THE PROLIFERATION OF THE GROTESQUE
IN FOUR NOVELS OF NELSON ALGREN

by

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THE PROLIFERATION OF THE GROTESQUE IN

FOUR NOVELS OF NELSON ALGREN

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Abstract

The evolution of the grotesque in four novels of Nelson Algren is the subject of this work. Algren's writing over his fifty-year career is rife with grotesque images, situations and characters, but there are important differences from novel to novel in his strategic deployment of the grotesque. His overall motive, though, from Somebody in Boots (1935) through The Devil's Stocking (posthumously published in 1983), is cultural criticism. Algren maintained throughout his writing life that "legal" authority was illegitimate, and that the "hard necessity of bringing the judge on the bench down into the dock" was the responsibility of any honorable writer of fiction. To do so, Algren made increasing use, in his first four novels, of the grotesque mode. The approach considers the theories of the grotesque advanced by Wolfgang Kayser, Lee Byron Jennings and Thomas Mann, and points up the insufficiencies of these theories for viewing Algren's work. The theories of the grotesque advanced by Donald Fanger and Mikhail Bakhtin, and the implications and suggestions of theories in the works of Walter Benjamin, T.W. Adorno and Guy Debord provide a more adequate basis for discussion of Somebody in Boots, Never Come Morning, The Man with the Golden Arm and A Walk on the Wild Side. Further, the tradition of the paraclete, so earnestly introduced into American letters by Walt Whitman, served both as the ethical ground of Algren's work, and

as the catalyst for the artistic strategy that Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism." Whitman's writing constantly informs the discussion of the nature of Algren's cultural criticism.

The significance of this concept of the grotesque, which defines the relationship of Algren to Whitman, is that it considers that most heinous disfigurement of America: the exclusion and denial of those found guilty "of owning nothing, nothing at all, in the one land where ownership and virtue are one." The evolution of Algren's use of the grotesque is further illuminated by Bakhtin's emphasis on laughter and "degradation." An intuition perceptible in Algren's early novels, that laughter can topple the image of the accuser and re-member those amputated from the social body, gained imaginative play as Algren moved more surely between horror and amusement. What sprang out of the oscillation was an offering to lay the ghost of the question Algren heard an accused woman cry out to a courtroom: "Ain't anybody on _my_ side?"

This work is for Norman Mitchell

For my part, in this foreign country,
I have no objection to policemen or
any other minister of authority; though
I remember in America, I had an innate
antipathy to constables, and always
sided with the mob against the law.

- Nathanael Hawthorne
Passages from the French and Italian Notebooks

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Introduction: "Every day is D-day under the El"

I would place the span of the grotesque in Nelson Algren's writing between two footings. The first is the conclusion of a story called "Pero Venceremos" (Spanish for "but we shall win"), which appeared in the 1947 collection The Neon Wilderness. The narrator, a barroom cipher with enough change to drink and play the juke box, half-listens to the hundredth recitation by one Denny O'Connor of the latter's war-wounds story. O'Connor has repeated the story obsessively since returning from Spain, with no variations save those which failure of memory make. Consequently, "no one pays O'Connor attention anymore. O'Connor is O'Connor and we've heard it all before. There's bock beer and a bingo game that you almost beat and a juke box that still plays 'Lili Marlene' and we all have our own troubles anyhow."[1] O'Connor insists on show-and-tell: one wound, the bayonet through the shoulder, healed long ago, and the narrator has to remind O'Connor that it was the right shoulder and not the left. The leg wound, from shrapnel "'no bigger'n half dollar,'" is open and festering after ten years. O'Connor holds forth: "'See that? That's rot. I used to think it'd stop but I don't think so no more. Some one of these days they'll be takin' 'er off me.'" He bullshits for a while longer, about the Spanish War, the "ballroom brawls" he's been in, his unimpeachable status as a "good union man" (not so since Pearl Harbor, the narrator tells us), the effectiveness of a broken beer glass as an equalizer in a ballroom brawl, the Spanish War, the Spanish War--

"Maybe you'd better forget Fuente de Ebro," I advised him directly. "After all, that's a hundred years ago."

He looked at me a long moment, as though trying to understand what I'd said. He was trying so hard he was biting his lip. Then he seemed to understand at last.

"Why, no," he told me, a little dreamily, "it ain't that long ago at all. It's just like yesterday."

He rose slowly, his last nickel in his palm, and leaned as though resting against the juke while it began, for the last time, "As Long As You Live You'll Be Dead If You Die." When it was finished he returned slowly and asked me, "Did I say _yesterday_?" And shook his head like a man recalling an endless dream. "It wasn't even yesterday, the way it feels."

"How does it feel, Denny?"

"It feels more--like tomorrow." (_NW_ 221)

The second footing is what I take to be the central point of the preface Algren wrote in 1965 for the republication of his 1935 novel _Somebody in Boots_. He speaks of the genesis of the novel, which he originally called _Native Son_,[2] in a hope "to show a Final Descendant: a youth alienated from family and faith; illiterate and utterly displaced. . . . a man representing the desolation of the hinterlands as well as the disorder of the great city, exiled from himself and expatriated within his own frontiers. A man who felt no responsibility even toward himself."[3] Algren was in the mid-1960s writing after the termination of yet another frontier, this one officially called the New one, and he saw in its violent conclusion some pertinence to his first novel's protagonist: "Reading, thirty years after, this attempt to depict a man of no skills in a society unaware of his existence, the curiously opaque face of Lee Harvey Oswald, alive

one day and dead the next, comes through like the face of new multitudes" (SB 9).

> Belonging neither to the bourgeoisie nor the working class, seeking roots in revolution one week and in reaction the next, not knowing what to cling to nor what to abandon, compulsive, unreachable, dreaming of some sacrificial heroism, he murders a man he does not even hate, simply, by that act, to join the company of men at last.
>
> My flash notion of a Final Descendant now appears to be that of a progenitor. (SB 9)

In both cases we are involved in history as a nightmare, but the question of personally awakening "from" it is nullified. The American writer Herbert Gold has used the phrase "war every morning" as metonymy for his existence, and Nelson Algren, who greatly influenced Gold's writing, sees the daily war as a social world of grotesque beings and situations and senses of time and history which are laboring--and that includes giving birth--within an unended war and persisting social pathology. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, another "bullshitter" whose war wound never healed, wrote in 1932: "I cannot help being doubtful whether there are any other manifestations of the inner working of our souls besides war and disease, those two nightmares of infinite duration."[4] Algren's work tells us is that there is no such thing as a "postwar" period, because the war experience has so thoroughly infected daily life that a "return to normalcy" is only part of the necessary lie. "Survivors" are so egregiously damaged, physically and spiritually, that they are seen by Algren as ugliness, animated corpses, zombies. Similarly, to speak of "recovery" from the Great Depression is what Algren calls, in

another context, "conventional fatuity." The patients were too sick to recover; the "cure," a war, killed millions of them; the marks of the disease are permanent. The issues joined by Algren's work are stated, in a different context, and with one crucial difference, by T.W. Adorno:

> One of the basic human rights possessed by those who pick up the tab for the progress of civilization is the right to be remembered. Contrary to the affirmative totality of ideologies of emancipation, this right demands that the marks of humiliation be committed to remembrance in the form of imagines. Art must take up the cause of that which is branded ugly. In so doing, art should not try to integrate or mitigate ugliness, or seek to reconcile it with its existence by employing humor, which is more repulsive than all the ugliness there is.[5]

Three images revealing the extreme hurt and ugliness inflicted by the progress of civilization stay with me. The first is a film clip of the announcement of V-E Day to the segregated regiment of Japanese-American soldiers who fought for the United States in World War II. Not a single man cheers, nor smiles, nor salutes the flag. These Nisei soldiers were the most highly decorated unit in the history of the American military. Their casualty rate in some battles approached 300%. Almost all of their families were interned in concentration camps in the United States during the period in which these men so distinguished themselves. When these "heroes" returned to the United States, the first task of most of them was to assist in moving their families out of the camps in which they had spent the war. Some of the veterans did so wearing their uniforms.[6]

Alfred Döblin's novel Berlin Alexanderplatz, which Algren

knew and esteemed, starts with this passage:

> He stood in front of the Tegel Prison gate and was free now. Yesterday in convict's garb he had been raking potatoes with the others in the fields back of the building, now he was walking in a tan summer topcoat; they were still back there, he was free. He let one street-car after another go by, pressed his back against the red wall, and did not move. The gateman walked past him several times, showed him his car-line; he did not move. The terrible moment had come (terrible, Franze, why terrible?), the four years were over. The black iron gates, which he had been watching with growing disgust for a year (disgust, why disgust?), were shut behind him. They had let him out again. Inside, the others sat at their carpentry, varnishing, sorting, gluing, had still two years, five years to do. He was standing at the carstop.
>
> The punishment begins.[7]

Herman Melville's profoundly predictive story "Benito Cereno" deals with a slave rebellion aboard a Portugese slave ship. The American captain who "rescues" the Portugese Don grows "more and more astonished and pained" at his beneficiary's gloom, and cries "'You are saved, . . . you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?'" Don Benito replies, "'The negro.'"

None of these scenes presents ugliness as deformity, damage or grossness. They carry and convey an ugliness that manifests itself as "frozenness" or inanition infiltrating the subjects' lives. The subjects are as if bound by their historical circumstances, and any next move--a next move has to be made--will carry all the marks and distortions of that binding. These images say, and Algren's work does as well, that all societal apparatuses or rituals for purgation, penitence, renewal, or salvation (war, prison, work, intoxication, "The Jeffersons," the

arrival of the U.S. Cavalry) fail because they are intrinsically anti-social, that is to say, they hurt the realm in which life reproduces life. The conventional fatuity that approves of, and even demands these "solutions," or the aesthetic expressions consonant with them is expedient partial vision--apotheosized. It allows only a monolithic vision, and enforces the terms of a monolithic discourse. Its pieties are "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all," or "Look on the bright side of things," or "Smile, darn you, smile." "Forget." "Turn your face away." "Stay in line." In the greater part of his work, Nelson Algren wrote correctively, that is, he wrote against the extinction of a real image of suffering, and in some of his work he wrote to provide a better vision of humanity than the official culture found it to its advantage to present. In "Things of the Earth: A Groundhog View," which seems in retrospect a summarizing credo, and what was at the time of its publication in 1952 an astonishingly bitter attack on the postwar American boom, Algren said:

> [W]e are today living in a laboratory of human suffering as vast and terrible as that in which Dickens and Dostoevsky wrote. The chief difference being that we can afford, as the England of Dickens and the Russia of Dostoevsky could not afford, a glittering psychological facade, a coast-to-coast tote-board upon which hourly bulletins proclaim our national contentment.
>
> An assumption of happiness through mechanical ingenuity none the less tragic for being naive.
>
> For the bulletins are as false as McCarthy himself. As false, let us say, as Mr. Whittaker Chambers, hand over heart, confessing, "I never inform on anyone but I feel something die inside me"--and in the same breath murmuring thank you

> for $75,000 in magazine serial rights.
> This is how a creature of the deep sees life steadily and sees it whole. [Algren had earlier referred to Chambers as a "subaquaeous growth."]

In 1952 the course of correction was clear to Algren:

> To my own lights Matthew Arnold's phrase today means, rather, the capacity to see that our myths are so many, our vision so dim, our self-deception so deep and our smugness so gross that scarcely any way now remains of reporting the American Century except from behind the tote-board. . . . In the acres and acres of furnished rooms as well as in the smalltown slums; along the dim-lit streets behind the bright-lit boulevards as on the rutted roads behind Main Street; in the chicken-wire flops as in the all-steel cells with the solid doors; in the backroom brothels as in the Central Police lineups; in the wards and the courts and the hospitals, the dens and the dives, we see and touch the bone and flesh of which our time is forged at last.[8]

That flesh and blood tended toward the shop-worn. Or history-worn. In the section of <u>Chicago: City on the Make</u> (1951) called "Bright Faces of Tomorrow," Algren spent some words on the casualties--and not those in the "Enemy Dead" column--of the American Century:

> You can't push nineteen-year-olds who want to be good doctors and good engineers into a war for the salvation of importers' investments and expect them to come out believing in anything much beyond the uses of the super-bazooka against "gooks." You can see the boys who stopped caring in 1917 under the city arc-lamps yet.
> Under the arc-lamps yet. As evening comes taxiing in and the jungle hiders come softly forth: geeks and gargoyles, old blown winoes, sour stewbums and grinning ginsoaks, young dingbats who went ashore on D Plus One or D Plus Two and have been trying to find some arc-lit shore ever since. Strolling with ancient boxcar perverts who fought all their wars on the Santa Fe.
> Deserters' faces, wearing the very latest G.I. issue: the plastic masks of an icy-cold de-

spair. Where the sick of heart and the lost of spirit stray. From the forgotten battlegrounds on the other side of the billboards, on the other side of the TV commercials, the other side of the headlines. Fresh from the gathering of snipes behind the nearest KEEP OFF warnings come the forward patrols of tomorrow. Every day is D-day under the El.[9]

With what I'd call "evolutionary persistence"--his methods changed but his loyalties didn't-- Algren reported the voices, faces, bodies, situations and memories of the laboratory behind the tote-board. That material was, as the Hartford Courant warned all America on both the spine and the cover of the Avon "Red-Gold" edition of The Neon Wilderness, "Not for the squeamish." Some time after the publication in 1949 of The Man with the Golden Arm, which was Algren's third novel, he ceased to be taken aback by critics routinely lashing him for writing almost exclusively about society's dregs: whores, cons, sadists, junkies, grifters, pimps, juicers, bums and "sec-fiends." The incidence of "lonesome monsters" is indeed high in his work. In fact, Algren wasted hardly any novelistic ink on dull conformists, bright boys, docile consumers, "successes," or the voting constituency of any senator in the United States. The reasons are fairly briefly stated: why write about the Man in the Grey Flannel Suit and Marjorie Morningstar--Algren said he wouldn't even be able to work up the interest necessary to show up at their wedding--when "the ones whose victories fall close enough to the heart to afford real hope; whose defeats cost everything of real value; and whose grief leaves scar tissue enough to satisfy Ilsa Koch"[10] aren't found in supermarkets, office build-

ings, universities, magazines, televisions, movies and other such ghost-pens. That one-dimensional existence is of no transformative help whatsoever. What can help are images and stories of the lives of those who are too maimed to participate in the single nation "where ownership and virtue are one."[11]

How they can help, and by what specific means they can do so, are the issues this thesis addresses.

