. Reading between these lines, it is clear that Norah is not in any mood to be impressed when, following the potentially successful – albeit close-run – robbery, Cass decides to terrorise the fountain boy into making him a drink of chocolate malted before leaving because '[t]hat would impress Norah.' Recognising an opportunity to rehearse his 'manly' persona, Cass performs the swaggering act of 'Bad-Hat McKay' who '[takes] his time, and [treats] his woman right.' In accordance with the code among thieves, Nancy saves herself and Cass is caught by the policeman. His ten months in prison are borne by dreaming of Norah and looking forward to seeing her again. 'He remembered how his life had been before he'd met her.' She 'was all things to him ... she was all life had given him; and he would not now let her go. His, Cass McKay's. And never anyone else's' (236). After his release, however, he can't find her – and when he eventually does, she rejects him.

Scene 3

The most popular critical interpretation of the final scene between Cass and Norah has it that she resists his proposal of marriage because she has contracted a venereal disease

⁷³ See p. 205: 'He kept picking at his chin all the time and she wished he'd stop doing it.'

which will make any life together impossible.⁷⁴ But this reading ignores what we know about Norah's true feelings for Cass (expressed in mumblings and asides to the reader since they met), not to mention the narrator's specific mention of the fact that she 'lets him have it with both barrels' by telling him about the venereal disease to 'get rid of him.' Throughout this scene, we are again privy to Norah's asides – as before, readers know how she genuinely feels whereas Cass does not: 'Same old spoosh, same old lunk. And the soft-nasty ones were the meanest' (281). Norah's body language expresses her reluctance to be with Cass: she prefers to talk to the ticket lady 'instead of watching him admiringly'; when he puts his arm round her waist she 'wriggle[s] free.' She tries to get away in a casual manner – 'I'd better be running along now' – but she stays on Cass's insistence because 'He had always been a queer customer. You never could tell what he really wanted, and what he might be going to do next' (279). When he tells her he wants to marry her she laughs and, through free indirect discourse, we read her thoughts:

He'd marry her all right. He'd get her alone up in that room and slap the soopreme hell out of her, that's how he'd marry her. She knew. She knew them all. They all tried a trick or two to get even, and they never forgot when once they got trimmed. If once you slipped over a fast one, by thinking faster, they'd get even if they had to bust a gut to get even. If it took two years to do it, they'd get their own back. (280)

To Cass she says simply, 'I don't want to get married yet ... I got another date.' She twists herself free; tries to distract him by reminding him of his customers; walks off fast, but Cass follows her. She won't stop so he grabs the arm of her coat, she walks faster and faster, with Cass hanging onto her sleeve. 'I'd rather go it alone,' she says 'that's what I want.' Then she changes her approach. Moving down the list of 'how to successfully dump your lover,' she tries to make Cass see that marriage isn't really best for him either: 'you don't need me really an' you got a big job now' and then, returning to her own wishes, she says plainly 'I never did need no one y'know.' Readers who have, up to this point, listened to all Norah's doubts and cynical thoughts expressed through free indirect discourse and focalised narrative are likely to recognise this as an

⁷⁴ See for example Chester Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 77: the 'liaison [between Cass and Norah] is doomed. The dream of love ends with venereal disease.'

authentic expression of her feelings. Finally, Norah is 'getting out of wind.' She has 'a stitch in her side.' So she tries another tactic that sometimes works to shake off an unwanted lover: she tells Cass 'I got a date. I got a new boyfriend.' He pulls her into a doorway, won't let her go. So finally, she thinks 'Well if lying wouldn't get rid of him, then the real thing would.' Whereas all existing readings understand from this last sentence that Norah has been lying all along, I understand it to refer only to the last of the excuses she grasped at to get rid of Cass – she doesn't have a date with a boyfriend – a reading confirmed when, having 'let him have it' with the venereal disease, she 'thought she'd gotten rid of him then for sure' (281). She hasn't, so at the first opportunity, after pacifying him in terms that roughly approximate what he wishes to hear, she finds an escape route through the burlesque.

Readers have consistently read this scene according to the directives of a 'fallen women' script, whereby Norah 'saves' the man she loves from the 'venereal sin' made manifest by disease. As such, most readings agree with Horvath that 'Finally found, she is immediately lost again because she feels her venereal sickness makes a life together impossible, although what Norah may find impossible at this point is believing in anything but defeat.'⁷⁵ By my reading, Norah finds it impossible – and has always found it impossible – to believe in Cass McKay.

The mythology of love in Algren's work relies heavily on outcomes rather than process. Cass does indeed end up alone but in neither Nancy nor Norah's case can we conclude that he is responsible for their 'destruction.' In this, as in all his novels, the communicative loop between men and women is irreparably broken. By the novel's end Cass's story has demonstrated not only how 'The Damned Feeling' develops (parental neglect, exposure to violence, experience of violence, homelessness, hunger) but also the important event that makes it manifest as a distinct form of anxiety that requires naming, when, in the penultimate chapter, he experiences it for the first time.

His heart had become callused. All those faculties which might have enabled Cass to see farther than the end of his nose had been dulled; they had been dulled into atrophy by hunger and cold and frequent humiliation. So Cass had not only gone hungry and cold, but he had been blinded to that which had robbed him. He knew

⁷⁵ Horvath, p. 29.

he had been cheated: he had been cheated of Norah Egan. And sometimes it felt as though it were someone behind him who kept cheating him all the time. (258-59)

The first chapter in the mythology of love in the Algren *corpus* is not a story about a love ‘destroyed by the hero’ – it is a story about the corrosive effect of the absence of love and abandonment by the mother/lover. The ‘true romances’ in *Somebody in Boots* are most important for their documentation of the palliative effect on Cass of the tenderness and care he receives – from his sister, and from Norah but also from Nubby. Note that no such sources of emotional support are available to either Nancy or Norah: brother-Cass neither asks Nancy what is troubling her nor tries to apologise for his harsh words; lover-Cass doesn’t even take step no.1 towards gaining Norah’s trust by allowing her to speak without interrupting her with ‘spoosh.’ And note, too, that when Cass finds Norah, he stops thinking about his sister because all his emotional needs are being met. Time and again throughout this novel we see that ‘Cass fe[els] a need of companionship ... almost like a hunger’ (271), and teams up with anyone (even when it means transgressing the colour code in his friendships with Matches and Dill Doak) who offers him the minimum of love, comfort or comradeship, man or woman. And ‘in his loneliest moments’ he misses having a friend like Olin Jones or Nubby (275). Cue Nubby.

Some Wore Dresses: Nubby’s Return

Why, we must ask, does Nubby re-enter the narrative disguised as a woman, if not to trouble gender divisions and queer notions of who speaks in the Algren text?

For one moment Cass thought that Nubby was going to cut his throat in that doorway.

‘Didn’t think I was still around, did you, son?’

Cass could do nothing but writhe helplessly. He was so shaken by fear and shock that he did not hear Nubby’s words clearly. Not until after a full minute had passed did he realize that Nubby was not hitting him. Nubby was only laughing low above him, and the girl, whoever she’d been, was gone. (275-76)

Of course ‘the girl’ has gone because ‘she’ is Nubby. Foreshadowing the final scene in *Never Come Morning* which, Cappetti observes, sees Bruno and the captain ‘manacled

together ... marching down the aisle in parody of a wedding ritual,⁷⁶ *Somebody in Boots* ends with Cass and Nub contemplating their future, together: 'It was time to be getting on' – or time, perhaps, to be 'getting on.' Thus Algren continues a tradition mapped by Fiedler in his *Love and Death in the American Novel* whereby male American writers from Melville to Mailer 'dream ... [them]selves in the arms of [their] dusky male lovers.'⁷⁷ Readings that end their analysis two pages before this final scene just fall short of appreciating one of the most sophisticated long-game jokes in the Algren *corpus*. We know, because Cass has periodically referred to his participation in the gang rape of Charlotte Hallem as a trophy of masculinity, that sooner or later – and probably sooner rather than later – he will pull this out of the bag as a means of winning respect from Nubby who, despite Cass's repeated requests, refuses to stop calling him 'son' until he proves he's 'a real white man.' Cass, lacking any ability to understand to any degree what is going in anyone else's mind, and whose need for friendship has repeatedly rendered him colour blind, will not have understood the long-term implications of Nubby's first words to him (and us):

“You wouldn't catch *me* ridin' a reefer, or walkin' down a street, or doin' *nothin'* with *no* nigger, North *or* South. ... And say, kid, don't you even know what comes of nigger-lovin'?” (141)

We witnessed the logic that instructs Nubby's justice system in the El Paso jail when he 'pointed one hairy finger at Cass and barked, 'You. You kiss niggers' arses. I seen him doin' it, gennelmen. I was there. So now we got to give him ten thousernd kisses on his tail. With the belts, gennelmen' (143). This punishment delivered by Nubby, nominated by Maxwell as the novel's 'itinerant professor of whiteness,'⁷⁸ was meted out by the Black Legion, an offshoot of the Ku Klux Klan, famous for its 'arson squads.'⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Cappetti, p. 181.

⁷⁷ Fiedler, p. 29.

⁷⁸ Maxwell, p. 198.

⁷⁹ George Morris, *The Black Legion Rides* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1936) <<http://archive.org/details/TheBlackLegionRides>> [accessed 7 April 2013]. This is one of the Communist pamphlets confiscated from Algren by the FBI. 'The Nazis, like the Black Legion, attracted with their appeal an element of morons and various types of degenerates. Those who could not think for themselves but allowed themselves to be impressed as blind dupes, the cowardly, sadist types, were candidates for the Nazis, as for the Legion. A common performance in the Black Legion is to tie the victim to a tree in a

Remember that Cass has at regular intervals since leaving him in the lurch in mid-robbery used Nubby's 'white law' as a gauge for measuring his own masculinity, repeatedly calling to mind the rape of Charlotte Hallem as the trump card that will convince Nubby, once and for all, of his claim to white-manhood. What do we think will happen when, as he is bound to because he desperately wants Nubby to understand 'how tough [he's] been in [his] time', (190) he boasts about what 'he and Olin done once t'gether' (193). That the end of the novel sees Cass riding into the sunset with the one man in the world who will punish him for raping Charlotte Hallem because you don't 'do *nothin'* with *no nigger'* weaves both a slow-burning and sophisticated joke and an epic tale of revenge from one end of this novel to the other.

Among recent readers I may be an anomaly in finding humour in *Somebody in Boots* but in 1935, Edith H. Walton considered it to be 'possessed of a dark humor.'⁸⁰ Moreover, since Algren believed it was the task of his generation of American writers to explore new forms and structures, I suggest that the long-story of Nubby and Cass can be read as a young writer's attempt to push the boundaries of American humour in ways suggested by another of Algren's favourites, Mark Twain. In his essay, 'How to Tell a Story', Twain proposes transatlantic differences between three types of story:

The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, the witty story is French. The humorous story depends for its effect upon the manner of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the matter.

The humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular; but the comic and witty stories must be brief and end with a point. The humorous story bubbles gently along, the others burst.

The humorous story is strictly a work of art—high and delicate art—and only an artist can tell it; but no art is necessary in telling the comic and the witty story; anybody can do it. The art of telling a humorous story—understand, I mean by word of mouth, not print—was created in America, and has remained at home.

position for a whipping, while black-robed knights of "Americanism" form a circle to delight in the show. They recruit the type that will jump at a chance to take part in a "necktie party".'

⁸⁰ Edith H. Walton, 'Somebody in Boots', *Forum*, 94 (September 1935), p. 36, cited in Walter, 'Nelson Algren and His Contexts', p. 30.

The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it....

Very often, of course, the rambling and disjointed humorous story finishes with a nub, point, snapper, or whatever you like to call it. Then the listener must be alert, for in many cases the teller will divert attention from that nub by dropping it in a carefully casual and indifferent way, with the pretence that he does not know it is a nub.⁸¹

That *Somebody in Boots* is a story ‘told gravely’ by a ‘teller [who] does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it’; that it is ‘rambling and disjointed ... finishes with a nub’ and that Cass, on re-meeting Nubby is insufficiently ‘alert’ to ‘know it is a Nub’ all together irresistibly suggest that Algren’s ‘experiment in narration,’ as well as responding to intellectual currents in sociology, responds also to Twain’s ‘How To Tell A Story.’ This proposition finds some support, too, in the fact that this essay enjoys intertextual relations with later Algren novels: the sub-section ‘The Wounded Soldier’ intertextually resonates with Andersen’s tale of the one-legged soldier in *A Walk on the Wild Side*; the intertextual shelf-life of the sub-section entitled ‘The Golden Arm’ is self-explanatory. I suggest, then, that, navigating by undercurrents of comedy, invisible to the eye but audible to the ear, in *Somebody in Boots*, Algren set out his literary stall in the narrative space where ‘word of mouth’ meets print and where horror meets laughter.

⁸¹ Mark Twain, ‘How To Tell A Story’, in *Great Short Works of Mark Twain*, ed. by Justin Kaplan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 182-87 (pp. 182-83).

Chapter Three

Love in the Neon Wilderness: *Never Come Morning*



Fig. 11

To study “rape” as a language symbol with high emotional content will be rather like travelling through an exotic country filled with ventriloquists, trolls, and fair princes. It is certainly not enough to leaf through a man-made dictionary and examine the legal strait-jacket that has been given the term.

Ruth Herschberger, ‘Is Rape A Myth?’¹

The plot of Algren’s second novel, *Never Come Morning* (1942), like his first, *Somebody in Boots*, hinges on a gang rape. It is central to the overall plot which documents another of the many ways girls and women are entrapped into institutions of prostitution. The thesis *Never Come Morning* proposes asks two of the most difficult questions in Algren’s oeuvre: How is it possible for a seventeen year old boy to stand by while his seventeen year old girlfriend is gang raped? And how, having been set up by her boyfriend to be raped by members of his gang, does a girl ever come to trust that boy again, as Steffi does Bruno by the novel’s end?

¹ Ruth Herschberger, *Adam’s Rib* (1948) (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row Books, 1970), pp. 16-17.

The answer to the first question is relatively easily located in *Never Come Morning*'s early chapters: the access Algren gives us to Bruno's 'inward gaze' provides insight into how the socio-psychological vulnerabilities of boys are exploited by other already-initiated boys and men according to the 'gang code.' The answer to the second is harder to identify because a) some of its complexity is bound up in the intricacies of the answer to the first, and b) it concerns the most mysterious and mythologised of all human emotions, love.

Mythologies of Love

As discussed already, the foundations on which the mythology of romantic heterosexual love in Algren's work is built were laid down by Bluestone's 1957 article, an essay considered seminal in Algren studies. The most sophisticated and nuanced readings of *Never Come Morning* in recent years reference Bluestone's identification of a narrative device he posits as Algren's 'special idiom and identity.' For Bluestone, the novel demonstrates

an emerging structural pattern which is characteristic of Algren's fiction: first the destruction of a love relationship, then a physical defeat or death. The pivotal acts constitute a kind of double reference, a dual climax, and both are somehow preordained from the moment the conflict appears. ... Between the crucial acts of broken love and brute destruction occur a number of events which scarcely affect the central character at all, a series of frozen images in which development and consciousness seem to be arrested. In such interludes, waking seems a kind of living death, and death seems like relief. Blanche Gelfant is right in observing that the people in Algren's world are not defeated solely by poverty or urban dispossession. "Rather it is some inexplicable, irrational destructive force loosed in the world, which drives people on to frenzied and unrelenting acts of self-destruction." But one ought to add that in Algren's central vision, self-destruction becomes operative only after the destruction of some loved object. The moment a central character becomes responsible for such ruin, he is irrevocably doomed.

That “irrational, destructive force,” then, is the impulse to destroy love which is tantamount to death.²

Readings that develop Bluestone’s concept of ‘frozen images’ are able to sidestep his (and Gelfant’s) more melodramatic claims because the question of Algren’s women falls outside their remit.³ This thesis, however, cannot ignore that his critical abstractions rely on the actual abstraction of certain ‘pivotal acts’ from the text in general and from Steffi’s story in particular. This is economically demonstrated by identifying what, for Bluestone, happens in *Never Come Morning*: ‘Bruno Lefty Bicek, a tough eighteen-year old who has decided to become a heavyweight fighter, seduces his girl, Steffi Rostenkowski. Later ... he permits his gang to “score” with Steffi.’ And, later, ‘Steffi becomes a prostitute at Mama Tomek’s parlor.’⁴

Today we acknowledge that some of the more coercive methods of inducement historically employed by boys and men to ‘seduce’ and ‘score’ girls and women are more accurately described as rape. But Bluestone’s reading is not only problematic because changes in socio-sexual mores highlight the ambiguities inscribed in the vocabulary he and we use(d) to talk about sex and sexual exploitation. It ignores two

² Bluestone, ‘Nelson Algren’, p. 31.

³ Bluestone, p. 32. See the following essays in *Nelson Algren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Ward: Stephen Hardman’s ‘A World of Ruins: Nelson Algren and Walter Benjamin’s Destructive Character’ explores the relationship between the thought of Algren and Benjamin, interpreting Bluestone’s ‘frozen images’ as ‘moments of a stasis that reveals a dialectical standstill’ (p. 54). Robert Ward in his ‘Spatial Enclosures in Nelson Algren’s *Never Come Morning*’ suggests these terms ‘imply and demand opposites, such as ... *thawed* and *escape*’ (p. 59) – on which basis he provides an insightful reading of *Never Come Morning*’s scenes of Bruno’s imprisonment. And Kasia Boddy, in her ‘Detachment, Compassion, and Irritability: The Naturalism of *Never Come Morning*’ posits that Algren’s ‘preoccupation with stasis’ is underscored by an intensity and receptiveness inherent in his characterisation of Bruno and Steffi and in their degree of consciousness at important moments in their story (see pp. 75-77).

⁴ Bluestone, pp. 30-31. For R. W. Lid, for example, Steffi is a ““good” girl whom [Bruno] had seduced and fallen in love with.’ ‘A World Imagined: The Art of Nelson Algren’ in *American Literary Naturalism: A Reassessment*, ed. by Y. Hakutani and Lewis Fried (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1975), p. 186. And for Sheldon Grebstein, ‘Steffi’s love and trust of Lefty moves her to give herself to him: he then betrays her love and gives her to others. ... From the moment Steffi surrenders her virginity to Lefty, neither is free.’ ‘Nelson Algren and the Whole Truth’ in *The Forties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama* ed. by Warren French (Deland, FL: Everett/Edwards, 1969), p. 304.

important textual ‘facts’: no-one is destroyed (except for the Greek and, perhaps, the old man in the alley), and the love between Bruno and Steffi, is not in the end, broken.

Factoring in pivotal acts in the novel that Bluestone and others ignore, my reading identifies quite a different ‘emerging structural pattern’ to the one he proposes. This pattern does not constitute a ‘double reference, a dual climax’; its pattern is multi-referential and its climax, triangular.

My reading will be performed with reference to five ‘pivotal acts’:

Act I: The ‘Seduction’ of Steffi Rostenkowski: Bruno bullies his virgin girlfriend into having sex with him.

Act II: Romance at Riverview: Bruno and Steffi go courting; Bruno tries to manoeuvre Steffi into a position where she will have sex with him again.

Act III: The Gang Rape: several men form a queue to rape Steffi one by one while the others watch.

Act IV: The Brothel: the place of Steffi’s incarceration after being gang raped, then entrapped by the barber.

Act V: The Poker Game: Steffi betrays the barber.

A final Act would be ‘The Boxing Match’ but that Act, for reasons that will become clear later, has no narrative bearing on the plot-line my reading traces.

By dividing *Never Come Morning* into Acts, I want to highlight its theatrical potential. If, as discussed already, the women of Algren’s work are important it is because all his protagonists, even the most apparently insignificant, have narrative or dramatic work to do. Breaking the novel down into (pivotal) Acts helps demonstrate this.⁵

Narrative Tensions: Staging the Surreal in the Inward Gaze (or Who’s Looking at Who?)

In her *Writing Chicago*, Cappetti writes that *Never Come Morning*’s portraits of the gang and the brothel ‘conceptually resonate and methodologically overlap’ with sociological studies such as Frederic Thrasher’s *The Gang* (1927) and W. I. Thomas’s

⁵ *Never Come Morning* was adapted for the stage by Paul Peditto (originally for Famous Door Theatre Company) and performed at the Latino Chicago Theater Company’s Firehouse in September 1994, directed by Jennifer Markowitz.

The Unadjusted Girl (1923). But she also suggests this novel moves beyond the bounds of empirical sociology to become ‘surreal sociology.’ The principal narratorial device Algren employs to this effect consists of a multi-sited audience of spectators and listeners who, throughout a series of metatheatrical scenes, Cappetti suggests, ‘provide its epistemological infrastructure.’ If, as I argued in my reading of *Somebody in Boots*, the presence of a shifting (and shifty) narrator determines who, where, and what we read in and into that novel, in *Never Come Morning*, it is the omnipresence of a storyworld-wide cast that, eyes open, ears alert, provides a multi-lensed, multi-directional narrative point of view and multiform site of reception: the relief worker, the fair barker, the boxing spectators, the police line-up and its spectators, the reporter at the police station, the policemen at Bruno’s interrogation, the jail inmates, the doctor who visits the brothel. The kewpie doll at Riverview is even endowed with foresight when, ‘seeing’ Bruno get ready to throw the ball, it waits ‘irresolute and wide-eyed’ then seems to tumble backward before it is hit, ‘as though too unnerved to wait any longer.’⁶ To return again to Brooks’ suggestion that texts have a way of telling us how they want to be read, *Never Come Morning* asks readers to be ready to change position at short notice – from one subject position to another but also from subject to object (literally as per the kewpie doll) and back again. A visual metaphor for what the structure of *Never Come Morning* seems to want to achieve is to imagine the storyworld in the round, with the audience able, across the heads of the actors, to see the audience on the other side of the arena. As Cappetti puts it, ‘Never for a second does Algren allow us to forget who is observing whom and that the observer must himself be observed.’⁷

The metatheatrical structure of the narrative not only serves to ‘stage’ the stories of Bruno and Steffi, it is intimately echoed in the surreal theatricality that characterises

⁶ *Never Come Morning* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1988), p. 53. All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. The most sophisticated readings of this novel point to the importance of these voyeurs-in-the-text: in *Nelson Algren: A Collection of Critical Essays* Ward draws on Michel de Certeau’s *Practice of Everyday Life* to consider Bruno Bicek (in the context of the Ferris wheel scene) as ‘a “solar eye”’ (p. 62), and Boddy evocatively reads Bruno and Steffi’s movie-viewings at Riverview for their intertextual play and for the questions they raise about spectatorship and identification (p. 83).

⁷ Cappetti, p. 180.

their respective 'inward gaze.' In Bruno's 'inward gaze' (like *Somebody in Boots*' Cass before him) he is audience to his own self-performance:

Bruno stayed silent while three images of himself careened upon each other through the city of his mind: B. Bicek, president and treasurer. Iron-Man Bicek in red-sleeved uniform, hurling no-hit ball against the Logan Squares. Bruno Lefty Biceps climbing through the ropes in a red bathrobe at the City Garden with a hurricane of applause coming across the ropes.

The last one did it. (19)

Steffi's 'inward gaze' signifies as much by its absence as its presence; it comes most clearly into focus only after she has been raped and a year after she has been put to work in the barber's brothel – to which point I will return in Act IV.

As Booth suggests, if an author wants to inspire 'intense sympathy for characters who do not have strong virtues to recommend them, ... the psychic vividness of prolonged and deep inside views will help him.'⁸ However, it can also generate extra-textual problems. It is perhaps due to his psychic vividness that Bruno, more than any of Algren's fictional cast, has been enlisted to represent the author in biographical portraits.⁹ In the Beauvoir/Sartre translation of the novel, an 'Algren' even appears in the text where a 'Bruno' should be.¹⁰ As mentioned in chapter one, I find the too-close

⁸ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Penguin Books, 1987), p. 378.

⁹ See Drew, for example: 'Like Bruno, [Algren] was moody, subject to bursts of anger that could culminate, as in [his own] suicide attempt, in violence. Then too, Algren's delinquents, both in this novel and in other published and unpublished stories, are usually the victims not only of adverse social conditions but of thwarted childhood love. Bruno and Steffi, like the heroes of every Algren novel, are both missing a parent, and Bruno's mother has taken no interest in him since his adolescent brush with the law. Algren too felt alienated from his mothers' love: he once told Geraldine Page that, growing up, he felt like an orphan' (p. 139).

¹⁰ Nelson Algren, *Le matin se fait attendre* (1950) (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 60.

'L'Index prit une pose théâtrale et, dirigeant la lampe vers son propre visage, il déclama:

Le brave Algren s'est fait tuer sur place.

Il est mort sans ôter les godasses

In the original version the rhyme goes: 'Finger struck a dramatic pose, playing the flash on his own face, and recited :

He [Bruno] died game, boys, I'll tell you

He kept his boots on till he blew.' (42)

association of Algren with his protagonists problematic because I suspect it immunises his fictional men against receiving the complete criticism they merit. However, there is also something very interesting about the way we rationalise the evidence of human presence when we share the ‘inward gaze’ of a fictional character. It seems to me that what we are doing when we project an author into his or her fictional works bears relation to the psychological processes by which we project or suppress difficult emotions, thoughts, and aspects of our selves: sharing some of the textual load with an absent author means we don’t have to own it. But of course, as critics such as Booth, Bakhtin and here, Herman Melville, insist, it just can’t be helped:

No man can read a fine author, and relish him to his very bones, while he reads, without subsequently fancying to himself some ideal image of the man and his mind. And if you rightly look for it, you will almost always find that the author himself has somewhere furnished you with his own picture.¹¹

I didn’t ‘rightly look for it,’ but I’ve found my ‘ideal image of the man and his mind’ in *Never Come Morning* and he strikes me as being a far better fit than Bruno. He appears one Saturday night at Mama Tomek’s:

As though sensing that it was story time he came scuffling up the stair, holding the banister with one hand, and crept into the chair beside her. His feet did not quite reach the floor, and his shapeless, colorless face was shadowed by an oversize derby into which he had pinned, buttoned, hooked and tied a dozen badges, buttons and pins ...

He was happy to be up here near the women instead of below with the ashes and river rats. He saw, by the way she looked at him without seeing, that it was story time. He knew her story line by line He recognized every line by its especial intonation, and his face grew anxious if she missed a line or changed its tone, or spoke too low for him to hear. (178-79)

Mama Tomek’s ‘single story’ is an almost exact transcription of the words spoken by a prostitute Algren interviewed for a FWP project. “When You Live Like I Done”, writes

¹¹ Herman Melville, *Hawthorne and His Mosses*, in *Essays of the Masters*, ed. by Charles Neider (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), pp. 250-68 (p. 263).

Cappetti, 'reads like a dramatic monologue addressed to a silent listener.'¹² In *Never Come Morning* the (not always silent) listener is the 'little Jew called Snipes,' the brothel janitor who fetches heroin for Mama T. 'without knowledge of evil' and who is 'repaid ... with a single story, told over and over.'¹³

So to play the role of 'Algren' in *Never Come Morning*, I nominate Snipes. His importance is indicated by the theatrical way he makes his entrance during the fateful poker game in 'The Law of Averages': a knock is heard on the door but when Steffi opens there is no-one there. The knock is heard again; Steffi opens; again, no-one is there; she looks behind the door opened out into the corridor and there is Snipes, 'in a faded army overcoat that fit[s] him like a burlap sack' (230). *Never Come Morning's* most outrageously intrusive yet most insignificant voyeur and eavesdropper, Snipes is always 'happy to be ... near the women' (179). His 'shapeless, colorless face' (178) makes space for us to project our own faces, to see through his eyes. He leads us to a scene in the text that most readings overlook. And, most importantly of all, he is responsible for sealing the fates of Bruno Bicek and Steffi Rostenkowski. Whose job is that, if not the author's?

Last but not least, Snipes stands out among the fictional cast because he is the only protagonist who isn't a gang member, and the only one not preoccupied with the performance of being 'a man in the world of men' (54).

¹² Cappetti, p. 165, "When You Live Like I Done" 17 July 1939. Federal Writers' Project Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. See also Algren's 'Ellen O'Connor', in *First Person America*, ed. by Ann Banks (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1980), pp. 177-80.

¹³ A Snipes-like character appears in almost every one of Algren's texts. His immediate ancestor is *Somebody in Boots's* Stir-Nuts who, when Cass and other members of the household on Orleans Street are playing cards, stands above them 'looking down and giggling half to himself' (*Somebody in Boots*, p. 225). The connection is made explicit when Steffi, during the fateful poker game towards the novel's end calls Snipes 'Stirnuts' (231). He appears next in *The Neon Wilderness's* monological 'Is Your Name Joe?' addressed by a woman to a silent listener who, like Snipes, wears glasses. In *The Man with the Golden Arm* his characteristics are visible in Peeping Tom and dog-kidnapper, Sparrow Saltskin. And finally, in the posthumous *The Devil's Stocking* he appears as the ageing john, Flash-from-the-Track, who, in writerly tradition, is killed off in the final act.

