

Nelson Algren: An American Outsider

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OVER THE MANY YEARS I HAVE SPENT WRITING AND THINKING ABOUT Nelson Algren, I have always found, in addition to his poetic lyricism, a density and darkness and preoccupation with philosophical issues that seem fundamentally European rather than American. In many ways, Norman Mailer was right when he called Algren "the grand odd-ball of American letters."¹ There is something accurate in the description, however pejorative its intent or meaning at first glance, for Algren held consistently and without doubt to an artistic vision that, above and beyond its naturalism, was at odds with the mainstream of American literature. And cultural reasons led to the lukewarm American reception of his work in the past several decades.

As James R. Giles notes in his book *Confronting the Horror: The Novels of Nelson Algren*, a school of critical thought citing Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman argues that nineteenth-century American literature was dominated by an innocence and an intense faith in individual freedom and human potential. But nineteenth-century American literature was also dominated by an intense focus on the American experience as unique in the world, a legacy, perhaps, of the American Revolution against monarchy in favor of democracy. Slave narratives, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), narratives of westward discovery such as Twain's *Roughing It* (1872), the wilderness tales of James Fenimore Cooper, and Thoreau's stay on Walden Pond were stories that could have taken place only in America—an essentially rural and industrially undeveloped America. But after the Civil War, a process of industrial-

ization began that paralleled earlier European movements from landed economies to those centering on industrial and commercial enterprises. The rapid growth of cities and railroads, the rise of corporate business, and the emergence of a mass consumer culture signaled a shift from the old agrarian America most famously articulated in 1893 by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who wrote, "[N]ow, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period in American history."²

As America shifted from an agrarian nation to one in which urban centers were key, Chicago in particular became the hub of a vast network of railroads and waterways that extracted, processed, and marketed grain, lumber, beef, and other natural resources from the West and carried to those living in the western hinterlands all of the manufactured wonders of the emerging consumer culture. Swift and Armour; Sears, Roebuck; McCormick Reaper; and the other new corporate powerhouses produced their wares by recruiting large numbers of European immigrants to work in Chicago. It has been reported that by 1880, an astonishing 87 percent of Chicagoans were foreign-born or born of immigrants. Two processes occurred with that mass immigration: One was that the cramped and wretched poverty of European cities began to be broadly and visibly recognized in American ones, so that cities began to be seen as evil and unhealthy breeding grounds for corruption and vice. The other, hardly surprising, is that the immigrants took with them revolutionary political ideals that had become current during European industrialization. In the late nineteenth century, America was awash in strikes that sometimes shut down the transcontinental railroad system. The balance of power between labor and capital—a relatively new conflict in America—was still being negotiated and constructed. In Chicago, the so-called Haymarket riot, which occurred in 1886 when a bomb was thrown at a demonstration for the eight-hour workday, was a public relations disaster for those radical and foreign political ideas. So-called perpetrators were hastily tried and convicted, and the word *anarchist*, with its old-world roots, became a code word in an emerging vocabulary of prejudice toward urban immigrants. Governor John Altgeld of Illinois, himself the son of Ger-

man immigrants, ruined his political career by obeying his conscience and pardoning those still living who had been unjustly convicted in the Haymarket affair. Even at that moment it was still possible, in some way, for government to take the side of labor, but in 1894, when President Grover Cleveland sent in federal troops to crush the Pullman railroad strike, the balance of power was effectively decided in favor of capital.

In the first half of the twentieth century, American writers and other intellectuals, especially those in Chicago itself, attempted to describe the effects of the new world created by unfettered, government-supported capital. And it is not surprising that they embraced the technique of naturalism, which, stressing the importance of natural forces such as heredity and environment, had worked so well for Émile Zola during the European industrialization experience. But the most-noteworthy novels of the American naturalistic movement looked at American life from the inside, just as antebellum writers had: from the point of view of Anglo-Americans coping with the transformation of the American way of life from its rural beginnings. Theodore Dreiser's novels *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914) explicated the rise of a common man into a financial tycoon; *An American Tragedy* (1925) explored the unsavory aspects of pursuing the American dream of success and social standing; *Sister Carrie* (1900) exemplified the exodus of Americans from rural and small-town life to the burgeoning cities. Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) depicted the reduced opportunities for poor American women already there, and in *The Octopus* (1901) Frank Norris depicted the railroads as social and economic forces affecting California ranchers. All of these novels were situated within a context that was noticeably American, and all of the characters had, to some degree, a connection to American land and history.