Throughout Algren's works, both the fearful and the exuberant grotesque show themselves. This thesis contends that the grotesque, as image, character and situation, is the primary expressive mode of Algren's novels, and that the character of Algren's fiction was changed by the steady proliferation through it of what the Russian theorist and critic Mikhail Bakhtin has spoken of as "grotesque realism." Although Somebody in Boots and Never Come Morning (1942) were deeply infused with the suffering of Algren's contemporaries and with Algren's sorrow over their torments, a crazy, subversive humor intermittently flashed out of these early books. That strain, which drew on what Bakhtin has called the "carnivalesque" traditions of folk humor, grew more vital to and in the later novels The Man with the Golden Arm and A Walk on the Wild Side (1956). The latter novel, which grew from a revision of Somebody in Boots into a full-blown parodic re-vision of it, is the height of carnivalization in Algren's work. Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque, as well as that of Donald Fanger, will be discussed in the first chapter. I have also discussed the insufficiencies, for reading Algren's books,

of three other concepts of the grotesque: the Romantic, the psychological, and the "aristocratic." The work of Walt Whitman, which was so vital in shaping Algren's social and political ethics, will frequently enter the discussion of Algren's novels. Whitman evolved a practice, if not a theory of the grotesque, which has been little attended to. Throughout my work here, the emphasis will be on the grotesque as a mode of cultural criticism, "the truth of which," as Adorno held, "consists of bringing untruth to consciousness of itself."[12]

Algren had the brass to answer in a single sentence Jean-Paul Sartre's question, "what is literature?" He said, "I submit that literature is made upon any occasion that a challenge is put to the legal apparatus by conscience in touch with humanity." His next sentence, because he was fond of mocking the _ex cathedra_ tone, was "Now we all know" (_CCM_ 81). This wise-guy moment, though, was backed by a body of writing which never dishonored his definition. We can learn about constancy from Algren, about critical loyalty and about endurance. Whatever species of the grotesque he put before us was a challenge to the manifold untruths of the law, understood as "those arrangements more convenient to owners of property than to the propertyless" (_CCM_ 81). To understand the magnitude of this project, to understand that Algren wasn't simply writing tough-guy bestsellers, to understand the gap between mid-century American cultural reality and Algren's convictions about what it could and should be, we should look at his preface to the 1963 edition of _Never Come Morning_.

In it, Algren gives a funny, mordant and deeply compassionate answer to the Polish Americans who, in the Chicago daily Zgoda, had sneered that "the author leaves a clue to his qualifications" by setting at the head of his novel these lines from Whitman:

> I feel I am of them--
> I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself,
> And henceforth I will not deny them--
> For how can I deny myself?

The review continued, calling Algren

> the product of a distorted mentality, for in his treatment of houses of ill repute he is in an element all his own and no doubt was on a narcotics jag when he concocted this story. It is doubtful whether Goebbels' personal adjutant could have ordered a juicier Pole-baiting tale than this Swede has dared. When free copies begin to find their way into the hands of unsuspecting victims it's a signal that this anti-Polish propaganda is definitely directed by Nazi money. At 32, Algren, a Scandinavian, cannot possibly be without malice in his heart against the Poles.[13]

Algren, who as he remarks was neither thirty-two, a Scandinavian nor an addict, and who was at the time the review appeared "nourishing so much malice in [his] heart against drill-sergeants that he had not a smidgeon to spare 4-F civilians," saw in this piece and the others of its ilk "the furious logic of illiteracy" (NCM xi). His phrase was not directed at Polish American unintentional dialect humor; Algren got his laughs out of that and left it. The "illiteracy" was the inability to see that,

> the novel attempted to say, about the American outcast, what James Baldwin has observed more recently of the American Negro: if you don't know my name you don't know your own. I felt that if we did not understand what was happening to men and women who shared all the horrors but none of the privileges of our civilization, then we did

> not know what was happening to ourselves. . . .
> The failure of the people at Zgoda was a failure
> of feeling. A failure to feel
> . . . I am of them--
> I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself,
> And henceforth I shall not deny them--
> for how can I deny myself?

Algren finished by saying: "And Zgoda runs from coast to coast" (NCM xiv). In the symnecrotic relationship of the American middle class to the images it devours, whatever the ambivalences or anxieties that condition the total experience of consumption, the sole desirable public face which emerges from the spectacular experience is a smiling one. Or a face so expressionless, so vacant, so smooth, that it betrays no evidence of remembering seeing anything at all. A solid citizen must, after all, have a certain degree of a certain kind of "help" simply to face war every morning, simply to curtain off or mediate whatever images of rupture, breakdown, or hostility might lunge out of a badly-diseased, but actual and living and sometimes uproariously funny social world. From the start of his career, Algren wrote against the staking down forever of a tarpaulin which would muffle speech and cut off vision. In the circus or army tent he most feared America would become, the only speech heard would be the gospel of the hunters and the hustlers, which in the service of the numb "is" expunges memory and conscience. Algren spent his life throwing incendiary writing at the big top. At the end, he thought most of it bounced off. But if we should want to stretch, take a leak and a look at the stars, we might yet trip over some, still lit, that would help us if we carried it inside.

Notes to Introduction

[1] Nelson Algren, "Pero Venceremos," in The Neon Wilderness (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 215. Hereafter cited as NW in the body of the text.

[2] Richard Wright, with whom Algren became friends through the Chicago John Reed Club, asked permission to use the title after Algren mentioned its being 86'ed by the publisher who chose the title Somebody in Boots. See Martha Heasley Cox and Wayne Chatterton, Nelson Algren (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), pp. 32-33.

[3] Nelson Algren, Somebody in Boots (New York: Berkeley, 1965), p. 8. Hereafter cited as SB in the body of the text.

[4] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Journey to the End of the Night, trans. John H.P. Marks (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 416.

[5] T.W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 72.

[6] Loni Ding, dir., Nisei Soldier: Standard Bearer for a People.

[7] Alfred Döblin, Berlin Alexanderplatz, trans. Eugene Jolas (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), p. 4. In a letter of February 3, 1968 to publisher William Targ, Algren suggests several "forgotten goodies" for republication. In addition to Döblin's novel, he mentions Wolf Among Wolves by Hans Fallada and Lion Feuchtwanger's Success. The letter is in the Nelson Algren Papers, Ohio State University Library, Columbus, Ohio.

[8] Nelson Algren, "Things of the Earth," The California Quarterly, Autumn 1952, pp. 8-9.

[9] Nelson Algren, Chicago: City on the Make (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), p. 59. Hereafter cited as CCM in the body of the text.

[10] Algren, "Things of the Earth," p. 9. Harold Rosenberg, with whom Algren had, as far as I can determine, no contact, said of a "typical New England town": "The only element with any human appeal is 'the shack people,' rural Bohemians who live on the outskirts of town, don't give a damn about its standards or self-delusions, take jobs when they need cash, and spend the rest of their time hunting, fishing and getting drunk. . . ." The particular spectre they personify is "the social void that lies in wait for those who fail to keep up with their various levels of

'stylized consumption.'" See "Roadside Arcadia" in his Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture, and Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 33.

[11] Nelson Algren, The Man with the Golden Arm (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1949), p. 17. Hereafter cited as MGA in the body of the text.

[12] T.W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in his Prisms, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981), p. 28.

[13] Nelson Algren, Never Come Morning (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. ix. Hereafter cited as NCM in the body of the text.

Chapter 1: Out of the Trophonian Cave: The Grotesque State of Theories of the Grotesque

i

The Problem of Rot:

We should go back to Denny O'Connor's shrapnel wound. The narrator tells us that he had first seen the leg and foot after Sierra La Valls:

> It was marked four times from shrapnel between the ankle and the knee; the heel wore a crusted wound, like a sea shell's crusted mouth, and was crossed twice by thin white scars, as a hot cross bun is crossed with sugar. After ten years it was still open and the edges were as hard as cement. Within, like O'Connor, it was decaying. (NW, 218)

O'Connor compares the size of shrapnel to half-dollars and dimes, and says of the dime "'this'll slice off a hand like slicin' through cheese.'" Of the particular piece of shrapnel that accounted for the heel wound, O'Connor "touched fingertip to thumb to indicate a pellet the size of a grape seed."

Even if it doesn't occur in full analysed consciousness to a reader, it's likely that gut if not brain will respond to the array of images based on the close quarters of food and putrefaction. We might note that the rot is spiritual as well as physical; that the grape seed may be symbol as well as measurement. But the basis of this cluster is the commingling in consciousness of two things that we never want to see together on our dinner plate.

Setting aside for a moment the insufficiency of talking about the grotesque simply by reading images and having done, I'd

like to put forward two other literary examples which confront the reader with biological and other kinds of decay. The first is from The Fair, the only novel of the Mexican writer Juan José Arreola.

> Today while I was walking along the furrows so happily, feeling the fat ears of corn, I was astonished to find one that was a genuine monster. It had grown so big that it had burst the husk. The kernels were not white, but black, like enormous, rotten teeth.
>
> I was shaken, but Florentino, the foreman, assured me that this phenomenon occurs every year, and that no cornfield is free from these tecolotes, as they call them here. But for me it was a sign of bad luck to find, in the midst of all this greenness, that vegetable caricature, that evil grimace that shows up everywhere.[1]

The second is from the Russian writer Yurii Olesha's 1927 novella Envy.

> "We are dying, Kavalerov. I wanted to carry Woman above my head like a torch. I thought that Woman would be extinguished with our era. Thousands of years are piled in a dump-hole in which are scattered machines, lumps of iron, old cans, odd bolts, rusty springs. . . . It's a dark, bleak pit. And the only light there comes from the rot of phosphorescent fungi, from mold. And those are our feelings! That's all that's left of our feelings, of the flowering of our souls. Then the new man comes down to the pit, gropes around, climbs down into it, picks out what he needs--maybe a machine part, maybe a wrench--and he tramples upon the shining rot, extinguishes it. I dreamed of finding a woman who would blossom in that pit with unprecedented feeling, the miraculous flowering of a fern. So that the new man coming to steal our iron would be frightened, would withdraw his hand, close his eyes, blinded by the light of what he had thought was rot."[2]

These passages give us more to work with in considering the problem of rot. Food is conjoined to rot here, but beyond food as such there is nourishment, there is life-carried-on. Beyond

biological nourishment, in the passage from Olesha, is the human opportunity, however threatened, to live by, or at least with, "feelings." Denny O'Connor is presented to us in grotesque combinatory images which make it hard to discriminate living matter from dead, the nourishing from the putrefying. The superabundance of the tecolotes, at the same time too alive and frighteningly like rotten, shakes the formerly happy narrator. Olesha's rot is the mold of human feelings, glowing in a junkyard of history, and the "woman who would blossom in that pit with unprecedented feeling," feeding and feeding off the mold, is the greeny flower that would frighten the new man, who rummages in history only for the instrumental.

These passages exemplify the ambivalence of the grotesque. As I've mentioned, approaching the grotesque solely by reading and decoding images in isolation is of little real worth. If we want to understand these startling occurrences, we have to see them as proceeding from both character and world, and in turn helping to define character and world. We also have to consider that no one response is appropriate to these images. In contradistinction from modes such as tragedy, elegy and the epic, and in contradiction of them, the grotesque rejects the desirability of ritualized--or if we prefer, educated--responses. It is a way of producing and responding that can shake up what Adorno called "the high priests of art religion."[3] Geoffrey Harpham has said that the grotesque,

> because it calls forth contradictory interpretations,

> and interpretations to which it refuses to yield, . . . disrupts the relationship between art and the meaning of art. We should expect it, therefore, to cause consternation in many camps--among those concerned to relate art and reality, those concerned to establish the basis of "pure art," those who deny that art has any non-artistic meaning, and those who believe that the moral status of art is grounded in reliable and true interpretations. No matter what kind of case one wants to make on these basic aesthetic issues, one runs up against the problem of the grotesque art as the final obstacle to a universal and internally consistent theory of aesthetics.[4]

In the scene from Arreola's novel, it is essential to consider that the narrator, an intellectual, is shaken by what he sees as a "vegetable caricature," while the foreman, more intimate with the fields, sees no cause for alarm. We are not, however, given an "explanation" of the _tecolotes_, and neither is the narrator. The phenomenon is regular, not to worry, but still "that evil grimace shows up everywhere." A world, populated by various reactions, and by no indisputable final word, is being built here. We have little chance of responding intelligently to the images from Olesha without some knowledge of the speaking character, the bearer of a powerfully ambivalent and noticeably corrupt romanticism, and his interlocutor, the self-acknowledged, self-appointed "jester" of a Soviet New Man. Further, there is little likelihood that our sounding of the scene or of the characters will be very deep if we don't consider the complex parody and counter-parody in the work on the theme of nourishment (the antagonists are pseudo-traditional "feelings" and new Soviet types of sausages). We also need to attain a literary-historical sense of the past use and contexts of such images and characters,

and not simply the artistic use but also their cultural roots. Finally, we need to inquire about the society which received this work, and the character of its reception. (It happens that that inquiry here provides as pointed an example as one could wish of the differing interpretive climates of party-line journals and the public square. Briefly: official praise, based on the work's apparent ideological rectitude, gave way to official condemnation as the public laughter--at the New Soviet Engineer of New Soviet Sausages, not at the counter-revolutionary scum represented by his brother and his "jester"--somehow penetrated the ears above the caterpillar mustache.)