The Gang Code: How to be a Man in the World of Men

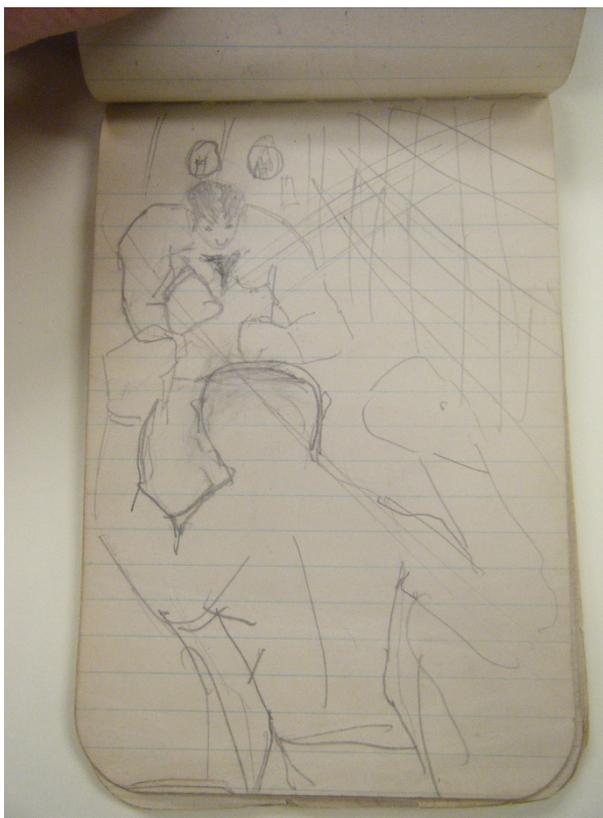


Fig. 12

I began *Never Come Morning* by doing crayon drawings of a fighter before I knew who he was. Or what I was up to. The drawing became Bruno Bicek.¹⁴

Never Come Morning continues the work *Somebody in Boots* started as a manual for the construction of hyper-masculinity. When we first meet Bruno, we find him, ‘ace southpaw of the 26th Ward Warrior, squatted forward on a milk bottle case, as he had seen Benkowski squat’ (11). Like *Somebody in Boots*’ Cass, Bruno’s mimicry of the rituals required by the gang (patriarchal) code, is foregrounded throughout the novel’s opening chapters. We understand that the extent to which he successfully ‘becomes’ a man depends on how convincingly he imitates and performs the gender-specific behaviours required by the gang code.

To be a man out there in the world of men. To be against men, any other men, with a hard-fought game behind him and the hardest hitter in front of him and the trickiest runner behind him; pouring sweat, the breaks going against him, aching

¹⁴ Cox and Chatterton, Preface to *Nelson Algren*, p. 10.

in his great left arm every time he raised it; but forever in there trying, not caring that they were all against him because they were making a man of him by being against him. Pitching out his arm and his heart and his life. But in there, pitching. To be a man in the world of men. (54)

Never Come Morning's documentation of how to walk the walk and talk the talk in order to become a man requires little further comment.¹⁵ Indeed, to list every act in the performance of masculinity in this novel is to begin a slow-slide away from the crux of what Algren's novels propose when they give us access to the 'inward gaze' of a Cass, a Bruno, a Frankie. For the etymology of 'performance' brings with it a history of fakery that threatens to empty the term of its socio-psychologically-constructive sense when too much attention is paid to the physical performance of masculinity. David Alderson has similar concerns. For him, the emphasis on masculinity as a 'performance' runs the risk of 'obscur[ing] our sense of it as bound up with the possession of power and the desire to retain that power.' Clearly, he writes,

overtly performative versions of masculinity, such as those by drag kings, may dislocate the relationship between masculinity as a set of signifiers and the male body, but the further relationship between that masculinity and the power that is attendant on its 'authentic' relation to the body is surely another thing. *That* relationship is beyond individual stylistic choices or identifications, and one of the problems with the emphasis on 'performance' – at least some invocations of it – is that it tends towards an emphasis on voluntarism and choice, on gender as a commodity.¹⁶

Algren's boys and men provide useful models for the study of masculinity, then, because while we, the readers, are made aware of their performance, for Cass, Bruno and the gang, that performance is unconsciously scripted and enacted (and re-enacted)

¹⁵ For a description of Bruno's 'Lefty Bicek Helt' outfit see p. 17, and to see how he walks, p. 31, ('only from the waist down, the whole torso resting, without effort, on the loose-muscled movement of the hips.')

¹⁶ David Alderson, 'Masculinity and Cultural Studies', in *Modern North American Criticism and Theory: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 199-207, pp. 206-7 <<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/soton/reader.action?docID=10130487&ppg=21>> [accessed 26 October 2014]

in earnest; its structural relationship with and towards power is not, in the process, dislocated because in rape and procurement there is no ambiguity about who has the power and who does not. But where both Cass and Bruno most successfully demonstrate the performativity of gender is, in fact, in their failure to give a convincing performance, especially where relations with women are concerned. Bruno ‘breaks the code’ when he falls in love: first, by falling in love at all:

“What’s eatin’ you, Left’—you in love?” ...

What kind of a man would they think him if he admitted he was? He wouldn’t be able to show his face at the barber’s, that was sure. What would Casey think of a president and treasurer who was lovesick? What kind of a contender was it who still scribbled with chalk on billboards, “I love Steffi R.”?
(68)

And then he breaks the code again by failing to overcome his emotional need for nurturing love. As Roger Lancaster notes, ‘the conquest of women is a feat performed with two audiences in mind: first, other men, to whom one must constantly prove one’s masculinity and virility; and second, one’s self, to whom one must also show all the signs of masculinity.’¹⁷ It is in this second performance that Algren’s leading men repeatedly fail; and it’s in the access Algren provides to their ‘inward gazes’ that we witness their failures. In the narrative gaps between what we readers know about them and what they know and don’t know, Algren ‘makes strange’ both the processes that construct gang-masculinity and the most extreme products of that process: rapists, procurers, johns.

Bruno’s failure to convincingly perform his masculinity to the audience that is himself, witnessed by us when he ‘gazes inwards’ is one of the most effective means by which Algren wins readerly sympathy for him. Even during the most disturbing scene of Steffi’s rape, he is redeemed in the reader’s mind by the fact that, from the first few lines of meeting him, we understand that his efforts to conform to the gang code have a psychological price: his sense of self is precariously suspended between two poles, two

¹⁷ Roger N. Lancaster, “‘That We Should All Turn Queer?’” Homosexual Stigma in the Making of Manhood and the Breaking of a Revolution in Nicaragua’, in *Conceiving Sexuality: Approaches to Sex Research in a Postmodern World*, ed. by Richard G. Parker and John H. Gagnon (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 135-56 (p. 149).

conflicting maps of psycho-social conditioning. His 'inward gaze' is bipolar, drawn in two mutually-excluding directions: in one direction, the gang, the threat of violence, loss of face, and feral sexuality; in the other, Steffi Rostenkowski, emotional continuity, love, a girl to call his own. In the story of Bruno and Steffi, then, Algren cracks the gang code in two ways: by demonstrating a) that it is literally codified, i.e. its rules are written in the invisible ink of rites and customs and are systematically hidden from non-initiates, and b) that its implementation depends on its members making dupes and scapegoats of girls and young women – in which brief summary we begin to see in what ways *Never Come Morning* illustrates key tenets of *The Second Sex*. But, to reiterate, I am not concerned here with treating the works of Algren and Beauvoir insofar as they form a referential loop; I want, rather, to demonstrate that Algren's stories of rape do feminist work – that is, they can be read as exercises in sexual-political consciousness-raising.

Sharon Marcus proposed two decades ago that we should work towards understanding 'rape as a language and use this insight to imagine women as neither already raped nor inherently rapable.' To this end she argued for 'a shift of scene from rape and its aftermath to rape situations themselves and to rape *prevention*.'¹⁸ Where a first step to prevention is education, *Never Come Morning* provides a forum to talk about safe sex – where 'safe' refers not only to venereal but also to emotional and physical security for all. Marcus explains how this might work:

To take male violence or female vulnerability as the first and last instances in any explanation of rape is to make the identities of rapist and raped preexist the rape itself. If we eschew this view and consider rape as a scripted interaction in which one person auditions for the role of rapist and strives to maneuver another person into the role of victim, we can see rape as a *process* of sexist gendering which we can attempt to disrupt. ... The rapist does not simply *have* the power to rape; the social script and the extent to which that script succeeds in soliciting his target's participation help to create the rapist's power. The rape script pre-exists instances

¹⁸ Sharon Marcus, 'Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words', in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 387.

of rape but neither the script nor the rape act results from or creates immutable identities of rapist and raped.¹⁹

In the first half of this chapter, then, my reading of *Never Come Morning* focuses on how gang-man masculinity encodes and constructs women within the terms of the gang code and how, according to this code, women are constructed as ‘rapable.’ For space and brevity’s sake, I will at times list items of the gang code as footnoted ‘rules’ as they might appear written in a manual.

ACT I: The ‘Seduction’ of Steffi Rostenkowski

Bruno and Steffi, born two months apart on the same street, have known each other since they were five years old. As children they

played Charley Cross the Water and Fox in the Box on one leg a thousand times down Noble Street. Had saved potatoes together in the corner fireplug and had hidden maps there too, for treasure hunting. Had kneeled on winter mornings in the same pew at St Bonifacius. He had swung her on the swings ... and had taken her, one night when they were twelve, to Schwante’s Family Theatre... (27)²⁰

When Bruno, having dodged past Steffi’s mother to reach the family’s rooms above the bar, stands before Steffi, she ‘knows why he has come’ and so do we. But if we were watching this as the opening scene of a film, we would witness a rape: Steffi ‘pleads,’ is picked up in her chair and thrown onto the couch, lets ‘everything be then as he wished’ and ‘inwardly bleeds and weeps’ afterwards (27). Kasia Boddy summarises the emotional ambiguity at the heart of this episode when she writes that Bruno ‘effectively’ rapes Steffi.²¹ This ambiguity is heightened by the fact that the event that is ‘Bruno and Steffi, long-time childhood friends, now boyfriend and girlfriend having (asymmetrically-wanted) sex for the first time’ is a key event in two distinctly separate social scripts. In one, the ‘young lovers’ script, their having sex, even if Steffi is bullied

¹⁹ Marcus, p. 391.

²⁰ The most direct route to appreciate the emotional and psychological impact of the ‘gang code’ is to re-read this section, bearing in mind what later happens to these two children.

²¹ Kasia Boddy, ‘Detachment, Compassion, and Irritability’, in *Nelson Algren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 76.

into to it and is privately distraught afterwards (this is the first time she has had sex with anyone) nonetheless represents a new stage of a lifelong association and romance and a future in which they will again kneel ‘in the same pew at St Bonifacius’ (27). In the other script, the ‘gang rape’ script, however, an important stage in a chain of events inscribed in gang code has been reached. Immediately before the above scene, Bruno declined an invitation from Finger and Casey to go ‘whorehoppin.’

“I can’t t’night, fellas. I got a date with the widow’s kid.”

“You score yet?”

“Maybe tonight. It looks pretty good.”

“Let us know when you do,” Finger suggested. “Then we c’n all score.” (25)

According to the gang code, Bruno’s ‘scoring’ is one step of the grooming process whereby Steffi will be ‘tossed up for grabs’ by other gang members. In this context, Bruno’s bullying her into having sex with him is definable as rape not only by her obvious reluctance but also by the gang rape that ensues a week later for which, according to the gang code, Bruno’s ‘scoring’ serves as ‘green flag.’

We understand, of course, that Bruno is deeply conflicted about the gang code’s requirements. In the pages that follow, we are privy to his battle of conscience as it starts its tightrope walk to the very end of the novel. We witness the same warped sense of cause and effect that we saw in *Somebody in Boots* when Cass jumps on a woman in the dark and considers it her fault for being in the way, and when he doesn’t register that the girl in the alley doesn’t run away because he is, in fact, pinning her down: ‘If a girl was really a good girl,’ thinks Bruno, ‘she ought to have sense enough not to bother with a Polack who had barely finished eighth grade, just because he’d been born on the same block. And hadn’t had a job, outside of freight handling, since’ (33). On the one hand, remembering an occasion when he stood Steffi up, it ‘hadn’t bothered him too much That was good for a dame, kept her from getting stuck up’; and on the other, she deserved respect. ‘But,’ then again, ‘what could you do with a good girl once she was yours?’ – in other words, once you had ‘joooped’ her. ‘You couldn’t,’ thinks Bruno, ‘keep on just sleeping around, above a poolroom or on the beach or in a corner as though she were some Clark Street tramp. If you did you’d make a Clark Street tramp out of her.’ He decided fiercely that no one else was going to sleep with her ever; as though others, unseen, were already challenging his exclusive right to any girl’ (33-35). Which, as Finger’s comment above indicates, they were.

ACT II: Romance at Riverview

... once he scratched with his fingernail on the wall:

Bruno B. loves Steffi R.

Then rubbed it out and wrote over it:

Bruno Biceps Contender

for the

Heavyweight Champeen (159)

A week later, Bruno takes Steffi to Riverview, to ‘make it up to her’ (29) but the ‘young lovers’ script is quickly interrupted. From the moment Bruno has a ball in his hand, he becomes locked into a fantasy in which he stars as a ‘big leaguer’ on the mound at Comiskey Park, facing Fireball (the gang member he most fears), in a world apart from Steffi so that he sees ‘her dancing eyes only dimly behind the backstop from where he stood in the spiked sand of the pitcher’s box’ (54). His fantasy is interrupted when Steffi, hugging the kewpie doll he has won for her, calls him ‘Bunny’ ‘as though it were a baby and he was too.’ Bruno reacts by ripping the head off the doll and tossing it into ‘a drift of confetti’ – in which symbolic gesture we ought to kiss goodbye to the chances of the ‘young lovers’ script holding up against the gang code. But here, in the same way as the ‘pauses’ in the script of Charlotte Hallem’s gang rape allow us to imagine our worst fears will not be realised, so too we are perhaps as convinced as Steffi is by Bruno’s ensuing attempts to ‘make it all up’ (again). We, like Steffi, can see that his violent decapitation of the doll’s head is an aberration from his normal behaviour when he shakes his head ‘as though shaking off a blow’ (54). And when Steffi says ‘What I think you need is a steady job’ why is he relieved?: Because Steffi is back ‘on script’ as future-wife, until they bump into Catfoot.

Bruno’s Nemesis: Catfoot Nowogrodski

As the only witness to the murder of the Greek, Catfoot will, at the novel’s end, play a decisive role in determining Bruno (and Steffi’s) fate when he betrays Bruno to the barber. We are introduced to him early in the novel when Bruno is thinking about how the gang ‘For lack of money ... played for chances to mock each other’ in a game whereby ‘the loser had to dance foolishly about ... with one thumb on the point of his cap and the other on his buttocks, making himself ... obscene, before others “Funny

thing,” Bruno recollect[s], “how old Catfoot use’ t’ try t’ lose all the time” (30). It’s not a coincidence that Catfoot is introduced this way. Fireball presents a threat because Bruno fears his knife; Catfoot’s threat is sexual. But, in the chronology of the novel, we don’t know this yet, when, at the rollerpark he asks Bruno, ‘How’s that new jump of yours, Left? You got her with ya? You gonna toss ‘er fer grabs?’

“Say, ain’t she even fixin’ you up yet?” Catfoot asked suspiciously. Catfoot N. from Fry Street was challenging the manhood of Bruno B. from Potomac and Paulina.

“You think I’d spend *gotówka* on somethin’ who wasn’t?”

“Where then? Upstairs by the poolroom?” His eyes never left Bruno’s face even to flicker.

... ..

Catfoot drew closer to whisper in Bruno’s ear: “If you ain’t got a good place I’ll let you in on one. Me’n Fireball pulled a bedspring into a corner of the shed after you’n Casey boarded it up. There ain’t no mattress, just the spring but ...”

“By the warehouse?”

There was a long pause. At a respectful distance the girl stood chewing caramel popcorn. (59)

In Steffi’s maintenance of a ‘respectful distance’ between herself and the muttered conversation, we measure at once the difference between civilised codes of behaviour and the gang code, and the extent to which the latter profits from the customs of the former.²²

As noted above, we most clearly perceive the extent to which Algren’s men ‘perform’ masculinity in those moments their attempts flounder. In his conversation with Catfoot we (but not Bruno) become aware that he has made two important mistakes, both of which, paradoxically, demonstrate his lack of understanding of the gang code even as they push Steffi closer towards her eventual gang rape. Catfoot indicates the first when he tells Bruno only smart guys ‘keep their trap shut’ (59) – the inference being that Bruno should never have boasted about Steffi in the first place. Then, when Bruno decides, having parted company with Catfoot, what he should have

²² Gang rule: never let girls and women hear conversations between gang members.

said, i.e. 'No deal, Cat, this is stric'ly private stock. Knowed her all my life,' he concludes he 'fumbled that one...' (61). Indeed, because the gang code makes provisions for 'private stock.' By the time Fireball and Catfoot arrive on the scene of Steffi's eventual rape, the time has long since passed when Bruno could and should have protected her – even according to provisional clauses in the gang code. As we saw with Cass, Bruno's naivety and lack of mental acuity prevent him from perceiving social complexities.

One point *Never Come Morning* makes very clear is that Steffi's rape occurs not as a result of one social script but of two. Until Bruno comes across Catfoot at the roller rink, the script in play between Steffi and himself is a continuation of the earlier rape (or 'seduction'), a matter between (sexually dominant) boy and (acquiescent) girlfriend, negotiating in asymmetric economies of trust and desire. After his conversation with Catfoot, Bruno's 'inward gaze' is dominated by his desire to have sex with Steffi again. Any warm, fuzzy, feelings we may have felt were stirring in him are gone. Now he doubts Steffi: 'Wouldn't she be pressing just as hard against Catfoot if he had bought the tickets?' (62). His mood changes, he speaks 'brutally', frightens Steffi but 'd[oes] not sense her fear.' And it is only now that the narrator begins to let us in on Steffi's 'inward gaze.' 'Despite her arm safely hooked in his, she [has] the feeling of being abandoned in the dark.' She has a sip of the whisky Bruno has bought (to get her drunk) 'in order to feel less alone. And because he'd spent all that money on her' (63). When he kisses her 'without caring' she clings to him, 'wanting to cry for the careless way he had done that; but able only to hold his shoulders and hide her head on his chest.' Finally, when Steffi is 'troubled by distrust, yet unable to distrust him' (64) we identify the principal problem she faces dealing with a situation that is about to spin beyond her control. Trust over-rides choice. Steffi cannot, having sensed there is something wrong, choose an alternative script because 'the script' of her relationship with Bruno states plainly that he is trustworthy – (she has known him all her life, they played Charley on the Water etc). In order to conform to the dominant script – the gang coded script according to which Bruno is not being as gentle and considerate as the 'young lover' script directs (because love is for cissies) – when Steffi feels 'uneasy' about Bruno, she 'dismisses her intuition' (57). This emotional double-bind is central to the construction of docile, unempowered girls (and boys).

ACT III: Next! The Gang Rape of Steffi Rostenkowski

A woman had to go to the wars to get mean. They weren't born that way, any of them. (77)

Never Come Morning's fictionalised enactment of a gang rape unfolds over the course of twenty pages – 20 minutes in the life of an average reader that begin when, in the conversation noted above, Catfoot asks Bruno, “You gonna toss 'er fer grabs?” via the moment he reminds Bruno of his sexual indebtedness (“‘Say Left’, 'member that old bob from the N'ort' Av'noo beach I built you up wit' that time 'n you raunched her by the boathouse while I was lookout fer you?’”), to the eventual delivery of Steffi by two of her rapists into the hands of the barber (58-60).

Taking my cue from the novel's demonstration of the important role sport plays in the construction of masculinity and the maintenance of homosocial bonds, we can discuss gang rape as a kind of sport – indeed, the staging of the gang rape of Steffi lends itself to the idea.

Team Rape: Raping by Numbers

'Gang rape' describes numbers and actions but tells us nothing about the dynamics that construct the act itself. Team-rape more accurately describes the fact that gang rapes are carried out according to a set or sets of rules of play. A group of boys and/or men come together to play it or the game kicks off when the right set of circumstances present themselves. In fact, it is not so far-fetched to describe this kind of gang rape as 'team rape'; in US university fraternity culture it is known as 'playing train' or 'pulling train.'²³

The first important element in the gang's rape of Steffi Rostenkowski is that, as far as the players are concerned, there is no 'Steffi Rostenkowski' present at the event. No such person is identified in any of the conversations that take place among the gang members: she is 'the widow's kid' to all of them, including Bruno. Secondly, she is, because Bruno has plied her with alcohol, drunk, so that her self-awareness of 'being Steffi Rostenkowski' is severely compromised. As we saw above, Steffi's reasons for

²³ See Peggy Reeves Sanday, 'Introduction to the First Edition', in *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 33.

drinking are far removed from the reasons Bruno wants her to drink. Team rape depends on its victims conforming to a set of customs that, coincidentally, set them up ready to play their role in the rape game.

The rape of Steffi, as noted to this point, depends on a series of actions taking place in a certain order. The golden rule of any sport is that practice makes perfect. Team rape practice takes place, not in real rapes, but, as we see in the scene noted above, in group activities in which boys and young men play ‘obscene’ games together. In such games, the penis is the star of the show; exhibitionism, of course, plays a vital role in team rape. As such, it is also enjoyed by team-rapists as a spectator sport.

Team Rape: A Spectator Sport

When the players aren’t raping, they watch the others raping: “‘Lookit ol’ Kodadek you. C’mere. Lookit ol’ Fireball go.’” Or they discuss the state of their victim’s vagina:

“Tight?”

“So you’ll skin yerself.” (69-70)

Worst of all, the metatheatrical construction of the scene makes us spectators too. The horror of Steffi’s rape lies in our witnessing of everything except the rape while witnessing everything that is most disgusting and inhuman about it apart from *it*: the grossness of the spectators; the pedestrian manner in which they queue to wait their turn; Bruno walking up and down the queue ‘like a reviewing general, taking a new pleasure in his status of president and treasurer’ and boasting ‘This one’s on me’ (69-71). Watching this scene of young men casually sharing the experience of arousal and having sex by rote, it is hard to avoid the idea that they are, in fact, having sex with each other by proxy. Indeed, in one early study of rape, it is treated as a given that in gang rape ‘men vicariously satisfy homosexual desires.’²⁴ Consider the namelessness of Steffi and the function she serves in this game, quite literally, as a vagina. As Peggy Reeves Sanday writes in the context of fraternity gang rape in US university campus culture:

²⁴ Arthur N. Foxx, *Crime and Sexual Development. Movement and Fixation of the Libido in Criminologic Individuals* (New York, 1936), p. 61, cited in Bourke, *Rape: Sex, Violence, History*, p. 501.

The woman involved is a tool, an object, the centerfold around which boys both test and demonstrate their power and heterosexual desire by performing for one another. . . . She is the duck or the quail raised and put in place for the hunter. Who she is doesn't matter and she is quickly forgotten after it's all over—sloughed off like a used condom. The event operates to glue the male group as a unified entity; it establishes fraternal bonding and helps boys to make the transition to their vision of a powerful manhood—in unity against women, one against the world.²⁵

The 'pivotal act' in the scene of Steffi's rape occurs when Bruno takes exception to the presence of an outsider in the queue of youths waiting to rape Steffi. While they are squaring up for a fight, Bruno hears Steffi's voice:

“Next!” He heard her call. And she was laughing a laugh like a single drawn-out sob, hard as a man in handcuffs laughs.

“Next! Next!” (73-74)

In the same way that Charlotte Hallem's rape remains live, first in Cass's voiced regrets, then in the jail scenes that re-enact the racial hatred and lynching of her husband, Steffi's 'Next!' resonates throughout the rest of the novel until, in the final scene, in the consciousness of Bruno, it punctures even the noise of the boxing spectators. 'Had she called "Next!"', he asks himself 'because she was mocking herself with the whisky in her? It seemed now that she had been mocking only him.'²⁶ There is no definitive answer because the text doesn't anywhere supply one. But surely, in his paranoid recall of Steffi's voice shouting and laughing "Next!" is the fear that she welcomed this procession of men, that she was enjoying being raped? This is, after all, one of the greatest myths surrounding rape. Another way of dealing with the question is to ask what it is about Steffi shouting "Next!" that so arouses Bruno's rage that he kills someone?

For Cox and Chatterton, Bruno 'is emotionally scarred by Steffi's hard and cryptic challenge of "Next! Next!"' and he 'releases his unbearable tension by murdering the Greek.' For Cappetti, 'Bruno . . . reacts to the guilt by killing the man.'

²⁵ Peggy Sanday Reeves, *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), pp. 7-8.

²⁶ See pp. 115, 156, and 270-74 for the scenes in which Steffi's cry of "Next!" haunts Bruno.

For Horvath, Bruno ‘lashed out in his shame at not protecting Steffi.’ For Giles, ‘Steffi’s repeated cry—“Next!”—shatters his attempt at detachment.’²⁷ All are plausible reasons – supported by the fact that Bruno’s feelings of guilt towards Steffi dominate his ‘inward gaze’ throughout the remainder of the novel. However, there is a more dramatic (Shakespearian, even) reason. When Bruno is first squaring up to the Greek, he asks Bibleback, how many ‘*us guys* been down [to rape Steffi]?’ Bibleback replies, “‘Five ’n the Catfoot twicet ...’ (73). Remember, Bruno has already fantasised that Steffi would be just as happy with Catfoot as with him. It is jealousy on hearing that Catfoot has ‘jooped’ Steffi twice (while he hasn’t ‘jooped’ her at all) that triggers his murderous rage: the deadly blow is dealt when Bibleback comes up behind him and whispers anxiously behind him: “‘You goin’ down *yerself*, Lefthander?” (74).

When Bruno kills the Greek, Catfoot uses the situation to gain leverage within the gang hierarchy: “‘Somebody’s got Catfoot N. pertectin’ him now. Whether he know it ’r not.’ And so that Steffi can’t report either the rape or the murder, he and Fireball deliver her to the barber – who, without attracting much critical attention, falls head over heels on the spot: ‘a desire he had not known for years shook him. Her helplessness, the very pallor of her and the disarray of her clothes aroused the barber; as weakness had always aroused him. It had been so long since he’d seen anything so young, so helpless. So wonderfully lost’ (78).

²⁷ Cox and Chatterton, p. 104; Cappetti, p. 176; Horvath, p. 40; Giles, p. 49. For blogger Peter Anderson, Steffi’s gang rape is ‘devastating, bleak and shocking in its callousness ... But Steffi proves equally callous and indifferent - after the third or fourth boy has had his way with her, she calls out a single word that will haunt Lefty for the rest of his life.’ Peter Anderson ‘For Some, Morning Never Comes’ <<https://dogmatika.wordpress.com/2008/12/08/for-some-morning-never-comes/>> [accessed 5 November 2014]

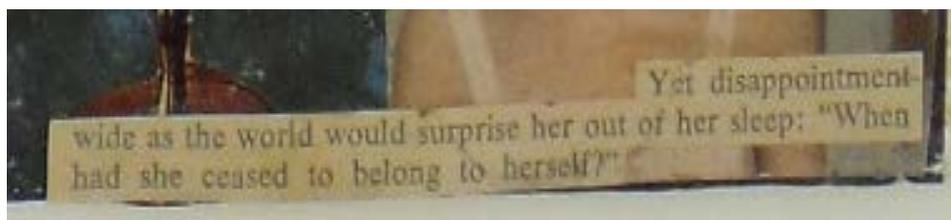
ACT IV: The Brothel

Fig. 13

If you have been in prostitution, you do not have tomorrow in your mind, because tomorrow is a very long time away. ... No woman who is prostituted can afford to be that stupid, such that she would actually believe that tomorrow will come.

Andrea Dworkin²⁸

Algren's earliest drafts of *Never Come Morning* are entitled 'Harlots and Hunted.' In 'The Hunted Also Hope', the women of its 'neon wilderness' – Mama Tomek, Steffi (The Duchess), Roxy, Josie, Chickadee, Helen, Tookie, and The Jockey – recount the circumstances of their initiation into prostitution: Mama T., 18 years old, 'put on the line' by the barber and 'scared to death' by him and the police; Steffi, gang raped and similarly manipulated by the barber; the others, manipulated, bullied, or like Chickadee, drifted into 'the life' through the vacuum created by a lack of viable alternatives. In the stories of Chickadee and Tookie, Algren draws on his experiences in Minnesota, documented in draft manuscripts noted in chapter one, when to Chickadee 'some shoe clerk' tries to make conversation with the opening line, 'I imagine this is a rather boring existence' (197), and to Tookie, another asks 'Been prostitootin' long, sister?' In the accounts of these women and their responses to such questions from men, we build pictures not only of the women but of the men who use them too. Before replying to the above, Tookie 'tells' us that 'They often asked something like that A professional billiard player had once given her an extra half dollar to struggle against him as though she were being raped' (205).

At once multi-voiced indictment of prostitution, *exposé* of men's sexual peccadilloes, and defence of the women who practise it, 'The Hunted Also Hope'

²⁸ Andrea Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy', speech delivered at a symposium entitled 'Prostitution: From Academia to Activism', sponsored by the Michigan Journal of Gender and Law at the University of Michigan Law School, 31 October 1992

<<http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/MichLawJourI.html>> [accessed 3 December 2014]

situates ‘the trade’ as an employment choice among limited others available to poor women. For the women at Mama Tomek’s, exchanging sex for enough money to ‘always [have] change in your slipper and a decent dress to walk down Division with’ is preferable to ‘scrubbing floors, or packing candy, or slicing bacon, or selling subscriptions,’ all the while making out ‘you never drank a drop’ because ‘the lower the wage the greater the morality demanded of you off the job.’ Life as a prostitute, most of the women in *Never Come Morning* agree, is ‘all so much easier, so much simpler, so much more sensible. Especially if you [can] tell those who accuse you of taking the easy way, that you’d already tried the hard way’ (210-11).

Perhaps critics have had so little to say about Algren’s women because, where they speak for themselves, studies that deal with the history, sociology, and politics of prostitution do little more than corroborate their stories. And when they speak less distinctly for themselves, in passages narrated by an omniscient narrator, it is not, strictly speaking, their story we hear but ‘Algren’s’:

... Tookie saw nothing clearly any longer; no one. Heard nothing, no one. Remembered nothing. No one. Asked no man’s help, no woman’s mercy, pitied no one, asked no pity. Without hope as she was without wonder, she avoided herself along with all others. Had lived on only to avoid the pain that others brought her. Till there was nothing left to bring her and nothing left to return. (204)

Algren’s reputed compassion for women who are prostitutes is inscribed in passages such as this. They are only saved from the brink where compassion falls into sentimentality because they are given teeth by his documentation of some of the ways some women are entrapped into lives of prostitution and what those women who’ve ‘been to the wars’ tell us about johns.

Here, for example, is Steffi (in mid-fight with the barber), one year on from being gang raped and entrapped into prostitution:

“*Kurwa!* Whore!”