A notable exception was Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (1906), an exploration of Chicago's meatpacking industry so entirely from the point of view of immigrant East Europeans that it began in the Old World. The hero, Jurgis Rudkus, and his family are peasants in a Europe where peasants are being marginalized, and they travel to Chicago to find a better life. But the America they find is one most Americans found unrecognizable. It is not a world in the process of becoming, but a world of exploitation com-

pletely formed, existing only in the brutish present. Worked beyond human endurance in the packinghouses, always on the verge of starvation, the Rudkuses are further exploited by a real estate industry that sells them a house built on sewage—a house that can be taken back the minute they fall behind in their payments. Upon the death of his family and the fall of his female relatives into prostitution, Jurgis becomes a tramp and in the end converts to socialism. Life in Packingtown has never been better described, and though the plot of *The Jungle* becomes increasingly preposterous, the book caused a tremendous stir. Congressional hearings were held. In a curious comment on American attitudes toward labor in the early twentieth century, however, the hue and cry did not concern the industry's ghastly wage slavery but the filthy practices uncovered in processing meat, and laws were passed to remedy those practices rather than working conditions. The completely European idea of socialism that Sinclair had hoped to inspire in his readers was virtually disregarded.

Algren's first novel, *Somebody in Boots* (1935), which told of life on the road during the Depression, was commissioned by publishers, its subject not entirely of Algren's own choosing. But Algren's first writings on Chicago—college themes that were essentially short stories—focused on the poor: especially East European immigrants and, to a lesser degree, prisoners. As a university student in the late 1920s, Algren had studied more British than American literature and had been deeply moved by the thinking of various European socialists he encountered in sociology courses. His college absorption in literature and sociology was so intense that he made almost no attempt to socialize with his peers, wondering whether it would be worth his while to answer a silly question when he could be memorizing lines from Shakespeare. His earliest literary influences, therefore, were by his own volition outside the sphere of the traditional depictions of the American experience and American identity.

Algren's second novel, *Never Come Morning* (1942), for which he himself chose the immigrant community setting in the slums of Chicago, was in that vein. As did *The Jungle*, it concerned Polish immigrants, and it too depicted the city of Chicago as a completely formed entity whose history and cultural identity were more or less irrelevant to his characters. Indeed, Bruno Bicek and

Steffi Rostenkowski are simply more-recent but direct descendants of Jurgis Rudkus: alienated from the brutal outside world and enclosed in an immigrant world without exit. The only remnant of the Old World in the prostitute Steffi's life is the church, which encourages her to blame herself for her suffering when she seeks solace there. For those characters there is no trace of the American dream of self-betterment; Steffi cannot see past stasis. "'Polish homes,' Steffi remembered. 'Men and women who worked by day in order to sleep together at night. If it wasn't for that they labored, what then was their labor for, she wondered.'"³ The only connections Bicek and Steffi have to American consumer culture are the images in Hollywood movies and the prizes won at amusement parks. That sense of total exclusion from mainstream American life is significant, and, as in *The Jungle*, it produced a curious effect. It forced the American reader to abandon presuppositions about American life and to "confront the horror," as Giles has put it, directly, as a reader from another country might see it.