A grotesque image, in the traditional Vitruvian sense, is a "bastard form" in which life forms never before joined are pictorially presented as single organisms.[5] Thus human or animal heads crown tendrils; dwarfs somehow form majuscule letters; pediments support human torsos, which in turn flow into depictions of fountains, the water of which becomes leafy vegetation encircling and finally melding with the extremities of a crouched beast which is human below the shoulders and canine above. This sort of decorative art was brought to the European eye again in the late fifteenth century as a consequence of the excavations of the Domus Aurea, the emperor Nero's "one-building city." The frescoes which survived their interment (a consequence of the construction of Trajan's baths) were visited by numerous quattrocento artists, who fell to naming the style of what they saw after the site: <u>grottesche</u>, with its pertinent overtones of

grotto, cave, crypt, vault and, as Geoffrey Harpham has indicated through etymology, "of the underground, of burial, and of secrecy."[6]

The Roman images share with virtually all later grotesques a preoccupation with the joining and mixture of "usually" discrete states of being. Much of what can most conventionally be spoken of as "grotesque" imagery commingles the human and the animal, human and vegetal, human and mechanical or architectural, the living and the dead, the being-born and the dying, the young and old, male and female, dreaming and waking, the dead-in-life and the animated dead. In so doing, it is undeniably gross in several senses of the term (the delicacy Harpham speaks of in Raphael's Vatican loggia designs is more or less abandoned by later artists in favor of a more urgent or feverish crowding of images). Both image and language are often manifested gigantism, cancerousness, excess, superabundance, hyperbole and exaggeration. The bursting of the cultural conduits, which normally carry separately the pure and the taboo, the sacred and the profane, the high and the low, mixes the banished and the strictured with the exalted and the approved. Diseased or rotting matter, excrement, urine, blood and vomit are materials the grotesque uses to season its feasts. The monstrous aspect of the grotesque, seen as a combination of cancerous superabundance and putrefaction, expresses itself through the depiction of bodily excresences and deformations. At this point of what is often called "freakishness," it matters little if the subject of a

portrait is a giant or a dwarf, a person with three legs or none, a rotting leper or a prize-winningly super-abundant "body-builder." On the other side of deformity there are means of "repair" or of compensation for lost limbs and lost opportunities, through which human beings can become new organisms to perception, so closely bound to false legs or crutches or wheeled platforms, or false doctrines or mechanized or antic behavior that the usually discrete is fused, and we have a "grotesque."

These matters are often the occasion of grotesque images in writing, but taken out of context they scarcely do more than indicate the true problematic of the grotesque. How does a writer intend such images, if he or she uses them? How are we to "take" them, or more to the point, how do we, and have we, taken them? What world is expressed by the grotesque predilection for mingling?

The mingling of the living and the dead or dying, as in the case of Denny O'Connor's wound, and Denny O'Connor's being, sets before us an essential quandary of the grotesque. If degeneration, biological or otherwise, is expressed, what likelihood of regeneration does the image, character or world carry in it? Is the grotesque pregnant, or nihilistic? The two extremes of the position are identified in a passage which Walter Benjamin quoted in his 1937 essay on Eduard Fuchs, a German art collector and aesthetician:

> The grotesque is the highest escalation of what is sensually imaginable. In this sense, grotesque products become an expression of the teeming health of a time. . . . Yet one cannot dispute the fact

> that the motivating forces of the grotesque have a crass counterpoint. Decadent times and sick brains also incline toward grotesque representations. In such cases, the grotesque becomes the shocking reflection of the fact that for the times and individuals in question, the problems of existence have taken on an appearance of unsolvable complexity. Which of the two tendencies, however, is the creative motivating force behind a grotesque fantasy can be recognized at first glance.[7]

While Benjamin was cool to what he identified as Fuchs's tendency to immediate valuation of artistic productions, and to his choice of relatively unproblematic periods such as the Renaissance in which to exercise his judgements, the value which he ascribed to Fuchs's work, which Benjamin himself was to extend in his writings on Baudelaire and Leskov, was manifold. The "democratic pathos of 1830," which Benjamin sees in Fuchs's understanding of history, moved the latter to attend to productions less representative of the "master" or the "genius" than of "the way the totality then looked upon the world and things" (Fuchs). This rejection of "the fetish of the master's signature," a fetish characteristic of the bourgeois art market, dictated the study of "border disciplines" such as caricature and erotic art. Benjamin felt that "the fact that he considers scorned and apocryphal matters indicates his real strength," because such studies "sooner or later meant the ruin of a series of clichés in traditional art history."[8] The central cliché was that classicism and masterworks represented the highest and most admirable state of human existence, and that the material problems such art ignored were not worthy of consideration by artists, critics or a public to be trained in consumption. Mass art,

such as Daumier's lithographs, produced caricatural and grotesque images in which "the productive forces and the masses come together in images of historical man."[9] Benjamin's most valuable contribution to a concept of the grotesque was to demonstrate in a historical and materialist way, particularly in his work on Baudelaire, that such images, graphic or literary, are by no means susceptible to "immediate valuations." Benjamin saw this aspect of Fuchs's work as the cause of its popularity, and chose to sacrifice wide and quick reception of his own work to a more tentative style, which stressed the interpenetration of cultural activities and values. In so doing, he produced a brilliant and unsettling way of looking for the grotesque, a method which owed much to Baudelairean "correspondances" and to surrealism.

That said, we should realize that the polar positions Fuchs identified continue to inform, with various degrees of usefulness, discussions of the grotesque as an aesthetic problem. The current state of studies of the grotesque is itself now irretrievably mixed and, for a terminological purist such as Wolfgang Kayser, degenerate. Kayser's seminal work Das Groteske: seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung appeared in 1957, and in English translation in 1963 as The Grotesque in Art and Literature. This volume largely represents the grotesque as an alienated world-view expressing "decadent times and sick brains." Until the appearance of Mikhail Bakhtin's Rabelais and His World (English translation 1968), Kayser's interpretation was regnant. Bakhtin's book on Rabelais, as well as his Problems of

Dostoevsky's Poetics and the essays collected in The Dialogic Imagination, constitute, for reasons which I will discuss, an absolutely necessary challenge to the assumed universality of Kayser's definition of the grotesque. Bakhtin's is the strongest voice speaking of the grotesque at its highest (Rabelaisian) development as "an expression of the teeming health of the times." Each theory has its particular character, but like grotesque images, and pace Fuchs, more than one glance is needed to determine the character of these theories.

"The constantly renewed invocation of fear":

Of Goya's work: "distinctly ominous, nocturnal, and abysmal." Of Lenz's: "images of a world in the process of dissolution and estrangement." Of Hoffman's: "madness is the climactic phase of estrangement from the world." Of Büchner's: "our smile is tinged by the fear of a world in which men are no longer themselves." What do Schlegel's thoughts on the grotesque in his _Gespräch über die Poesie_ (_Conversation About Poetry_) omit? Only "the abysmal quality, the insecurity, the terror inspired by the disintegration of the world." And Friedrich Theodor Vischer's yoking of the grotesque and the humorous? The "inhuman and ominous quality." It is Jean Paul's "constantly renewed invocation of fear in the presence of a world about to be alienated" which allows Kayser to emphatically subscribe to a view of him as a writer of the grotesque. Keller's work, despite realistic elements, is grotesque because "the ominous, unfathomable, and somber powers form part of his world, and the narrator, no matter how deeply his keen glance penetrates and how much he likes to smile and to make others smile, is by no means unfamiliar with the horrors of the abyss."[10]

The nature of the Kayserian grotesque should be apparent through the assemblage above, as should be his reliance for textual material on the primarily German Romantic and post-Romantic writers noted. This sensibility, which we could call the Romantic and post-Romantic Germanic Satanic Demonic Inverted-

Christian Masochist proto-pseudo-Nietzschean Nihilist Grotesque, but won't, has a good deal in common with the expressions of Charles Baudelaire, particularly in his essay "On the Essence of Laughter." His hero Edgar Allen Poe was often the American carrier of the strain. It is characterized by fear of eternal damnation or "the void" (this term becomes obsessive in Bonaventura); by the assertion of the Satanic origin of laughter (Jean Paul and Bonaventura as well as Baudelaire speak of this); by an unwilling inclusion of the earthly, the common and the material in its imagery; and by a view of history as neither cyclical nor progressive, but rather as dystrophic or apocalyptic. Further, the images of this writing often shift attention toward the appurtenances of the soul (the eyes, particularly) and away from what Bakhtin calls "the lower bodily stratum." Topographically, the "heroes" of this school yearn for ascent to heaven, to a beyond, or, generally, to a higher life. They are, at the same time, tempted by the terror of descent to the lower regions of their own or other bodies, of their cities, and of human thought and experience. A number of protagonists of the Romantic grotesque are of the seedy-dandy type, and they yearn for remove from the grubby congress of daily life to any elevation out of the masses and into a hermetic state of luxury altogether beyond both economic struggle and economic class. The marked contempt for democratic reality which so often surfaces in Poe and Baudelaire expresses the "unnecessary man" fighting to maintain not only his imagined uniqueness (which even in parox-

ysms of self-ridicule causes him terrible pain), but also his separation from the masses _and_ their masters the owning class. This consciousness is fired by the complex of intellectual pride, agony over worldly and bodily necessities and drives (drives which are rarely experienced as pleasures), anxiety over the maintenance of a supra-class position, desperate self-mockery and nihilistic self-appraisal, masochism in its self-debasing identification with the wealthy, sadism in its hatred of the poor and the otherwise stigmatized, and finally, buffoonish apocalypticism. The most perfect expression of the plexus in all its contradictoriness is Baudelaire's tortured prose poem "Let's Beat Up the Poor." All of these aspects of Romantic consciousness can conduce to the creation of the images and stories, and finally world, that Kayser certifies as grotesque.

Most significant for Kayser, though, is that this grotesque, both engendered by and expressing alienation, is above all else metaphysical. With what he takes as the advent of the realist strain of grotesque art, Kayser sees a diminution: "In its attempts to define the nature of the grotesque, modern esthetics has not yet reached the level attained between 1770 and 1830, for it still assigns it a place in the lowlands of the coarsely humorous."[11] Speaking of post-1850 writing on the grotesque, Kayser maintains that "the metaphysical content of the grotesque, which was still essential to Hegel, now ceased to be recognized and was simply ignored; instead of Vischer's fairly comprehensive definition of humor, the measurable psychic effect of laughter

became the legal [!] basis of future definitions."[12]

This is a daunting fragment. Even if Kayser could explain why he used the word "legal" in this context, and even if he could tell us how to measure the psychic effect (note the singular) of laughter, we still might be troubled by his put-outedness at the appearance of laughter, and the disappearance of metaphysics, as characteristic of the grotesque. Kayser explicitly assigns the highest value to metaphysical concerns and interpetations of the grotesque, and in fact to a particular metaphysics of the absurd. It is meaning which vitiates the grotesque, in Kayser's view, and "the creator of grotesques . . . must not and cannot suggest a meaning. Nor must he distract our attention from the absurd."[13] I quote Max Horkheimer's Dammerung to suggest one meaning of such "meaningless" creation:

> I do not know how far metaphysicians are correct; perhaps somewhere there is a particularly compelling metaphysical system or fragment. But I do know that metaphysicians are usually impressed only to the smallest degree by what men suffer.[14]

Would it in any sense be wise or just to apply such a theory of the grotesque to the writing of Nelson Algren, a man impressed to a very large degree by what men and women suffer, and who warned off metaphysicians by saying "I wouldn't know an Eternal Verity if I met a Conservative leading one on a leash at four a.m. under the Logan Square El"?[15]

Kayser is, however, correct in stating that with the appearance of the realist grotesque stemming from criminal lowlife and coarse humor, a turning-point in the history of the term had been

reached. Correct, that is, if we add "re-" to "appearance" and "turning" in the previous sentence. Before moving to the scholarship that clarifies the importance of such sources to the grotesque, and sees in the Kayserian Romantic grotesque a branch rather than the trunk, we should consider two theories of the grotesque which offer useful ideas but which are ultimately insufficient in dealing with grotesque realism.

The unsystematic formulation by Thomas Mann of an "expressionist" grotesque is found in his Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen (Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man), published originally in 1918. Mann's thoughts on the subject can't be said to constitute an elaborate theory, but they are important to consider in their fragmentariness, particularly because of the inaccurate valuation they have been accorded in English-language criticism. The translated text was not published in full until 1983, and the practice of quoting *via* the "found in" method made it difficult for those without German to weigh Kayser's suggestion that Mann's work is more unlike than like the Romantic grotesque. Given the following passage (and this is the one usually quoted in English-language texts), it might be possible to see more difference than similarity:

> The grotesque is the supratrue and the exceedingly real, not the arbitrary, false, antireal, and absurd. And an artist who would deny all obligation to life, who would carry disgust for the impression [Tolstoy's characteristic source] so far that he practically divests himself of all obligation to real forms of life, and who only allows the dictatorial emanations of some kind of absolute art demon to hold sway: such an artist may well be called the greatest of all radical fools.[16]

Mann's theory would seem to part company at least with the most extreme fantasists of the grotesque, and perhaps with the Satanic Baudelaire and the demonic Poe. But Mann equates the grotesque with expressionism, any untempered use of which he unreservedly damns. The inevitable tendency of the expressionist grotesque is to pull away from all the reality of the really real that Mann defends throughout the book, that is, the unpoliticized--and naturally, the undemocratic. When Mann blasts "social-critical expressionism" for its "inability to love the close and the real" he is speaking against a kind of creation he despises: the fantasies of democrats masquerading as artists (e.g. Emile Zola). In Mann's terms, the close and the real become the arrangements enjoyed by the beneficiaries of an unmixed and unthreatened Bürger culture. These "realities" are set against what Mann calls the expressionist fantasies of writers like Zola. Only when conditioned by what he saw as a Tolstoyan valuation of reality can the grotesque be useful to the affirmation and preservation of the culture Mann speaks for. In its insistence on a very particular kind of "impressionism" as a brake on the root impulses of the grotesque, Mann's theory is a variant on that of the Romantic. In both cases the word is used to characterize a species of alienation, however dissimilar the motivating forces of that alienation. Confronted with Zola's work, Mann seems to have felt much the same shock--and perhaps fear--that Kayser equates with a genuine response to the grotesque. Both have, in any case, used the word to indicate a

fearful departure from the close and familiar: Kayser to the abyss, and Mann to democracy. In this sense, Mann's "cultural despair" echoes Baudelaire's most elegant, contemptuous, fear-ridden and isolated pronouncements.[17]

Critics who have adopted the vocabulary and world-view of ego psychology explain laughter in the presence of the grotesque as the operation of a "mechanism" which defends the individual against the embodied terrors of the situation. Michael Steig has pointed out that "the grotesque involves the managing of the uncanny by the comic."[18] As Steig sees it, this managerial function of laughter is carried out--when it performs as it "should"--when laughter casts down the uncanny, the alienating, and the terrorizing into a psychological basement. Comedy, or the comic reaction, builds a shaky floor over these threats; we spend our lives in what Lee Byron Jennings calls, and Steig quotes him, "playfulness . . . constantly on the verge of collapsing and giving way to the concealed horror."[19] While this notion of laughter moves us closer to the powerful Bakhtinian concept of "reduced laughter," there are problems with the further expression of this theory that we should notice.