...

“You made me one,” she accused him, like a child accusing its mother even at the risk of another blow. “You told me I had t’ stay a couple days, the police was lookin’ for me, there’d be a stink about it in the papers ’n my Ma ’d find out

from the neighbors 'n have Bunny arrested. You told me Mama T. went to see her to tell her I was keepin' house for her, 'n Mama T. didn't go a-tall. 'n then I couldn't go, then I had t' stay, then I couldn't face Ma. I c'n hardly face her now." She buried her face in her hands, seeing herself as it had been all night, in this same room with the one door locked, stripping herself for the three of them: Catfoot, Kodadek, and the old man. First for Kodadek, then for Catfoot. She hadn't understood why they had made her dress herself anew each time, only to strip before them again. Now she knew. (240-41)

What Steffi Knew

If Steffi is made to dress and undress for the three men it is that, in making her instrumental to her own humiliation (agency is required to perform the act of dressing and undressing), they force her to collude in their construction of her as sex object. In one year, Steffi comes to know a great deal about men who use prostitutes and about the social hypocrisies that underpin the practice of sexual servitude. If, as Cass McKay tells Dill Doak, "there al'ays was stalls everywhere an' likely al'ays will be" (271), it follows that johns don't change much either. According to Steffi, there is 'no bottom to their depravity.' Indeed, the 'more respectable they appear the deeper their depravity.' There is 'no satisfying the best of them. ... no real limit to their demands.'

To Steffi the terror of them lay in this: that they went to work and joked and lived sensibly with their mothers and saved their money and married and grew conservative and cared for their health by day, while practicing, all their lives by night, the madnesses of the streets as though their madnesses were the reward of being virtuous by day. They went about as though their real selves were the mad selves, as though to be obsessed by drink and depravity was – between themselves – the normal way to be. She heard them speaking innocently of innocent things; yet heard always, behind their voices, the tone of men locked in for life. (216-17)

A year after her rape, Steffi sees beyond the smokescreen of the 'gang code'; she sees Bruno clearly, 'without love, a duped hoodlum who had kicked her into the gutter and let her lie because others might laugh if he helped her up' (246).

Knowing what we know about what Steffi knows about men who buy sex, then, and what she has come to understand about Bruno, we can begin to understand how and

why she is ready, at the novel's end, to forgive him: whatever else he has done, he is not, and has never been, a john.

ACT V: The Poker Game

Snipes limped to the corner and squeezed between the radiator and the wall with his back turned, clucking his tongue at the yellow walls. He wanted to look but felt ashamed.

“Barber,” she said gently, “you’re hurtin’ me.”

Snipes peeked covertly through his fingers. The naked light was on them.

He turned to the wall and did not dare to look again. (245)

Bonifacy ‘the barber’ Konstantine, neighbourhood brothel owner and crime boss is *Never Come Morning*’s chief Patriarch. In the barber, ‘The Damned Feeling’ of *Somebody in Boots*’ Stubby has lost its melodramatic edge to resemble a more pedestrian paranoia: ‘He could never feel sure enough about anything. They were always trying to cheat him in this country.’ His monstrosity is communicated by the narrator’s descriptions of his movements and speech: he is crude, he ‘lurches,’ ‘wheedles,’ loves only his parrot, Polly, and keeps four blue roller canaries in cages so small the birds can only just flutter their wings – an obvious symbol of the brothel and his control over the women entrapped therein (10).

One of the ‘pivotal acts’ in *Never Come Morning* that most readings overlook occurs during the poker game in ‘The Law of Averages.’ The game has finished and the players have left, leaving Steffi alone with the barber and, for reasons it’s hard to fathom (perhaps simply because he is so quiet and so small he becomes invisible), Snipes. During this scene Snipes confirms what readers only suspect till now when he betrays Steffi to the barber, letting it be known she has helped Bruno cheat him at poker. In so doing, Snipes turns the narrative key that unlocks the novel’s final dramatic scene. Bruno is not, contrary to most readings, informed on because he has stepped outside of the barber’s sphere of control by teaming up with Casey to fight Honeyboy Tucker; he is informed on because the barber doesn’t want to lose Steffi.

When the barber learns that Steffi has betrayed him, we learn what she means to him: ‘This was his last woman and his best. ... the others were all gone and let them go; but let this one remain. For all the others who had cheated, he would cheat them, in return, ten times for their once. But let this one not cheat; in order that she be

uncheated.’ In other words, the barber, despite being a sadistic thug, feels protective towards Steffi – indeed seems to be genuinely in love: ‘... had he broken her after all? Had she not broken him instead?’ Poor barber, her defense of Bruno ‘cut[s] the old man’, a ‘white film wince[s] across his eyes, like the wincing of a bird’s eye’ (238-39). “‘Don’t call [Bruno] ‘Bunny’” he pleads. Steffi, at the end of the fight, realises ‘He really meant it. All the way down. ... He’d rather have her in a cell than with another man. He’d rather have Bruno in the electric chair than to lose her. He had her and he had Bruno. He had them both as completely as he had Mama T. He had them all’ (247).

To return to Bluestone’s article, then, the ‘inexplicable, irrational destructive force loosed in the world, which drives people on to frenzied and unrelenting acts’ not of ‘self-destruction’ but other-destruction, is not as mysterious as Gelfant supposes. Neither is it, as Bluestone asserts and other readers have agreed, an ‘impulse to destroy love which is tantamount to death.’ The ‘force’ that destroys Bruno, and his and Steffi’s chances for happiness together, is a volatile combination of possessive sexual jealousy and homosocial power-mongering: the possessive sexual jealousy of Bruno that triggers his killing of the Greek; the equally possessive sexual jealousy of *Never Come Morning*’s paranoid and more powerful patriarch, the barber; and finally, the power-mongering of Catfoot who, by betraying Bruno, eliminates a competitor and assures his place in the upper echelons of the gang’s hierarchy.

Mythologies of Love continued...

The mythology of love associated with Algren’s work is not only problematic because it is based on old-fashioned readings with a masculinist bias; it is problematic because it encourages the under-reading of its scenes of rape, the testimonials of women forced into prostitution, and the emotional information documented in, around, and about them. By talking about love or women ‘destroyed’ we neatly avoid discussing the documented means by which the male protagonists in Algren’s texts consciously set out to violate girls and women according to homosocially agreed codes, supported, maintained, and reinforced by public networks of legal and civic administration. By critically leap-frogging the acts of rape, we romanticise them, not only diminishing their importance within the narrative structure of each text but also ignoring that Algren’s attention to this, the sexual violence of a Cass, a Nubby, a Bruno, a barber, a Dove, showcases

deeper, more difficultly accessed, structures – psychological at the level of the individual, socio-political everywhere else.

In 2014, Steffi Rostenkowski's story was often in the news; it came as a revelation to millions that gangs of men in UK cities have – despite social workers and police being aware of the problem – groomed and raped hundreds of girls into prostitution. The following questions were ominously absent in media coverage: Why do men rape? How do so many men get away with rape? What are the social structures that support men's volition to rape? The same disconnection that we see in the relationship between Bruno and Steffi produces the same ends, everywhere, *ad infinitum*. For if girls are vulnerable to grooming it is because they are typically already groomed by their social circumstances – poverty, parental neglect, lack of education – that render them apathetic, powerless, docile, and, worst of all, ignorant of the 'rules' according to which their 'brothers' play the game.

On the basis of my readings of Algren's first two novels, then, we can hazard a more accurate guess as to what, apart from sexual chemistry, united him and Beauvoir in love and friendship from 1947 to 1956. As I have argued, Algren's attention to the socio-sexual construction of rape and prostitution are not incidental to stories plotted through their men: they are as central to his plots as they are to the protest that motivated his writing in the 1930s and 40s. If these, the most difficult areas of his work, remain most relevant today for what they can bring to masculinity studies, so too, they provide a relatively safe means for us to explore the issues of rape and prostitution in social, emotional, and historical contexts. As his interviews with Donohue demonstrate, Algren was self-reflexive and talked openly about his own adolescent confusions surrounding sex and his sexuality. While there is no editor-in-the-text in *Never Come Morning* to support this claim, I think Algren – who saw himself in the lineage of US writers whose hope for their works was to effect social change – wanted these scenes to perform the social work my reading suggests is possible. Marcus outlines the instructive potential of such stories in her discussion of how we might approach the task of preventing rape:

Attempts to stop rape through legal deterrence fundamentally choose to *persuade* men not to rape. They thus assume that men simply have the power to rape and concede this power to them, implying that at best men can secondarily be dissuaded from using this power by means of threatened punishment from a

masculinized state or legal system. They do not envision strategies which will enable women to sabotage men's power to rape, which will empower women to take the ability to rape completely out of men's hands.

We can avoid these self-defeating pitfalls by regarding rape not as a fact to be accepted or opposed, tried or avenged, but as a process to be analyzed and undermined as it occurs.²⁹

²⁹ Marcus, 'Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words', p. 388.

Chapter Four

The Monkey's Other Paw: *The Man with the Golden Arm*

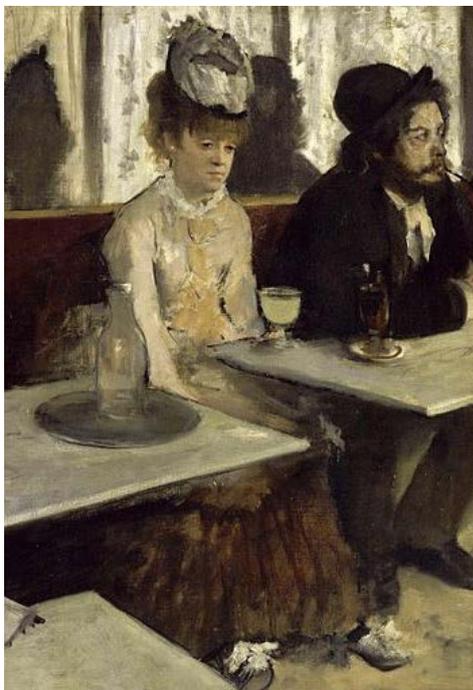


Fig. 14

Innumerable martyrs to love attest to the injustice of a destiny that offers them as ultimate salvation a sterile hell.

Simone de Beauvoir¹

The Man with the Golden Arm, Algren's most critically acclaimed novel,² is renowned for its groundbreaking treatment of drug addiction. It is well-known in Algren-lore, however, that this theme came late in its writing. Imagining the novel without it brings into focus the storyline onto which it seamlessly layered – the disastrously unhappy marriage of Frankie and Sophie Majcinek. When Frankie, after four nights of fighting off the sickness of morphine withdrawal boasts to his lover, Molly Novotny, 'I got one of that monkey's paws off my back,' there remains 'the blurred image of a woman in a

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, 'The Woman in Love', *The Second Sex*, p. 725.

² *The Man with the Golden Arm* won America's first National Book Award in 1950.

wheelchair to darken his moods: ... the monkey's other paw', his wife.³ If Algren's previous two novels can be read as 'savage illustrations of *The Second Sex*'⁴ because they document the gendered laws that govern hyper-patriarchal micro-societies (the gang, hoboemia), his third novel is equally harsh in its critique of patriarchy's domestic frontline, marriage. Bracketing Frankie's morphine addiction, *The Man with the Golden Arm* reads as an extended tragi-comic treatise on the ills of matrimony: in the union of Frankie and Sophie lies its tragedy, in that of Violet and Stash Koskozka, its comedy. In each, the tragi-comedy is enhanced and developed through the prism of a love-triangle: Molly completes the triangle with Frankie and Sophie, and Sparrow, where 'love' is a euphemism for sex, with Violet and Stash.

That Algren wrote a novel structured around two love/sex-triangles during the two years he was playing a 'contingent' party to Beauvoir and Sartre's 'essential' relationship and was intimately involved with at least two other women apart from Beauvoir (three if you count his continuing attachment to his ex-wife, Amanda Kontowicz, whom he would remarry in 1953) endorses his conceptualisation of his writing as 'emotionalized reportage.'⁵ But this wasn't the first time Algren had tackled these issues in his writing. Of his college essays, two in particular suggest he was early preoccupied by questions of marriage-versus-freedom and triangulated love affairs. 'Escape – or the Woman?' treats the choice a man must make between freedom (escaping from prison) or, after years of waiting, being able to hold the woman he loves in his arms before she dies; as the door to freedom/imprisonment closes, narratorial ambiguity leaves the reader guessing as to which side of the door the man finally stands. And 'News Flash: A Short Short Story' enacts a love triangle (two brothers and one woman) that ends in equally Jamesian uncertainty as to who loves whom and how much.⁶

³ *The Man with the Golden Arm*, (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc., 2000) p. 119. All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁴ Beauvoir, letter of 11 April 1951, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 415, *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 424.

⁵ See Donohue, p. 154.

⁶ 'Escape – or the Woman?', NA/OSU, Box 28, File 429; 'News Flash: A Short Short Story', NA/OSU, Box 30, File 500. Drew writes of 'News Flash' that it 'introduced what would become a familiar Algren theme: the criminal forced to choose between two undesirable options; though in contrast to later stories, here the convicted man did not choose life.' However, the important reason the man doesn't choose life is that he thinks the woman he loves is dead so he would rather die than live without her. He's not choosing

Several of Algren's stories in his 1947 collection, *The Neon Wilderness*, demonstrate a bemused fascination with a certain style of married life. 'How the Devil Came Down Division Street', 'Stickman's Laughter', 'Poor Man's Pennies' (recycled in the story of *The Man with the Golden Arm's* Violet and Sparrow), 'He Swung and He Missed': all are stories of more or less negligent husbands (drinkers, a gambler, a compulsive liar) treated with humour, patience, and knowingness by long-suffering but ever-loving wives, narrated by an amused but slightly perplexed fly-on-the-wall or listener-in-the-bar narrator. If these narrators seem mystified by how couples steer themselves through such relationships in silent accord, or how women put up with such men, or why men repeatedly 're-offend' both their wives and, in the process, themselves, the mystery remains unresolved in the short stories and only partially unpacked in *The Man with the Golden Arm*. When a similarly sketched couple appears herein, again, it is presented through the eyes of a mystified and slightly awed narrator. During one of Sparrow's stints in jail

some poor mutt of a cabbie ... kept boasting that his Gracie had actually come to see him. ... "Gracie came. Like she said she would. They wouldn't let her past the desk but she hollered down at me, "Still wit' you, DeWitt!" – all his worries solved because some dowdy old doll with a double chin and hair cascading down to her ears had hollered down to him through the concrete, the steel and the stone. He could face one to fourteen now with a splitting headache and a double-crossing lawyer because some Gracie or other had called some nonsense to him. Hope, tears and nonsense.

Borne on the FM waves of the heart. (289)

Across the novel, characters contribute to a group-meditation on the mysteries of love in general and the marriage of Frankie and Sophie in particular. 'They want to love each other,' their landlord 'the Jailer' explains to himself, 'but they don't know how' (33). "“Them two,” Violet echoes (300 pages later), “him ’n her, wantin’ to love each other just ever so long. Wantin’ so much ’n never knowin’ how, neither one of ’em””

death for the sake of it. Of 'Escape – or the Woman?' Drew asserts that the convict, Mario, chooses freedom but according to my reading, the ending is ambiguous, we don't know which side of the door Mario ends up on. And the 'woman prisoner he's adored from afar', as Drew puts it, is rather more than that: she and Mario murdered her husband so they could be together. See Drew, pp. 29, 30, 33.

(329). 'You married, horse?' Sparrow asks Bogacz the Milkman's horse as he feeds him a stale doughnut, to which the horse replies by rolling 'one white, derisive eye', accepting the doughnut 'only because he sometimes [gets] lonely himself over the week ends' and 'know[s] there are worse things than loneliness along the long hard road to the glue works' (260). Worse than loneliness, of course, is the marriage of Frankie and Sophie.

Again, because there has been little critical development of or departure from Bluestone's reading of love and sex in Algren's work, I will use his key observations on the novel as a point of departure for my discussion. Following the structure of the previous two chapters, I will then outline the principal 'narrative tensions' that have most bearing on my reading: influence, intertextuality, and form. This section is longer than the 'narrative tensions' sections of my readings of *Somebody in Boots* and *Never Come Morning* because this discussion has a particular bearing on Algren's work more generally and its key points relate also to my next chapter's reading of *A Walk on the Wild Side*.

Algren's Central Vision

In his critique of *The Man with the Golden Arm*, Bluestone writes that 'To reject Algren's structure is to reject his central vision. When his vision changes, then his structure, too, will change. He is too careful a writer to have it otherwise.' Where I depart from Bluestone is in my identification of what, exactly, shapes the structure of this novel and, it follows, the horizons towards which Algren's vision extends. For Bluestone, its 'real center lies in an advancement of the love-death theme' that he traces in his reading of *Never Come Morning*, and, more specifically, 'in the complex relationship between Frankie and Sophie on the one hand, and between Frankie and Molly on the other.'⁷ I am more circumspect as to where any 'real' centre of the novel should be located because the novel is built on and around a complex web of triangular relationships that also triangulate thematically across the text: as well as the 'leading cast' outlined above, there is the Frankie/Sparrow/Sophie triangle, and the Frankie/Molly/Drunkie John triangle. Furthermore, while I agree that the love-death theme is central to most of Algren's fiction, for me its importance extends beyond his

⁷ Bluestone, pp. 36, 39.

treatment of romantic or heterosexual relationships. Any analysis of love in this or any Algren text that doesn't include the web of homosocial relationships that circulate love deals with only half a deck. The friendship between Frankie and Solly 'Sparrow' Saltskin is an essential strand in this novel's web of 'complex relationships' – and not only because the plot hinges on it (it is, after all, Sparrow who betrays Frankie to the police in the final act). Frankie is tortured by his marriage to Sophie, and finds solace and hope in his relationship with Molly, but it is in his failing trust of Sparrow and Sparrow's pain at the loss of Frankie's trust and friendship that the drama of love's decline is most clearly (and poignantly) rehearsed.

There is, too, the question raised in previous chapters of the narratorial 'baton' that Algren's characters pass between them which, in dispersing narratorial authority, renders the text without 'centre.' In this respect, Sophie, for example, plays an essential narratorial role from her 'off-centred' perspective. For Carlo Rotella, for example, she is 'the novel's most sophisticated mythographer of decline,' a 'type of urban intellectual' because of the important extent to which she 'thinks the text.'⁸

For Bluestone, 'A pervasive sense of disaster, following love's ruin, reverberates throughout the book'⁹: for myself, the Algren 'true romance' is far more complex than such a cause and effect model allows. The impossibility of love precedes every one of Algren's storyworld scenarios: for Cass and Norah, Bruno and Steffi, Frankie and Sophie, love always-already comes wrapped as a luxury they cannot afford. All are, as a Bluestone would say, 'doomed,' by their socio-psychological and environmental conditions (and conditioning), and yet, in each case – and I would call this an Algren paradox – love survives, even if and when the protagonists do not. My reading will demonstrate this point.

The Man with the Golden Arm is the only of Algren's books that doesn't feature any prostitutes and his only novel that doesn't explicitly document a rape. There is, however, an abundance of sex-work going on between its covers. Its potency is best expressed by the voice of a long-absent prostitute who speaks from the wall of the prison cell Frankie searches, 'hoping to find the name or initials of someone he knew or

⁸ Rotella suggests that Sophie's vision and consciousness presents Algren's analysis of a Chicago neighborhood in decline and his anxieties about the future. See Carlo Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Los Angeles & London: University of California Press 1998), p. 73.

⁹ Bluestone, p. 36.

fancied he once had known.' The 'single arresting detail' he discovers is 'a woman's scratching, accomplished with a hairpin or barrette and almost obliterated with time, from years when the tier had been used for women.

A whore's life is always hell
She's always living in a cell. (196)

The woman's writing on the wall signals the means by which this novel's sex-work is exposed: we have to get up close and scratch the surface of the text to find it but once uncovered its message is plain.

For my reading of this novel, Algren's 'central vision' is best represented both structurally and thematically by the collage he made that heads this thesis as a pictorial epigraph: Algren's eyes look out across a composition of photographs, illustrations, paintings, poetry, prose, and song among and between which connectivity necessarily only exists according to what we know or imagine about individual images and texts and their potential symbolic freight. In the collage-text the women and men signify equally; each visual or lexical component makes an equally important narrative contribution even when one of a kind occupies a comparatively small area of the collage. One such, to demonstrate, (if it's not a case of mistaken identity), is the small illustration of a comic character known as 'Plastic Man', a description of whom (from a comic-fan website) demonstrates his relevance within the scope of Algren's 'central vision': 'Able to morph into anything—a table, a countertop, even a woman's dress—he can bounce, stretch, and repel any foe. No weapon as sharp as his wit, he'll introduce jocular justice to humanity's darker side.'¹⁰

¹⁰ Plastic Man first appeared in *Police Comics* #1 (1941). 'Pop culture's silliest superhero, Plastic Man is as much a humor icon as a heroic one. During a heist gone wrong, petty crook Patrick "Eel" O'Brian was doused in chemicals, allowing him to stretch his body into any shape he desires. Nursed back to health by altruistic monks, he was inspired to embrace life's brighter side. Taking their ideals... maybe one step too far, Eel abandoned crime, becoming the pun-dropping, wise-cracking Plastic Man.' See <<http://www.dccomics.com/characters/plastic-man>> [accessed 1 December 2014]



Fig. 15

For this reading, then, I nominate Plastic Man as the ideal representative for its ‘implied author,’ Algren. Not only because his plasticity serves as metaphor for the writer’s ability, as Hemingway put it, to ‘move around,’ but also because there is a comic undertow in this novel that no serious reading should ignore and a reading focused on unpacking the dialogical contribution of its women cannot ignore.

Narrative Tensions: Influence, Intertextuality, Form

In his chapter, ‘Algren’s Influences: Kuprin, Sartre, and Céline’, Giles traces the evolution of Algren’s views concerning environment and external determinism through a comparison of his work with that of Kuprin, Sartre, and Céline. ‘Initially,’ writes Giles, ‘it seems strange to discover a contemporary novelist so strongly and directly influenced by *Yama*. It is even stranger to find that same writer praising Kuprin along with such existential writers as Céline and Dostoyevsky.’¹¹ In the light of all the archival and documentary information relating to Algren’s writing and reading practices that has come into the public domain over the last 25 years Giles may have revised this view because, to me, neither fact is strange. If Kuprin was important to Algren it is surely because, like Kuprin, he was passionately committed to defending women who are prostitutes; and we know that his tastes were eclectic and that he did not value a book’s worth according to received ideas of intellectuality or literariness.¹² Indeed, the

¹¹ Giles, p. 24.

¹² In a 1950 radio discussion, ‘What is America Reading?’, Algren said ‘My idea of a good book is almost any book that would make the reader be a little less smug. I think a book that can touch a reader’s

number of books cited in the interview to which Giles refers suggests influence-detectives should consider many more sources – so many as to make the exercise kaleidoscopic or redundant (take your pick). To the question, ‘What writers, books, painters, philosophers and so on have held up best for you?’ (which in any case is not a question about ‘influence’) Algren replies:

The Old Curiosity Shop, The Good Soldier Schweik, Yama, Hemingway's short stories, Twelfth Night, Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov, Anna Christie, A Streetcar Named Desire, Grapes of Wrath, Native Son, The Time of Man, Wolf Among Wolves, Of Time and the River, Light in August, Sanctuary, Alice in Wonderland, Catch-22, War and Peace, The Lower Depths, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, The Blue Hotel, Journey to the End of Night, The Trial, Jean Christophe, Madame Bovary, Peer Gynt, Hunger, Growth of the Soil, Sean O'Casey, Orwell, L'Assamoir (sic), and Ring Lardner. I'm not conscious of having my work shaped for me, but I'm sure Stephen Crane had something to do with where my interests in writing lie. And Alexander Kuprin also.

Toulouse-Lautrec is the most interesting man, if not the greatest of painters, to me. Also Kathe Kollwitz. I haven't read any philosophers.¹³

smugness about anything is a good book, regardless of whether it is well written or not. I've got several nominations. ... Tom Lea's *Brave Bulls*, which is a fine book; and Frank Reel's report on *The Trial of General Yamashita*; and then a little book that I just mentioned on juvenile delinquency, *Duke* by Hal Ellson; and a little book called *Sinners, Come Away* by Leon Wilson; and a book in which I have great confidence is *The Big Cage* by Robert Lowry. That is one of the best reports since Vardis Fisher's first book *In Tragic Life*. 'What is America Reading?': a radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System/ Nelson Algren, Harrison Hayford, Margaret Scoggin, Forest Spaulding. Moderator: James H. McBurney (Evanston Ill.: Offices of the Director of Radio (Public Relations), Northwestern University, 1950. NA/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded.

¹³ J. W. Corrington, 'Nelson Algren Talks With NOR's Editor-at-Large' *New Orleans Review* 1 (Winter 1969): 130-32, p. 132. Titles of works by Charles Dickens, Jaroslav Hašek, Alexandre Kuprin, William Shakespeare, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Hans Fallada, Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner, Lewis Carroll, Joseph Heller, Leo Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky, Stephen Crane, Louis Ferdinand Céline, Franz Kafka, Romain Rolland, Gustave Flaubert, Henrik Ibsen, Knut Hamsun, Sean O'Casey, George Orwell, Émile Zola.

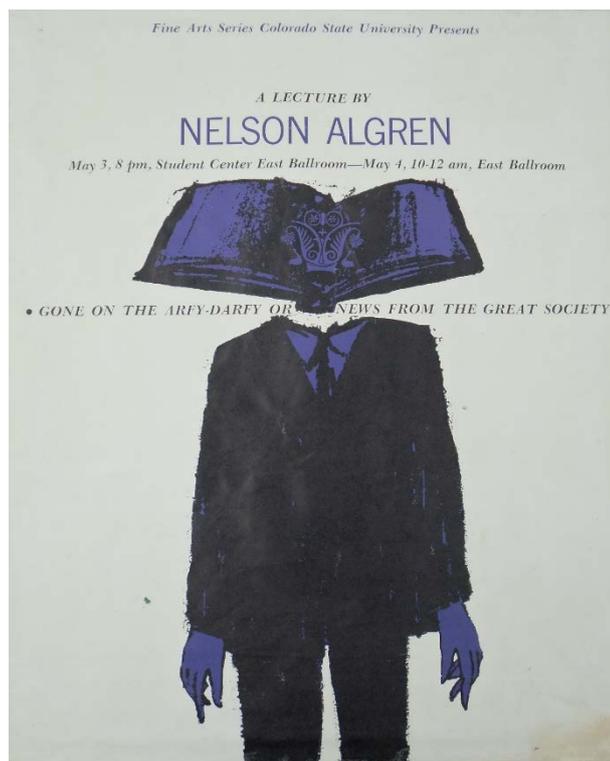


Fig. 16

Algren had, of course, read some philosophers.¹⁴ But, as Giles notes, he ‘never admitted any influence upon his work by Sartre. On more than one occasion, in fact, he went to some pains to deny that Sartre’s ideas had influenced him.’¹⁵ Giles’ Sartrian reading of *The Man with the Golden Arm* would seem to refute this but it’s worth recalling that *Never Come Morning*, described as ‘a savage illustration’ of *The Second Sex* by a French reviewer, precedes the latter by seven years, and the 1947 *Neon Wilderness* was declared in one review to contain “enough horror, ugliness, and ghoulishness to satisfy Sartre” and in another to represent “an Existentialist world.”¹⁶ That Algren was marshalled into the Existentialist pen by book reviewers before he ever met the Sartre-Beauvoir family surely demonstrates the argument George Cotkin makes in his *Existential America*, that existential concerns had, by 1947, long ‘colored the American intellectual temper.’ ‘Dread, despair, death and dauntlessness,’ writes Cotkin, ‘helped frame the existential imperatives’ of writers from Melville to Mailer before and after

¹⁴ See Drew, p. 25.

¹⁵ Giles, p. 27.

¹⁶ *Saturday Review of Literature*, 8 February 1947, p. 14; *NY Times Book Review*, 2 February 1947, cited in Drew, p. 174.

any such philosophy was formulated.¹⁷ But even this is not necessarily why Algren would have denied Sartre's influence. After the English publication of *Force of Circumstance* (1964) Algren took every opportunity to distance himself from the Sartre-Beauvoir family.¹⁸ But even prior to their parting of the ways, one reason Algren may not have 'admitted any influence upon his work by Sartre' is that if, as Giles notes, 'Sartre admired Algren's work,'¹⁹ the obverse did not apply – as demonstrated by Algren's scribbled notes in the back of his copy of *Nausea*:

Nausea is an eye-witness view of Paris by a bodiless eye: the reporter is a man so cerebral that his views seem sterilized. This is the view of the sterilizer. The telling is devoid of all feeling. A man who feels himself surrounded by cardboard scenery which could be quickly removed. A man who doesn't know what to do with himself.

... Antoine [Roquentin] is a man without his own digestive tract.²⁰

Sartre's *The Reprieve* fares no better: for Algren it is 'an experimental novel which would work better were it not experimental,' an improvement on *Nausea* because 'Sartre steps up the sense of movement' but then not, because he does so 'at the cost of

¹⁷ George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 6.

¹⁸ See p. 29, f.n. 59 of this thesis for Beauvoir's summary of the 'contingency pact' between herself and Sartre. For clues as to why Algren might have severed all connection with Beauvoir after reading her *Force of Circumstance*, compare his encomium on Beauvoir's professional and political achievements in his 'Paris' chapter of his 1963 *Who Lost an American?* with her treatment of their affair in her biography. In 'Paris' Algren applauds Beauvoir's critique of America, praises her for the impact she made with *The Second Sex* and demonstrates his intellectual respect by quoting from her 1947 essay 'An Existentialist Looks at America' (published in the *New York Times* magazine, 25 May 1947). He also praises Beauvoir for her work in bringing the case of Djamila Boupacha to public notice in her articles in *Temps Modernes* and in the book she co-authored with Gisèle Halimi, Boupacha's lawyer, *Djamila Boupacha* (Paris: Gallimard 1962), (*Algren at Sea*, pp. 84-86). And in 'Chicago IV' Algren takes up *The Second Sex*'s discussion of Montherlant to support his critique of Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* and his theory that America was moving from a 'first-person' to a 'third-person' society (*Algren at Sea*, pp. 260-64). (See Frédéric Dumas, *La quête identitaire et son inscription dans l'œuvre de Nelson Algren* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001) for its comprehensive treatment of this theory.)