Clearly, by the 1940s, Algren's artistic vision was too sophisticated to allow espousing the Marxist political stance that had made *Somebody in Boots* seem so heavy-handed. Under the European influences of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Alexander Kuprin, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, among others, Algren aspired to create literature whose themes were central to humanity rather than national identity or ideology, for Algren's was essentially a humanistic vision for all mankind: In his imagination the world was borderless, his Chicago like "the Petersburg of Dostoyevsky."⁴ His next book, the story collection *The Neon Wilderness* (1947), included both immigrants and Americans from the lumpenproletariat Algren had experienced during his Depression wanderings, and the lines from David Wolff's poem "The City," which opened the book, suggested one of Algren's most deeply held beliefs: "not walls, nor men / brutal, remote, stunned, querulous, weak or cold / do crimes so massive, but the hideous fact / stands guilty: the usurpation of man over man."⁵

Such usurpation led to Algren's preoccupation with imprisonment, the point in any society at which the individual is face to face with the armed power of the state. He saw incarceration first and foremost from a sociological perspective, as an issue of social

control and therefore a mechanism perennially prone to the age-old horror of usurpation. He depicted that in the story "Depend on Aunt Elly," in which a female prisoner gives up her life savings to get parole, only to find herself the victim of a never-ending black-mail, and there is a jail scene in every novel he wrote and in many of his finest stories. He also saw military service as the source of a similar conflict between the individual and a powerful and armed social mechanism, and around 1950 he had plans to write a novel about soldiers absent without leave who had revolted against military authority and set up their own camp composed of outlaws from every army. "It was quite an operation—they had food and guns and trucks and their own women,"⁶ as Algren described it. But Algren's essentially sociological and philosophical thinking on incarceration and military service was at odds with a general American attitude toward incarceration as a practical issue and military service as a matter of pride.

While American social organization emphasized individual achievement, Algren had an unwavering belief in collective human responsibility. Algren felt that if we did not know what was happening to the men and women who endured all the tragedies and enjoyed none of the benefits of our society, we then did not know what was happening to ourselves, and he found a life's purpose in showing the American public what was going on in their midst if only they took off their ideological blinders. He hoped, as Sinclair had hoped, that by so doing, he could generate in America compassion as well as guilt and shame that could bring about social change. Algren believed that in undertaking responsibility for oneself and others—a process involving compassion for others—a meaningful life could be created, and guilt, while a heavy burden in Algren's world, is a sign of humanity because it can generate that compassion and collective responsibility. Ernest Hemingway told Algren that in *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949) he had "beat Dostoyevsky,"⁷ and the reference is significant. In the novel's culminating scene, in which the police captain Bednar understands that in failing to have seen that "We are all members of one another"⁸ he has condemned himself to a living death, Algren makes numerous references to Bednar's hanging on a cross. Here Algren espoused the importance of collective responsibility through a subtle appeal to Christian tenets acceptable to his audience. And

this was a shrewd move, for as any student of American life and culture knows, the idea of collective human responsibility in the United States is a hard sell.

But from 1945 to 1950, as many American troops remained in Europe and as both Europe and the United States were enjoying the victory of a hard-won fight, there was, in America, a brief openness to European ideas and influences. Jean-Paul Sartre and, later, Simone de Beauvoir traveled to the United States to spread their ideas about existentialism, and many European refugees from the war began to build new careers in the United States. European composers such as Erich Korngold were writing Hollywood movie scores, and European architects were constructing buildings in American cities. Scores of émigré intellectuals from Kurt Weill to Bruno Bettelheim were introducing European ideas into the American mainstream. It was during that period that *The Man with the Golden Arm* became a best-seller and won the National Book Award. And later, Algren would describe that brief window from 1946 to 1950 as "very fresh time"⁹—the time in life to which he would most like to return. Though certainly he enjoyed the time because of his personal success, there were also cultural forces at work during those years that made him comfortable and made his ideas more acceptable in his own country.

By the early 1950s, however, that openness had virtually disappeared, and political events in the United States made Algren look at his own country with concern. The Korean "police action," said to be the war to contain communism, signaled to Algren the growing power of the military-industrial complex that Sartre and de Beauvoir feared would start World War III. The House Un-American Activities Committee, the loyalty oaths, and the media saturation with military preparedness prevailed. Algren had long fulfilled what he considered his political obligations by giving talks to civic groups and lending his name to petitions, and now he wrote two long essays on the American scene; the new genre allowed him more room for direct social commentary than his novels. The first was *Chicago: City on the Make* (1951), a wide-ranging and poetic history of the city in which he stated the role of his own work in concrete and politically charged terms: "[L]iterature is made upon any occasion that a challenge is put to the legal apparatus by conscience in touch with humanity."¹⁰ The second