Again, note the topographic character of this theory: at the bottom is chaos, horror, extinction of the ego. Descent is always a serious threat to continued individual psychic survival. The terrorizing and estranging grotesque is managed--barely--by banishment to the cellar. The "job," if one wants to remain integral, is to stay above all that. Jennings is quite melodra-

matically taken with the topographic metaphor: "the threat of chaos brings with it a terrifying vertigo and loss of footing, but the footing is regained as we attain the superior vantage point of the observer."[20] We (for Jennings and Steig this is not a problematic term) maintain superiority through the expression of an "attitude of amused detachment." Sharing the psychological high ground with "us," indeed defining it, are "the basic norms of existence (e.g. personal identity, the stability of our unchanging environment, the inviolate nature of the human body, and the separation of human and non-human realms)."[21]

The problem here is that in considering the sources of grotesque images (Jennings calls it "a primordial wellspring"), the psychological, the philosophical, and the theological are noted, and the social is entirely ignored. The world beyond the individual psyche and between that psyche and the world of "nature" and metaphysics simply doesn't exist for this theory. Thus the realm in which each day we could encounter grotesques--say some of the very poor--whose personal identity, stability of environment, bodily integrity, and distinction from the inanimate is under unremitting attack by social arrangements and socially-conditioned perception, is virtually passed over in silence. In this kitsch-romantic preoccupation with the suffering self and the chaos and grandeur of nature, we have yet another theory of the grotesque that only leaves the self to go to Heaven or Hell or Nature or Abstraction. The preoccupation is with the inner and the beyond, to the exclusion of the between. Jennings in

particular has anchored his theory in "basic norms of existence" without pausing to consider that such norms are not the exclusive properties of psychology, and that indeed they may be the property of the class that can pay for them. At stake is a hierarchy, and laughter here is directed down at that which threatens the hierarchy.

The tendency of all these theories of the grotesque is to center experience either in the isolated individual psyche, or to place it in a yearning for a wholly unearthly existence. Only in Mann's theory is the social world a matter of consideration, and then only in the most pessimistic terms. While artists have unquestionably written out of such a despairing consciousness, of what use is the critic who in his or her analyses reproduces the ideology without illuminating it? The problem is put briefly by Mikhail Bakhtin in The Formal Method of Literary Scholarship:

> We are most inclined to imagine ideological creation as some inner process of understanding, comprehension, and perception, and do not notice that it in fact unfolds externally, for the eye, the ear, the hand. It is not within us, but between us.[22]

In the spirit of Bakhtin's willingness to sharpen his own work by grinding it on the flawed stone provided by his adversaries, I will say that much use can be made of the theories so far discussed. It is essential to realize, though, that their application cannot be universal; that the theories, like the works of art they discuss, are deeply implicated in historical and cultural circumstances; and that blinding rather than illuminating criticism results from the dogmatic use of an inappro-

priate theory (e.g. Kayser on Rabelais). I have no quarrel with a critical application of a Romantic, alienated concept of the grotesque to Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," as has been done frequently. Does the same theory get us very far with "The Man of the Crowd," with Poe's essay "Man and Superman," or even with "The Tell-Tale Heart"? Baudelaire's demonism is demonstrable, as is the tendency of some of his work toward an extreme symbolic inwardness. His essays on laughter and on the caricature are controlled by that animus. Can this spirit prevail in the emotional and intellectual climate Baudelaire created in works like "Le Crepuscule du soir" ("Twilight: Evening"), or is it finally less compelling to the speaker than what is "between us"? That poem concludes, after an impotent invocation of demons to make hysterical and "erase" the daily urban agony:

> This is the hour to compose yourself, my soul,
> ignore the music they make; avert your eyes.
> Now comes the time when invalids grow worse
> and darkness takes them by the throat; they end
> their fate in the usual way, and all their sighs
> turn hospitals into a cave of the winds.
> More than one will not come back for broth
> warmed at the fireside by devoted hands.
>
> Most of them, in fact, have never known
> a hearth to come to, and have never lived.[23]

Kayser would perhaps deny that the poem is authentically grotesque,[24] since the alienated world of demons and hysteria falls off in the presence of almost naturalistic images, images carrying pathos and sympathy. But the poem is grotesque, perhaps doubly so, in that it undercuts any validation of the Romantic posed reaction. That pathos, as a single-minded, unself-critical

seriousness, is seen by Baudelaire as tawdry opportunism and an easy way out of a far more disturbing world: the very bleak world of those dying who have never lived.

Baudelaire's essayistic Satanism fails him and his drive for isolation is checked; Mann's elitist cultural pessimism couldn't survive the hideousness of National Socialism and scrutiny by his own feeling intelligence; Kayser's valorization of the metaphysical limits and sometimes makes his notions irrelevant; and Jenning's melodrama in the skull begins to seem like coded, evasive fantasy about an unbearably real social world ("the immediate threat of attack to our person . . . disappears as we gain the superior vantage point of the disinterested spectator; the nightmare creature has been disarmed").[25]

Are there, though, theories of the grotesque that grow out of the social, and by their attention to the voices of "the between," always put isolating and insulating pathos to the test? Emphatically, yes.

The grotesque as habitus and habitation:

> There was one man who was allowed, as an indulgence, to keep rabbits. His room having rather a close smell in consequence, they called to him at the door to come out into the passage. He complied of course, and stood shading his haggard face in the unwonted sunlight of the great window, looking as wan and unearthly as if he had been summoned from the grave. He had a white rabbit in his breast; and when the little creature, getting down upon the ground, stole back into the cell, and he, being dismissed, crept timidly after it, I thought it would have been very hard to say in what respect the man was the nobler animal of the two.

- Charles Dickens, American Notes

In one of his few mentions of social reality, Kayser remarks that "the disintegration of order in a spatially unified social group, the estrangement inflicted upon an entire city" is a motif that frequently occurs in post-seventeenth century grotesque writing.[26] In his brief remarks on the motif, it is clear that Kayser will continue his metaphysical construal of "estrangement." If, however, this term is heard in its cultural and political-economic sense, we have located the basis of one of two theories which achieve a socially-defined theory of the grotesque. Donald Fanger, in Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism and The Creation of Nikolai Gogol, sets forth observations on the grotesque productions of Balzac, Dickens, Gogol and Dostoevsky, attentive always to the crucial distinctions between their works. Fanger's attitude toward the varying uses of the term "grotesque" is sane and good-natured (a rarity in the field): "the word may fairly be used to mean a variety of things, so long as its

meaning on any given occasion is indicated with sufficient precision to distinguish it from other possible (and equally legitimate) meanings."[27] He defines the grotesque as: "any deviation from a conventional ('natural') norm so sharp as to seem monstrous, but not so sharp as to obscure the norm itself" (F 231); and says, in his more recent book, that "'the grotesque' . . . signals an interference of series: an unresolvable dualism of narrative attitude toward what is being presented, an arbitrarily shifting scale of magnitude (physical and semantic), and so a provocation to the reader."[28]

The basis of Fanger's commentary is "a cluster of artistic values newly connected," at the center of which is "the romantic rediscovery of the notion of the grotesque." (F 20) Fanger uses the qualifier "romantic" to indicate a particular shade of realism which became the artistic vision "first to fully realize the potentialities of the metropolis as a subject of fiction" (F 20). Romantic realism carried on the romantic _typos_ of the rebel, outcast, and criminal, but its insistence on immersion in the phantasmagorical cities of the nineteenth century allowed it to "renew its [the outlaw hero's] appeal and deepen its relevance to contemporary life by discovering a milieu that would give it support and substantiation" (F 21). The new _topos_ is the urban hallucination, real and hyper-real and not-real, the "laboratory of human suffering" Algren spoke of, typified by Balzac's Paris, Dickens's London, and the St. Petersburg of Gogol and Dostoevsky. The romantic yearning for escape and elevation is broken, and the

precipitous descent into a dreamlike social reality fetches up in an underworld of grotesque shadows, of real walls and streets and squalid interiors, of Balzac's "thieves, prostitutes, and convicts." These types are indispensable to Balzac precisely because the pressure of bourgeois homogenization has flattened social contrasts, the presentation of which is vital to a novel. It is not just that the comfortable lack savor, but that they have no interruptions of their endless serial. Balzac says that "the only strongly marked mores and the only possible comedy are to be found among thieves, prostitutes, and convicts; the only energy is to be found in these beings separated from society."[29] Charles Dickens, in his preface to the third (1841) edition of Oliver Twist, insisted on the necessity of rendering with uncompromising fidelity (excepting language which could offend) "the miserable reality" of the early eighteenth century London world of thieves, fences, pickpockets and whores. With the exception of a somewhat sanitized criminals' argot, Dickens saw the entire value of his lesson ("the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last") in the realistic representation of the utter squalor through which the essentially pure and good Oliver is dragged, and yet prevails. The loci and appointments of the actual criminal world are not in the least piquancies or seductions, but rather are "the cold, wet, shelterless midnight streets of London; the foul and frowsy dens, where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn; the haunts of hunger and disease, the shabby rags that scarcely

hold together." At the same time that Dickens argues for a monitory picture of vice, he argues against the prevalent depiction of the criminal as a figure of romance, and writes off the consumers of such representations. The gallant, the highwayman, the Macheath or even Vautrin type--all catered, as Dickens sees the situation, to a genteel readership which had a marked taste for crime stories, but only when the characters were scented, accented and bedecked in a congenial, non-offensive, near-aristocratic but nevertheless most wicked manner. Dickens bluntly dismisses this audience: "I have no respect for their opinion, good or bad; do not covet their approval; and do not write for their amusement." Citing Hogarth's work as the sole uncompromising representation of criminal reality which he had encountered, the creator of Fagin, Bill Sykes and the prostitute Nancy said:

> It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really do exist; to paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid poverty of their lives; to show them as they really are, for ever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great, black, ghastly gallows closing up their prospect, turn them where they may; it appeared to me that to do this, would be to attempt a something which was greatly needed, and which would be a service to society.[30]

It is with these key polemical assertions, and with Fanger's dilation on their later extensions and modifications in practice, that we discover a primary stratum of Nelson Algren's world. Of Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg in Crime and Punishment, Fanger says: "it is a city of unrelieved poverty. The wealthy are depraved and futile, like Svidrigailov, or silly and obnoxious, like

Luzhin. Magnificence has no place in it, because magnificence is external, formal, abstract, cold" (F 198). It is in the lower depths of such a city, though, that what is left of authentic life--authentic, not conventional or "natural"--labors on. "The real city is here, where for all its distortions there is life--which means people and suffering" (F 199).

In Robert Stone's recent novel Dog Soldiers, a character frightened by her involvement in a heroin deal wishes that she could give the junk back, "'to wherever the hell it emanates from.'" She is answered by the carrier, a "death's-head harlequin": "'It doesn't emanate. People make it.'"[31] It is this sense of the production and reproduction of the grotesque, then, that is the vital new element expressed by romantic realism, and by its heirs. This is a profound shift, in that the primary characteristic of the Romantic grotesque, the alienation of the familiar world, here occurs not in moments of metaphysical terror, but every day all the time. The Romantic realist grotesque depicts humanity learning to live in a daily nightmare, without even being able to imagine demons as the agents responsible. In the twelfth chapter of Bleak House, speaking of the parasites and fops that floated on the surface of this new world, Dickens made this observation: "even with the stillest and politest circles, as with the circle the necromancer draws around him--very strange appearances may be seen in active motion outside. With this difference, that being realities and not phantoms, there is the greater danger of their breaking in." The

imagery favored by Balzac and his descendants is, as Stanley Edgar Hyman has pointed out in his writing on Marx's literary techniques,[32] grotesque in the Romantic sense: succubi, demons, hags, devils. These figures of speech enter this writing, though, only to have their masks torn off and their human faces revealed, thus standing a prominent Romantic grotesque trope on its head. The source of the grotesque can no longer be seen as gaping Hell or the fever'd brain. The sources of the demonic are the prison, the factory, the tavern, the courtroom, the brothel, the school, the orphanage, the spital, the morgue, the tenebrous streets and stinking alleys. These are things people make, the writer of grotesques realizes, and they make people--or something like them.[33]

The sense of the word "grotesque" has shifted here, hasn't it, from its denomination of "unnatural" forms found in an emperor's "one-building city"? Or has it?