¹⁹ Giles, p. 27.

²⁰ Algren's copy of *Nausea*, inscribed 'To my friend Algren to read in airplane, from Jean-Paul Sartre', was given to Algren when leaving Paris in September 1949. NA/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded.

coherence,' which 'In the end ... gets tiresome.' Similarly, editorial marks in Algren's copy of Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* suggest he took issue, if not with certain existential premises, then at least with her articulation of them:

To exist is to ~~make oneself a lack of being; it is to~~ cast oneself into the world. Those who occupy themselves in restraining this original movement ~~can be considered as sub-men. They~~ have eyes and ears, but ~~from their childhood on~~ they make themselves blind and deaf, without love and without desire. This apathy manifests a fundamental fear in the face of existence, in the face of the risks and tensions which it implies. ~~The sub-man rejects-~~This "passion" which is his [Algren's annotation replaces 'his' with an illegible word that might be 'man's,' 'wm's' or neither] human condition, the laceration and failure of that ~~drive toward being which always misses its goal,~~ but which thereby is the very existence which he rejects.²¹

It could be argued that Algren's excisions illustrate the extent to which Existentialist concepts such as 'making oneself a lack of being' or 'sub men' remain oblique to readers uninitiated in the principals of Existential theory (in much the same way that translations of Beauvoir's *Second Sex* have been criticised for not understanding its existentialist framework).²² It can also be argued, however, that Algren took issue with those concepts because they mystify their own political implications. Certainly, his interpretation of Existentialism in his essay 'Paris' supports this view: 'Stripped of

²¹ See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1986), p. 42. Algren's copy of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948) is signed 'To Nelson, with non ambiguous love, S. de Beauvoir'. On his death, Algren owned several of Beauvoir's works, most of which were presentation copies from her: *The Blood of Others* (New York: Knopf, 1948), *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), *She Came to Stay* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953), *The Marquis de Sade* (New York: Grove, 1953), *America Day by Day* (New York: Grove, 1953), *All Men are Mortal* (Cleveland: World, 1955), *The Mandarins* (Cleveland & New York: World, 1956), *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (Cleveland: World, 1959), *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome* (London: New English Library: Four Square Books, 1962), *The Prime of Life* (Cleveland & New York: World, 1962), *La Force des Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963). Of all the books Beauvoir presented to Algren, only *The Marquis de Sade* is signed with his famous cat signature. NA/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded.

²² See, for example, Toril Moi's review of Borde and Malovay-Chevalier's 2009 translation <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n03/toril-moi/the-adulteress-wife>> [accessed 10 November 2014]

philosophy,' he writes, 'the question asked a decade ago by Existentialism was, simply, "Why not?" Meaning that, to multitudes who despair at risks involved in living, it offers the answer that not to try is to die. It answers that there is no alternative but to assume the responsibility of giving oneself: That the only way to be alive was to belong to the world of men [*sic*].' For Algren, Existentialism echoes 'the ancient biblical warning that to gain the world is to lose oneself, and to give oneself to the world is to gain one's self. This,' writes Algren in 1963, 'was the beginning my French friends were making in 1949.'²³ In other words, for Algren, Existentialism represented little more than a renewed call to self-responsibility through political, social and spiritual engagement with the world. The idea that the Existentialist call for engaged writing represented anything more than 'business as usual' for a writer of Algren's generation and politics is risible. Algren demonstrates this in his Afterword to the 1961 edition of *Chicago: City on the Make* when he introduces his own literary manifesto with reference, but not deference, to Sartre's *What is Literature?* Indeed, that Algren frames his response to Sartre's question without reference, even, to writing, demonstrates both the radicalness of his project and its departure from any kind of literary theorisation that, in the last three decades' climate of critical theory, might have found any canonically-approved home at all:

"What is literature?" Jean-Paul Sartre once asked in a small volume bearing that title.

I submit that literature is made upon any occasion that a challenge is put to the legal apparatus by conscience in touch with humanity.

Now we all know.

When the city clerk of Terre Haute refused to issue warrants for arrest of streetwalkers in spite of his sworn legal duty to issue warrants for arrest of streetwalkers, and instead demanded of the Terre Haute police, "Why don't you make war on people in high life instead of upon these penniless girls?" the little sport performed an act of literature.²⁴

²³ *Who Lost an American?*, pp. 85-86.

²⁴ *Chicago: City on the Make*, p. 81. Algren includes and develops this paragraph in his later *Notes from a Sea Diary* with his reference to Sartre excised. See *Algren at Sea*, p. 394.

In her interview with Drew, Beauvoir reports that Algren 'laughed at' Sartre's *What is Literature?*²⁵ One clue as to why leaps from its opening lines (which respond to contemporary French critics of the concept of politically engaged literature):

No, we do not want to "engage" painting, sculpture, and music "too," or at least not in the same way. And why would we want to? When a writer of past centuries expressed an opinion about his craft, was he immediately asked to apply it to the other arts? But today it's the thing to do to "talk painting" in the argot of the musician or the literary man and to "talk literature" in the argot of the painter, as if at bottom there were only one art which expressed itself indifferently in one or the other of these languages...²⁶

Algren's annotations of the introduction to an edition of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*²⁷ indicate he was, *contra* Sartre, a writers who was indeed interested in a shared vocabulary between the visual and verbal arts. They also demonstrate what Algren actually meant when he said that Crane 'had something to do with where [his] interests in writing lie.' The following section is circled with thick black felt-tip pen:

Here again little proof of influence can be established one way or the other, but whether [Crane] borrowed something of his technique from the studio or nothing at all, the fact remains (as H. G. Wells concluded) "there is Whistler even more than there is Tolstoy in *The Red Badge of Courage*."

And he circled 'prose pointillism' in the following:

Crane anticipated the French post-impressionist painters. His style is, in brief, prose pointillism. It is composed of disconnected images which, like the globs of color in a French impressionist painting, coalesce one with another, every word-group having a cross-reference

²⁵ Beauvoir, interviewed by Drew, 1985, 1987, BD/OSU, Box 15, Cassette 28-29.

²⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949) <<https://archive.org/details/whatisliterature030271mbp>> p. 7, [accessed 29 November 2014]

²⁷ On his death, Algren's bookshelves housed five editions of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1949, 1951, 1960, 1963, 1964).

relationship, every seemingly disconnected detail having interrelationship to the configured pattern of the whole.²⁸

Finally, in view of Algren's intimate relationship with Beauvoir and the interest he exhibited in Existentialism in the early days of their association,²⁹ it is not Sartre whose influence one would expect him to acknowledge, but Beauvoir's. Of course Algren acknowledges neither as 'influences' because even though there are very obvious thematic, ideological or political concurrencies between the three writers' works, neither Sartre nor Beauvoir significantly influenced the fabric of his writing, i.e. its style or structure. The marks of 'influence' in Algren's work can far more often than not be described as intertextualities, as instances of him addressing other writers in his work, or of invoking other texts to echo within his own and outwards towards other texts. As noted above, Algren's attitude towards books and learning was profoundly democratic and, in the case of the Existentialists, he was, up until the early 1950s, highly invested in forging intellectual links with his European peers. As such, *The Man with the Golden Arm* is littered with Existential motifs: Sparrow's Peeping Tom activities and the prisoners who 'behind the wall' examine Captain 'Record Head' Bednar's anguish 'through some peephole, nudging each other and winking ... as they watched' (314), may well be referencing Sartre's *Being in Nothingness* theory of the 'look' but the same scenario (of someone looking through a keyhole, being caught in the act and experiencing shame) also appears in fictional form in Beauvoir's *L'invitée*, published in the same year (1943), and also, of course, has a long history in children's stories and fairytales.³⁰ 'Influence' in Algren's work very often shows up as such nudges and winks to other writers and often advertises itself too. In one scene, for example, we see Captain Bednar drying the sweat off his forehead with a blood-red bandanna and tossing the rag aside 'as if he had touched his temples with the blood of others' (313). Could there be a more overt advertisement of Beauvoir's *The Blood of Others*, probably the

²⁸ NA/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded.

²⁹ Algren, for example, debated Louis Blomfield on the subject of Existentialism at the Midwestern Writers Conference in the autumn of 1947/48. See Drew, p. 189.

³⁰ I have seen no evidence of Algren having read *Being and Nothingness* – it is not one of the works sold to OSU by his estate after his death – but it is likely Beauvoir (or Sartre when they met) would have talked about this, probably the most easily communicated, understood, and recyclable of Existentialism's key tenets.

first of her novels Algren read after they met? Thematically too, Bednar's paranoid ruminations on the ambiguous nature of his own innocence and his complicity in the guilt of others talks to Beauvoir's characterisation of Jean Blomart and *The Blood of Others*' treatment of love, guilt, collaboration, and resistance in Second World War France. But Algren's characterisation of Bednar does not owe everything or even anything to Beauvoir's Blomart since Bednar is another of Algren's *Neon Wilderness* exports who, furthermore, enjoys other even more obvious intertextual relations.³¹ Another thing Algren does very often in his fiction is address jokes to specific people. When he writes of Sophie, for example, that 'She never wrote. But had added several morbid memories to the five-and-dime loose-leaf volume, her Scrapbook of Fatal Accidence' (253), he is, unbeknownst to the general reader, addressing a particular reader, i.e. Beauvoir, who also kept a scrapbook (not necessarily of 'Fatal Accidence' but of article clippings, pictures, and comic books Algren sent her).³² I am not suggesting that we now attempt to map all the ways Algren's work 'talks to' particular people or books. My point is that such connections are to be found everywhere in his work and they reflect the same gregarious personality researchers have detected in all his dealings with people as evidenced in letters, documents, and interviews, in and out of the many archives that hold his letters to friends and colleagues. If we are to talk about influence proper, we need to be more inclusive and precise about how and where we identify it: at the very least, an accurate appraisal in the case of Algren would

³¹ See James Lewin, 'A Jew from East Jesus: The Yiddishkeit of Nelson Algren', *MidAmerica*, 21, (1994) 122-31 (p. 130). Lewin suggests that Algren's characterisation of Captain Bednar owes a clear debt to the observations of British tourist William T. Stead in his *If Christ Came to Chicago* (1894). He argues that if Record Bednar is dogged by the idea that 'we are all members of each other' it is perhaps in response to Stead's view that 'nothing and nobody remained except the cop on the beat and the hack politician of the big city machine to "remind men that they are members of one another and are united by common interests and in common concerns" (128, Stead) 'Not only did Algren adopt the underlying argument,' writes Lewin, 'he even puts Stead's words into the mouth of a defrocked priest, standing in a police line-up.'

³² Algren would also have been familiar with a very funny girl in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*: 'This young girl kept a scrap-book when she was alive, and used to paste obituaries and accidents and cases of patient suffering in it out of the *Presbyterian Observer*, and write poetry after them out of her own head. It was very good poetry.' But says Huck Finn, 'I reckoned, that with her disposition, she was having a better time in the graveyard.' See *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 161.

require us to read everything he had read up to the time of writing this or that book. And even then, as Mary Orr notes,

Deeply experiential, intuitive or inspirational works ... defy or bypass didactic, directive or partisan levels of representation or recipes of form. Something of a greater wisdom and understanding flowing erratically down the generations, yet channelled by sure knowledge of the right way to retell the old story, provides deeper recognitions than are possible within traditional source studies, which concentrate on a single lineage, or intertextuality as orderly web of previous texts.³³

I feel, too, that we need to be more speculative about what effect writers hope or intend to achieve when they reference one another's work. The epigraph to this novel, taken from Alexander Kuprin's *Yama: The Pit*, is a case in point. A journalist, Platonov, addresses a group of men keeping company in a brothel:

Do you understand, gentlemen, that all the horror is in just this – that there is no horror!

Introducing his novel with Platonov's exasperation about the 'horror' that lies at the heart of prostitution can be explained, as Giles does, as marking the fact that 'Kuprin helped Algren formulate a stance toward all social injustice.'³⁴ But it can also be read as a recommendation for further reading and an exhortation from the author, Algren, to his own 'gentlemen' readers. With a reading of *Yama* in place, the 'horror' of prostitution sits below the surface of the storyworld as supplement and continuation of Algren's treatment of prostitution in his previous three books. By 1949, he had documented in considerable detail some of the socio-economic and socio-sexual conditions that entrap women into lives of prostitution, and he had presented possibly two of the most disturbing rape scenes in American literature, each of which point the finger of responsibility for a woman's sexual violation at men (Cass and Bruno) and masculine complicity (gangs of men). The 'horror' is perhaps that Algren's own efforts to problematise the horrors of sexual exploitation and violence in his novels, as he would

³³ Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 86.

³⁴ Giles, p. 26.

later say with reference to his work in general, had by 1949 made no 'dent' at all, they had not provoked the public outrage necessary to effect social change.³⁵

Finally, there is one writer worth mentioning who hasn't made it into any of the published lists of Algren's influences. When asked for advice on writing, he often recommended the English writer and academic Arthur Quiller-Couch's *The Art of Writing* (1917) and *The Art of Reading* (1920). One particular citation illustrates some of his relevance to Algren:

Now if you accept ... that verse is by nature more emotional than prose—certain consequences would seem to follow: of which the first is that while the capital difficulty of verse consists in saying ordinary things the capital difficulty of prose consists in saying extraordinary things; that while with verse, keyed for high moments, the trouble is to manage the intervals, with prose the trouble is to manage the high moments.³⁶

The critical consensus on *The Man with the Golden Arm* is that it overcomes both sets of 'capital difficulties' by successfully marrying poetry with prose (making it the only successful marriage in the Algren oeuvre).

To conclude this discussion, let us once again take up Brooks' suggestion that 'viable works of literature ... guide us toward the conditions of their interpretation.'³⁷ As 'prose pointillism', *The Man with the Golden Arm* asks to be read not simply as 'poetic prose' but, rather, as prose that 'thinks' like a poem. As Bruce Bassoff observes in a reading of the novel's poetics,

Algren places little emphasis on the staples of realistic fiction: the chain of events through which characters develop and reach (or fail to reach) a certain plateau; the characters' psychological and sociological motivation; and the particulars of environment in which events take place. ... [T]he emphasis in *The Man with*

³⁵ See Donohue, p. 94.

³⁶ Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), p. 73. Both volumes available on Gutenberg. Algren recommended Quiller-Couch to his friend, photographer Art Shay. Art Shay, interviewed 12 April 2008, Galerie Loeb, Paris.

³⁷ Brooks, p. xii.

Golden Arm is paradigmatic: on the repetitions and variations of word and image that create a dream-like or poetic effect.³⁸

In other words, in accordance with the above description of 'prose pointillism,' 'every seemingly disconnected detail [has] interrelationship to the configured pattern of the whole.'

The Guilt-Edged Inward Gaze: Frankie Machine (and his Sparrow)

In this novel, the male 'inward gaze' is shared between Frankie Machine and Sparrow Saltskin. And, in the opening pages, the narrator constructs their relationship in the terms of a love triangle when describing how much Sparrow looks forward to 'watching Frankie's bag of corny card tricks once more' when he comes home from the war,

... the tricks of which he had never tired; as Frankie's Sophie had so long ago tired of them all. As Frankie had so long tired of showing them to her; yet had never wearied of revealing them, the same ones over and over, for Sparrow's ever-fresh amazement. (10)³⁹

Through Sparrow's 'inward gaze' we learn as much about Frankie as about Sparrow. He sheds light on Frankie's relationship with Sophie: 'What kind of bull was Frankie feeding Zosh now that she wasn't even supposed to know he was in the building [with his lover, Molly]?' (114). And he serves as an important gauge for the measurement of Frankie's decline. Despite Frankie's elevated status in his eyes, Sparrow is in fact both sharper than Frankie and more intelligent than Frankie esteems him: again, like *Somebody in Boots*' Cass and *Never Come Morning*'s Bruno, *The Man with the Golden Arm*'s lead man is virtually incapable of self-reflexivity and lacks both the emotional sensitivity to access and the psychological wisdom to assess the reality of others. If we

³⁸ Bruce Bassoff, 'Algren's Poetics in *The Man with the Golden Arm*', *Études Anglaises*, 4 (1987), 413-20 (p. 413).

³⁹ Frankie Machine's closest relative is Snipes from *Never Come Morning* who was also 'a professional dealer, in his young manhood, before the first World War.' By the 1930s, 'of all the games he had dealt, in a dozen silver-dollar houses between Reno and Cicero's Rock Garden Club, he recalled nothing save the single phrase "p-poker cards' (230). And, just as Solly Saltskin is fascinated by Frankie's card tricks, so too, *Somebody in Boots*' Cass sat for hours each day 'with Ashes, 'a card-sharper, an Assyrian with a long tragic face ... trying to learn sleight-of-hand' (224).

think again of Cass's question: 'Was there no way to know how someone else felt? What was it that went on inside of heads all the time?' (36); if we think of Bruno, psychologically caught by and between the directives of two conflicting gendered scripts; and if we consider Frankie's hellish and lonely road to self-destruction through drug-addiction: emotional and psychological isolation result in an other-blindness that is everywhere advertised in Algren's fiction as the Achilles heel of its men. The particular importance of Sparrow in this regard is that through his eyes we watch Frankie progressively become estranged from himself.

"It kills me in the heart, how you are now," Sparrow couldn't keep from saying. "it just ain't like bein' Frankie no more.

"That's the hardest thing of all for me to be, Solly," Frankie told him with a strange gentleness. "I'm getting' farther away from myself all the time." (272)

That the unambiguously heterosexual Sparrow is Frankie's most devoted admirer and love-companion is a paradox that cannot be solved by reading their friendship as closeted homosexuality.⁴⁰ More important for my reading is its narrative effect: their story – and especially where Sparrow's 'inward gaze' sheds light on it – transports us into a quasi-sexless love-story that, no less than any passionate sexual love-connection, rehearses the longing of love and the pain that people-in-love everywhere experience when they are rejected by a loved one. Giles wonders exactly where in the novel Charles Walcutt finds "waifs and strays" exhibiting "tender and beautiful feelings": the first suggestion I have in answer to this question is in the friendship of Frankie and Sparrow and especially in Sparrow's sensibility.⁴¹ Throughout the novel most emotional 'pangs' are felt by them – first one, then the other – as their relationship breaks down. A fellow prison inmate has 'a look so swift and furtive Frankie [is] reminded, with a

⁴⁰ The question of a homosexual undercurrent in the relationship of Frankie and Sparrow has been raised by Stephen Perrin in 'Hero and Heroin: Opiate Use and Sexual Identity' *Dionysos: The Literature and Addiction Triquarterly* 4.3 (1993) 25-29. I don't engage with this question here because Perrin's essay approaches it as though *The Man with the Golden Arm* were about a novel primarily about drug-addiction so the issues he raises, while interesting in their own right, require too lengthy a digression from the focus of this chapter.

⁴¹ Giles, *The Naturalistic Inner-City Novel in America: Encounters with the Fat Man* (Columbia: South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 99, referring to Charles C. Walcutt's *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream* (1956), pp. 299-300.

troubling pang, of Sparrow Saltskin' (216). Sparrow, after several instances of Frankie turning on him, feels there is 'no place for him in any joint on Division Street, nor in the whole world, without Frankie Machine.' No romance is spared in Algren's treatment of these man-lovers:

Now the first full moon of December burned with a steady yellow fury, the way a night light once had burned above the dealer's head. A pang of regret caught the punk unaware: that such a night could not come again. (127)

The complexity of the relationship between Frankie and Sparrow deserves a fuller treatment than I can offer in this chapter. Key, however, is that Sparrow's adoration of and blind faith in Frankie is not mirrored in kind: Sparrow's 'pangs' are nostalgic for a love lost; Frankie's are fuelled by a complicated cocktail of suspicion and guilt. If Sparrow trusts Frankie implicitly, he discovers, to his *chagrin*, that Frankie does not trust him. Presented as a double-act in the jail scene that opens the novel, they may well '[get] along like a couple of playful pups' (8), but Sparrow (everywhere referred to as 'the punk') is never allowed to forget that Frankie is top dog. Sparrow is the only person he doesn't give in to; he always gives in to Sophie, 'to Schwiefka in arguments over the take. ... Louie in arguments over the price of "God's medicine." As he [gives] in to Zygmunt and Antek and Schwabatski' (85). Sparrow, he shoves around and instigates the vaguely sadistic game of 'hearts for noses' that 'Sparrow always lost. He would take his punishment then almost – but never quite – without flinching, trying very hard not to let the tears come into his eyes at the swift sting of the cards' (26). In other words their relationship is sado-masochistic. Of all the reasons why the Frankie/Sparrow relationship must be treated as integral to Algren's 'central vision' this is the most important because it provides an important baseline, first, for a complete reading of the marriage of Frankie and Sophie but also, for the questions it raises about sado-masochism in the construction of patriarchal masculinities.

'What is life without a wife?'⁴²

For Frankie Machine 'life without a wife' would, of course, be a life with Molly but more importantly it would be a life without guilt. As noted above, the shame Frankie

⁴² Old Irish song hummed by Banty Longobardi in 'Stickman's Laughter', *The Neon Wilderness*, p. 67.

experiences as an addict seamlessly dovetails with the guilt that underpins his marriage. Guilt is the monkey that was riding him before the 'monkey on the back' of drug addiction was written into the novel's plot.

"I'm no good but my wife's a hundred per cent," somebody down the tier confided aloud to everyone in hearing distance.

"Mine stinks," Frankie Machine thought softly; immediately his conscience kicked him in the shin. "I got a good one too," he answered loudly to make up for everything.

And his conscience kicked him in the other shin for lying. (22)

The doubly-bound truth of Frankie's 'inward gaze' is that it cannot bypass his guilt. His wife does, in his mind, stink and loudly telling the world otherwise only magnifies his guilt. If, as he says in respect of his drug-addiction, he 'rolled up all the little troubles into one big trouble' (335), this action is facilitated by the fact that, at the heart of all those troubles are the closely related emotional states of shame and guilt. When he kills Louie it is 'the flame of cold shame for having lain in a cold and secret sweat begging for morphine' that drives the fatal blow (158). That Frankie's morphine addiction and the psychological trauma associated with it merge seamlessly with the traumas of self- and other-destructive relationships suggests parallels between the states of psychological dissociation this novel explores: morphine, administered for pain relief, becomes the means by which Frankie momentarily escapes the crippling guilt he feels towards Sophie, and for Sophie, the paralysis she suffers after Frankie crashes their car, gives physical form to a process of dissociation that precedes the car-crash by many years and for which that crash ever after serves as totem. For readers, too, the scenario we find in the novel's present tense is the one that has historically dominated readings of it so that our understanding of Frankie's guilt and Sophie's bitterness and paralysis does not extend far beyond accepting each of their systems of self-justification and other-misunderstanding as read. Certainly, the car crash they have when Frankie, drunk at the wheel, drives into a lamp post instigates Sophie's paralysis, thereafter providing her with a physically-supported reason, a concrete alibi, to blame Frankie for ruining her life. But, in fact, Frankie 'ruined' Sophie a long time before the car crash when, during their adolescence, he coerced her into having sex with him; in this their sexual relationship begins on a similar footing to that of *Never Come Morning's* Bruno and Steffi.

The central 'true romance' of *The Man with the Golden Arm* picks up the story of Bruno and Steffi at the point where they go down to the gang's hideout after their evening at Riverview – except that the gang doesn't turn up and, following instead the 'young lovers script', Frankie and Sophie proceed to the altar (though, of course, 'lovers' here conjures far too romantic a picture). Like Bruno and Steffi, Frankie and Sophie have known each other since they were children. But even without the obvious parallels between the early years of the Bruno/Steffi, Frankie/Sophie relationships, one symbolic motif, the roller skate, a prose-pointillist's 'blob of colour,' rolls from the earlier to the later novel to symbolically – and therefore, in prose pointillist terms, thematically – connect their stories. If we remember, just at the moment that Bruno is trying to prise Steffi's hands off the arms of the chair (that she is gripping 'fiercely, that he might not raise her to him'), outside, as 'the evening's first arc lamp came on ... Someone in the street was roller-skating on a single skate' (28). Then later, when in prison, Bruno hears 'the flowing grind of roller skates over a hollow walk' and is reminded of Steffi and her cry of "Next!" (115). In *The Man with the Golden Arm*, the motif of the single roller skate comes back into play as Sophie thinks back to a day when she went to Frankie to borrow his roller skates and he told her,

"You can only have one and you have to do what I do." Then rolling away on his single skate down the darkening boulevard the old terror that he was going away forever shook her and she had to follow ... all the way up to that old leaf-covered porch ... and down into the dangerous hide-out lit only by a single broken ray from the arc lamp's eye across a leaf-strewn darkness where other lovers had lain. Here where the earth held like a pang the odor of dry leaves, night dew, and faintly the scent of sometime lovers' sweat, he said, "Lie down, Zosh." (103)

The source of Frankie's guilt towards Sophie lies in their ancient history. Much later, towards the end of the novel when he is hiding at Molly's place, he points again to this source: 'I didn't know how to get out from under 'n the more they [the troubles] piled up the more it felt like it was all my fault, right from the beginning, when me 'n Zosh was little stubs together 'n I made her do the things she wouldn't of done with nobody else' (335). The long history of Frankie's guilt rests on a series of sadistic harms done to Sophie during their teenage years when 'he'd liked taking her down Division because she dressed so sharp and had that haughty, hard-to-get stride that had had everyone fooled but himself' because 'he'd solved it before she'd had a chance to develop adult

defenses.' Can it be any plainer? The power Frankie holds over Sophie bears direct relation to his exploitation of her naivety and emotional dependency while she was still a child, before – a psychologist-narrator informs us – she had developed the psychological maturity that might allow her to protect herself. The formative years of their relationship were governed by the domineering manipulations of our 'good for nothing chump', Frankie Machine.

Once, when both were still in their teens, he'd ignored Sophie for a month just to show her he didn't care one way or another. Until she'd asked him straight out if they were still sleeping together on Saturday nights or not.

He'd fished a nickel out of his pocket and slipped it into her palm. 'Here's a nickel, kid. Call me up when you're eighteen. Right now I got to do some shoppin' around.'

She'd gone off in such a high-wheeled huff he'd thought that that was surely the end of *that*. But two days later she'd slipped him a note in front of the corner *apteka*. 'I have to talk to you.'

But in her own living room there really hadn't been anything to talk about after all. She'd come down off that high horse onto her knees. He'd brought her down till she'd never have her full height again. He'd broken her pride for keeps that afternoon. (122-23)

So, it may well be, as Giles suggests, that the 'central horror of *The Man with the Golden Arm* is the existential anguish and nausea of its main character,' but I suggest it is towards the guilt for his acts of cruelty towards Sophie when they were young that his unconscious relentlessly gestures in feelings of anguish and nausea. If we leave Existentialist ideas out of the frame, we are talking not about 'solitary man versus world' but, rather, psychological trauma. Frankie Machine, like many of his literary forebears, is, by the time we meet him in the novel's present tense, suffering from mental illness.⁴³ And, of course, he's not the only one. Quite apart from the psychosis of Sophie, to which I will turn presently, Algren readers are very familiar with his proposal of a peculiarly American form of guilt: 'The great, secret and special American guilt of owning nothing, nothing at all, in the one land where ownership and virtue are one'

⁴³ Giles, *Confronting the Horror*, p. 59.

(256). But if we read the novel according to the logic of a poem; if we allow more space for individual phrasing and reflection; and most importantly, if we read as though we don't know what's coming next, as though, like a poem, *The Man with the Golden Arm* can arouse a different set of emotions, thoughts, feelings, on different days; then the passages that precede Algren's Americanisation of guilt, describe the symptoms of that guilt in the men in the prison tier who have

eyes with the small bright gleam of hysteria and eyes curtained by the dull half glaze of grief. These glanced, and spoke, and vaguely heard and vaguely made reply; yet looked all day within upon some ceaseless horror there: the twisted ruins of their own tortured, useless, lightless, and loveless lives.

Though he had seen not one man of them in his life before, Frankie knew each man. For each was seared by that same torch whose flame had already touched himself. A torch which burned with a dark and smoldering flame from within till it dried a man of everything save a dark-charred guilt. (17)

Drop the American-ness of the much-cited sentence that follows on from the above and we are again looking, not at a political statement, but a diagnostic portrait of a generalised condition of mental ill-health among prison inmates. Formulated in a strikingly similar way to Middleton's notion of the masculine 'inward gaze,' the men 'look all day within upon some ceaseless horror there' because most of them are of course guilty of something – that's why they are in prison. So, I'm suggesting Algren's treatments of men in prison don't only serve as a metaphor for Man's existential entrapment or proclaim on the State of the Nation, they equally expose the emotional and psychological effect of containment, and the long-term effects of guilt on the human psyche.⁴⁴

I will leave Frankie's story in suspension now in order to attend to the work of the novel's women. But first I want to propose that Frankie's rape of Sophie is as central to its plot as those of Charlotte Hallem and Steffi Rostenkowski are to *Somebody in Boots* and *Never Come Morning*. Frankie's rape of Sophie is not made explicit in the text, but

⁴⁴ It's important to note here that Algren was also interested in how women cope in prison and in the particularities of the women's prison system. We see this in his short story in *The Neon Wilderness*, 'Depend on Aunt Elly'. And, as I noted in chapter one, he also wrote 90-odd pages for a novel about a girl in jail (mentioned in a letter to Amanda Algren).

where poetry 'thinks the text' in *The Man with the Golden Arm* its centrality to the emotional and psychological structure of the novel can be demonstrated with reference to its poetic structure. The closing lines of the novel, as Frankie is about to hang himself, echo those of the scene at the hide-out: "Have a good dream you're dancin', Zosh" says Frankie,

- and the words were whirled like leaves in a dead-cold wind blowing up from the other side of the wall. Into one brief strangled whimpering.