essay, finally published only a few years ago under the title *Non-conformity: Writing on Writing* (1996), directly discussed the increasingly repressive intellectual atmosphere in early 1950s America and the rising threat of the military-industrial complex. Stating that "we live in a laboratory of human suffering as vast and terrible as that in which Dickens and Dostoyevsky wrote," he decried Americans' complacency with the new world order and the look of irresponsibility on American faces. "In no other country," he wrote, once again putting America in world perspective, "is such wealth, acquired so purposively, put to such small purpose. . . . Do American faces so often look so lost because they are most tragically trapped between a very real dread of coming alive to something more than existing, and an equal dread of going down to the grave without having done more than merely to be comfortable? If so, then this is truly the American disease."¹¹

The language of this essay—existence, purpose, responsibility, dread—was the language of existentialism, the European existentialism of de Beauvoir and Sartre that had found even in Algren's earlier novels an American literary exponent. Algren was a man of European intellectual orientation in an America that was becoming more isolated and more intolerant of outside political thought. His editor, worried, arranged editorial sessions aimed at toning down Algren's message. But in a symptom of the very atmosphere Algren was discussing, his publisher, Doubleday, declined to publish the book because it did not want to be known as a "Red House."

What clearer proof that the stifling cold war cultural atmosphere was everywhere; to try to be a writer in it was to become engulfed; one could drown in it. Algren soon booked passage to Paris; he needed not only Simone but also the international community, who had tolerance and respect for his ideas. But his passport was not renewed. Two years later, in 1955, he did manage to get to Cuba, where American citizens could then travel easily, and was buoyed by its Old World charm and a visit to Hemingway. But having his freedom taken away and being forced to live in a new, powerful, confusing, and stifling political environment damaged him artistically. For six years, from 1953 to 1959, he was an exile stuck in his own land, watching America embrace values that he found empty and meaningless.

Those six years generated tremendous changes in American society. The space race, new science curricula in the schools, and the availability of mass-produced cars, housing, household appliances, and television fueled a technology-driven consumer culture that pushed aside the old railroad networks of manufactured goods and caused the great nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century industrial machine of Chicago to falter. Algren had unwittingly found himself amid a tide of white flight and suburbanization when he personally realized the American dream by buying a house on the Indiana Dunes, and at the end of the decade, he was living in an America that thought it had liberated itself from the cold war by electing as president the dashing John F. Kennedy, the father of young children. The nuclear family was *in*, and it was prosperous; for those who wanted to remain single there was the life of the *Playboy* king Hugh Hefner, who portrayed himself as a pasha 1960s style: by selling sex as a legal commodity and earning respect and millions as a businessman while the girl on the street went to jail and was treated with contempt for trying to make twenty dollars.

In the New World nobody worried about the girl in the street. In the New World everyone was middle class, and everyone was polite: smiling on a man while slapping a subpoena in his hand, defrauding him by contract when he was not watching. The New World excluded Algren, denied him contracts and the right to travel; for lack of money he had to let Otto Preminger's "purchase" of his movie rights go unchallenged. He wrote now:

To the artist, the landscape of commercial enterprise has always been a chamber of mirages by which the true world is perverted; and the *Milieu-Man*, the critic, has, traditionally, been the artist's apologist.

But to Business, Government, Church, Military, TV, Press, and Hollywood, the world which feeds, clothes, arms and amuses men is the one real world; the artist is the distorter.

The *Milieu-Man*, has now, by and large, become the Establishment's apologist."¹²

The pall of American commercial life seeped into the minds of the middle class and lulled it into happiness with prosperity; the glorification of self-promoted men like Hefner had removed the desire even to find compassion.