> Just as, according to the legend, Parmeniscus in the Trophonian cave lost his ability to laugh, but recovered it again on the island of Delos at the sight of a shapeless block which was exhibited as image of the goddess Leto: likewise did it happen to me. When I was very young I forgot in the Trophonian cave how to laugh; but when I grew older and opened my eyes and contemplated the real world, I had to laugh, and have not ceased laughing, ever since.
>
> — Søren Kierkegaard, Diapsalmata

> It may be noted by the way that there is no better start for thinking than laughter.
>
> — Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer"

Balzac did say "the only possible comedy," did he not? At the close of an essay called "Domination: Metaphor and Political Reality," Alkis Kontos speaks of becoming "irreverent enough to commit the ultimate sacrilege of exposing the emperor as the thief of humanity."[34] If one accepts that as a necessity, one would perhaps proceed with the serious and principled irreverence of Algren's contemporary C. Wright Mills, who wrote on the assumption that "all intellectual work is, in fact, relevant in so far as it is focused upon the symbols that justify, debunk, or divert attention from authority and its exercise."[35] The mind has to concentrate its powers on the processes of the theft, and on the ridiculous, pathetic, defenseless, defensive, aggressive creatures the processes make. But the danger of this necessary work is the forgetting of what was stolen, and the extinction of an image of humanity in place, vital, undistorted. To achieve this whole image, the Romantic realists adopted, in their own

complex ways, the devil-angel dichotomy, and created characters in those images. This world contains visible fragments of a wholeness, but very rarely in these fictions does a single character pull together in himself or herself the terms of the antagonism, and then only momentarily. Balzac's comedy would always risk becoming an alienated expression of contempt for the bearers up from underneath of the energy his work could not do without.

Kontos has given us two important words which illuminate the limits of the Romantic realist grotesque: irreverence and sacrilege. A theory of the grotesque in which these terms are crucial, and which is not concerned only with Fanger's "interruptions of series," but also with what continuities can be revealed in the process of interruption, has been set out by Mikhail Bakhtin. This theory brings us to a second stratum of Nelson Algren's work, one in which he turned suffering over, and wrote the word "laughter" on its bottom.

The materialization of the Devil (in figures such as Vautrin, Fagin and Ivan Karamazov) by the Romantic realist grotesque paved the way for a return to what Bakhtin was later to take as the center of his project, the culture of folk humor. In so doing, the Romantic realists jumped the ideological rails of Romanticism, and made for an older complex of images and forms. The dominants of the Romantic grotesque are isolation and fear, and Bakhtin points out that "if a reconciliation with the world occurs, it takes place in a subjective, lyric, or even mystical

sphere."[36] The relationship to materiality is explicitly stated by Kayser: the grotesque "is primarily the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe."[37] One aspect of that failure, and its attendant terror, is the felt assurance that the death of the individual is final, and represents the end of any life in which the body could participate. Bakhtin, speaking of "the school of nightmares and horrors," says that here "death, as is always the case with the Romantics and the Symbolists, ceases to be an aspect of life itself and becomes again a phenomenon on the border between my life here-and-now and a potential other kind of life. The whole problematic is concentrated within the limits of the <u>individual</u> and <u>sealed-off</u> progression of a single life."[38] In this consciousness old age, death, putrescence, spilled blood, disease and deformation always and everywhere are messages from the grave only, and have no perceivable reality in the continuation of the life of humanity. For the Romantic (or the modernist-existentialist descendant), either the Devil or the void is all that is beyond the grave; either represents utter earthly annihilation. The only laughter heard here expresses mockery, anxiety, isolation and despair. The Romantic realist grotesque, because it emerges from a vision of suffering at the depths, can carry angry, compassionate laughter meant at least to notify an oppressive superstructure that horror does exist in society. The risk is, though, that because the project is essentially an expression of loyal opposition, as Fanger has pointed out (F 70), terror of revolution will crystal-

lize into mockery of the masses.[39]

Bakhtin opposes to this culture of fear the culture of folk humor, and its literary branchings. The particular laughter which Bakhtin heard in European folk culture sounded out of "carnival (in the sense of the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms of a carnival type."[40] While Bakhtin bases his characterization of carnival on well-researched cultural patterns, the consciousness and actions he speaks of as particular to, or derived from this "syncretic pageantry" (PDP 122) amount to not the "idea" researchers have had of them, but to a relationship to materiality and abstraction, to foolery and seriousness, to freedom and authority, to life and death. All of Bakhtin's works--and they are addressed to writing as apparently diverse as Rabelais's and Dostoevsky's--have at their center a conception of carnival which both acknowledges the cultic origins thereof, and makes clear its departure from their ideologies. The Saturnalia, the Festival of Fools, Mardi Gras, Fastnacht, the recurring feasts of the agricultural cycles and the later religious calendar--all took shape under the influence of laughter. Bakhtin points out that "the basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastical dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are also completely deprived of the character of magic and prayer; they do not command or ask for anything" (RW 7). Carnival is not a propitiation on the knees of the higher by the lower, it is the erasure or overturning of such ultimately false distinctions, in

the name of human community and continuity. As opposed to the official feast, which Bakhtin calls "a consecration of inequality" (RW 10), carnival expresses the anti-authoritarian and the anti-hierarchical, the realization of the temporality of position. This bias gave birth to "special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came into contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times" (RW 10).

The carnival laughter which permeates the "extremely rich idiom" of carnival forms and symbols is festive laughter, and as such "is not an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event. . . . it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity" (RW 11). A final characteristic of carnival laughter is its ambivalence. Simultaneously, it destroys and regenerates. Whatever is isolated, severe, gloomy, withholding, lofty and "completed" is laughed out of existence, and laughed into a new life as responsive, developing, communal, a part of humanity with no false distinctions to enforce. Just as Baudelaire's Satanic laughter expresses a world-view (isolation and fear), so does carnival laughter. Bakhtin quotes a passage from Goethe's prose poem "Nature," which is deeply imbued with a carnival view of life, and then states: "Goethe understood that seriousness and fear reflect a part that is aware of its separation from the whole.

As to the whole itself in its 'eternally unfinished' condition, it has a 'humorous' character; that is, it can be understood in a comic aspect" (RW 254). These lines express the cosmic aspect of carnival laughter, an essential counterpart to the secular aspect. Bakhtin distinguishes between the cultic and the popular view of the cosmos when he says:

> Cosmic terror is the heritage of man's ancient impotence in the presence of nature. Folk culture did not know this fear and overcame it through laughter, through lending a bodily substance to nature and the cosmos; for this folk culture was always based on the indestructible confidence in the might and final victory of man. Official culture, on the contrary, often used and even cultivated this fear in order to humiliate and oppress man. (RW 336)

Bakhtin's greatest distinction as a critic and writer is to have elucidated a history of imagery, social forms, and literary works and genres--outstandingly the novel--which have at their heart "the awareness of the people's immortality . . . combined with a realization that established authority and truth are relative" (RW 256). The "unofficial truth" is always carried by ambivalent carnival laughter, and in fact the possibility of an unofficial truth existing depends on it. The definition of "unofficial" is not vague: "by 'unofficial' is meant a peculiar conception free from selfish interests, norms, and appreciations of 'this world' (that is, the established world, which it is always profitable to serve)" (RW 262). Rem acu tetigiste. This laughter and its cultural forms proceed from neither isolation nor a fearful inner defense mechanism nor contempt for the

masses. In the atmosphere of carnival, classes are mixed familiarly and indiscriminately, power is relativized and "degraded," and the people realize themselves gaily as such, rather than in agony as "isolated pellets of humanity" (Algren). The laughter is purposive: "for thousands of years the people have used these festive comic images to express their criticism, their deep distrust of official truths, and their highest hopes and aspirations. Freedom was not so much an exterior right as it was the inner content of these images. It was the thousand-year-old language of fearlessness, a language with no reservations and omissions, about the world and about power" (RW 269). At the heart of Bakhtin's writing is the conviction that carnival laughter, and the forms that sprout from it, are humanity's most potent way of opposing authority, and of expressing its freedom. Carnival is the time of the revelation of the thief (all emperors, all authorities compounded) and of the common humanity threatened by dogma, authoritarianism, and narrow-minded seriousness--in short, the official means of theft. In a passage from Alexander Herzen's On Art which Bakhtin calls "profound," the values of laughter are declared, and its enemies identified:

> Laughter is no matter for joking, and we shall not give up our right to it. In the antique world, the public roared with laughter on Olympus and upon earth while listening to Aristophanes and his comedies, and roared with laughter up to Lucian. Humanity ceased to laugh from the fourth century on; it did nothing but weep, and heavy chains fell on the mind amidst moans and pangs of remorse [Bakhtin notes Herzen's omission of "the laughing Middle Ages"]. As soon as the fever of fanaticism subsided, men began to laugh once more. It would be extremely interesting to write the history of

> laughter. In church, in the palace, on parade, facing the department head, the police officer, the German administrator, nobody laughs. The serfs are deprived of the right to smile in the presence of the landowners. Only equals may laugh. If inferiors are permitted to laugh in front of their superiors, and if they cannot suppress their hilarity, this would mean farewell to respect. (RW 92)

The laughter we're speaking of is not amusement only, nor distraction, nor banal silliness, nor bare negation. It is an assertion of rights, and a weapon against the terror of the big lie of official seriousness. It recovers for all humanity the image of a human reality. Because it opposes the monolithic, the always-equal-to-itself, and at the same time creates anew a dynamic human image, its heritage of images and forms is always an expression of ambivalence. The agelasts (a Rabelaisian term that Bakhtin uses meaning "those without laughter") have their own suitable esthetic canon which forever churns out repressive reproductions in the image of its values. The canon is idealistic in conception and execution; it presents the human body as closed, a finished surface, self-sufficient. It always tends toward the abstract, always distances and subordinates the observer, always effectually makes us ashamed of our bodies, of our gross, untidy, earthbound, hankering, diseased, humorous, vulnerable, eating, drinking, excreting, copulating, gestating, dying bodies. Emerson said that "heroism, like Plotinus, is almost ashamed of its body." He did not, though, go on to talk about the contagious nature of that shame. It just kills us--or is supposed to--as we gaze upward in reverence at the hero, the

leader, the god, the goddess, the priest or pope or teacher or champion or warrior or boss or policeman or department head or movie idol, that we will never, as long as our butts need scratching _et cetera_, be equal to ourselves as are the icons, that is, in a state in which our social role, self-appraisal, and popular estimation are congruent.[41] There is a coercive aspect to this aesthetic. While internally punishing ourselves for our absolute or relative inability to "be like" the classical figure (or the socialist realist or the American Hero figure), we continually try to shape our surface of appearance and conduct so that it appears to be template-true to the "original." In proportion to one's achievement of conformity to a "conventional ('natural') norm," one is tolerated, even accepted as normal, and profits from service to the normative world. But to the degree one fails to do so, if the deviation is "so sharp as to seem monstrous, but not so sharp as to obscure the norm itself," one is accounted "grotesque" in Fanger's sense of the term. If it wasn't for two thousand years of the classical presence in culture, it would hardly need saying that this granting of authority to an idealization, an abstraction from always-present bodily reality, and the submission to attempts to make oneself in that image, will always ultimately fail. The ugliest thing about classicism and its variants is that some of its practitioners, and all of its vendors, perfectly well know that, and seize on that fact to extend its hegemony by inculcating guilt and fear over the failure in the inadequate human being, instead of seiz-

ing the opportunity to celebrate the unprescribability of human bodies and thoughts. The grotesque sufferers which the Romantic realist tradition excels in portraying are apprehended at the point of their greatest torment over these matters. The extreme pathos of their portrayals incorporates the realization that they will soon be, if they are not already, bereft of resources to oppose their annihilation as human beings.

It remains for what Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism" to attack the canonical and celebrate the unshapeable. It is to works built on the values and insights of grotesque realism that we must turn to find a history of potent oppositional images. This stream of Western culture springs from carnival laughter, as I've indicated, and continues as the major shaping and axiological force in genres Bakhtin identifies as Menippean satire and the polyphonic novel. Before discussing the literary genre aspect of the carnival legacy, though, we should pause over the characteristic motives and content of carnivalesque imagery.

In both the current and the etymological senses, "exuberance" is equated by Bakhtin with the grotesque. Great joy and vigorous fertility: quite the opposite of obsessive fearfulness and isolated sterility. In keeping with carnival laughter, though, the grotesque image is always ambivalent:

> The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growing and becoming. The relationship to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying

> and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (RW 24)

The classic presentation of the body always stresses "finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development" (RW 25). Grotesque realism counters this image and its ideology by showing the material bodily principle, which combines cosmic, social, and bodily elements in "an indivisible whole . . . gay and gracious" (RW 19). Embodied is every energy of growth, reproduction and nourishment. Death is seen as inseparably a part of life, not isolated, private bourgeois economic survival, but the collective life of humanity. Every tendency toward gigantism, hyperbole, and bodily exaggeration is here brim-full and spilling over, and ambivalent combinations result when images of parturition are combined with images of decay (ripeness becoming rottenness). The whole, though, as in the statues of the laughing, senile, pregnant hags which Bakhtin mentions, expresses a balance of joy. Bakhtin says "laughter degrades and materializes" (RW 20), and this is the primary process which drives folk humor. The central term "degradation" is here used in a particular sense:

> Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely

> hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving. (RW 21)

The topography of this world is not, as in Romanticism and psychologism, largely abstract or metaphorical. The downward thrust is, in its cosmic aspect, toward what the American poet Charles Olson called "an actual earth of value,"[42] and in the bodily aspect, "which is not clearly distinct from the cosmic" (RW 21), away from the face, eyes and head and towards the belly, buttocks and the genital organs. This apprehension of up-down is further expressed in the gestural sphere by images of the topsy-turvy and the world turned upside down. Based on the carnival tumbling *topoi*, this becomes, in later carnivalistic forms, one of the most potent and significant tropes: the high brought low. This process Bakhtin variously calls "degradation" or "discrowning" or "uncrowning"; and its pertinence to *imperium* is deliberately and tendentiously democratic.