To rustle away down the last dark wall of all. (357)

The 'leaves in a dead-cold wind' echo the 'leaf-strewn darkness' of the hide-out into which Frankie leads Sophie, where 'the earth held like a pang the odor of dry leaves' (103) and where 'brittle leaves fell stiffly'. Leaves are everywhere a symbol of this moment: a direct link between 'leaves' and Frankie's guilt is made when 'the old regret, like the old wound fever, struggled in him to kindle fresh flames of guilt' (guilt, at this juncture, because he is betraying Sophie by sleeping with Molly). 'Guilt that burned like so many small strange flowers putting out petals of fire in place of leaves' (124). And again, later, when Frankie is recounting the story of his marriage to Molly, looking out of the window, he sees a 'prairie snow ... looking for dry leaves upon which to rest...' (152).

I will return to these scenes of snow and leaves later. Now I will outline the work of Molly Novotny, Frankie's lover.

The Golden Arms of Molly Novotny

Yet there was a difference now to the dealer's nights. He had found that, with Molly Novotny's arms around him, he could resist the sickness and the loneliness that drove him to the room above the Safari. He had confessed the whole business to her, she had half guessed the truth before he had told it. (119)

It is no accident that Algren has Frankie 'confess' the whole business to Molly: one function of the phosphorescent crucifix that lives above the clock in Frankie and Sophie's room (and countless other rooms in Algren's fiction) is to remind us (and his protagonists), not just that they are Christians but that they are Catholics. For Frankie, raised in the Catholic Church, guilt comes always-already with spiritual and existential

significance beyond any physical wrongs he may have committed in the flesh.⁴⁵ But his only succour, if not salvation, is found (if only temporarily) not in the arms of God, but in the arms of Molly. Just as for Cass Norah's affection melted 'the shadow of shame', Frankie's love for Molly gives him the strength to resist – albeit temporarily – his craving for morphine. It is because Algren places so much emphasis on the healing property of love (and not only, as Frankie's and Sparrow's love demonstrates, sexual love) that Bluestone's formula (male protagonist destroys love, everything goes downhill for everyone thereafter), to my mind, misrepresents what 'love' is doing in Algren's fiction. As poets and songwriters know, love is most keenly felt (by the reader, the listener) when held just out of reach; we tend to know more and feel more about it in its absence; it is heart break that arouses our compassion, not sing-song-happy romance. Algren's protagonists may, as the saying goes, have a hard time to row of it, but it's one of the mysteries of reading Algren that their romantic loss is the reader's emotional gain.

Molly has historically suffered from being absorbed into readings that treat Frankie as the most important protagonist of *The Man with the Golden Arm* with most of the other characters read as scaffolding, either for the grand narrative of his decline, or as props to support a theoretical framework or genre. For Bluestone, 'Frankie's destruction of Zosh has made Molly's love impossible.' And for Giles 'Molly is ... too idealized ... largely because she fulfils a symbolic function. She personifies that almost dead part of Frankie Machine which longs for life and psychological health, while Sophie embodies his guilt, his fear, and his longing to surrender completely to his addiction.'⁴⁶ To my mind, however, Molly can only be deemed 'idealized' if your ideal woman is a bit of a bitch – as her attitude towards Sophie demonstrates: "I remember Zosh from the old days, Frankie", she says during one of their conversations. "Remember the time you took me to the dance by St Wenceslaus 'n she come right

⁴⁵ For Horvath's reading of the Christian symbolism in the novel see his *Understanding Algren*, pp. 80-81; and see also Lewin's 'A Jew from East Jesus: The Yiddishkeit of Nelson Algren' for its reading of Solly (Sparrow) Saltskin's and Algren's Jewishness.

⁴⁶ Bluestone, *Nelson Algren*, p. 36; Giles, *The Naturalistic Inner-City Novel in America*, p. 114. It is to Molly whom Giles refers when he writes in his earlier *Confronting the Horror* (1989) that 'Algren's tendency to idealize selected women characters as embodiments of psychic health and momentary escape from sordid environments will possibly alienate feminist critics' (p. 65).

across the floor 'n slapped me a good one, right in front of everybody – you wasn't supposed to go dancin' with nobody but Zosh? 'N look at her now. Such a *shame*" (116). And when she visits him in prison: "'How's Zosh?'" asks Frankie. "Gettin' fatter than ever, Frankie," she says, and 'hear[s] the ancient malice in her [own] voice' (225). Neither is it very 'golden-hearted' of her to say to Frankie when he is, clearly, in a hopelessly vulnerable position, on the run from the police, "'One to twenty'd be worse than the chair for you ... The shape you're in you wouldn't live four'" (333).

Like Solly, Molly (characters rhyme for good reason in Algren's storyworld) plays an important narratorial role; they each contribute to a running commentary on Frankie's marriage and his attitude towards that marriage. Molly's long-view diagnostic is especially important in this respect. On several occasions, she provides an important folk-psychologist's reading of Frankie's situation. When Frankie, recounting his and Sophie's dish-breaking fight, for instance, tells her that he joined in to show Sophie he didn't care about her either, "'You just think you don't,'" is Molly's reply (152). And it is through Molly that we learn more about the history of Sophie's mental state. For Molly, she was 'wrong in the head ... way back', before the war, before the car crash.

"You wouldn't fall in love with her the way she wanted you to, the way she was in love, she had to get even with you for that. She never got another chance till the accident. That was her one big chance 'n she took it without even carin' what she was doin' to herself. It's all she ever tried to do for you was to get even. 'N you're lettin' her do it every time you knock on that Fomorowski's door or sneak up to see Blind Pig." (149-50)

And when Frankie tries to tell her he's taking morphine for pain relief:

She shoved him away from her. "Don't you give me that Purple Heart romance. It's nothin' of the kind 'n you know it. If things were right with you you wouldn't be runnin' to Louie because you got a pain in the belly. You're runnin' over there because you get to thinkin' the whole thing is all your fault, that you smashed her up on purpose. She's got you lyin' to *yourself*, Frankie. You *got* to believe that that girl was wrong before the accident. (150)

So, narratorially speaking, Molly shapes up as a more important and more well-rounded figure than critics have generally noted. Perhaps the readerly reception of her presence

in the text has been conditioned by the first impression we gain of her. When we first meet her, 'a girl scarcely out of her teens', sitting in the Tug & Maul being scolded by the 'little terrier called Drunkie John', she is caught in a relationship in which she is tyrannised and financially exploited by a man who is 'close to forty' (28): perhaps, due to the 'primacy effect,'⁴⁷ readers take this image of a docile, subservient Molly into their reading of her relationship with Frankie? But appearances can be deceiving. If we re-read Molly's first scene on the basis of what we know about everyone at the end of the novel, her behaviour is not that of a meek soul: she is exercising a technique people who are routinely bullied adopt in order to micro-manage the violence of others. When John, '[is] trying to work up his anger like a man pumping a dry well; [and] she touche[s] him with real gentleness,' it's not because she is a 'gentle person', it is because she is a person who knows how to be gentle and, in that moment, has to be gentle if she doesn't want to precipitate the next stage of John's behaviour pattern which is to get her home and kick her – with boots on. In the orbit of Drunkie John, Molly's gentleness is her only form of self-protection. None is needed around Frankie: there she circulates as a strong, wise, opinionated, woman who – like Norah (*Somebody in Boots*) and Steffi (*Never Come Morning*) – knows more about her lover than he knows about himself.

Finally, Molly plays an important role in the novel's structure when, in a conversation with Frankie, she adds to the 'recommended reading' list inscribed in Algren's oeuvre:

"... You read books?" [she asks Frankie,]

"No."

"I do. Sex books. *Intellectual* sex books like that *Strange Woman*. She has this guy, that's the sex. Then they get married, so that makes it intellectual." (117)

Ben Ames Williams, author of the 1941 novel *The Strange Woman* was a prolific writer of short stories, historical novels, and detective fiction but he is not canonical and is only one of the many writers listed in the 1951 *American Novelists of Today* who was

⁴⁷ See Fludernik, *Introduction to Narratology*, p. 19.

well-known in 1949 America but is virtually unheard of today.⁴⁸ Adapted for film in 1946, and starring Hedy Lamarr, Molly's *Strange Woman* book is likely to have rung bells for Algren's contemporary readers.⁴⁹



Fig. 17

It is surely no accident that in his only major work that doesn't include any prostitutes, brothels, or physical evidence of rape, he buried in the text the story of one woman's (Jenny Hager) double-life: in one, a respectably married Christian pillar of the community; in the other, a murderous, sexually rapacious woman who, for her own sexual fulfilment, works clandestinely as a prostitute. That Algren buried this treasure at the same time as mocking 'intellectual sex books' suggests exactly who this joke (or textually embedded marriage proposal?) was for: Beauvoir, who, while he was writing *The Man with the Golden Arm* was, of course, writing the highly 'intellectual' *Second Sex*.

⁴⁸ See Harry R. Warfell, *American Novelists of Today* (1951) (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), pp. 458-60. Williams' entry sits between Gale Wilhelm and Thames Ross Williamson. Ben Ames Williams wrote thirty-eight novels and nearly four hundred short stories. Fourteen of his books were adapted for film. His papers are housed at Dartmouth College, Hanover USA <<http://ead.dartmouth.edu/html/ml32.html>> [accessed 30 November 2014]

⁴⁹ Perhaps Algren was also mocking Hedy Lamarr whose marriages were salaciously followed in magazines such as *Life* during the 1940s and 50s. See *Life* 28 August 1939, pp. 38, 41, for 'The Problem of Hedy Lamarr' <<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=7EEEEAAAAMBAJ&q=Lamarr#v=snippet&q=Lamarr&f=false>> [accessed 21 November 2014]. Another intertextual echo in this regard is that Lamarr, when in Chicago on a promotional tour for the movie, found a young Peeping Tom hiding in her wardrobe. See <<http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/81375%7C0/The-Strange-Woman.html>> [accessed 21 November 2014]

As noted in chapter one, one of the first books Algren sent Beauvoir was Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. We can't possibly know with any precision what Algren found interesting about this collection of essays. But *The Man with the Golden Arm*'s critique of mass advertising and the introduction of the TV into public spaces talks to Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of popular culture in 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception'.⁵⁰ For Beauvoir, the fact that her next essay after *The Second Sex* was 'Must We Burn Sade?' suggests she would have found their chapter 'Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality' interesting. (And, for her more immediate project, of course, it addresses key tenets of *The Second Sex*'s thesis.⁵¹) Algren, on the other hand, put his reflections on sadism to work straight away in *The Man with the Golden Arm* which rather suggests he too found 'Juliette' interesting. As we saw in *Somebody in Boots*, Algren was interested in the connection(s) between pain and pleasure: when Cass comes round from a beating, and feels 'pain ... gathering speed until it flashed like an orgasm beneath his heart' (56); when Nubby's left testicle tightens in response to the emotional load of his racist hatred (141). And he had himself experienced what one might call (along a scale of sado-masochistic possibilities) low-level sado-masochism when in jail in Alpine, Texas in 1934. In *The Man with the Golden Arm*, sadism hovers 'on the other side of the wall' – literally, it occurs out of sight in rooms of the rooming house, the prison, the hospital – but also behind the 'wall' of Frankie's consciousness in dreams. In a dream of Molly one night:

"I think you turned out to be one of them kind after all," he reproved her.

"I always was one of them kind except with you," she admitted cheerfully and from somewhere the other side of the wall, a low, agonized laugh, hoarse and insignificant, made him feel that some young girl was being either transported with rapture or murderously beaten in there.

⁵⁰ See pp. 46-47 for Antek's explanation of why the Tug & Maul has no TV, and the very many comic references to the advertising industry's selling techniques.

⁵¹ One short section stands out as an example: 'Man as ruler denies woman the honor of individualization. Socially, the individual [woman] is an example of the species, a representative of her sex; and therefore male logic sees her wholly as standing for nature, as the substrate of never-ending subsumption notionally, and of never-ending subjection in reality.' Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London, New York: Verso, 1997), p. 111.

“That’s the other side of the wall, poor thing,” he heard Molly telling him, “he does that to her every night, some nights it’s worse’n others. Some nights, though, there ain’t a sound – that’s when it’s worst of all.”

“Does *what* to her?” Frankie asked with a certain fear.

Molly looked up at him with a dumb appeal, like a beaten animal’s. “There ain’t words for some things any more, Frankie,” she told him with an effort. “There ain’t no key to *that* room and all sorts hear about it. They come in at any hour at all ’n do whatever they want with her – she don’t seem to care for nothin’ since you went away like that.” (285)

Molly, of course, is perhaps the best member of the novel’s cast to talk about what’s going on ‘on the other side of the wall’ because of her long association with Drunkie John. In fact, it could be their room Schwabatski the landlord is telling us about here:

It was the rooms from which no sound came at all, while man and wife were together in there, that caught Schwabatski’s ear. It was from such rooms that real trouble came, the sudden glass-splintering crash, the moment of panting stillness and the unspeakable flat-level scream of straight terror as the woman stumbled out of the room with the blood down the side of her face and her particular prize behind her with the broken bottle in his hand. (33-34)⁵²

But the last word on such scenes is pronounced by Sophie from her hospital room in the final pages of the novel. She wakes one evening and ‘hears’, i.e. auditorily hallucinates, ‘from the other side of the wall, a low animal moaning. It was that Drunkie John beating that poor hide of a Molly Novotny again, ... beating her harder than ever before, ... with a certain contentment.’ “If he loves her,” thinks Sophie, “what are a few blows? ... If a man tells you you’re his – what are a few slaps to *that*?” (331). ‘Love’ again: what is Sophie saying? We can’t dismiss her point of view just because she is ‘mad’ – if only because it is not an exceptional one, neither in this novel nor the real world. The banality of domestic violence is announced within the first paragraphs of the novel:

⁵² Of course, readers know Molly is not married to John but as far as the landlord is concerned, there is a label on their door ‘thumbtacked’ by John: ‘Mr and Mrs Drunky John.’ (The difference in spelling is, of course, a device to give John’s hand in the writing of his name some authenticity, not a typo or inconsistency. Algren spells it ‘Drunkie’.)

“Who do you fight with?”

“My wife, that’s all.”

“Hell, that’s no crime.” (4)

That a policeman pronounces on the lack of criminality in fighting with one’s wife is, of course, in the context of everything else going on in *The Man with the Golden Arm*, funny. But I am not convinced that Algren’s comedic treatment of the ‘battle of the sexes’ is designed just for fun or only to be laughed at. The subtextual presence of men’s violence against women in the novel forms too persistent an undertow to ignore. And one can only conjecture as to what questions Algren is raising; his narrators, as ever, sit on the wall with one leg hanging on either side.

The Woman Behind The Wall: Sophie Majcinek

“Oh, don’t always pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about,” she persisted, “a woman is the downfall of every man ’n a man is the downfall of every woman. You’re my downfall ’n I’m yours.” (253)⁵³

Sophie Majcinek is the most complex of all Algren’s women protagonists, not only because of her deteriorating psychological condition but also because her neurosis doesn’t entirely define either her character or her narratorial role. Furthermore, she is funny ha-ha as well as ‘funny’ in the head. Her contribution to the novel’s comedy is easily overlooked, especially if one accepts too early in one’s reading that her ‘endless harping,’ as Bluestone puts it, is not worth listening to.⁵⁴ Algren routinely embeds his most earnest social critique in his funniest scenes, so to sidestep Sophie’s work in that department is to under-read important items on his socio-political agenda. However, to find Sophie funny, we have to first take her seriously because it’s precisely in the ambiguous emotional terrain where comedy and tragedy meet that the Algren story performs its most important work.

In his essay, ‘The Quality of Laughter’, Savage borrows vocabulary from the famously comic scene in which Bednar questions individual members of the police line-up to suggest that ‘The difference between snickering and laughing out from the heart is

⁵³ Sophie Majcinek to Frankie Majcinek.

⁵⁴ Bluestone, p. 36.

the difference between laughing at someone and laughing with someone. This quality of laughter,' he suggests 'is what Algren wants us to focus on and to consider as we confront the characters and the situations he depicts.'⁵⁵ I would add to this that Algren also has a keen eye out for what makes women laugh. Remember, the important information Florence Shay urgently wished to share with me the first time I met her was that she could see precisely where Algren's finger was pointing, whereas Art could not – for Art, Algren's finger was pointing towards the front page item of the newspaper, for Florence (and for Florence's benefit) it was pointing to one particular photograph. I think Algren does similar finger-pointing for the benefit of a female audience both in this novel and in his next, *A Walk on the Wild Side*.

The Battle of the Sexes: A Farce in Two Acts

The most obvious sexual comedy in this novel plays out in the slapstick triangle of Violet, husband Stash, and lover Sparrow. The mind boggles at the mystery of who, exactly, is being mocked, and where, in the dramas of this triangle. Its explicit critique of the 'marrying kind' pejoratively known as a 'gold digger' requires no further analysis here; and Violet's sex-life, again, while gloriously funny, speaks adequately for itself about one woman's need for sexual fulfilment and the lengths to which she'll go to achieve it. (Do we really believe Stash fell out the window?)⁵⁶ The flipside of all this laughter, however, lies in the genuine issues Algren raises in these scenes about the masculine sexual libido and the sexual and emotional cost of labour to the mid-

⁵⁵ Savage, 'The Quality of Laughter: Algren's Challenge to the Reader', in the 50th anniversary critical edition of *The Man with the Golden Arm*, ed. by Daniel Simon and William J. Savage Jr. (New York: Seven Stories Press 1999), p. 421.

⁵⁶ See p. 165 for Violet and Sparrow's discussion about the window and consider Algren's construction of the following: 'Had it not been for chance and an icy pane...'. 'Chance' can mean 'accident' or 'occasion for'. 'Violet is the novelistic embodiment of the kind of woman Algren would have seen at the movies in the 1930s who, by the late 1940s, was gone, arguably, according to Mick LaSalle, never to return. Before the Code, 'women on screen took lovers, had babies out of wedlock, got rid of cheating husbands, enjoyed their sexuality, held down professional positions without apologizing for their self-sufficiency, and in general acted the way many of us think women acted only after 1968.' When the residents of Division Street look back with nostalgia (as they almost all do) it is to *this* era they are looking. Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books; St Martin's Griffin, 2001), p. 1.

twentieth century American working-man. Stash may not be in the full flush of youth but another reason he is sexually uninterested in his young wife, Violet, is that he works a long, hard, week. As Sparrow argues when Violet tells him he should get a job, 'if I had a full-time job I couldn't do my fam'ly duty so good.' And then, even for young Sparrow, when he finally takes up full-time occupancy of Violet's bed, just as the narrating furniture predicts, the hours prove too long:

Of late the bedposts had taken to leaning together with a faintly disapproving air. They'd seen them come and they'd seen them go: this one wouldn't last as long as the others, they calculated, the reckless way he was going about things. A cooler head was what was needed; a cooler head, an older hand, a bit more restraint and snatches of sleep between rounds. (255)

However, it is a mistake to equate Violet's sexual marathon with Sparrow with her actual sexual libido: she steps up the action to get rid of him because he's no use to her as a provider (and then secures herself a rent-free future by marrying her landlord, the Jailer). Stephanie Coontz writes that, in the mid-1950s, 'before Betty Friedan voiced the discontents of the trapped housewife ... men were detailing the discontents of the trapped breadwinner.'⁵⁷ With *The Man with the Golden Arm* we have to re-set that date to 1949 (and I suspect there are earlier examples). Moreover, in the figures of Stash and Sparrow, the novel doesn't only rehearse the 'discontents of the trapped breadwinner' (could there be a better metaphor than Violet shutting Stash in the broom cupboard?). If it highlights the sexual and emotional cost of labour to the mid-twentieth century American working-man, it also debunks the myth that your average working class stiff can't get enough sex.

It is in these scenes, too, that one of Algren's favorite comic effects is most clearly demonstrated, when, at the end of a whole page of dialogue Violet 'pants' in Sparrow's ear, "'Hurry up, honey, ... we got to get dressed pretty soon'" (165). Without knowing it, we've attended a sex scene. A return to my earlier discussion of influence and intertextuality is apposite here.

⁵⁷ According to Stephanie Coontz, the first best seller of this wave was psychologist Robert Lindner's *Must You Conform?* (1956). See Coontz, *Marriage: A History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), p. 251.

Another writer Algren is not well-known for having loved is Henry James.⁵⁸ In *The Man with the Golden Arm* Algren uses in concertinaed form a narrative device that James stretches across whole novels. In both cases it is employed so expertly that the textual method that creates the effect is, in the reading, invisible. It is only demystified in the re-reading. The signature James story asks readers to suspend the need to know; to read a whole book without knowing a key detail for the duration of the read. It is to this effect that those of Algren's college essays mentioned earlier seem to aspire. But this isn't merely a surface effect or style; this type of reading exercises cognition in ways that knowing readings do not. A lacuna in the text creates the need for the reader to backtrack, to read again to ascertain what has been missed. In the case of the above example, one realises nothing has been missed. There is no prior indication that Violet and Sparrow are having sex while they're talking.

In Sophie's case, a similar effect is wrought in two notable instances, in the first it is comedic, in the second it is demonstrably not funny – and yet the two events are inextricable one from the other for reasons we will see. This dynamic, one same act or event being funny and not funny, is an Algren trademark. I will treat these two instances as 'Act I' and 'Act II'.

ACT I

Sophie's major comedy scene plays out in her search for treatment for her paralysis, first, with Pasterzy, 'a sort of siko-patic doctor', then with Doc Dominowski, a 'wandering masseur' whose slogan stamped over the door, '*Ad Electrica Necessitas Vitae. Big Boy Is In*' announces his therapeutic tool kit. 'The whole trouble with Sophie,' he sees straight away, is that she hasn't 'been awakened.'

"You *can* feel *something*, can't you?"

"Yeh. I feel *somethin*.'" It was his right hand growing moderately bold as his breath grew warmer and the astral power really began to *move*. "My husband takes care of that angle," Sophie told him quietly, wishing Frankie really did. For

⁵⁸ See Bair, p. 650, f.n. 1. Beauvoir told Bair that he sent her some 'short fiction by Henry James, a writer he greatly admired. ... "Not too many people know how much Algren was influenced by Henry James. He greatly admired James's fiction, especially *The Turn of the Screw* and *What Maisie Knew*. He always said he wished he could get into people's minds the way James did.'"

Frankie's physical interest in her, increasingly casual since their marriage, had passed altogether with the accident. (82)

Apart from this scene's comedic value, Algren is documenting and critiquing a particular moment in the history of psychiatric medicine when 'pelvic massage' was routinely carried out on women to treat hysteria. In the above scenes the concept of a happy marriage between a quack doctor exploiting women's sexual frustration and the opportunity it affords those women to experience an orgasm in the hands of another in the guise of 'therapy' pushes farce to its limits. However, if we rewind to when Sophie first starts to feel strange and read again, ignoring the comedic slants, a more troubling picture of her condition comes into view. First, if we attend to the physical events following the car crash, there are indications she might have suffered some kind of nerve damage. Today, any reader with a modicum of first aid awareness knows that what you don't do with someone who has been in an accident – no matter how minor – is 'drag her' up and down the street. That this occurs before 'the corner pharmacist [brings] Sophie around' suggests she was dragged around while semi-conscious for some minutes after the crash. To what extent one should take such details into account in a work of fiction is obviously a moot point. But the idea that Sophie has suffered some kind of trauma to the nervous system is supported too by Frankie's observations: her sight is impaired, she can't hear, she sleeps 'like one who hadn't slept in weeks, without help of any drug' (74). We know from his essays and interviews that Algren was fastidious about the accuracy of documentary detail in his fiction. What hospital would keep a woman under observation for four days after a minor accident if it was felt there was nothing wrong with her? And when she is home from hospital, Frankie, seeing her eyes have 'the same immoveable stare' they had immediately after the crash, knows 'right then, however inadmissibly, that something ha[s] gone wrong with his Zosh' (75). So an important detail in the biography of Sophie's paralysis is that, of the two of them, Frankie is the first to be 'in denial' about its seriousness. Then Dr Pasterzy, 'dressed in theories', literally denies' that Sophie has a physical condition – it is she who is in denial:

“You're lying to yourself, Mrs Majcinek” ... and she ... turned in a flood of tears to Frankie. “Don't just *stand* there when he's talkin' at me like that – *gawpin'* while he calls your wife a liar 'n cops free feels – get me to a doc who

respects people.” She turned with condescension upon the doctor kneeling at her feet. “*Do* you mind?”

Dr P. stood up and the two men had exchanged understanding glances.

‘Bring her back when she’s better rested.’ (79)

These scenes capture a moment in the history of American psychoanalysis, before it was understood that hysteria was being over-diagnosed and that people with real but difficult to diagnose injuries were being subjected to the humiliations we see Sophie undergoing in these scenes.⁵⁹ In Act I, above, this is all very funny; in Act II, it is not. The relationship between the two scenes is only appreciated, of course, after a full reading of what comes in between. So for the benefit of this exercise, one must take it as given that between the two Acts – and between the lines that draw a portrait of Sophie as a nag, a scold or any other of the ways readers have perceived her – we have also understood that Sophie’s malice is a symptom, not a character trait. In other words, if we haven’t developed any sympathy for her in our reading we are unlikely to ‘catch’ the second half of Algren’s ‘double act’ device.

ACT II

Sophie, in the novel’s penultimate scene, is in the psychiatric hospital and, having been very quiet (for all the reasons we learn through her interior voice) suddenly speaks out loud. The doctor and nurse urge her to say more:

“Oh, *Doctor* – you do me *so* much good.” Then hid herself behind her eyes and grew so rigid, under the nurse’s stroking, that the doctor had to tell the woman to stop.

“There’s *real* spite for you,” Sophie heard the nurse decide. (353)

The horror of this scene is that, like the earlier one where we only realise after the event that Violet and Sparrow have been having sex as we read them, here it is only ‘the nurse’s stroking’ that alerts us to what, for the duration of our reading this section, has been happening to Sophie. And this time it is not funny. The earlier scenes of Dr P. and Dr D.’s ministrations are funny for all sorts of reasons but read them again: Sophie didn’t find it funny on either occasion. In fact, Sophie not finding it funny was part of

⁵⁹ See Andrew T. Scull, *Hysteria: The Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

what made it funny. Between the two Acts, we have also witnessed Frankie's nightmare in which Molly tells him about Sophie on 'the other side of the wall, poor thing,' where 'they come in at any hour at all 'n do whatever they want with her' (285). And now here we are witnessing – with no hint of comedy – the institutionalised sexual and psychological abuse of a deeply traumatised woman. Remember Sophie's words to Frankie at her consultation with Dr P.: "get me to a doc who *respects* people" (79). If we haven't already noticed by the time we reach Sophie's last scene that she has received no 'respect' for being a 'person' from the nurses attending to her, then perhaps the nurse's final comment, 'There's *real* spite for you,' rings the necessary alarm bells to make us read the preceding scenes again. Because (quite apart from all the questions about medical professionalism this and the prior scenes are asking) how exactly is 'spite' relevant here? The answer is, it isn't. The spite belongs to the nurse.

While Algren may not have subscribed to this or that psychoanalytical (or other) theory, and while he was (Drew notes) averse to undergoing psychoanalysis himself,⁶⁰ it seems unlikely he would have told critics Cox and Chatterton (writers of the first scholarly text on his work) that Achilles Schmidt was the Freudian key to his work if he hadn't read any Freud: indeed, Freud was typically read by artists and intellectuals in this period. Certainly, the abundance of dreamscapes in the Algren oeuvre attests to his belief that the 'royal road' to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind lies in the interpretation of dreams. And one of Freud's essays in particular, 'The Aetiology of Hysteria', provides a useful insight on the case of Sophie Majcinek. In this essay, Freud writes that, 'at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience.'⁶¹ In the light of this, the story of Sophie Majcinek – initiated too-young into the world of sex and adult relationships by a bullying, manipulative, teenage boy – is the story of hysteria as well as the story of how a diagnosis of hysteria, at certain times in certain places, damaged already-damaged women. The defining tragedy, then, in the case of Sophie Majcinek is that the last time we see her, before she finally retreats to 'hide herself behind her eyes', she is receiving

⁶⁰ See Drew, p. 280.

⁶¹ Freud quoted in Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 13.

a 'cure' for hysteria, i.e., more of the same of what made her mentally ill in the first place: sexual and psychological abuse.

The Downfall of Mr and Mrs Majcinek

Looking out of the window of her room in the psychiatric hospital, with the El in view, Sophie watches the snow falling and thinks back to another night when she watched snow falling: the first night when Frankie didn't come home but stayed with Molly. Her thoughts turn to 'the slow suspended motion of the snow that had fallen so slowly all night long and he hadn't come home at all' (352). If we go back (200 pages) to that night, we see Frankie, looking out of the window at the snow falling, with the El in view, and seeing a 'prairie snow ... looking for dry leaves upon which to rest' (152). If we recall,⁶² dry leaves are an important symbol in the story of Frankie and Sophie; for each, they hold the memory of the

dangerous hide-out lit only by a single broken ray from the arc lamp's eye across a leaf-strewn darkness where other lovers had lain. Here where the earth held like a pang the odor of dry leaves, night dew, and faintly the scent of sometime lovers' sweat, he said, "Lie down, Zosh." (103)

So, even though Frankie is with Molly, the poetry in the prose of this novel draws a connection between the two scenes so that we connect Frankie and Sophie – because Algren wants us to. And it seems to be this that creates the effect of love and connection in a storyworld that, on the surface, is about loss and disconnection. Webs of symbolic connections demonstrate that poetry makes memory stretch across time and bring the past into the present. The roller-skate, the dry leaves, the arc lamps: symbols make the reader remember what Algren, at the novel's end, does not want us to forget.

"Have a good dream you're dancin', Zosh" – and the words were whirled like leaves in a dead-cold wind blowing up from the other side of the wall. Into one brief strangled whimpering.

To rustle away down the last dark wall of all.

⁶² See p. 172 of thesis.