The American intellectual surrender to the cold war was devastating to Algren. Derided for writing about, as Otto Preminger described them, "such animals, you know,"¹³ he continued to be unable to get a contract for a novel despite his solid-gold literary reputation. Of American indifference to its social woes he said, "I thought I'd make a dent—I didn't make the least dent."¹⁴ The loss in intellectual prestige he had suffered by being censored and financially manipulated by New York and Hollywood was accompanied, for Algren, by a loss in belief that his work was wanted. Algren said that he stopped writing serious novels because of that and because the cost to him was excessive; to continue writing in such an environment, he said, would have been to consider himself an artist with a capital A and not a human being. Of course, when he said that his work was not wanted, he meant in the United States, where responsibility-oriented existentialism did not find a home. Indeed, American writers, as in other cultures with intellectually oppressive regimes, began to embrace a literature of allegory and the absurd exemplified by such writers as Thomas Pynchon and John Barth. After Algren became what he called a "journalist," his work also sometimes took on an absurdist ring, and the titles of his next two books, *Who Lost an American?* (1963) and *Notes from a Sea Diary: Hemingway All the Way* (1965), reflected the alienation from America that he increasingly tried to quell by travel. Later, he would also travel to Vietnam, and the title of the next book, *The Last Carousel* (1973), suggested nothing so much as a sense of loss.

Algren's life and his identity as an American formed an ongoing struggle to insert his ideas into the mainstream of American discourse that ultimately failed. There were works of literature about the disenfranchised, such as John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), that became classics, but the Joads were an intact family, as were Sinclair's Rudkuses, while Algren's people are almost always outside such sources of support. Indeed, Algren, who had always been after far larger intellectual game, came to be perceived as being obsessed with "such animals, you know." And quoting F. Scott Fitzgerald, Algren began to wonder how he became "identified with the very objects of my horror and compassion."¹⁵ It happened because in the prosperous cold war years, Algren was associated with the poor, whom Americans no longer

found of cultural interest. And indeed, despite the huge increase in the number of homeless people in the past two decades, American writers no longer, by and large, consider the homeless and the lost as appropriate subjects for literature despite the tradition of such work abroad. And so Algren—purveyor of a humanistic and existentialist literature, who once stood at the cusp of literary greatness—found himself driven, under the steam of American postwar culture, down a dark and lonely tunnel into an obscurity that was occasionally pierced by reference to him as a prison writer or a novelist of juvenile delinquency.

Algren's novels and stories, which are now back in print in the United States, generally sell fewer than five hundred copies a year. The exception is *The Man with the Golden Arm*, which sells about twenty-five hundred copies a year and has recently been reissued in a critical edition that sold out its first print run of nine thousand copies. Perhaps Algren's American legacy will be, finally, to be known as the author of *The Man with the Golden Arm*, while European scholars experience him as a rich and complicated writer of intellectual, cultural and artistic significance.

NOTES

1. Norman Mailer, quoted in Carla Cappetti, "Urbanism as a Way of Writing: Chicago Urban Sociology and Chicago Urban Literature, 1915-1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1989), 9-10.
2. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 1-38, reproduced in *The Frontier in American History* (1895; repr., New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 38.
3. Nelson Algren, *Never Come Morning* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), 211.
4. Nelson Algren to Richard Wright, October 22, 1940, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
5. David Wolff, "The City," in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 55 (1940): 169. Quoted in Nelson Algren, *The Neon Wilderness* (1947; repr. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1986), 15.
6. Nelson Algren, quoted in H. E. F. Donohue, *Conversations with Nelson Algren* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), 90.
7. Norberto Fuentes, *Hemingway in Cuba* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1984), 266.
8. Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm: 50th Anniversary Critical Edition*, ed. William J. Savage Jr. and Daniel Simon (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), 197.

9. Nelson Algren, quoted in Donohue, *Conversations with Nelson Algren*, 330.
10. Nelson Algren, *Chicago: City on the Make* (1951; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 81.
11. Nelson Algren, "A Walk on the Wild Side," 46-48. Ohio State University, Rare Books and Manuscripts.
12. Nelson Algren, *Notes from a Sea Diary: Hemingway All the Way* (1965; repr., London: Mayflower-Dell, n.d.), 15.
13. Nelson Algren, quoted in Donohue, *Conversation with Nelson Algren*, 136.
14. *Ibid.*, 94.
15. *Ibid.*, 161.