Two significant verbal forms supplement the ritual spectacles of carnival: the indirect degradation and renewal achieved by parody and comic recension; and the frontal attack expressed in "various genres of billingsgate . . . curses, oaths, popular blazons" (RW 5). These latter types of marketplace speech can carry a good deal of violence. Indeed Bakhtin calls them the verbal equivalent of beatings and blows, which also are prominent carnival motifs. They are, however, no less ambivalent than laughter or parody; they aim at both the annihilation of the

repressive and the isolated, and the regeneration of the individual by his incorporation into the grotesque body. Whatever damage--including death--that results from carnival beatings is not to be understood as individual. What is beaten is abstraction; what is restored is the body, understood communally. "The body is the last and best word of the cosmos, its leading force. Therefore it has nothing to fear. Death holds no terror for it. The death of the individual is only one moment in the triumphant life of the people and of mankind, a moment indispensable for their renewal and improvement" (RW 341).

Failure to comprehend this has, in Bakhtin's view, led critics to see Rabelais as an exceedingly cruel writer, whose images of dismemberment and slaughter, attended by their laughing perpetrators, bespeak an incredible barbarism. (The story of the Widow of Ephesus, from The Satyricon, has been similarly seen as a presentation of brutalized emotions.) These interpretations misconstrue, or more likely, are ignorant of the carnival tradition, which acts out or presents images of violence only to reveal the deep connectedness of human to human, and the nihilism inherent in isolation. Violence and other images of disruption, commingling or hilarity in the presence of death, all of which are terrible to the Romantic, are here taken as expressions of grotesque realism, in which:

> The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire

> material bodily world in all its elements. It is an incarnation of this world at the absolute lower stratum, as the swallowing up and generating principle, as the bodily grave and bosom, as a field which has been sown and in which new shoots are preparing to sprout. (RW 27)

All of this is the basis of a convincing reading of Rabelais, but it is fascinating to follow Bakhtin as he finds branchings of the carnivalistic in literature both preceding and following Gargantua and Pantagruel. The genre-creating power of carnival, with its accumulation of images, forms and values, manifested itself initially in both the Socratic dialog and the Menippean satire, and later in a wider range of European and American novels than might first be suspected. Bakhtin makes clear his belief that carnival forms, as they were acculturated by the novel, and as the agricultural and market-place societies in which they flourished were largely obliterated by industrialism, frequently became petty, individual and negative. Rabelais was the writer who embodied the peak of carnival image and significance; later writers have worked with variously degenerate legacies of Antique, Medieval and Renaissance carnivalesque. Nevertheless, there is an unkillable strength to the strain, and the most significant modern writers, in Bakhtin's view, are best spoken of in terms of their manifesting the tradition anew. The results of Bakhtin's having done so are very often revelatory and, particularly in the Soviet Union, controversial. Bakhtin himself provided the keynote for the application of his theories to American literature when he wrote in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics:

> It cannot be denied, of course, that a certain degree of special fascination is inherent in all contemporary forms of carnivalistic life. It is enough to name Hemingway, whose work, on the whole deeply carnivalized, was strongly influenced by contemporary forms and festivals of a carnival type (especially the bullfight). He had a very keen ear for everything carnivalistic in contemporary life. (PDP 179)

The Dostoevsky book and the essays composing The Dialogic Imagination both work towards a theory of the novel which, because of its foundations in the study of the anti-canonic dialogues and menippea, conduces to a dynamic appreciation of the novel as forces and tendencies rather than a static enumeration of formal "ingredients." The theory is huge in both its presentation and its implications; I can do little more here than mention some of the many aspects of it pertinent to a reading of Algren's work.

The eponymous body of writing which derived its name from Menippus of Gadara, a slave of the third century B.C. who settled in Thebes after buying his freedom, became "one of the main carriers and channels for the carnival sense of the world in literature, and remains so to the present day" (PDP 113). The "school" takes to itself the free right to parody all serious productions, characteristically doing so in ways which enact the mixture of the high and the low, the serious and the comic, the lofty and the debased. Genres previously thought "completed" (e.g. the epic) are mixed with the developing and topical letters, speeches, journalistic forms such as the feuilleton. The single most apparent target of the menippea is epic literature,

which presents precisely the same distanced, valorized, "inviolable" classic image against which carnival laughter is directed. The epic genre exists to "fix" privilege and to validate power; it presents a past "inaccessible to personal experience" (DI 16), a past "walled off from all subsequent times by an impenetrable boundary . . . preserved and revealed only in the form of national tradition" (DI 16). Again and again Bakhtin stresses that the epic's significance lies not in the historical events presented, but in the "reliance on impersonal and sacrosanct tradition, on a commonly held evaluation and point of view--which excludes the possibility of another approach--and which therefore displays a profound piety toward the subject described and toward the language used to describe it, the language of tradition" (DI 16-17). Over against this absolute removal from familiar and contemporary contact, dismemberment, and renewal, is the carnivalistic urge. The repressive unity of subject matter and hierarchical evaluation characteristic of the epic (and to a degree all serious genres such as tragedy and the lyric), only begins to be overcome, in Bakhtin's view, with the inclusion of the fertile and anarchic everyday elements of low life and the marketplace. Because the menippea's first function is the testing of "the truth," the lofty and repressive dogma is kicked out of its sanctuary and forced to hit the road, where it is tested "in nakedness," and without deference to any authority. Thus the entire banished world of "the low" is essential to the menippea's plots, because a very particular sense of "evaluation" is present

here: "the adventures of truth on earth take place on the high-road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, market-places, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults" (PDP 115). This element of "crude slum naturalism" is vital to the Menippean satire, and to its descendants (Bakhtin sees Dostoevsky as the most important of them).

The inclusion of the voices of criminals, vagabonds, charlatans, prostitutes, of all of the despised and the dispossessed, is not peripheral, either to this genre or to Bakhtin's theory of the novel. It constitutes a part of a revolt against reification, and the novel has no more significant role to play in culture:

> What is involved here is a very important, in fact a radical revolution in the destinies of human discourse: the fundamental liberation of cultural-semantic and emotional intentions from the hegemony of a single unitary and language, and consequently the simultaneous loss of a feeling for language as myth, that is, as an absolute form of thought. (DI 367)

The immense importance of Bakhtin's work is that it perceives the literary-historical significance of the voices of the street breaking through the carved doors of the temple. While low-life can be used simply for exoticism and titillation of class modesties (the blushing face of repression), certain authors--Villon, Rabelais, Boccaccio, Cervantes, Balzac, Dickens, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Zola, Alexandre Kuprin and, I will argue, Nelson Algren--have intended and accomplished far more in their journeys to the lowest depths.

I have indicated _thematically_ and _generically_ some of Bakhtin's importance to this thesis. The kelson of Bakhtin's thematics is the overcoming of distance and isolation. Politically, that means the overthrow of tyranny. Generically, it calls for language organized by laughter and parody (_DI_ 50-51). Linguistically, it rejoices in the "interanimation" of diverse speech types, a proliferation with no freezing, final word. One could attempt a terminological summary of Bakhtin as well. His vocabulary is _sui generis_, after all, and vital to his approach. But I would prefer to define and use the terms polyphonic, heteroglossia, chronotope and dialogue as the need arises, and in the context of Algren's writings.

What Bakhtin develops as a scholarly method is one outcome--an admirable one--of the vital shift of attention by the Romantic realists toward those who are, Adorno would say, still picking up the tab for the progress of civilization. The ability to carry on one's work, after that shift has been accomplished, was the very thing toward which Edgar Allan Poe was groping, with a good deal of anxiety, in his essay "Man and Superman":

> . . . nothing can be clearer than that a very generous spirit--_truly_ feeling what all merely profess--must inevitably find itself misconceived in every direction--its motives misinterpreted. Just as extremeness of intelligence would be thought fatuity, so excess of chivalry could not fail of being looked upon as meanness in its last degree:--and so on with the other virtues. This subject is a painful one indeed. That individuals _have_ so soared above the plane of their race, is scarcely to be questioned; but in looking back through history for traces of their existence, we should pass over all biographies of "the good and the great,"

while we search carefully the slight records of wretches who died in prison, in Bedlam, or upon the gallows.[43]

These lines exemplify the central problems presented by Algren's work and by the theories of the grotesque so far discussed: isolation ("*their* race"?), pathos, the writer's relationship to the lower depths, the preservation of memory, and the question--recall Adorno--of whether humor or the lack of humor is "more repulsive than all the ugliness there is." The four novels by Algren that I will discuss in relation to these questions are *Somebody in Boots*, *Never Come Morning*, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, and *A Walk on the Wild Side*. In their abounding grotesquerie, they show themselves as the right quarter in which to ask those questions.

[1] Juan José Arreola, The Fair, trans. John Upton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), pp. 122-23.

[2] Yurii Olesha, "Envy," in his The Wayward Comrade and the Commissars, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 80.

[3] Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 283.

[4] Geoffrey Harpham, On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 179-80.

[5] Vitruvius, De Architectura, quoted in Wolfgang Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Literature, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 20.

[6] Harpham, p. 27.

[7] Eduard Fuchs, Tang Plastik [Tang Sculpture], quoted in Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," in The Essential Frankfurt School Reader, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), p. 238.

[8] Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs," pp. 251, 234.

[9] Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs," p. 252.

[10] Kayser, pp. 18, 43, 74, 93, 52, 103, 51, 109.

[11] Kayser, p. 104.

[12] Kayser, pp. 103-04.

[13] Kayser, p. 186.

[14] Quoted in Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950 (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 46. Jay's translation could be compared with that of Michael Shaw in Max Horkheimer, Dawn & Decline, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), p. 46.

[15] Nelson Algren, "The Word Game: The Best Novels of World War II," The Critic, January-February 1973, p. 74.

[16] Thomas Mann, Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man, trans. Walter D. Morris (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), p. 417.

[17] Fritz Stern discusses this aspect of Mann's Betrachtungen in The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 87, 196, 207.

[18] Michael Steig, "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Winter 1970, p. 259.

[19] Lee Byron Jennings, The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 16. Steig, pp. 255, 258.

[20] Jennings, p. 18.

[21] Jennings, pp. 18-19.

[22] M.M. Bakhtin/P.N. Medvedev, The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics, trans. Albert J. Wehrle (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 8.

[23] Charles Baudelaire, "Twilight: Evening," in Les Fleurs du Mal, trans. Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982), p. 100.

[24] See Kayser, p. 186: "If Keller in his Kammacher had described with compassion his protagonists' progress and their race toward destruction, the ensuing emotional perspective would have weakened the effect of the grotesque."

[25] Jennings, p. 12.

[26] Kayser, p. 67.

[27] Donald Fanger, Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 273. Hereafter cited as "F" in the body of the text.

[28] Donald Fanger, The Creation of Nikolai Gogol (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 230.

[29] Quoted in Fanger, Dostoevsky, p. 21.

[30] Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, ed. Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. lxii. One hundred years after Dickens, we can find the same disparagement of the popular media for their depictions of the living conditions of the majority of small-time criminals:

Sometimes I went with some people when they were on

> the streets and found the attractions depressingly grubby. It is a grubby existence, as a rule. . . . The movies make such a to-do about the life, and television is even more fantastic. Crooks always have these neat apartments, lovely women, everybody is witty and knows which fork to use.

See Bruce Jackson, In the Life: Versions of the Criminal Experience (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 7.

[31] Robert Stone, Dog Soldiers (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), pp. 96, 111.

[32] Stanley Edgar Hyman, The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud as Imaginative Writers (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966), pp. 134-35. See also Eleanor Wilner, Gathering the Winds: Visionary Imagination and Radical Transformation of Self and Society (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 166-67. There are valuable remarks on the grotesque throughout Wilner's work.

[33] I am aware that Fanger implies the supersession of the social by the metaphysical in Notes from Underground, calling the social "explanation": "almost a decoy, a bait for shallow understandings" (F 182). Dostoevsky was far too deeply affected by the social ever to offer it as such. Fanger is a careful writer, though, and for our purposes it would be well to emphasize his "almost."

[34] Alkis Kontos, "Domination: Metaphor and Political Reality," in Domination, ed. Alkis Kontos (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), p. 226.

[35] C. Wright Mills, White Collar: The American Middle Classes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 143.

[36] Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 39. Hereafter cited as RW in the body of the text.

[37] Kayser, p. 185.

[38] M.M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in his The Dialogic Imagination, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), p. 200. Hereafter cited as DI in the body of the text. Bakhtin may have been thinking of Baudelaire's evaluation of Melmoth in "On the Essence of Laughter": "the outcast of society, wandering somewhere between the last boundaries of the territory of mankind and the frontiers of the higher life." Also, apropos of the Kayserian grotesque: "Melmoth is a living contradiction. He has parted company with the fundamental conditions of life; his bodily organs can no longer sustain his

thought. And that is why his laughter freezes and wrings his entrails." See Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter," in his _The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays_, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), pp. 156, 153.

[39] C. Wright Mills, a careful reader of Balzac, notes, without citing the source, Balzac's remark: "insignificant folk cannot be crushed, they lie too flat beneath the foot." Mills, _White Collar_, p. 28.

[40] Mikhail Bakhtin, _Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics_, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 122. Hereafter cited as _PDP_ in the body of the text.

[41] Jan Kott's definition is pertinent here: "the grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience." His excursus, though, is metaphysical and absurdist. See Jan Kott, "King Lear or Endgame" in his _Shakespeare Our Contemporary_, trans. Boreslaw Taborski (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), p. 132.

[42] Charles Olson, _The Maximus Poems_, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 584.