One of the mysteries of *The Man with the Golden Arm* is that, finally, on closing the cover, one feels that one has, after all, read a love story – not the ‘love story’ that critics of a certain era sought and didn’t find, but the love story, as the Jailer and Violet say, of a man and a woman, ‘wantin’ to love each other just ever so long. Wantin’ so much ’n never knowin’ how, neither one of ’em’ (329).

Chapter Five

Reading Women on the Wild Side: *A Walk on the Wild Side*

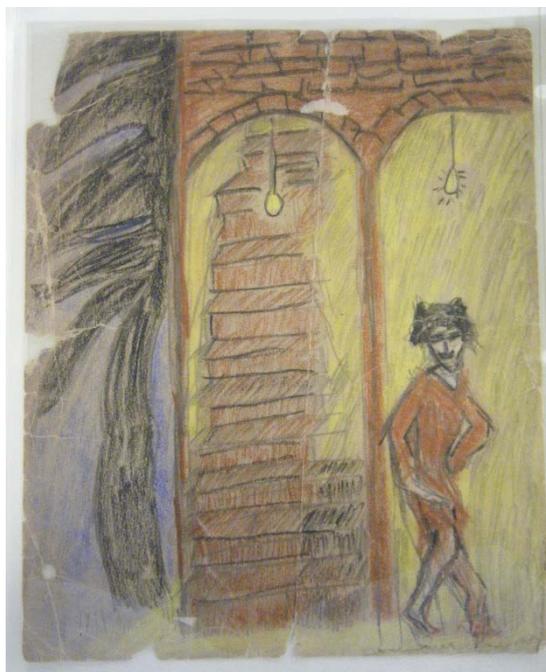


Fig. 18³¹¹

Crusades from pulpit, court, or column against prostitution can have no effect except to divert it to another part of town or from brothel to escort service, because the basic cause isn't with the women who practice it, but in our own concept of sex. The conviction that sex is basically evil is a perversion out of which prostitution develops. So long as we remain punitive toward sex, we are going to have crimes of sex. Until we recognize sex as a natural urge, pleasant, beautiful, interesting, and useful, to be treated, like any other important faculty, such as work or learning, by welcoming it, enjoying it without reverence, and permitting discussion of it to be as open as that about art or play or science, we will have crimes of sex.

Nelson Algren³¹²

³¹¹ See Cox and Chatterton, Preface to *Nelson Algren*, p. 10, for Algren's comments on his drawings: 'Between *Somebody in Boots* and *Walk* I kept making crayon drawings of a New Orleans whorehouse, seen from the street. That was long before I ever knew that I was going to rewrite the novel into something new. The legless man came in and out of the crayon drawings of the whorehouse, but I didn't write the poems about him until *Walk* was dramatized.'

³¹² Nelson Algren, 'Chicago III', *Who Lost an American?*, *Algren at Sea*, p. 222.

Algren's blurb for the first edition of *A Walk on the Wild Side* (1956) opens with the following line:

"This is a story that tries to tell something about the natural toughness of women and men, in that order."³¹³

When Granville Hicks, a prominent left-wing critic of the day, reviewed the novel, he omitted this line and began his citation of Algren from the next paragraph:

The book asks why lost people sometimes develop into greater human beings than those who have never been lost in their whole lives. Why men who have suffered most at the hands of man are the natural believers in humanity, while those whose part has been simply to acquire, to take all and give nothing, are the most contemptuous of mankind.³¹⁴

Algren's reputation rests in part on editorials and reviews such as this, cited and re-cited, that have skewed notions of where his 'central vision' is coming from and where it is directed. The principal work of this chapter's reading, then, is to reassert his original emphasis.

If, in *The Man with the Golden Arm*, the issue of prostitution echoes in epigraph and intertext and sexual violence throws Sadeian shadows 'on the other side of the wall' (357), in his fourth novel Algren discards all modesty: sex comes out of the closet, and all the women of his previous works come into play to demonstrate, once and for all, their centrality to his thinking, his stories, his sexuality, his work, his life. 'Once and for all,' because when Algren wrote this novel, he did so thinking it would be his last (and it was indeed the last published in his lifetime). I make so bold a claim because I think *A Walk on the Wild Side* makes that bold a claim, and I submit the following reading to support it.

For Algren, *A Walk on the Wild Side* was 'a kind of novel that, so far as I know, has never been written before. It is an American fantasy, a poem written to an American

³¹³ Nelson Algren, dustsheet interior blurb (*A Walk on the Wild Side*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956). First edition. I've retained speech marks here because they are used in the blurb.

³¹⁴ Granville Hicks, 'Nelson Algren's Solid, Convincing "Walk on the Wild Side" and 4 Other Novels', *The New Leader*, 28 May 1956, pp. 23-24.

beat as true as *Huckleberry Finn*.³¹⁵ Laura Hapke suggests it belongs within a body of American works that Alan Wald, in his essay ‘Marxist literary resistance to the Cold War’, describes as an ‘Un-American Renaissance’, ‘the radical anti-witch-hunt resistance culture of the late 1940s and 1950s’.³¹⁶ As Ian Peddie argues, Algren’s fourth novel ‘crashed directly into the pieties and shibboleths of 1950s America, in the process creating a harrowing critique of that era’s values and a dark prophecy of conflicts to come.’³¹⁷ However, if for Peddie, *A Walk on the Wild Side*’s ‘homology of capitalist society and the grotesque is always at the forefront of the reader’s mind’, for Hapke, the novel is misread when it is read ‘a languid reprise of 1930s literary proletarianism,’ because it ‘actually vibrates with mockery of both the gravity of the 1930s down-and-out protest novel and the hostility of postwar critics. In place of Steinbeck’s vernacular *vir bonus*,’ Hapke suggests, ‘Algren offers a father-and-son pair who comically invert Tom Joad’s rural honesty and peripatetic militance. ... Dove ... roams the country seeking a creed and exuding a back-country manliness, but unlike Tom, the only politics he believes in is sexual. With a phallus much larger than his working-class consciousness—Algren’s slap at HUAC prudery—this Dove seeks no peace. He becomes a ... peep-show regular.’³¹⁸ Actually, the novel ends with Dove seeking peace by returning to the beginning of his story in Arroyo.

This reading is organised as in the previous chapters: a section on the particularities of *A Walk on the Wild Side*’s ‘narrative tensions’ will be followed by sections organised according to the didactic and sex work performed by individual protagonists. As noted in chapter one, *A Walk on the Wild Side* began its existence as a re-write of *Somebody in Boots*. As such its ‘narrative tensions’ present a complex response to Brooks’ notion of a work of literature’s viability because, more than any of

³¹⁵ David Ray, ‘A Talk on the Wild Side: A Bowl of Coffee with Nelson Algren’, *Reporter*, 11 June 1959, p. 32.

³¹⁶ Alan Wald, ‘Marxist literary resistance to the Cold War’, in *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict*, ed. by Andrew Hammond (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 100-103, p. 102. See Laura Hapke, *Labor’s Texts: The Worker in American Fiction* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London, 2001), p. 273.

³¹⁷ Ian Peddie, ‘The Wrong Side of Town: *A Walk on the Wild Side* in an Age of Reaction’ in *Invisible Suburbs: recovering fiction in the 1950s United States*, ed. by Josh Lukin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), p. 23.

³¹⁸ Hapke, p. 272.

Algren's works it offers quite specific guidelines about how it is to be read and, quite simply because it is a re-write, guides us toward the conditions of its interpretation.³¹⁹

Narrative Tensions: Vanished Moments of Beginning

I suggested in chapter one that Algren's novels demonstrate the point Hague makes in her *Fiction, Intuition, and Creativity* whereby 'Novelists are engaged in a quest for the genesis of their fiction, for it is to this vanished moment of its beginning, its mysterious potentiality and open-ended suggestiveness, that the author endlessly attempts to return for inspiration.'³²⁰ Using one novel as the springboard for another, having his earlier novel in front of him as an emotional, if not an actual blueprint, allowed Algren to layer the story of *A Walk on the Wild Side* with several 'vanished moments of beginning.' To demonstrate this, my reading will have to make several returns to the beginning, both in this section and later in my reading too.

First, the novel's title: *A Walk on the Wild Side* has its source in an essay Algren was writing before he started work on the re-write. 'A Walk on the Wild Side', a fifty-page essay on the impossibility of being a writer in America, was also the first time he spoke out in first person voice in defence of women who are prostitutes.³²¹ Citing Chekhov's observation that "When one is peacefully at home ... life seems ordinary, [b]ut as soon as one walks into the streets and begins to observe and to talk to women, then life becomes truly terrible," Algren continues:

And when one walks into a courtroom where women are being tried, it begins to seem that they are the innocent ones. That it is His Honor, the arresting officers and that little man who stands beside His Honor whispering, "She was up before you on the same charge last week, Your Honor," as well as the indifferent spectator, who are the guilty parties.³²²

³¹⁹ Brooks, p. xii.

³²⁰ Hague, p. 8. See my p. 58.

³²¹ See Daniel Simon's Afterword to *Nonconformity*, pp. 81-112 for more details. Sections of the essay were published in *The Nation*: 'American Christmas, 1952' (27 December), 'Hollywood Djinn with a Dash of Bitters' (25 July 1953), and 'Eggheads Are Rolling: The Rush to Conform' (17 October 1953).

³²² Nelson Algren, 'A Walk on the Wild Side', see Simon, *Nonconformity*, p. 58.

Doubleday proposed publishing the essay under the title ‘The State of Literature’ with some ‘polishing’ by Algren but every excision they requested, he replaced with something equally inflammatory. Eventually they pulled the plug on the project, so Algren sent the original to his agent to find another publisher for it – but it was ‘lost’.³²³

When asked, years later, where the title for his novel came from, Algren said he couldn’t remember.³²⁴ But as the musical undertones of the novel suggest, he often had the radio on when he was writing and, in 1952 when he was writing the earlier essay of that title, an interesting musical conversation was taking place on the airwaves.³²⁵ Hank Thompson topped the charts with William Warren’s ‘The Wild Side of Life’ in which a husband complains about his wife leaving him to go enjoy a ‘game life’ at the honky tonk bar. Songwriter J. D. Miller, hearing the song on the radio, wrote lyrics for the wife’s response. ‘It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels’, sung by Kitty Wells to the same melody as the first song, also enjoyed huge popular success.

I didn't know God made honky tonk angels
 I might have known you'd never make a wife
 You gave up the only one that ever loved you
 And went back to the wild side of life

William Warren (1952)

It wasn't God who made Honky Tonk angels
 As you said in the words of your song
 Too many times married men think they're still single
 That has caused many a good girl to go wrong

J. D. Miller (1952)

³²³ See Drew, p. 252.

³²⁴ Algren was very often economical with the truth in interviews. I’ve always understood this to be one of the means by which he protected his privacy and mocked journalists’ and others’ need-to-know.

³²⁵ Algren included references to and excerpts from songs in all his work but none more so than *A Walk on the Wild Side*. The novel is a song-lovers’ anthology, referencing over forty popular songs across a broad sweep of genres: hymns, jazz, blues, folk songs, Irish ballads, and Mexican love songs.

So a title that today is more often associated with a song by Lou Reed sinks roots into another conversation between songs. This conversation about the ‘wild side’ of human sexuality is central to *A Walk on the Wild Side*.

To return again to the beginning: In an archived manuscript fragment, Algren recounts the story of how, when his publisher first sought to issue another novel in *The Man with the Golden Arm*’s wake, he had nothing to offer. ‘So,’ he writes,

McCormick dug down twenty years and came up with that bag of dead bones, that nineteen-cent remainder, *Somebody in Boots*. I took an advance against it before re-reading. When I did I wished that I hadn’t. ... I was less dismayed by its rhetoric attempts at poetry than at its utter humorlessness. ... Changing its title to *A Walk on the Wild Side* was a definite improvement [but] Cass McKay, its main character, who’d gone through the world like anybody’s victim, seeking sympathy from all and receiving it from none, had nothing within to invite sympathy. He was, simply and plainly, a shmuck. A shmuck’s shmuck.

I renamed him Dove Linkhorn and gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He stirred a moment, then sat up grinning.

Grinning!

“It’s Mr. Linkern’s war,” he told me, “we don’t reckon him kin of our’n.”

He was, I then perceived, one of that tribe of Americans who, forever trying to keep from working with their hands, had been pushed off the plantations into the Southern Ozarks. Where they had hidden out so long, saying “A Plague On Both Your Houses,” that this hiding out had become a way of life with them: white trash.³²⁶

As Algren progressed with his re-write, he says in a letter to Cox and Chatterton, ‘it began to strike me as very funny: in every chapter some child had her head cut off. So I kept making it funny. And this guy that was so grim in there at the beginning just became a stud, a big, silly stud.’³²⁷ Thus, the levity of the 47 year-old Algren reading the creation of his 23 year-old self purges *Somebody in Boots* of its horror: Stubs McKay, the vicious, paranoid, bullying father becomes Fitz Linkhorn, comical, bible-bashing preacher dad; Cass’s stupid ignorance becomes Dove’s naive curiosity and

³²⁶ Algren, NA/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded.

³²⁷ Cox and Chatterton, p. 33.

capacity for wonder; Bryan is promoted to 'Byron' with an obvious nod to the poet.³²⁸ Instead of Marxist proselytising, *A Walk on the Wild Side*'s Fitz preaches Deuteronomy and Corinthians. But Algren also populated the later novel with memories that weren't

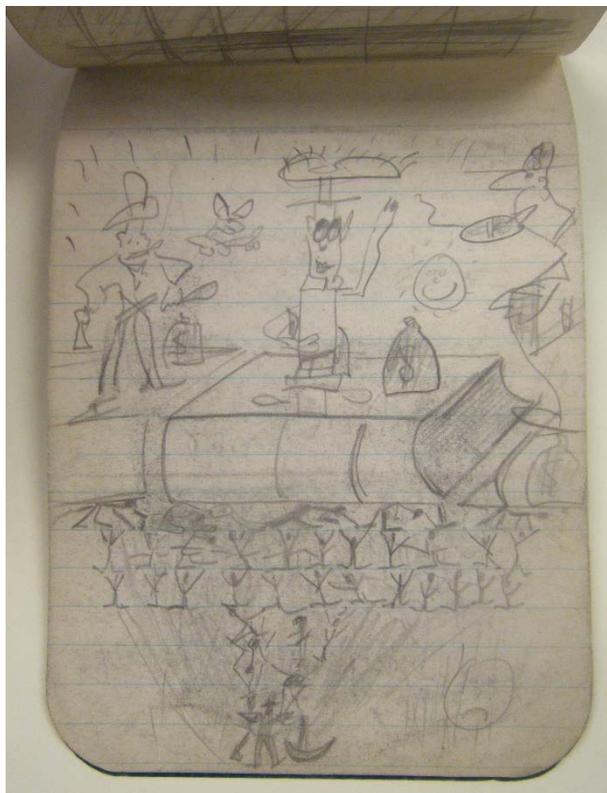


Fig. 19

inscribed in the earlier novel; the episode where Dove climbs up a ship's mast, the coffee pot scam, the hairdressing coupon scam: these are all incidents re-membered, given literary form in *A Walk on the Wild Side* but taken from the time of *Somebody in Boots*. And Algren saturates the text with references to American history, culture, and music.³²⁹ *A Walk on the Wild Side* represents an unusual textual exchange then – 'out

³²⁸ Algren's first draft of his re-write was a hard-back first edition of *Somebody in Boots* (OSU). It is a fascinating record of his creative process, of his first excisions and additions, whole sections struck through and new ones pasted in on paper, with different coloured inks mapping the changing shape of the story across different editing/writing sessions.

³²⁹ The political and cultural history of the United States is recorded in passing references to all the following: boxers, Harry Greb, Jack Dempsey and Harry Wills; Wallace Reid; Starr Faithfull; Andrew Jackson, 7th US President; John Caldwell Calhoun, 7th US Vice-President; Warren Gamaliel Harding, 29th US President; Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America; James Ewell Brown 'Jeb' Stuart, U.S. Army officer from Virginia and a Confederate States Army general during the American Civil War; Benedict Arnold V; Jesse James; Alfred Emanuel Smith, Jr.; Davy Crockett; John Barrymore;

with the old, and in with the old' to make something completely new. Beauvoir's *The Mandarins*, the English edition of which was published within weeks of *A Walk on the Wild Side*, helps identify some of the what was 'old' about the 'new' in Algren's account of his Depression years in *A Walk on the Wild Side*. Despite Beauvoir's insistence that it is not a *roman à clé*, it contains certain fictionalised 'facts' that correspond exactly with biographical ones. Here, 'Anne' (aka Beauvoir) describes walking through the streets of New Orleans with 'Lewis' (aka Algren):

He showed me the busy districts where, fifteen years earlier, he'd sold soap door-to-door; the docks where he survived on stolen bananas; the red light district he had walked through with his heart pounding, his sex on fire, and his pockets empty. Sometimes he almost seemed to miss that miserable, angry, time and the violence of his unsatiated desires.³³⁰

Algren's transformation of Cass's 'days of misery ... and ... unsatiated desires' into the 'kind of sexual odyssey'³³¹ of his prolifically virile Dove, a young man paid to have sex, is arguably a comic act of indulgence to his younger self – or perhaps an indication that Algren got wind of the nature of Lewis Brogan's bit-part in Beauvoir's *The Mandarins* before it came out in translation. Either or neither way, despite the eventual mercenary application of his sexual proclivity, Dove's most fervent desire is to be able to read. And the passport to this pleasure in *A Walk on the Wild Side* is a woman who teaches him, first Terasina Vidavarrì, then Hallie Breedlove. And now I must start again, again, because *A Walk on the Wild Side* not only follows Dove's journey from illiteracy to literacy, it talks back to its source novel on the subject of reading books and reading people.

Marian Marsh; Dolores del Río; Mary Pickford; Wallace Beery; Edward G. Robinson; Anna Q. Nilsson; Ann Harding; Rod La Rocque; Russ Columbo; Enrico Caruso; Robert Burns; Mark Twain; John Edgar Hoover; Al Capone; Harry Emerson Fosdick; Kewpie dolls and Raggedy Ann dolls.

³³⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *Les mandarins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 225, translation mine. ('Il me montra les quartiers populeux où quinze ans plus tôt il colportait des savonnettes, les docks où il se nourrissait de bananas volées, les petites rues bordelières qu'il traversait le coeur battant, le sexe en feu, les poches vides. Par moments il semblait presque regretter ce temps de misère, de colère, et la violence de ses désirs inassouvis.')

³³¹ In a note in his archive Algren says he sent Dove Linkhorn 'on a kind of sexual odyssey.' NA/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded.

I suggested in my reading of *Somebody in Boots* that the opening paragraphs' insistence on the problem of Stubs McKay's 'Damned Feeling' implicitly invites the reader to solve the question as to what this 'Feeling' is. *A Walk on the Wild Side* opens with a syllogism that sets the same puzzle and gestures to its resolution:

Somebody in Boots

Why Stub McKay turned out such a devil he himself hardly knew; he himself did not understand what thing had embittered him. He knew a dim feeling as of daily loss and daily defeat; of having, somehow, been tricked. A feeling of having been cheated – of having been cheated – that was it. He felt that he had been cheated with every breath he had ever drawn; but he did not know why, or by whom. (13)

A Walk on the Wild Side

'He's just a pore lonesome wife-left feller,' the more understanding said of Fitz Linkhorn, 'losin' his old lady is what crazied him.'

'That man is so contrary,' the less understanding said, 'if you throwed him in the river he'd float upstream.'

For what had embittered him Fitz had no name. Yet he felt that every daybreak duped him into waking and every evening conned him into sleep. The feeling of having been cheated – of having been cheated – that was it. Nobody knew why nor by whom. (3)

Sixteen pages later we learn that Fitz is indeed 'a pore lonesome wife-left feller' whose wife died and, judging from the description of their lovemaking, it seems likely that losing her is what 'crazied him' (19). But *A Walk on the Wild Side*'s echo of the earlier novel has other intellectual ramifications. A short anecdote is illustrative. According to a friend of Algren's, Dave Peltz, just after the publication of *A Walk on the Wild Side* and before the publication of the US edition of *The Mandarins*, Algren said the two books should have been published by the same US publishers because 'To him,' recounted Peltz, 'that was where the true marriage was, the two books.'³³² In common

³³² 'Interview with Dave Peltz', *A Walk on the Wild Side*, documentary produced and directed by Louise Wardle, BBC 'The Works', Series 3, last screened 5 June 2001 (Imprint BBC2, 22 November 1997). This quotation of Peltz is from an interview transcript that was accessible online in 2005 but is no longer available: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/works/s4/beauvoir/peltz.shtml>>[accessed 23 October 2005]

with many of Algren's friends, after the event that was Beauvoir's meteoric rise to feminist superstardom, almost anything Algren had previously said about Beauvoir was interpreted in the light of her success and his perceived failure. Interviewed by a BBC producer over 40 years later, Peltz interpreted Algren's statement as self-aggrandisement (which he probably also did at the time). For me, however, it is just as likely that Algren was saying that the enduring connection between himself and Beauvoir lay in the contents of their books, i.e. it was an intellectual one. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters' readings (and in each I have only been able to scratch the surface of the deepest layers of gender-wisdom embedded therein), Algren brought rather more than his personal sex and heart to the table when he met Beauvoir in 1947. If *The Man with the Golden Arm's* intertexts and Algren's treatment of the relationship between Frankie and Sophie Majcinek hint at the kinds of conversations these two writers were having during the two years they were writing their most important works to date, it is *A Walk on the Wild Side* that most dramatically displays Algren's response, not only to Beauvoir's thinking in *The Second Sex* but equally to her *Ethics of Ambiguity*. Indeed the novel leapfrogs thinkers such as Beauvoir in its understanding of the extent to which philosophy depends first of all on acts of reading.

Reading: The Ethics of Ambiguity

Philosophy may be the invisible power in control of fictions, but if she is the first to show herself, she will destroy all their magic.

Germaine Necker de Staël³³³

A Walk on the Wild Side doesn't only open with a proposed answer to *Somebody in Boots'* riddle about 'The Damned Feeling.' Its opening lines also provide a key to a philosophy of reading, a writer-poet's directive on how to negotiate the 'narrative tensions' in all his fiction.

'He's just a pore lonesome wife-left feller,' the more understanding said of Fitz Linkhorn, 'losin' his old lady is what crazied him.'

³³³ Germaine Necker de Staël, 'Essay on Fictions', *An Extraordinary Woman: Selected Writings of Germaine de Staël*, translated and with an Introduction by Vivian Folkenflik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 61.

‘That man is so contrary,’ the less understanding said, ‘if you threwed him in the river he’d float upstream.’

For what had embittered him Fitz had no name. (3)

By presenting two conflicting voices, the ‘more understanding’ and the ‘less understanding’, the reader may hear two types of people: one who is more understanding because s/he is kind and the other who is less understanding because less kind. Another reading of these lines understands the word ‘understanding’ in terms of cognition; so the first interpretation is correct because the first speaker understands more than the second one. The narrator’s phrase, however, complicates things further because ‘for’ can be understood to mean ‘because’ which adds weight to the first speaker’s ‘embitterment’ theory, but ‘for’ can also be read as the first component of the noun phrase in ‘*for what had embittered him Fitz had no name*’ which emphasises the namelessness of his situation.³³⁴ In this case Fitz’s inability to name the source of ‘what had embittered him’ is either because his mental lexicon lacks the vocabulary or because for some things there is no name. The discussion between the two voices proposes a recommended reading praxis, one that allows opposing points of view to coexist in tandem; and Fitz’s muteness suggest that deciding between two options may not in any case provide the right answer. An ethics of ambiguity, the novel’s opening lines tell us, is an ethics of undecideability, of not making up one’s mind – so as not to ‘make up,’ i.e. create, fabricate, a particular mind-set before all the possibilities of the story have played out in the reading. Different languages play different games with their grammars and lexicons. *A Walk on the Wild Side* opens with a philosophical proposition that is impossible to translate into French which perhaps explains why Algren’s ‘intellectuality’ was lost on Beauvoir and others for whom ‘intellectuals’ necessarily write ‘theory.’³³⁵

Fitz Linkhorn is only one of Algren’s characters to testify that under certain circumstances the resources of language are hard pushed to convey meaning. *A Walk on*

³³⁴ Italics mine.

³³⁵ In August 1952, Algren sent Beauvoir a copy of a lecture he had delivered (in Missouri) – a version of ‘A Walk on the Wild Side.’ “I should very much like to have it in *Temps Modernes*,” Beauvoir wrote to him, ‘the only point is that, as usual, nobody seem to be able to translate it. ... all what they answer is: ‘Oh! Algren! That is impossible!’” Letter of 3 August 1952, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 468, *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 477.

the Wild Side's opening lines demonstrate Bakhtin's proposal that 'It is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language.'³³⁶ In *A Walk on the Wild Side*, the character Algren delegates to investigate these questions of reading and comprehension is, of course, Dove Linkhorn (probably the only male character in the Algren oeuvre I would call a 'good for nothing chump'). So, taking up Algren's note that he sent Dove on a 'sexual odyssey,' this reading will follow Dove's journey across several chapters that visit each of the women with whom he falls in love, Terasina Vidavarrì and Hallie Breedlove, and each of the feminist and masculinity issues these women's stories document: rape and prostitution. Before this, however, there is another 'vanished moment of beginning' to revisit.

If, as Le Sueur wrote, it had cost Algren dearly 'to put himself like a thermometer into that burning hell' of the 1930s Depression,³³⁷ what did it cost him to return there through the portal of his own book, twenty years later? That he attempted suicide in the months following the publication of *Somebody in Boots* and had a severe emotional breakdown after the publication of *A Walk on the Wild Side* suggests that his earlier novel was (among many other things, as his own comments affirm and as I've demonstrated in my reading of the humour in that novel) a touchstone for trauma. I'm not flagging this up to make any claims about Algren's psychology or the psychoanalytical implications of his return journey to the past; rather, I am interested in the creative genie that transforms trauma into art. Thinking of the process of 'getting lost in a good book' as what narrative psychology calls 'transportation,'³³⁸ the genius of *A Walk on the Wild Side* lies in the fact that, if indeed Algren was transported to a traumatic past, he made the return journey bearing gifts of laughter. And it is this laughter, Horvath suggests, that renders the novel

a tour de force, a mature handling of apprentice material that now presents our world in all of its emotional complexity and roundness, the humor as various as the wider range of emotions informing the novel—its anger and disgust, sorrow and wonder, hope and despair, guilt and pride. As slapstick yields to horror,

³³⁶ Bakhtin, p. 272.

³³⁷ Le Sueur, letter to Bettina Drew, BD/OSU, 'Series 1: Research', Box/Folder number unrecorded.

³³⁸ See my page 54 for Melanie Green's description of 'the transported reader.'

beauty to ugliness, pathos to scorn, depravity to poetry, the reader is ravished by a world seized whole and as emotionally complete as the reader's own.

And as Constance Rourke suggests in her 1931 study of American humour, 'humor bears the closest relation to emotion, either bubbling up as from a deep and happy wellspring, or in an opposite fashion rising like a re-birth of feeling from dead levels after turmoil. An emotional man may possess no humor, but a humorous man usually has deep pockets of emotion, sometimes tucked away or forgotten.'³³⁹ Laughter is not only a deeply personal emotional response to life's events; it also serves as a conduit for the transportation of knowledge from one consciousness to another. As Bakhtin proposes,

Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment—both scientific and artistic—and into the hands of free experimental fantasy.³⁴⁰

Apart from laughter, Algren's transportation system for the emotional freight of *A Walk on the Wild Side* is, of course, poetry. I am unable to improve on Cox and Chatterton's analysis of the novel's poetic structure: Algren's 'basic technique,' they write, 'is to bind together a succession of individual fragments through the syntax which normally controls a long single sentence. Sometimes he varies this effect by using a short, uncomplicated run-on sentence. By the time he wrote *A Walk on the Wild Side*, he had fine-tuned this technique ... until it was capable of conveying subtle nuance and astonishing variety of effect.

The result is that, during moments of high emotional pitch, his sentences and paragraphs break into an almost limitless variety of specially designed sentence fragments – all controlled by their being part of an otherwise conventional set of

³³⁹ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931) (New York: New York Review Books, 2004), p. 20.

³⁴⁰ Bakhtin, p. 23.

antitheses, subordinates, or coordinates. The effect is that of high rhythmic flexibility that has unusual prose control of pause and acceleration and that ranges from crackling staccato through crescendo. It is common, then, to find such syntactical virtuosités as the following shattered pattern of adverbial clauses, coordinate clauses, appositives, and implicit imperatives:

‘Under wire on either side other dime-a-nighties slept out their ten-cent dreams. Till the hundred harps of morning struck on strings of silvered light.

And down the long unshaded street a vendor of colored ices beat a rainbow of tin bells. A bell for every flavour as he tinkle-tinkled past. Every flavour made of water sold to tunes made out of tin.

Come bummies, come beggars, two pennies per tune.’³⁴¹

One of its contemporary reviewers described *A Walk on the Wild Side* as a novel written ‘as though Pollyanna were writing *The Grapes of Wrath* in dactylic hexameters.’³⁴² The following paragraph, sandwiched between two more well-behaved ones, demonstrates some of the rhythms to which such critics objected (which, for influence-detectives bear a strong resemblance to those of Vachel Lindsay’s singing poetry).

It was an ancestral treachery that all do-righters practice. When opening time was closing time and everyone was there, down where you lay your money down, where it’s everything but square, where hungry young hustlers hustle dissatisfied old cats and ancient glass-eyed satyrs make passes at bandrats; where it’s leaping on the tables, where it’s howling lowdown blues, when it’s everything to gain and not a thing to lose – when it’s all bought and paid for then there’s always one thing sure: it’s some Do-right Daddy-O running the whole show. (104)³⁴³

I demonstrated in my ‘Reading Algren’ exercise at the end of chapter one that adopting a certain voice to read (and un-read) a passage from *Somebody in Boots* adds volume to

³⁴¹ Cox and Chatterton, p. 91 (citing *A Walk on the Wild Side*, p. 89).

³⁴² Norman Podhoretz, ‘The Man with the Golden Beef’, *New Yorker*, 2 June 1956, p. 126. On the re-write process see Cox and Chatterton, p. 33.

³⁴³ For an original recording of Vachel Lindsay reciting his ‘The Congo’, see <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O31Y8qmiLy4>> [accessed 23 December 2014]

the dimensions of its narrative potential; vocalisation reveals what the eye may miss which, in the case of that section is that it reads as an epic. Algren didn't risk readers not making that connection with *A Walk on the Wild Side* – this novel flaunts its relationship with ancient ways of telling stories by using older story-telling rhythms and cadences; it sets out its wares in the domain of epic poetry to map an American mythology which, following tradition, has a love quest story at its heart.

The Mythical People: A Sexual Odyssey

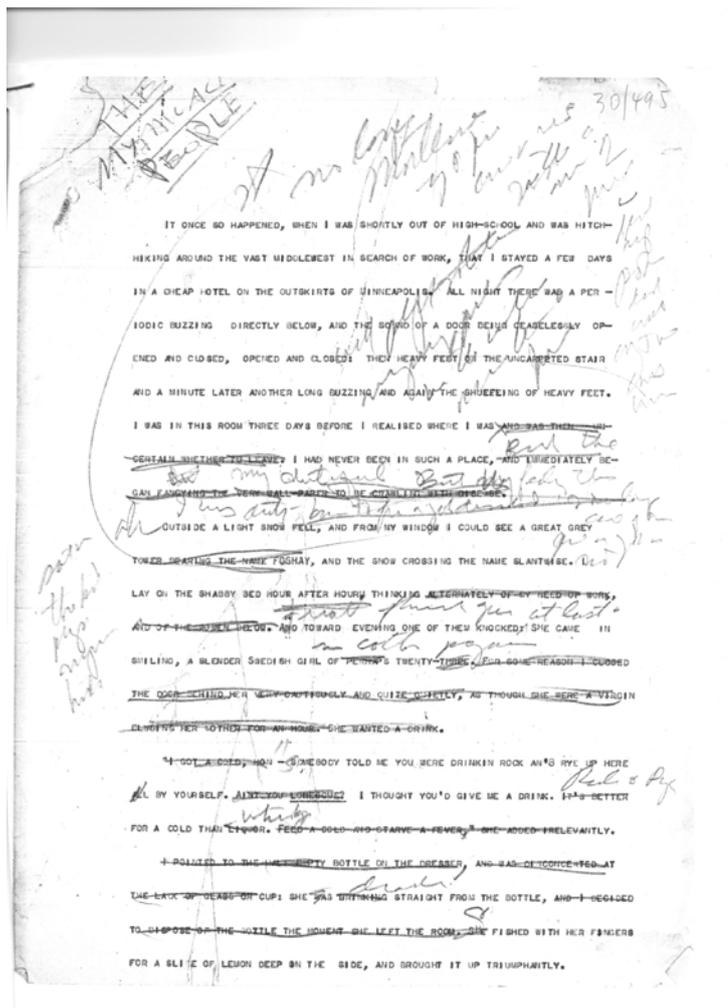


Fig. 20

The miners came in '49,
 The whores in '51,
 They jungled up in Texas
 And begot The Native Son.

Old Song

In the small-time vice village of Matamoros I took a room in a hotel run by a woman who had entitled herself “The Mother of the Americans” though she didn’t look like anyone’s mother. There I wrote the first chapters of a novel I first called *Native Son*.³⁴⁴

In his first draft of *A Walk on the Wild Side*, a first edition hard back copy of *Somebody in Boots*, Algren mapped out all his first ideas for its plot transformation. Its first working title is ‘I’d Love to Live in Loveland’, and the ‘critical debate concerning the novel’s ending’ to which Giles refers in his *Confronting the Horror* (i.e. does Terasina welcome Dove home or not?) is resolved by Algren’s own hand in the endpapers.³⁴⁵ As noted above, *A Walk on the Wild Side* talks back to its host text about reading but also about ‘reading the other.’ The mystery of why Fritz is contrary and embittered is resolved in a highly animated love/sex scene: the power and transcendental capacity of passionate love-in-sex/sex-in-love is communicated by ‘the whole room rock[ing] in the looking light and ... lock[ing] them heart to heart.

While the moon that could never wane looked on, on brandy, silver comb and wine.

While in all the rooms upstairs or down, beds wide or beds narrow, the lights had flared brighter and more bright.

On marble, mirror-shine and wind.

Till the dice players had begun crying out with despair at something more than merely losing, the roulette wheel had begun to spin as if each turn must be its last; and the pianola began a beat that rolled as though all hope were gone—

Sometimes I have a great notion

To jump in the river and drown—

keeping time to the rolling man lashed fast between those black-meshed thighs, breathing her breath as she breathed his till she moaned his lips apart: the pianola roll below flapped loose, the music stopped yet the roll whirred on. Her eyelids fluttered in the drain of her passion – it had not happened to her before like this.

³⁴⁴ Nelson Algren, Preface, *Somebody in Boots*, p. 10.

³⁴⁵ Giles, *Confronting the Horror*, p. 75. Obviously, I won’t be divulging what Algren wrote in the book in this essay: not-knowing is what makes the ending an Algren ending.

Fitz had felt the flutter against his cheek. The pianola roll whispered on and on, it had not happened to him before so heart-shakingly as this. (19)

So *A Walk on the Wild Side* is not only about America or the Depression, Capitalism and all of that, it is about the power of love and sex (not necessarily in that order) and the funny (comic and strange) flipside of a peculiarly American mythology of sexual puritanism.

An absolutely central effect of Algren reading Algren is demonstrated by the role he accords Fitz's 'wild girl': Algren's 'native son' Cass/Dove's mum, the 'Mother of the Americans', is a prostitute – which, in the light of the work of historian, Anne M. Butler, is not a fantastical idea but has its basis in history. According to Butler, the prostitute's position in the genealogy of the American south west in folklore (see Algren's 'Old Song' epigraph) is mirrored by the important part she played in the history of the formation of the United States. In her study of prostitution in late 19th century America, Butler draws on first-hand accounts and readings of epistolary and administrative military and civic documentation to argue that prostitutes were important contributors to 'the frontier montage', the various civilian and military actors and groups responsible for the mid-19th century push into the Western states of America.³⁴⁶ Each of Algren's novels demonstrate similar points and come to the same conclusions about prostitution as Butler and a vast body of literature on the subject: in the stories of *Somebody in Boots*' Nancy and Norah, Algren demonstrates that poverty and a lack of viable alternatives force women into prostitution; in *Never Come Morning* he foregrounds the close connections between pimps and brothel owners, the police, and civic authorities and details the extent to which women are used as sexual pawns in the dealings of power-mongering men. Twenty years after *Somebody in Boots*, the work of *A Walk on the Wild Side* is far more complex and presents a more nuanced understanding of the social and psychological factors that nourish the roots of prostitution in urban America. Underneath its farce – indeed, again, because of Algren's collagist technique that juxtaposes farce and horror – this novel, more starkly than any other of his works, unpacks the brutality at the heart of the institution of prostitution in general and brothel prostitution and pimping in particular. In *A Walk on the Wild Side*

³⁴⁶ Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Mercy: Prostitutes in the American West 1865-90* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

he focuses his ‘central vision’ on the peculiarly perverse John, represented by ‘Navy.’ And most important of all, the novel makes plain the case implicit in all his previous treatments of prostitution: women who practise prostitution are innocent of any crime. His ‘Chicago III’ chapter of *Who Lost an American?* (1963) describes the stance that informs his treatment of the Perdido Street brothel:

And should you say such a woman cannot go unpunished, I must ask in what fashion has she harmed anyone? She has assaulted nobody, robbed nobody, done nothing criminal, yet her chance of staying out of jail is nowhere near as good as that of a utility executive who has made a fortune by price fixing. Still, everyone feels entitled to punish her.³⁴⁷

I will return to Perdido Street later in the chapter. Now we have to start again and hitch a ride with Dove Linkhorn.

The Inward Gaze: Dove Linkhorn

“It’s awful when it’s like this,” Dove thought, “and it’s like this now.” (319)

Dove Linkhorn’s literary ancestor, Stuart (Stub) McKay tells us all we need to know about Dove’s ‘it’ and his ‘this’, ‘The Damned Feeling’ that dogs the ‘inward gaze’ of Algren’s men.³⁴⁸ But none report back on the subtleties of its emotional contours with more philosophical lucidity than Dove. In his essay ‘Consciousness and the Novel’, David Lodge suggests that ‘Lyric poetry is arguably man’s most successful effort to describe qualia’, and the novel is ‘arguably man’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time.’³⁴⁹ By the time we arrive at Dove’s comment above, if we know what he means by ‘it’ and ‘this’, it’s unlikely we can reiterate or translate it without, even if only slightly, deviating from the crux of what Dove is saying. We may know what he means but is that meaning representable in our own words (or as my auto-corrected typo would have had it,

³⁴⁷ Nelson Algren, ‘Chicago III’ in *Notes from a Sea Diary & Who Lost an American? Algren at Sea*, p. 221.

³⁴⁸ Middleton, p. 11.

³⁴⁹ David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel: Connected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 10.

‘worlds’)? That’s qualia, and this is a novel’s articulation of it. So I will dwell no more on Dove’s ‘inward gaze’ here except to say that of all Algren’s men, he’s the only one whose narratorial abilities can be relied on; we don’t, I think, go too far from Algren’s ‘central vision’ by staying close to Dove’s point of view.

“I don’t know what kind of great I’m bound to be,” Dove considered his prospects calmly, “all I know for certain is I’m a born world-shaker.” (54)

When Beauvoir wrote in one of her letters to Algren that ‘Dove seems to be a puppet, not so real as Frankie or Bruno’³⁵⁰ she unwittingly identified a key narrative tension in the Algren text because Dove parades what Algren’s other men more artfully conceal – they are all dummies and Algren is a ventriloquist.³⁵¹ In *A Walk on the Wild Side* his cast speaks (in shifting order) of women, men, love, and sex. Dove’s first love is Terasina Vidavarri.

Terasina Vidavarri: Mother of the Americans

According to Giles, Terasina is ‘central to a critical debate concerning the novel’s ending.’³⁵² However, as noted in chapter one, there has been almost no critical debate on this or any other aspect of the dialogic work Algren’s women perform in his storyworld and there can in any case be no debate on the ending of the novel unless there has been a debate about its beginning. For *A Walk on the Wild Side* announces its interest in passionate love and sexuality in no uncertain terms. It is no accident that the Davy Crockett where Dove’s parents first make (transformative, earth-shaking) love is home to Terasina and her chili parlor, ‘La Fe En Dios’, for hers and Dove’s story forms the second chapter in the novel’s thesis on love and sexuality. When Dove meets Terasina, over ten years have passed since she married (aged 16) a ‘bald, middle-aged Floridan ... an exporter of day-lilies’ who, on their wedding night, performed ‘indignities’ for which she ‘still had no name’ with his swagger stick – since which she has avoided any physical relationship with a man (the Floridan went back to Florida), fending off the advances of ‘section hands, firemen, railroad detectives, brakemen,

³⁵⁰ Beauvoir, letter of 12 July 1956; *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, p. 524, *Beloved Chicago Man*, p. 535.

³⁵¹ Algren would later foreground this narrative mechanism in *The Devil’s Stocking* in Red’s expertise at ‘mugging’ songs. See *The Devil’s Stocking*, p. 33.

³⁵² Giles, p. 75.

tramps, tourists, engineers, conductors and truck drivers' with a set of stock responses to their various attempts to seduce her.³⁵³ Through her we learn what Algren thinks of a certain type of machismo when she 'marvel[s] at truckers whose vanity [knows] no truck-turning. The driver sat so long above so much pent-up power that after a while he [comes] to believe the motor's power [is] his own.' But Terasina also knows how to heave her breast ("God has been generous," she says) to earn bigger tips, how wide to smile, and how far to flatter her male customers (23-25). Beauvoir outlines the conflict that dominates Terasina's affective life in her chapter on the 'mystic' woman:

Love has been assigned to woman as her supreme vocation, and when she addresses it to a man, she is seeking God in him: if circumstances deny her human love, if she is disappointed or demanding, she will choose to worship the divinity in God himself.³⁵⁴

Terasina, disappointed in love, chooses God: "In Jesus is my peace," she told the mirror in her small room, "*en tristes horas de tentacion, en Jesus tengo paz.*" And the mirror looked back as much as to say I think somebody just lied' (29). The subtext here is in the story of St Teresa (of which 'Terasina' is a variant) whose spiritual transcendence is linked to sexual ecstasy and who is referenced several times across *The Second Sex* (including, of course, in 'The Mystic Woman' chapter), and to whom two of Algren's earlier fictional women pray: the woman monologist in 'Is Your Name Joe?' and Steffi in *Never Come Morning*.³⁵⁵ Terasina's daytime, conscious rejection of men (and the possibility of sexual pleasure) is partnered by a night-time resurgence of the repressed (desire for sexual pleasure). The stairway to her bedroom (and heart) is 'guarded ... by the Virgin Mary' (22) but, once asleep,

³⁵³ The story of Terasina's Floridan husband bears comparison with an anecdote in *The Second Sex*.

Beauvoir tells the story of a 'female friend' who 'became intimate with a prostitute who 'emphasised that 90 per cent of her clients were perverts and about 50 per cent were self-hating pederasts. Those who showed too much imagination terrified her. A German officer asked her to walk about the room naked with flowers in her arms while he imitated the flight of a bird; in spite of her courtesy and generosity, she ran away every time she caught sight of him.' *The Second Sex*, pp. 622-23.

³⁵⁴ *The Second Sex*, p. 726.

³⁵⁵ *The Neon Wilderness*, p. 44; *Never Come Morning*, p. 215.

She would find herself waiting in some great shadowed corral in a sheer night dress, for one whose hair, worn long, kept blowing across his face like a mane; whose scent had salt and sweat in it. A stallion made of moonlight, to rear against her neighing and all her hopes rearing with him. Then the salt-sweat scent turned sick and she wakened with a barber-shop scent fleeing faintly along the boarded doors. Weak with disappointment, she would dress in the holy cold and shrive herself like a nun to make herself proud again. (23-24)

Enter Dove, who quickly becomes '[t]he only thing in pants around the place who pleased her ... the browless, raggedy boy with the streaky red hair who had come in one day with a sheet of Sunday funnies in his hand – "I don't know how letters make words," he told her, "so I'd appreciate it mightily if you'd quote these to me, M'am"' (24). And so begins a love story that seems to end with a rape but, in fact, only begins with a rape.

The Rape of Terasina Vidavarri

What begins as Terasina teaching Dove to read and write in return for him helping with chores culminates violently in the third major rape scene documented in Algren's fiction, the complexity of which is signposted by the difference between Horvath's and Giles's summaries of the act: for Horvath, Dove 'forced himself' on Terasina ... with whom he had earlier had consensual sexual relations'; for Giles, 'Dove brutally rapes her' because, having succumbed to his advances, she 'regrets her momentary weakness and refuses to sleep with him again.'³⁵⁶ Both are accurate and inaccurate, accurate with most of the actual facts but inaccurate with regard to the emotional facts; neither acknowledges the emotional intensity of Dove and Terasina's sexual-love attraction or the minor and major acts of hope, tenderness, and humiliation that precede and set the emotional scene for the act of rape. And Giles's is inaccurate insofar as Terasina does not exactly 'refuse' to sleep with Dove again because the idea is never again mooted as such.

As I demonstrated in my previous readings, the rapes of Charlotte and Steffi are the result of social scripts enacted by men and women a long time before any actual rapes occur. The rape of Terasina is equally scripted – most importantly, as Horvath and

³⁵⁶ Horvath, p. 103; Giles, p. 77.

Giles indicate, by the fact that Dove and Terasina previously had consensual sex, but also by the complex series of emotional mis-judgments set in train by the arrival of the ubiquitous 'third party' in the Algren text: Dove's brother, Byron. It is Byron who breaks the love-spell that encircles 'La Fe En Dios' when he arrives in the wake of Dove and Terasina's sexual union to assert the Linkhorn family code (i.e. hatred of Mexicans, hatred of book-learning, and an over-inflated sense of masculine entitlement). Moreover, the sexual and emotional chemistry between Dove and Terasina is explosive, not only because of the mutual anger that lights the touch paper for the rape, but because they each feel lust and desire in-itself: he is a teenage boy experiencing his first powerful sexual-love emotions; she is a woman whose habit of sexual restraint has been short-circuited by her feelings of tenderness towards the 'raggedy boy', not to mention the effect he has on her when his dancing 'invite[s] all women in a grind so purified by lust Terasina [feels] her own thighs start to part' (32). (Here, by the way, Algren is describing Elvis Presley in Dove's 'King of the Elephants' dance scene: 1956 was the year his hip gyrating performances created a national scandal when he appeared on US TV shows.³⁵⁷) The spark that ignites the explosion of Terasina and Dove's relationship in rape finds its kindling in two sets of circumstances: Terasina's internal conflict (revealed in her dreams) between spiritual piety and sexual impropriety, self-denial and self-abandonment, and Dove's feelings of humiliation and shame. These scenes between Terasina and Dove are not meant only to animate the novel's 'subtheme of frustrated power' as Giles suggests but are explicit in their exploration of sexual love and power: sex is the theme here, not social politics. So I disagree that 'Dove simply lusts for Terasina more than he loves her' and that 'he is not, after the attack, tormented by guilt.'³⁵⁸ For me, this reading underestimates the depth of passion that a sixteen year old experiences, an age when lust and love are typically difficult to separate; and it ignores the several indications made across the rest of the novel that Dove deeply regrets his rape of Terasina. When, later, her handkerchief drops out of his pocket, he feels 'a shadowy apprehension that he might never hurt anyone

³⁵⁷ Elvis Presley was the first candidate suggested to play the role of Dove Linkhorn when a film was under discussion. See <http://www.fineorsuperfine.com/crank/crank6/crank6_king1.html> [accessed 27 December 2014]

³⁵⁸ Giles, pp. 76-77.

except those who were dearest,' and '[t]hat he 'would know an abundance of pangs, some swift, some slow, some merely passing, and one that would never let him go.'

"Hopes I didn't hurt you bad, Señora," he explained. "Just when I was gettin' ready to help you up to say I didn't mean what I done, that fool engineer blew his whistle and I had to hasten on."

Yet the light lay pasted like a second-hand shroud against a guilt-stained wall: she had held out a handkerchief to him and he'd wiped his mouth with the back of his hand instead.

"I'll get somebody to handwrite a letter," he promised himself, "to tell I'm sorry now for what I done.' (90)

Later in the novel, Dove sees 'a high brass bed precisely like another he had seen in his lost long-ago' and later again, daydreams of 'friendly street lamps [that] lit the way to some old chilli parlor door. And half-dreaming [hears] voices of women of his little lost town.

*When you're on some distant shore
Think on your absent friend
And when the wind blows high and clear
A letter too pray send (138)*

Soon after this a girl who can buy none of Dove's wares says: 'I didn't *intend* to disappoint you,' repeating the words Dove said to Terasina immediately before they made love for the first (and last) time (138, 53). Then later again, 'it seemed to Dove that the sun had gone down the same morning that Terasina's arms had last locked in love behind his neck, that her good thighs in love had last drawn him down and her good mouth had last loved his.

"You were my onliest," he admitted at last, "but we only got to B. These days when I don't get to see you are plumb squandered like the rest of all them letters. My whole enduren life you were the only human to try to see could I live up to the alphabet.'" (159)

It is surely for Terasina that Dove 'strangely flush[s] with guilt' when he tells Oliver Finnerty he 'sure didn't sexutory-rape nobody' (162). And lying in jail:

“Terasina,” the boy asked in a small awed wonder of the woman who once had pitied his ignorance there, “Are you there? Are you there in your bed at the end of the world while I’m here in my bed at mine?” (321)

Dove’s feelings of guilt are more emotionally eloquently expressed than Cass’s refrain (‘Ah guess ah shouldn’t of said that to sister that time’): across the novel it is made plain that he regrets his actions and yearns to repair them. As for Terasina, the most critically honest way to contribute to the ‘critical debate concerning the novel’s ending’³⁵⁹ is to cite my MA thesis, (written before knowing Algren’s first thoughts expressed in his first draft): the Terasina I read in 2007, ‘would have had a wash, sewn up her dress and gone back to her erotic dreams that very night. I’m certain ... that on seeing a new wounded Dove, her need to nurture that the reader witnessed before her sexual fire was fanned (for it was smouldering before Dove came along) would have been re-aroused, for after all his suffering, Dove would give her another “smile that suffered too much, that pulled at her heart like an animal’s plea,” and she would again watch his “anxious dog trot, one shoulder higher than the other” and watch him eat his *segundos* of *chicharrones*. The “tribal beat” would again “beat fast.”³⁶⁰

The Mythical People continued...

Kitty Twist

“What do the sign sayz, mister?” he tapped a fedora no higher than his shoulder, rambling along atop a faded plaid lumberjack.

“It sayz here this is a city shelter,” a foxlike bark came out of a face like that of a terrier bitch – a face neither feminine nor male, but the voice was a girl’s... (62)

“Call me brother,” says Kitty Twist to Dove. Others have noted that Kitty is the antithesis of the ‘golden-hearted whore,’ primarily because of the viciousness she demonstrates during *A Walk on the Wild Side*’s finale fight. But Kitty’s profile is representative of probably the most vulnerable cohort of prostitution’s recruits in the

³⁵⁹ Giles, p. 75.

³⁶⁰ Christine Guilfoyle, unpublished master’s thesis, ‘Nelson Algren: Songs of Women in the Era of Conformity’, University of Southampton, 2007, p. 43; *A Walk on the Wild Side* citations, pp. 32, 25.

industrialised west: girls (and boys) who end up in care institutions and for whom the psychological dissociation caused by emotional neglect and abuse constitutes an ideal ‘training’ for prostitution. Because strictly – and legally – speaking, Kitty is a child when she appears as a savvy, street-wise, ‘brother’ who befriends Dove, and promises to hustle for him.

Apart from adding to Algren’s catalogue of the social conditions that funnel girls into prostitution, the ‘twist’ of Kitty is that she is responsible for what must be one of the most invisible ‘rapes’ in American literature (certainly it isn’t mentioned in any Algren criticism) when Dove wakes from a dream because he can hear her giggling and finds she has ‘locked him to her in a vise and it was a moment too late to get loose.

“I’m just so *ashamed*,” she told him later. “What ever got *into* you to make me *do* such a thing?” ...

“I must of just got carried away,” Dove decided.

“Promise you’ll never pull a sneaky trick like that on me again?”

“I promise.”

“Then I forgive you.”

“You’re good to me. Real good. ...” (82)

By what mysterious mechanism does Kitty so easily turn the tables so that Dove, without any persuasion at all, is convinced that it is he and not she who has ‘pulled a sneaky trick’? This short episode satirises a classic scene in the archaic ‘battle of the sexes’ whereby men historically bore the responsibility for initiating sex with women. That Dove, simply because he has had sex, so readily accepts that he initiated it – and, to boot, is required to feel guilty, and complies, qualifies for high farce precisely because it harbours a truth that many heterosexual men would recognise – which is that they often feel guilty in their relationships with women even when (unlike Cass, Bruno, or Frankie), they have done nothing wrong. But if we twist the script again so that Kitty is a ‘brother,’ i.e. male, and Dove is the girl – which is a more accurate description of the stereotypes to which their respective behaviours conform – then the scene takes on a darker satirical hue: it is then the ‘classic’ scenario of the one ‘underneath’ docilely accepting responsibility for the actions of the one ‘on top.’ These two readings of the scene do not exhaust its possibilities; more readings by more readers are needed.

Minnie Mae

If, as I suggested and demonstrated in my reading of *Somebody in Boots*, Algren was experimenting with Twain's directives on humour in his 'How to Tell a Story', in *A Walk on the Wild Side* he doesn't make the mistake he made in 1935. In order for the 'nub' of that novel's 'rambling and disjointed humorous story' to work, Charlotte Hallem's story had to be taken to heart by readers so that her rape by a gang of white men would be imaginatively reconstructed as the novel's central tragedy. Unfortunately for Charlotte and the 'nub' of the novel, her rape has historically been read as 'business as usual.' As Toni Morrison observed of Henry James scholarship in 1992, 'It is possible ... to read [it] exhaustively and never arrive at a nodding mention, much less a satisfactory treatment, of the black woman who lubricates the turn of the plot and becomes the agency of moral choice and meaning in *What Maisie Knew*.'³⁶¹ As I demonstrated, too, in my reading of Sophie Majcinek, if you don't take Algren's women seriously you don't have a hope in hell of finding them funny.

Minnie-Mae could be any sexually opportunistic woman having a party, but the 'cawfee pot' scene challenges on many levels.³⁶² For Frédéric Dumas, it 'is reminiscent of such licentious classics as *The Canterbury Tales* ..., showing sex as a healthy activity and ... flouting oppressive social conventions. The black woman's domineering role ... endows the scene with a subversive carnival touch that dramatizes both feminist and equal rights concerns.'³⁶³ I suggest, too, that Minnie talks back to Charlotte Hallem: where Charlotte has her power and her human rights stolen from her by a gang of white men, Minnie commandeers a white man's penis for her own pleasure. However, there is another 'vanished moment of beginning' to which Minnie Mae's presence talks back: the biographical source of certain of Algren's fictional scenes in his writing-present. According to Drew, Algren picked up a lot of his stories for the novel's brothel scenes from 'a middle-class black woman on Chicago's South Side whose husband ... came home only once a week. The other six days she was a madam for a group of respectable

³⁶¹ Morrison, p. 13.

³⁶² See pp. 119-26.

³⁶³ Frédéric Dumas, 'America as a Spectacle: Nelson Algren's *A Walk on the Wild Side*' in *Image-Identity-Reality*, ed. by Biljana Đorić-Francuski (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p. 39.

neighborhood ladies, not professional prostitutes but family women who went to church on Sunday and picked up extra money by turning occasional tricks on the side.’³⁶⁴ As I suggested with reference to Algren’s ‘pointing finger’ visible only to Florence Shay, Minnie-Mae may also be designed with the laughter of at least one particular woman in mind. Indeed, in this respect, *A Walk on the Wild Side* is possibly one of the most vociferous of Algren’s works because some of its madcap personae effectively mask at the same time as they address people Algren knew both before and during its writing, some more recognisable than others.³⁶⁵

If Minnie Mae turns the idea of the sexually victimised black woman on its head, she also talks back to a host of sexually outspoken black women singers whose songs and stage acts flouted puritanical sexual mores in 1920s and ’30s America. Minnie’s desire for the coffee grinder closely echoes, for example, a song most famously sung by 1920/30s singer, Clara Smith, ‘Ain’t Got Nobody to Grind My Coffee’.³⁶⁶ In view of the other sexual myths this novel takes to task, Minnie Mae reads as more than just an entertaining diversion. And, whatever our readerly response, readings that sidestep her presence fall into a trap described by Morrison whereby

³⁶⁴ Drew, p. 255.

³⁶⁵ For New York artist, Lily Harmon, the episode where a puzzled Dove tries to understand the meaning of a sign saying ‘No warm ups. No wee bits’ would have had a particular resonance. In her memoir, Harmon, with whom Algren was romantically involved in the final stages of writing the novel, describes a trip to a coffee shop where they see a sign, ‘No wee bits,’ that convulses them with laughter. That it ended up as an episode in Dove’s ongoing education in the art both of reading and of ‘reading the other’ doesn’t detract from the fact that it would have had special significance for Harmon but none, apart from its contribution to Dove’s story, to a general audience. Likewise, Algren’s twice-married ex-wife, Amanda, on reading the ‘King of the Turtles’ final farewell at the end of the first section of the novel (“‘Dear friends and gentle hearts,’ he wigwagged’) might have remembered the letter she received from Algren in 1946 in which he told the story of song writer, Stephen Foster, who died in New York with only 37 cents in his pocket and a note that read ‘Dear friends and gentle hearts.’ Lily Harmon, *Freehand: An Intimate Portrait of the New York Art Scene in its Golden Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), p. 251; Algren, letter to Amanda Algren, ‘Nelson Algren letters to Amanda Algren’, NA/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded.

³⁶⁶ See Clara Smith, ‘Ain’t Got Nobody To Grind My Coffee’

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yY14TfNCmO8&list=RDyY14TfNCmO8>> [accessed 23 December 2014]

... the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. According to this logic, every well-bred instinct argues *against noticing* and forecloses adult discourse. It is just this concept of literary and scholarly moeurs (which functions smoothly in literary criticism, but neither makes nor received credible claims in other disciplines) that has terminated the shelf life of some once extremely well-regarded American authors and blocked access to some remarkable insights in their works.³⁶⁷

As I've demonstrated in my readings, the most remarkable of insights Algren's work has to offer are overlooked when readings bypass Algren's women in general but the women of *A Walk on the Wild Side* are particularly important – in the case of Minnie-Mae, quite simply because she is there, having herself a good old time. In her story, Algren makes what was, in 1950s America, a controversial claim, especially if we factor his sex-work into assertions such as Peddie's that this novel 'is a harbinger of the urban unrest that exploded in the 1960s.'³⁶⁸ In his essay about male prostitution, 'It's Different for Boys', Julian Marlowe argues that comparing the relative lack of social stigma attached to gay (male) prostitution 'helps to highlight a fundamental flaw in the arguments of antiprostitution feminists: the objection relates not to the actual transaction ... but rather to preconstructed sex roles that attempt to stigmatize women for being anything other than the traditional passive partner. Rather than advocating a manifestly patriarchal view of female sexuality,' Marlowe suggests, 'perhaps feminist energy would be better spent trying to eradicate the whole good girl/bad girl paradigm altogether.'³⁶⁹ I suggest Mollie-Mae represents just such a contribution to a new (in 1950s America) paradigm of female sexuality and that, attacking the problem from another angle, *A Walk on the Wild Side's* treatment of prostitution performs similar work.

³⁶⁷ Morrison, pp. 9-10.

³⁶⁸ Peddie, p. 36.

³⁶⁹ Julian Marlowe, 'It's Different for Boys', in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. by Jill Nagle (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 141-44.

Angel's Trade: I'd Love to Live in Loveland

As I noted earlier, in *A Walk on the Wild Side*, Algren's emphasis is less on the environmental factors that force women into prostitution and more on an insistence of their innocence. Of all Algren's women, it is probably the occupants of Finnerty's brothel Le Sueur was thinking of when she wrote that Algren created 'portraits of women never before given.' Mama Lucille, Hallie Breedlove, Kitty Twist, Reba, Frenchy, Five, Floralee; all contribute to the key narrative tension of *A Walk on the Wild Side* in their dual role as prostituted women and comedians.

In both *Somebody in Boots* and *Never Come Morning* Algren's treatment of prostitution voices a very clear anti-prostitution message: if Norah is a 'haybagger' it is because she does not want to have sex with strangers to put food in her belly and a roof over her head. While she breaks a certain code in terms of street law, on a more important level – where self-preservation is equivalent to the preservation of her self-respect – she maintains at least something of her psychological, physical and sexual integrity. It is only the policeman in that novel and certain of Algren's readers who find her behaviour 'immoral'. But Algren doesn't provide Norah's case history as a pedestrian exercise in contextualisation; he does so to demonstrate her lack of viable alternative, her revulsion towards the idea of having sex with strangers at all, and her resistance to the social pressure that requires her to prostitute herself – for even the starchy employment agent 'black Bombazine' infers she should sell her body to get by. Similarly, Steffi, emotionally and physically entrapped into prostitution – first by the betrayal of Bruno, then by the gang rape then, by being taken – as prisoner in the first instance – to the Barber's brothel where, after being 'in a hundred corners with a hundred men ... The enormity of being accessible to any man in the whole endless city came to her like a familiar nightmare' (190).

Across the board, Algren's women articulate the truths of prostitution such as those documented, for example, in the recent autobiography of Rachel Moran. Moran writes of women who, like *Never Come Morning's* Chickadee, would claim if and when asked, to be happy in their work as prostitutes: "I like it here," Chickadee says, 'Yet Chickadee was distressed all night, sleeping or awake' (209). Moran writes about how prostituted women distance themselves from their reality by the process psychologists and health care professionals call *dissociation*.

Here is the essence of the paradox: to dissociate is to break away from and to turn away from, so the disconnection which is so crucial for maintaining her own peace of mind is itself a pollutant because it forces her to deny to herself the reality of her own experience. Dissociation is essential here: the prostituted cannot maintain her identity or sanity without it, but the cruel double-bind is that, on a psychological level, dissociation is a betrayal of the self. She's damned if she does, and damned if she doesn't, on the deepest of levels.³⁷⁰

Dissociation

Moran's book is distinguished from the hundreds of academic books that exist on prostitution by its grounding in Moran's personal experience combined with her nuanced application of theory. That much of what she writes corresponds with the prostituted women's voices in Algren's fiction testifies, I think, to Algren's depth of understanding of the issues they face in their daily lives.

For women in prostitution, dissociation is a necessary but dangerous thing. ... the woman in prostitution ... breaks away from the reality of her situation, with disastrous consequences for her mental and emotional health. Continually denying any painful lived reality inevitably causes a person to become separated from their own self. As a woman feels her psyche being abused she will protect against that and she will use the act of dissociation as a tool to do that. As she fails (and she will always fail, because it is not possible to dissociate fully from an influence you continue to be exposed to) the degree of her ability to dissociate from prostitution directly reflects the degree to which she has become separated from herself.

Every time a prostitute numbs her inner self against the feel of unwanted hands on her body she both employs dissociation and suffers the separation of self.³⁷¹

A Walk on the Wild Side's Mama Lucille's words (cut and pasted in the bottom right-hand corner of the Algren collage epigraph to this thesis) express the effect of

³⁷⁰ Rachel Moran, *Paid For: My Journey Through Prostitution* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2013), p. 139.

³⁷¹ Moran, pp. 138-39.

dissociation: 'For disappointment wide as the world would surprise her out of her sleep. "When had she ceased to belong to herself?" (197). And *Never Come Morning's* Steffi describes many of its effects: in alcohol abuse, when she contemplates suicide, when she tries to find solace (as she had in her pre-prostituted existence) in religion but can't. Central to the disintegration of the prostituted woman's selfhood is precisely this: there is no possible return to 'the beginning.' For Steffi, 'each time she permitted herself some recollection of childhood her fevered mind tricked her into some monstrous confusion with the present, till she feared the past as fully as the future' (252). Moran describes a similarly 'monstrous confusion' in her account of how, when she was still in prostitution, the past would make itself present in her consciousness through such an everyday act as walking through dry leaves. She describes how, one day, kicking dry leaves as she had done as a child, she realised they 'didn't make the same sound' as they had before and, when wet, they didn't smell the same. Eventually she understood that it wasn't that the sound and smell of leaves had changed – she had changed. 'When those moments of clarity came,' she writes, 'I would feel that all of nature and literature and everything I had loved before I'd become a prostitute was still there and still the same, but not open to me any more because I was different now, and those thoughts were even more hurtful, even more devastating than the notion that all about me was changed and gone.'³⁷²

A Walk on the Wild Side sets out not only to decriminalise the women who become prostitutes but also to draw attention to the harmlessness of prostitutes to wider society. Algren's introduction to the women of Perdido Street renders them as innocents.

From wheatland and tenement, hotel and harbor, girls and women of a hundred feathers had come to nest both sides of South Basin. Girls downy as chicks who have just lost their mammas and chorus-line dolls who had long lost their down. Girls who came scolding like winter jays, ruffing their feathers and ready for battle. But some like little wrens of summer, seeking hollows to hide in forever.

At evening they watched the stricken street from their windows like sea-birds seeing a sunless sea darken and recede. (178)

³⁷² Moran, pp. 57-58.

And with the same effect, Algren highlights the similarities between women who are prostitutes and those who are not: ‘Good girls and bad carried on so much alike, in the cheery old summer of 1931,’

Bobbed or banged or flowing to the shoulders, rose-red girls or sallow, they wore their hair in all the styles, they softened their mouths in all the wiles that good girls did.

Sick or silly, maimed or strayed, fresh-fallen leaf or sear, the Storyville hustler chattered as cheerfully about husbands and wives, washday and landlords, lost chances and chances left as the good girls did. And kept souvenirs of their luckier hours, locket and albums, letters and rings, exactly as good girls did.

(181)

Identifying a pro- or anti-prostitution message in this novel is almost impossible but some indication can be gleaned with recourse to old-fashioned storytelling devices: if its prostitutes are ‘Angels’, the pimp, Oliver Finnerty, is the Devil.

Oliver Finnerty

Algren’s portrait of Finnerty is informed by a pimp he came to know through some of his criminal friends in St Louis while writing *A Walk on the Wild Side*; it represents a closely observed exposition of the various bullying, sadistic, manipulative tactics pimps employ to subjugate girls and women. ‘Finnerty’s talent lay in his limitless contempt for all things female. He treated women as though they were mindless. And in time they began to act mindlessly’ (189). Reading the scenes that enlighten us as to the peculiarly vicious mindset of the pimp, Savage’s argument that ‘Algren warns us to consider how we laugh’ comes to mind.³⁷³ Because there is nothing funny about Finnerty – and whether there is meant to be or not is debateable. Here, I will limit my reading of the mechanics of pimpery to noting Algren’s documentation of how Finnerty’s assigning of a prostitute’s ‘trade name’ functions as key dynamic in the dissociation process. As Moran explains,

The age-old practice of using an alias is an example of how prostituted women have always actively sought to separate themselves from what they do. Women

³⁷³ Savage, ‘The Quality of Laughter’, p. 421.

who use an alias ... literally do what they do under another name; this is dissociation at its most practical level.³⁷⁴

However, the same process represents a further erosion of autonomy and the denial of self-hood when women do not choose their own name but are re-named by pimps.

Her ears heard the pants inquire her name, and her answer to that too was assigned. (“This week you’re Pepper, little baby.” If you let her pick her own she’d come up with something like Jane or Mary). (189)

In three words, ‘Her ears heard’ we are given a glimpse of the mechanics of dissociation, a sense of the distancing between self and world that gives it cognitive shape. “*Now* you finally got her where you can trust her,” was Finnerty’s view “So long as she wants to pick her own name you still ain’t got good conditions” (189).

One of the sexual services Finnerty offers men is the opportunity to watch a ‘virgin’ being ‘deflowered’: enter Dove Linkhorn to demonstrate exactly ‘what kind of great’ he was bound to be.

The Virgin

For sometimes once a day, sometimes twice, Finnerty’s gentlemen stood with eyes fixed to a wall to achieve vicariously that ancestral lust: the deflowering of a virgin.

Algren’s treatment of the peepshow where Dove earns big bucks as the ‘Big Stingaree’ giving live sex performances with a prostitute playing the role of a virgin, apart from its comic value, critiques the mythology of the virgin, ‘a fantasy that pursue[s]’ the men who come to watch Dove and Floralee, Reba, or Frenchy, ‘pursues them, every one, all their lives; ... They had only made of it a secret mystery that never could come true.

A mystery as false as it was secret. Yet Finnerty made it whirl with fiery colors, like a pinwheel in the dark; that becomes, when it is not spun, no more than a piece of painted wood. He instructed the girls not to yield their chastity easily, but only with tears, after a bit of a struggle. (235)

³⁷⁴ Moran, p. 138.

Algren is not saying here that the peepshow is false. We already know that. It is virginity itself that is a ‘mystery as false as it is secret’ perhaps because, as the peep show demonstrates with ‘false’ virgins, a virgin is necessarily someone who has never had sexual intercourse; so the only way to ‘have’ a virgin is not to ‘have’ her. ‘Breaking’ a woman’s virginity the man removes the ‘thing’ he wants – which, according to various cultural diktats is always a more or less symbolised or sublimated version of a disease-free fuck or the assuagement of a psychotic desire to defile and destroy. In all cases its social construction is one of the most powerful ways in which patriarchal societies control and police female sexuality. It is to this cultural monolith that Algren’s ‘keyhole virgin’ scene takes a swipe with a line-up of ‘virgins’ happy to perform. However, as important as its debunking of the myth of virginity is the opportunity the peephole scene presents Algren to set the scene for the final drama that will be the undoing of Achilles Schmidt and Dove. One of Algren’s early drafts indicates the scale and structure of tragedy he had in mind: ‘To this colossal wreck ruin [Achilles] Finnerty plays Iago.’³⁷⁵

Hallie Breedlove

A Walk on the Wild Side is a novel in which a condom factory slowly rubberizes its residents, including the roast chicken; where a man feigns blindness and cannot see, and another one is blinded yet sees clearly; where an eyeless man has sex with a pig; where a lamppost steadies itself for the long night ahead: and none of this is quite so strange, it would seem, as three men loving a woman who is a prostitute. Hallie Breedlove (the clue is in the name) is central to another barely acknowledged love triangle in the Algren oeuvre.

As I demonstrate above, Algren’s treatment of prostitution in this novel in every way seeks to portray the women involved as innocent of any crime and as having more in common with non-prostituted women than is generally entertained. In the story of Hallie and her relationships with and to Achilles, Oliver, and Dove, Algren debunks another important myth pertaining to the prostituted woman, which is that her existence is defined only by her role as a sex-object: for these three men, Hallie represents far more than ‘trade.’ Achilles is in love with her (as she is with him) but tormented by the

³⁷⁵ Nelson Algren, draft manuscript, NA/OSU, Box/Folder number unrecorded.

fact that she can be ‘held in any nameless stranger’s arms’ (243). For Dove, she possesses the gift of literacy. For Finnerty she is the only woman in his brothel who doesn’t ‘belong’ to him and who refuses to play the role of the virgin in his peepshow:

It was never Hallie. It never could be Hallie. Yet what Finnerty would have given to get *that* one in there! There was no way of debauching her. She had been in a thousand corners with a thousand men and had come away with herself untouched. (236)

Snubbed by Hallie, Finnerty decides that if he can’t ‘get at’ her himself then his ‘next best bet is to get at somebody who has already gotten to her,’ i.e. Achilles (237-38). But the final act that triggers the violence of the novel’s penultimate scene has little to do with the machinations of Finnerty and rather more to do with the disappearance of Hallie. In fact, as others have observed, the ending of *A Walk on the Wild Side* becomes so episodic that one wonders whether, more or less homeless during the final months of his re-write, Algren didn’t lose a section of the manuscript in transit.³⁷⁶ The love story between Hallie and Dove jumps from Hallie promising to teach Dove to read, via her last lovemaking session with Achilles and the fleshing out of Achilles’ back-story, to her and Dove lying in bed in their new room ‘a long winding way from old Perdido’ (258) with no prior indication that they were on such intimate terms. This said, the love story between them becomes a platform for two major events: Dove learning to read and Hallie breaking away from prostitution to return to her village to have a baby – an event that receives little if not any mention in Algren criticism: a potentially happy ever after scenario for someone – and a woman at that.

For Giles, Hallie leaves Dove (and the novel) because ‘she already had a lover, Achilles “Legless” Schmidt, and she ultimately realizes that she can never truly escape Schmidt’s hold on her.’³⁷⁷ But there is no textual evidence for this. Hallie does not return to Perdido Street; when Dove returns there initially and then again after five months in prison Schmidt is still looking for her. Giles’s reading ignores Hallie’s realisation that ‘she had wished it for some days now, to return to the mulatto village in which she had been born. And there put her hair in pigtails in her people’s ancestral way until the baby came.’ That Hallie intends to escape is clarified when she realises that

³⁷⁶ Giles, for example, finds this section ‘out of place’ (p. 80).

³⁷⁷ Giles, p. 80.

‘[t]hings would have to be done quickly before this white man [Dove] could guess’ (270).

A Walk on the Wild Side’s final scene of violence in which Achilles dies and Dove is blinded, is the result of masculine jealousy and the competing desires of Oliver Finnerty and Achilles Schmidt to dominate and own one woman, Hallie. Yet published readings barely recognise the existence, let alone the importance, of this love-triangle to its plot. The tradition of reading Algren’s work as a relentless diatribe against a version of ‘America’ ignores the fact that for Algren, in common with many writers of fiction, writing is a highly flexible medium with which to creatively explore and work through deeply personal and emotional issues. So when, for example, Grebstein describes the final scene as ‘a legless man smashing to a pulp what had been the face of a handsome youth, in a fight over a prostitute,’ he isn’t wrong about the labels for things but he seems to be quite wrong about the scene’s potential emotional content.³⁷⁸ And if Giles finds it ‘difficult to see anything hopeful in Dove’s return’ to Arroyo because Dove is ‘blind and virtually helpless: the outlets of literacy and sexual power ... closed to him,’ it is because he doesn’t appreciate what use a woman like Terasina might find for a blind handsome youth who knows how to sweep a floor. Furthermore, if Terasina is happy to see Dove and accepts the apology he has periodically yearned to give her, she is likely to read to him, as she did before.

Sympathetically Imagining Women: Vanished Moments of Beginning

For hours each morning Nancy sat bent above that stove, reading in dimness with moving lips. She sat with her knees propped high toward her chin, reading the Bible. The Bible was all that she ever read now.³⁷⁹

According to Judith Fetterley, American texts are often self-reflexive. ‘The American “classics”,’ she writes, ‘are filled with scenes of readers and reading.’³⁸⁰ Across his

³⁷⁸ Grebstein, p. 301.

³⁷⁹ *Somebody in Boots*, p. 72

³⁸⁰ Judith Fetterley, ‘Reading about Reading: “A Jury of Her Peers,” “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” and “The Yellow Wallpaper”’, in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 147-64 (p. 147).

oeuvre Algren continues this tradition: acts of reading and storytelling are foregrounded in all his novels – and more often than not it is the women who are reading. In *A Walk on the Wild Side* they are his expert storytellers and reading teachers. But first, there is Nancy, Cass's avid Bible reading sister from *Somebody in Boots*; Mary of 'Design for Departure' reads Christiano's 'worn catechism' avidly.³⁸¹ *The Man with the Golden Arm*'s Sophie collects her newspaper clippings of 'accidence,' Mollie reads jazz magazines and her 'intellectual sex book,' *The Strange Woman*, and Violet reading Steve Canyon. The only significant male reader in Algren's fiction is *Never Come Morning*'s Bruno, reading his boxing magazine in jail, but *The Man with the Golden Arm*'s Frankie has it on his 'to do' list.³⁸² In *A Walk on the Wild Side*, as noted above, Dove's most fervent desire is to be able to read. Before meeting Terasina, he would lie in his bed, 'moving his lips with the longest words he could pick up' from the arguments about religion taking place between his father and brother (11); and, looking at the posters Byron had previously read to him, he would 'stand making his lips move with his memory, so that some passerby might get the impression that he was actually reading. He even frowned now and again, to pretend he'd hit one that was tough enough even for an educated boy like himself' (38).

I would most likely be married and well-fixed by now, keepin' my clothes in a sweetwood chest and taking the paper in the baseball season if I could but make words out of letters,' Dove dressed himself in his daydream now wearing terribly thin, 'with a girl who could read 'n write too. 'N little kids – I'd learn them how to do it my own self.' Anything could happen to a man who could make words from letters. (158)

Dove's ambition to be a reader is fulfilled, as we've seen, with the help of Terasina and Hallie: Terasina reads Hans Christian Andersen's *The Brave Tin Soldier* and *What the Old Man Does is Always Right* to him, and she starts teaching him to read with *How to Write Better Business Letters*, an education he continues later with Hallie (who also has a copy of Andersen's tales), reading poems from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *King Henry IV*, *Twelfth Night*, and Sir Edward G. D. Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Some, if not all of these

³⁸¹ *The Neon Wilderness*, p. 50.

³⁸² "I got to get a lib'ry card myself," Frankie determined' (*The Man with the Golden Arm*, p. 247).

latter had been read to the young Nelson by his sister Bernice who, seven years his senior, would read to him, practise her roles in school plays in front of him, and bring him books from the library.³⁸³ His short stories, ‘Previous Days,’ and ‘Everything Inside is a Penny,’ and his tales of his ‘first love’, Ethel, further suggest that girls played a key role in his formative reading years.

I was five and in love with a girl of six. Her name was Ethel, she lived upstairs, she was Catholic; and she liked me too. She could read and write, and as soon as I could read and write, too, we’d be married at St. Columbanus.

The wide stone steps and the high stone cross of St. Columbanus rose directly across from our windows at 7139 South Park. I could even see the rabbit warren, where one of the fathers bred Belgian hares, in a patch of greenery.

Every morning I watched Ethel climb those steps and disappear into the shadowed, still, and holy mystery where one learned to write and read. Love and marriage, priests and hares, the cross that hung pendant from her throat and the cross that guarded her high overhead, merged into a hope of salvation: I would be saved when I learned to read and write. I prayed for the day, a year away, when Ethel would lead me by the hand up those holy stairs.³⁸⁴

In *A Walk on the Wild Side*, stories from Algren’s childhood resonate in the obvious intertexts cited above but also in more subtle ways, such as during the robbery scene with Kitty Twist in which an owl and pussycat figure when, ‘Under his feet a house cat leaped from sleep. Dove went headlong, shattering the flash and on his knees felt wings brush his hair – the fool cat was halfway up a wall trying to get at something big as an owl’ (83). Writing the final scenes of what he thought would be his last novel, Algren wove childhood readings into a love context that reflected the ones in which he first felt the passionate desire to read and in so doing, I propose, inscribed into the *Wild Side*’s

³⁸³ Drew, p. 18.

³⁸⁴ Algren, ‘Previous Days’, in *The Last Carousel* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997), p. 211. First published in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 30 April 1972, under the title ‘Blanche Sweet Under the Tapioca’; ‘Everything Inside is a Penny,’ first published in *Playboy*, July 1962, under the title ‘Ipsos Facto.’

closing pages, his remembrance of the readers and readings of his childhood but especially of his sister, Bernice, who died in 1940 when she was only 37 years old (and Algren, 31).

The following is from one of Algren's College essays about a boy, Nick, who appears in a few of his college essays. Nick has been bullied at school when, at the end of the day,

He felt a quiet hand take his, heard a firm small voice at his side: "Come home now, Nick."

It was Blima, and he suddenly knew the terrible day was over at last. He wept on her shoulder softly, without a sound. She placed her awkward little arms about his neck, then thus they stood for a moment in that strange dark place. Then she took him by the hand and led him home.

A week later he had, after the manner of a child, forgotten the incident. But Blima had come to mean home and peace for him forever, and years after, when his soul was sick unto death and he stood against the gathering dark alone, he saw two children walking in the night, and thought he felt a quiet hand in his.³⁸⁵



Fig. 21

Algren, aged 1

³⁸⁵ NA/OSU, Box 27, Folder 413.

Conclusion

Reading Men, Reading Women

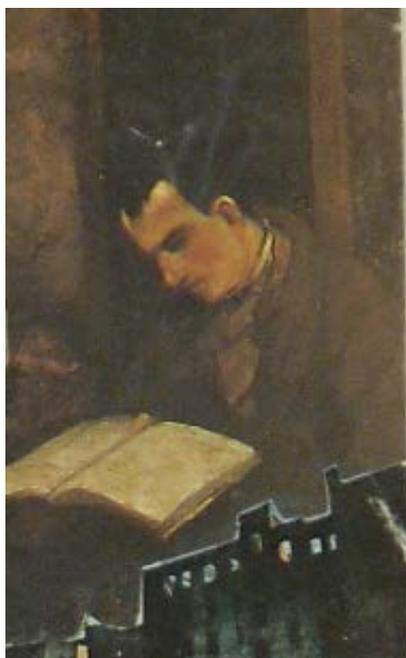


Fig. 22

Tough guy fiction? Proletarian fiction?

Enough of labels!

Critics, particularly the young critics to whom the depression decade is only a chapter in a book, have the responsibility critics have always had – to open the books.

Benjamin Appel, 'Labels'³⁸⁶

Written in conversation with, and in contribution to, the mid-twentieth century American intellectual *zeitgeist*, it should come as no surprise that between the lines of Algren's novels and short stories there emerge 'savage illustrations' of *The Second Sex* and rough sketches of Adorno et al's 'authoritarian personality.' As other scholars have demonstrated, Algren's work also converses fruitfully with that of other important twentieth-century theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Michel

³⁸⁶ Benjamin Appel, 'Labels' in David Madden, ed., *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968; Arcturus Books, 1979), pp. 13-17 (p. 17).

Foucault.³⁸⁷ There is an obvious general point to be made here: whether intellectuals and artists are more or less invested in exploring issues of sex, race, colour, or class, depends and has always depended on their personal situation – their gender, national and cultural background, sexual orientation(s), colour, race, education, political sympathies, religion, social class etc. In this respect, Algren's fictional problematisation of the nexus where the social, the psychological, the sexual, and the political play out in and among (the) bodies of marginalised, homosocially grouped white men in his first two novels owes as much to his personal situation riding the rails and hanging out with other men as it does to his political sympathies or his commitment to a particular school of thought or creative endeavour. An important side-effect of twentieth-century feminist theory was that it gave the lie to the idea that men's creative and intellectual endeavours told the whole story about being human, that men had privileged access to universal or objective knowledge. We now understand that much of men's fiction is 'masculinity studies.'

That Algren's fictional men – rapists, thugs, panderers, johns – have so successfully drawn critical attention away from what they tell us about the construction of masculinity in general and violent masculine sexuality in particular is a testament to Algren's skill in producing 'emotionalised reportage' that renders his compassion contagious: for how not to feel sympathy towards the irremediably ignorant Cass McKay, the peculiarly dull-witted Bruno Bicek or the feckless ruin that is Frankie Machine? How not to be seduced by Dove Linkhorn's spectacularly eloquent hips and comically inexhaustible libido? However, allowing Algren's men, as becoming as they are, to charm us, we bypass their most important work; under-mining the layers in the Algren text that catalogue masculine sexual behaviours, we undermine what was clearly a profoundly personal investment in exploring the social construction of masculine sexuality and sexual violence and, in turn, the implications of all this for gang-man masculinity's uncomfortable bedfellow, love.

Algren's novels provide a relatively impersonal (there is no-one to personally offend with our readings: the author really is dead) and emotionally safe fictional forum

³⁸⁷ See *Nelson Algren: A Collection of Critical Essays* for Ward's 'Spatial Enclosures in Nelson Algren's *Never Come Morning*', Hardman's 'A World of Ruins: Nelson Algren and Walter Benjamin's Destructive Character', and Philip McGowan's 'Nelson Algren and Carnival in 1930s America.'

on which to base a discussion of the cultural and socio-psychological factors that construct the rapist and the john. As such, this thesis responds both to feminist theorists who insist on the necessity for issues such as rape and prostitution to receive more analysis as acts instantiated by masculine sexual behaviours, and to the need, expressed by masculinity theorists, for bodies of work that allow us to examine and freely discuss these behaviours without recriminations for either 'being a man' or for taking up a reading position as an ideal reader subjugated by the textual dictates of a macho writer to 'read like a man.'

The 'inward gaze' of the guilty man in the Algren story – Cass, Bruno, Frankie, Dove – everywhere demonstrates the capacity of guilt and shame to disrupt, to a more or less incapacitating degree, our capacity to build a self-convincing-enough sense of self. How do men who have raped negotiate or work round their feelings of guilt if and when they emerge from the 'wild side' of teenage naivety as lovers, life-partners, husbands, fathers? How do they remember events, i.e. reconstruct them into a shape that can be psychologically assimilated, if not by a process of dissociation similar to that performed by all who must deal with trauma and the memory of events they would rather forget? Think of Frankie, whose conscience allows him to admit neither to the world nor to himself how bad his marriage is and how bad being in that marriage makes him feel, let alone contemplate the original source of his malaise in his teenage rape and maltreatment of Sophie; think of Bruno, trapped between two social scripts, neither of which he can wholly adopt and neither of which can, in the end, be adapted to repair the wrongs he committed: 'The Damned Feeling' and the troubled 'inward gaze' of Algren's men suggest that 'being men' in a hyper-masculine culture has a psychological price.

As discussed in chapter one, the scope of our understanding of the cultural and sexual-political work Algren's texts perform has been limited by the reading and marketing conventions according to which publishers, critics, and academics have, historically, categorised his work, coincidentally minimising the dialogic value of his women protagonists. Bringing these women into the fold of our reading allows us to more accurately answer the question of where, exactly, Algren's work fits in the Western canon today. Putting his fiction in conversation with contemporary work on prostitution and rape takes us a long way from thinking of his women and the scenes of prostitution, sexual violence, and rape in which they feature only as textual opportunities for sexual voyeurism and of Algren as 'no-feminist.' If the study of rape

and its consequences have given us an A to Z history of sexual victimhood, *Somebody in Boots*, *Never Come Morning*, and *A Walk on the Wild Side* document a short historical biography of the perpetrator. In this respect Algren's first two novels in particular leap-frog Beauvoir's thesis to address some of the most pressing questions of the first generation of her 'daughters' and 'great-grand-daughters' at the same time as they stake out ground within the long history of problematised masculinities.

Despite Algren's reputation as 'no feminist' and his casting as Beauvoir's 'bad boy,' Beauvoir scholarship has for some time been quite circumspect on the subject of his work. While the general consensus agrees with Giles and Horvath that he was demonstrably 'no feminist', Margaret Simons, Ursula Tidd and others have noted that his work demonstrates shared interests with Beauvoir's. Tidd, for example, notes that they were equally invested in representing the material aspects of oppression through the testimonial use of literature, and they held similar views on prostitution.³⁸⁸ The popular interest in their 'true romance' and the perpetuation of the mythology that Beauvoir's emphasis on sexuality in her thesis was because she was enjoying a satisfying sexual relationship with a man, not only undermines the intellectual basis of *The Second Sex*, it marginalises the place of both writers in relation to the bigger picture of twentieth-century intellectual histories of sexuality and gender. Reading Algren and Beauvoir together, considering the resonances that connect as well as the lacunas that separate their works, returns us to a 'vanished moment of beginning' we might need to revisit if the most important work of their respective oeuvres is not to be lost.

³⁸⁸ See Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 37-43.

Appendix: 'A Walk on the Wild Side'

Nelson Algren, 'From the unpublished 'A Walk on the Wild Side' essay written in 1952', The Nelson Algren Collection at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library of the Ohio State University.

American writers have always had a hard economic row to hoe. Three quarters of a century ago the Republic's first major novelist, Herman Melville, complained: "When a poor devil writes with duns all around him, and looking over the back of his chair, and perching on his pen, and dancing in his inkstand – like the devils about St. Anthony – what can you expect of the poor devil?" These were the words of a man harassed by economic fear. Such fear is more than distracting: it degrades. And it is not enough to point out that Melville's genius overcame adversity long enough to permit him to write "Moby-Dick". The truth is, that had Melville been less distracted by the "duns all around him", "Moby-Dick" would have been a better book – and he would have written more than one such book. In the end Melville gave over the struggle. He became an outdoor customhouse clerk in New York, and for two decades took the same steps between his work and home, never once putting pen to paper. The loss to American culture is not only immeasurable: it is typical.

Most of the men who have produced significant works in America have only done so against heavy odds. For every Mark Twain and Jack London who finally achieves a degree of security, a hundred promising youths relinquish the struggle. How many mailmen, merchants, journalists and farm boys have a good book or poem in them, and have to postpone the expression of it from day to day until at last it is no longer there? It is always easy to mention those instances wherein a Knut Hamsun or an Oliver Goldsmith produced a classic because of adversity: yet the truth remains that the history of great literature is, by and large, a history of well-heeled men. The English aristocracy is more productive of creative literature than the English peasantry not because it is a more capable class, but because it is a leisure class. It is no accident that great English literature, from Chaucer to John Strachey is the work of privileged men; Sir Thomas Browne, Lord Byron, Lord Tennyson, Shelley, Browning and Swinburne were undistracted by fear of where their next meal was coming from.

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