[43] Edgar Allan Poe, "Man and Superman," in _Edgar Allan Poe_, ed. Philip Van Doren Stern (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), pp. 660-61. In a 1946 letter to Leo Lowenthal, Max Horkheimer quoted these lines of Poe's and then added: "During the last years I have never read any sentences which were closer to our own thoughts than these." Quoted in Martin Jay, _The Dialectical Imagination_, pp. 290-91. See also Max Horkheimer, _Eclipse of Reason_ (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), p. 160.

Chapter 2: The Grotesque as Lumpenproletariat

> The questions confronting our politically engaged literature have had the effect of making one particular problem very actual--the jump from one kind of style to another within the same work of art. This happened in a very practical way. Political and philosophical considerations failed to shape the whole structure, the message was mechanically fitted into the plot. The "editorial" was usually "inartistically" conceived--so patently that the inartistic nature of the plot in which it was embedded, was overlooked. (Plots were in any case regarded as more artistic than editorials.) There was a complete rift. In practice there were two possible solutions. The editorial could be dissolved in the plot or the plot in the editorial, lending the latter artistic form. But the plot could be shaped artistically and the editorial too (it then naturally lost its editorial quality), while keeping the jump from one idiom to another and giving it an artistic form.
>
> - Bertolt Brecht, "Against George Lukács"

> Keep all that in mind, and as the process of literary movements is an organic process, examine the given moment a little longer, and let us see if it does not already contain in itself the beginnings of a blueprint of decomposition.
>
> - Apollon Grigoryev, <u>My Literary and Moral Wanderings</u>

It is a tale told again and again. A young man leaves his family home in the provinces and follows the road to the city, where he gets on well or poorly, prospers or falters, recovers or perishes. He does or does not return, full or empty of wisdom and experience, to his rural place of origin. In the telling, though, and in the hearing, the story becomes--or does not become--a myth, "that is . . . an absolute form of thought" (<u>DI</u>

367). To the extent that the storyteller sets about making a myth, each character, incident, setting and detail carries a memory of the blueprint which assigns it a place in an intentional structure. When the structure is built, it very often looks like a pulpit, a throne, a judicial bench or an assemblage of party lines. But if the storyteller can "only" make a "blueprint of decomposition," then of course the immediate or eventual likelihood of the absolutizing of thought is unmade.

In 1933, shortly after his release from the El Paso County Jail (vagrancy conviction, five dollar fine), and after a short stint as a carnival shill, Nelson Algren, a recent graduate of the University of Illinois Journalism School, found himself in Alpine, Texas, the site of the Alpine Teachers College. In the almost deserted classrooms of this brand-new institution, Algren would, without disturbing the administration for permission, use the typewriters. He formed a particular attachment to an old upright Royal, so particular in fact that when the urge hit to head back to Chicago, Algren a) bought a wooden box from the local hardware store, b) crated up the Royal and addressed it to himself in Chicago, c) put the parcel in the hands of the Alpine freight agent, and d) hopped an eastbound freight. Smoking Bull Durham and stretching at a stopover near San Antonio, congratulating himself on his shrewdness, he noticed a sheriff bearing down on him. The lawman asked Algren who he was, Algren told him, and Algren was on his way back to Alpine. People had noticed the only stranger in Alpine carrying a typewriter through town, and

buying a sizable wooden box. The freight agent, rather than sending the Royal on its way, had called the law. After five months in the local jail, Algren received an all-day jury trial. The verdict was "guilty," the sentence "two years at Huntsville. It was a pea farm, a chain-gang deal."[1]

Algren never served the two years; the state of Texas had no room in its penal system in 1931, and another hoe in another pair of hands meant another body to feed and cage. The typewriter thief from Chicago was told he could serve his sentence, at large, anywhere _except_ in Texas. He was to report back after two years, and if they had been trouble-free, the debt to society would be considered repaid. Algren never returned, having succumbed in the two years following his trial to what Sherwood Anderson in _Poor White_ called "the disease of thinking." Algren spent those two years--in fact, almost the next fifty years--writing. In 1935 his first novel, _Somebody in Boots_, was published by The Vanguard Press in an edition of 700.

The book is the story of Cass McKay, born in a border town on the West Texas prairie, and born into the American Century[2] and a world on the brink of cataclysm. The marginal existence of the McKay family inexorably worsens, and Cass hits the road. The book chronicles his incessant centrifugal motion through Depression America, broken only once by a doomed love affair in Chicago, and ends with the realization that, once again, "it was time to be getting on." There is no sense that Cass will return home, for the experiences of the worst years of the Depression

have destroyed what meager possibility there ever was for stability, constancy and rootedness in Cass's life.

This barest retelling of the novel's plot suggests affinities with the tradition of the Bildungsroman. The details of character, place and language in Somebody in Boots, however, make up a kind of book for which we have no ready term. The German word connotes making, construction, perhaps even acquisition. The story of Cass McKay is a story of loss, of distortion, and of the destruction of the human subject. It might be more useful to speak of the book as an "education novel" (Erziehungsroman), for it certainly is that, but only if we abandon the etymological sense of "education" as a "leading out." The experiences of Cass McKay crush him within himself. Somebody in Boots is very much a novel about learning and teaching, but the subjects are brutality, deprivation, isolation and, above all, fear. The pupil is for the greater part of the story illiterate, and there is little hope that his eventual learning to read will, in the context of a life so comprehensively denied nourishment, autonomy and authenticity, make any difference at all. The teachers--use corporal punishment; let's leave it at that for now.

In four closely related, yet distinguishable, senses, the paradoxical phrase "blueprint for decomposition" given to us by Apollon Grigoryev, a Russian critic and theorist who drank kerosene when the vodka ran out, best characterizes Somebody in Boots.[3] First, and most obviously, the book is a portrait of the United States in decay. Algren uses the "final descendant" Cass

McKay to personify the decomposition of Whitman's vision of national, democratic possibility, as well as the reduction of the American mythological/inspirational figures of the pioneer woodsman and the Jeffersonian smallholder. Nourishment is diminished to the point of starvation, prosperity is for an unknowable world above Cass, equality of the citizenry and justice before the law are bad jokes or campaign rhetoric. The stink of decomposing national myth is heavy about this book. Second, (and this is vital to the release of a series of grotesque characters which will appear transformed slightly or greatly in all of Algren's subsequent novels) Algren portrays a class named and defined by Marx: the lumpenproletariat. The determining metaphor of Marx's animadversions to this class is rot. The novel illustrates the progressive corruption of one particular and several subsidiary members of a class defined in terms of the taboo and the socially putrescent. The third sense of decomposition is primarily formal and technical: it is the problem of plot and editorial posed by Brecht in the passage quoted above. Algren's first novel is specifiably tendentious, and the compositional problems Brecht speaks of show themselves in a reasonably clumsy manner. Algren's way of dealing with the two elements had to "decompose" before he could write better novels, that is, his first book provided him with a blueprint of how not to write politically engaged literature. Finally, the compositional problem became part of the larger axiological struggle between Marxist and Whitmanic attitudes toward the lumpen. The two couldn't co-exist

in equal measure and force in an artistic work; one or the other had to decay if Algren was to represent anything but his own confusion over other men's values. Further complicating the matter was the incipience of Algren's own attitude toward the lumpen world: it could be very funny. (At this point in the evolution of Algren's writing, Bakhtin's "solution," the polyphonic novel which allows numerous opposed positions to "sound" without the superimposition of a final word, authorial or otherwise, would have been beyond Algren's range.) I will take up each of these four points in turn.

The first pages of the novel speak about Cass's family and their dwelling-place. His father, Stub McKay, is consumed with the bitterness and pain of "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" (SB 12). The reader will soon divine that for a hurt and humiliated bundle of "white trash" like Cass's father, finding a victim to answer the question "who?" is much the easier thing to do than attempting to answer the "why?" of his deprivation. This passage opens the book, and foreshadows not only Stub's doom (he will, under the accumulated pressure of envy and resentment, murder the man who replaces him after he is fired from his job), but the decay of the entire family. Bryan McKay, Cass's older brother, was gassed at St. Mihiel, and drinks, lazes, pimps and titters his way to

the scene of his literal castration by his enraged father's kicks. Nancy, the older sister, at first strong and happy and eager for life, gradually succumbs to hunger, shame and despair, becoming a dollar-a-trick prostitute in the otherwise deserted family home. The shack in Mexican-town in which this family lives at the story's beginning "faced a broad dust-road that led east to the roundhouse and west to the prairie: a road with gas lamps leaning askew above lean curs asleep in the sun, where brown half-naked children played in the ruts that many wheels had made" (SB 13). In it, "poverty, bleak and blind, sat staring at four barren walls." This shack and its inhabitants are joined by Algren in a passage which announces the subject of this novel, and what was to become a constant subject of Algren's later writing:

> Their home stood like a casual box on the border; it was wooden and half-accidental. It had no roots in the soil, it stood without permanence. Although it was old and unpainted and rotting, yet it appeared somehow to have been in its place for but the past few days. So the people within--Texan-American descendants of pioneer woodsmen--they too had no roots. They too were become half-accidental. Unclaimed now they lived, the years of conquest long past, no longer accessory to hill and plain, no longer possessing place in the world.
>
> They too were rotting. (SB 16)

Habitation and habitus: both embody what Algren was later to call "the only really ugly thing on earth," that is, "the death that comes before true death arrives."[4] As David Boxer has pointed out, the perfusion of Somebody in Boots with the spirit of Walt Whitman's great elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" makes of Cass's boxcar wanderings a sorrowful fulfill-

ment of the morbid indications of the rail journey of Lincoln's coffin.[5] Cass himself becomes, if not a corpse--and in many ways he is one--then a later, hopeless incarnation of Whitman's persona, crossing America "with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me, / And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me." Death in the novel is brutal and final; there is no Whitmanic sense that an American death can be mourned and that a better life for the nation can then grow out of the grave. As ugly as the many violent and pointless deaths, though, are the deformation and disease which are omnipresent in Algren's report on America. Starvation pushes Nancy to the brink of madness, and all the way into prostitution; Olin Jones, an army veteran who initiates the gang rape of a black woman unlucky enough to be travelling with "lousers," compulsively tries to conceal his hare-lip by sucking it down beneath his lower lip: "The habit gave him the impression of having two mouths; a big and oblong cross-cut one, and a little triangular hairy one right on top and growing out of the other" (SB 92). Norah Egan, Cass's Chicago lover, contracts venereal disease when she is forced back into hustling after Cass's arrest; Cass is told by a jail inmate whose "skin was drawn so tightly over his cheek bones that the flesh appeared to have been drawn down and then tied tightly under the chin like a woman's bonnet-strings" that he never did anything really wrong except being "'born in Texas with a hungry gut'" (SB 61). This naturalistic sense of the inexorable destructive power of the social environment is joined to grotesque imagery, and to

the apprehension of the city and the civilization it represents as a single organism which is intent on expelling or destroying the likes of Cass:

> Curled up on the editorial page of the _Evening American_ one afternoon, within the lengthening shadow of some butcher-on-horseback's statue; when he brushed aside paper his eyes met the sunset, a thin red line between two darkening towers.
>
> Lying here among other men now, starving and thirsting daily with other men, being now part of this life led by so many other men, Cass thought, in his moment of waking, that "Civilization" must mean a thing much like the mob that had threatened his father. For this too was a thing with a single mouth, this too mocked with pointing fingers. And as it had threatened his father, so now it threatened him. Through hunger, cold and shame it had pursued. "We have no work for you" (he heard familiar voices); "We have no place for you. This is our world, louser. We do not claim you, you have no right here. We are _The Owners_. We own all. Get out, get along, go somewhere else--keep moving till you die."
>
> Along the broad boulevard a thousand men raced in automobiles toward food, warm fires, homes, and wives. This was the fecund and darkening city, its towers, its terror, its threat. (_SB_ 83)

This "organic portrayal" of the city is altogether consonant with the Romantic realist tradition, as Fanger has defined it (F 263-64). It is a curiously final nail in the American democratic coffin that this should be so, given that the organic portrayal of the city was a critical reaction to the ascendacy of the new and deformative hierarchical arrangements of European cities and their economies. Whitman, particularly in _Democratic Vistas_, argued against the use of Old World techniques, convinced that the American situation was so different from the European that native artists should develop new techniques adequate to

that new chance. But when Algren presents the inevitable concomitant of this unitary "world above" Cass, the Whitmanic vision of health, contributory labor, comradeship and tolerance, in short, a world wholly different than the European, is given despairing burial:

> It might be that for others there was something different; but for him lonely pain and lonely evil were all that there was in the whole wide world. The world was a cruel place, all men went alone in it. Each man went alone, no two went together. . . . He moved, moved, everything moved; men either kept moving or went to jail. Faces, like fence-posts seen from trains, passed swiftly or slowly and were no more. They raced for one moment by, they faded, they changed; they became dim, darkened, or ran blackly in sun. From day to day faces appeared and passed, from hour to hour dimmed and died. Finally they seemed to Cass like faces seen in dream. They were no longer real then, they were no longer living. They were things then formed of death-flesh, as dark and as dead as the fence posts flying. (SB 55, 80)

A sense of the grotesque that is alert to the historical moment colors each one of Algren's novels, each in a somewhat different shade. A particularly charged colorant, red, made a great deal of difference to the sense of decomposition in Algren's first novel.[6] This is not, though, in two of Walter Rideout's senses of the term,[7] a proletarian novel; it deals not at all with striking workers, and depicts a failure to convert, rather than an intimated or accomplished conversion to revolutionary class-consciousness. Into Rideout's third classification of what has too loosely been called "proletarian literature" fall the works representing what Edward Dahlberg called "bottom dogs." These are the chronicles of the half-lives of the American lum-

penproletariat. The distinction between industrial wage-earners and declassed, unemployable cynics from which the criminal element is recruited is of absolute importance in describing the grotesque in Algren's work. This is because Algren's attention is invariably directed to the latter world, and because an "unresolvable dualism of narrative attitude toward what is being presented," which Fanger identifies as a signal of the grotesque, originates with the never fully resolved struggle within Algren's work between the conflicting attitudes toward the lumpen of his two giant tutelary figures, Marx and Whitman. Of the influence of Whitman on Algren something can be inferred from the epigraph to Never Come Morning: "I feel I am of them--I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself, / And henceforth I will not deny them--for how can I deny myself?" There remains a good deal to be discussed in relation to that work and The Man with the Golden Arm. Marx directly enters Somebody in Boots in the epigraphs to the third and fourth parts of the novel. The former, which precedes the Chicago episode in which Cass and Norah Egan live briefly on love and stick-ups before Cass takes a fall and does ten months in the Cook County Jail, speaks of the character of the class with which Algren was to spend virtually (or maybe not) his entire writing life:

> The "dangerous class," the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.[8]

The first English translation of Marx's The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte was published in 1934, when Algren was at work on Somebody in Boots. I do not know whether Algren read the work then or ever, but as a dilation on the passage from the Communist Manifesto quoted above it would have interested him. In this short volume, Marx provides a specific characterization of the composition and political malleability of the lumpenproletariat of the Paris of 1849. Louis Bonaparte, under the guise of creating a "benevolent society," organized a combined cheering section and "party fighting force" made up of:

> decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie . . . vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni [goldbricks], pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaus [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ-grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars--in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term la boheme . . . .[9]

Marx and his successors anathematized the lumpen as the rotting underside of a rotting class, the bourgeoisie, which invariably found the lumpen the perfect mercenary arm of its need for thugs. It would have been wise to call a halt to the rot metaphor after Marx's use of it. Unfortunately, and probably under the influence of Lenin's "Letter to American Workingmen," decay became the image of choice for most doctrinaire American proletarian writers of the 1930s. Daniel Aaron has pointed out several ingredients of the fetid stew these writers made of their reaction to dying--they were sure--American capitalism.[10] Mike

Gold, Joseph Kalar, Howard Fast and many others used and over-used these formulas, and in retrospect they are both revolting and ridiculous, while their original intent was to be revolting and convincing. Thus,

> Joseph Kalar, for example, could not say simply that bourgeois writers were corrupt. He had to contrast the proletarian writer of the future with "the literary vermin that swarm over and gnaw America's literary corpse, who play the scented whore, and for thirty pieces of silver, will do the hootchi-kootchi dance, or wriggle their abdomens in imitation of legendary oriental ladies.[11]

Thus Nelson Algren, for another example, bursts forth in response to the second (1934) spring of the Chicago World's Fair:

> Even the mayor has to pimp a little to make ends meet: for the Chrysler outfit, or Standard Oil, or any other big business scurve who has the money to pay. You understand. That's what the mayor was doing over on that platform three blocks east. That's what he was doing there all the time he was talking. Pimping for the old whore called Chicago Business, painting her up for her last big Saturday night. (SB 237)

The city itself becomes 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" (SB 238). This editorial imagery, common in the thirties, reflects as much the torture of the American male over the inaccessibility of women in the Depression,[12] and the renowned and hotly-denied puritanism of the CP, as it does a hatred of the effects of capitalism. Immediately following this grotesque tirade comes the sermon addressed to the rotten bourgeoisie--and, presumably, their scented whores as well:

> Be pure in your hearts, be proud yet a little while, wave your flags, sing your hymns, close your eyes, save your souls, go on grabbing. Get all you can while yet you may. For the red day will come for you and your kind, be assured. (SB 238)

As orthodox Marxism conduced, in its American version of the thirties, to the production of this stock imagery and prescriptive thinking about the bourgeoisie, so would it have been expected to crank out pasteboard lumpen who embodied every vile tendency of the "scum, offal, refuse of all classes." Marx scornfully says that Louis Bonaparte "constitutes himself chief of the lumpenproletariat," recognizing in them "in mass form the interests which he personally pursues," that is, the benefitting of himself at the expense of the laboring nation. The lumpen are degraded, because as a class they aid in the oppression of the proletariat. The lumpen thus are presented as parasitic, viciously unpredictable except when bought by an anti-democratic movement, and, paradoxically, as relatively insignificant, that is, as having no claim as human beings on the sensibilities of a revolutionary. The duty of the Marxist writer, when he or she pays any attention at all to the lumpen, is to depict them primarily in a state of decay.[13] This myth of the lumpenproletariat, that is to say, this absolute form of thinking about them, and of "metaphorizing" their experience, played a significant part in Somebody in Boots, but it does not finally control the book. Cass is the primary bearer of orthodox thinking and images. It is Cass who, after being beaten up by a whorehouse rouster because he can't pay for the sex he's had with one of the

women, wakes up to a gray New Orleans morning:

> He was lying in an open lot that appeared to be chiefly a dumping ground. It smelled of dead flesh. The first thing he saw was the head of a dog whose body was gone. That head smiled amiably, there were ants in both eyes. (SB 50)

Cass later encounters a man in a soup line who from the rear is "sullen shoulders . . . a flat-backed head on a hairy neck," and when he turns, Cass sees that "disaster or disease had torn or eaten the nose away until only the nostrils now remained. Cass had seen faces beaten expressionless by defeat, faces hungry and hopeless and sick with long shame--but this was the mask of death itself" (SB 105). Immediately after this, Cass is given a plate in a Jesus-Feeds-All mission on which is a thing "formed like a meat ball, and it might well have been all of that; but it wambled about in a thin yellow swill, a kind of diarrheal brown gravy. Cass thought of cow-dung dropped thinly and long. . . . the meat was as rank as something a half-starved street-cur would have to regurgitate twice before downing" (SB 106). Unable to get it down at all himself, even though he is starving, Cass leaves the mission. He wanders the San Antonio streets, truly frightened at the certainty of being arrested if he tries mooching. After falling into conversation with a Lithuanian immigrant as badly hurt by the Depression as himself, and after shaking him off because "'if it weren't fo' furriners times'd be better'" (classic lumpen-think), Cass digs in a "grab-can" for something to eat. He pulls his hand out covered with human excrement.

Cass did not feel disgust this time. He saw his

> hand with eyes which were dry and burning, and no longer capable of disgust. He smelled with a nose which nothing could now offend. He scraped his fingers half-heartedly against the ashes and fence. And Belly whispered, "Look! Look <u>behind</u> the ashes!" But there was nothing behind the ashes to eat, there was nothing save a few drifted leaves. So Cass sat down on the leaves, between the high-piled ashes and the fence, and he pulled his cap down low over his eyes, and he slept. (<u>SB</u> 109)

On the bum again, Cass dives into a reefer car to dodge the rounds deputies are firing at the scuttling "lousers," and smashes down on the belly of a pregnant woman. She delivers a dead child, the floor of the car "becomes a cess-pen running with blood, stinking of urine and strewn with rags," and in the night,

> the child, dead as decay, moved with the long car's swaying. Sometimes it seemed to raise itself, sometimes it rolled toward the wall. Once, when the car buckled [sic] violently, it worked whole inches toward him just as though it lived. Cass thought then that, it being so strangely dead, it knew whom to blame for its death. He felt that it would crawl like that soon again, that in hate it would bite him with small teeth like a rat's teeth. He lacked the courage to rewrap it in the paper. He just shut his eyes, and let it bounce, and listened to its mother's muttering. (<u>SB</u> 115)

These horrors in the plot are the fitting curriculum of the lumpenproletariat, but they are the "lectures." The "seminars" are, in this novel, conducted in the El Paso County Jail, where Cass is locked up in tank ten with a group of grotesques under the absolute sway of Algren's first full materialization of the Devil, his first Fagin and Bill Sykes combined, the repulsive troglodyte Nubby O'Neill. It is with this particular lumpen, though, that a dogmatic view of the lumpenproletariat, which may have been suitable for a manifesto, comes to be, in the context

of a novel, less than equal to reality.

This kangaroo-court judge, this homosexual terrorist, this one-armed "fake cowboy" from South Chicago, whose stump arm, which bears the tattooed legend "Texas Kid: His Best Arm," takes the place of the club any cop would carry, most thoroughly makes Cass's life grotesque, in that he is the final and most terrifying of a series of emanations of Cass's father released by the decomposing world of the lumpen. Cass finally speaks brutally to his sister Nancy when, in a nightmarish scene of elided identities, she takes on all the hardness and hatefulness of Stub McKay. His last words to her are to try for work "in a spik whorehouse." Again and again, the railroad bulls and small-town cops wear boots, and Cass is forever driven on the point of them. When he is literally kicked out of a gas station by the attendant, "he felt the boot bite in deep, deep at the base of the spine where his father's boot would have bitten" (SB 52). "Nub" O'Neill, with his own vicious boots, is a recapitulation of all that is most detestable and frightening in Stub McKay: the violent racism, the treachery, envy and resentment, the vanity, the absolute domination of all around him.

The Authoritarian Personality, an empirical study which T.W. Adorno organized and contributed to, and his essay "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," contend that within the personality most susceptible to the pull of fascism, a continual oscillation takes place between hatred of and subservience to manifestations of a powerful father image.[14] Both

hatred and subservience are essentially rooted in the perceived possession by the leader-father figure of authority and self-definition, which are based in turn on power. The follower-child hates and fears the exclusive power of the leader-father, to which access is possible only by the masochistic renunciation of (inadequate) individual strength and personal desire, and through dissolution in the mass identity and power gained by abasing oneself before the leader image. Such a psycho-sociological move necessitates, for its validation, the ritualized persecution of the outsider. To the extent that this description characterizes Cass McKay's experiences, then Cass learns, in the most irrational way imaginable, that the fascist is <u>right</u>, that the animus of the "father" can distort and then destroy any being or thought or emotion which does not worship its power. (What Cass does not fully realize, however, is the complicity of "legitimate" authority, including economic arrangements and cultural curricula, in ensuring the success of an essentially fascist project: his own destruction.) Algren depicts the lumpen state as thoroughly grotesque, in that the repressed material which surfaces in a nightmare becomes material reality. Cass's father does castrate his son Bryan; Nancy, who in the absence of a mother takes on the maternal, domestic role in the house, does accuse Cass of sexual desire for her, and does become a whore who, not recognizing Cass in the evening gloom of his last return, propositions him. Cass does meet a man who fulfills in waking life all the requisites of a nightmare father: he is thoroughly violent and obscene, and

demands that behavior from those he protects; he forces the passive homosexual role on to any who challenge his authority; he is inescapable and irresistible. One can accept or dismiss a "Freudian" view of these elements in the plot; in any case such a view could only intensify what is already a representation of a kind of final horror. Algren consciously framed his plot in Marxist editorials, but he could have said of Freud, as William Faulkner did say: "Everybody talked about Freud when I lived in New Orleans, but I have never read him. Neither did Shakespeare. I doubt if Melville did either, and I'm sure Moby Dick didn't."[15] We can only wonder at Algren's production, in his mid-twenties and only a few years into the Nazi hell, of an almost diagrammatic portrayal of what Adorno and others in the Frankfurt School came to see as the root relationships between the sado-masochistic resolution of the Oedipus complex and the tendency to submit to fascism.

Adorno maintained that fascist propaganda was "psychoanalysis in reverse,"[16] and Bakhtin noted the absolute dependence of psychoanalysis on "human verbal utterances."[17] The near-catatonia of Cass McKay, his practically complete inability to verbalize any sense of himself beyond "'Ah'm Texas McKay, case you ain't heered" and the tic-like wish to get a tattoo, are the chilling results of his lumpen curriculum, and represent an irreversible fall away from even the rudiments of "the talking cure." Cass's ability to speak is altogether atrophied, and this condition of his life prepares him, and virtually makes it necessary for him,

to attach himself to a speaking power. This he does, and in depicting the grotesque symbiosis of Cass and Nubby O'Neill, Algren represents the ultimate destruction of any chance for Cass to achieve wholeness, selfhood and autonomy. When Cass is jailed after being arrested in the company of the young black man Matches, Nubby's first speech to him is full of the elements which will become, in a vitiated form, Cass's language:

> "Goddamned if I don't think you _deserved_ ninety days, hookin' up with some young shoke that way. Me, I hates them sons of bitches. You wouldn't catch _me_ ridin' a reefer, or walkin' down a street, or doin' _nothin'_ with _no_ nigger, North _or_ South. Say, kid, I wouldn't let a jig smell the hole where I crapped in a year ago easter-tide. I hates them black sons of bitches so bad as soon as I smell 'em my left nut gets tight. And say, kid, don't you even know what comes of nigger-lovin'?" (_SB_ 125)

What could come of "nigger-lovin'" is in this case a beating with belts by the other prisoners. This is a real possibility, and it thoroughly terrorizes Cass, but Algren's presentation of Nubby O'Neill moves directly to the substance of one of the most disturbing observations ever made regarding the fascist agitator. First, Judge O'Neill:

> "Gennelmen," he pronounced solemnly, "I've just learned somethin' downright dis-graceful. The prisoner has just confessed it to me what he is. [Cass has denied all.] This here is a nigger-lover standin' 'mong our midst. He is very strong on anythin' black, just so long as it's plenty stinky. He finds 'em in box-cars mostly, he says, down in reefer bottoms is where he has most his luck. When I asked him just now he said he is es-spesh-ully great in nigger whores with soft shankers on their behin's--" the judge paused for the sheer effect of the pause, 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." (_SB_ 126-7)

Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, in _Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator_ (1949), anatomize the fascistic character of the pronouncements of demagogues such as Father Charles E. Coughlin, Gerald B. Winrod, and William Dudley Pelley, all of whom were active during the Depression.[18] The authors hold that the agitator manifests his doctrine of "drawing the ultimate consequences of a totally amoral opportunism" in several ways, the first of which is "unseriousness": "The agitator's ambiguous approach to values is often revealed in the undercurrent of unseriousness in his statements, the effect of which is to dismiss ideals as mere bunk, hogwash, lies."[19] Not just ideals, but ideas, articulate speech, heartfelt emotion, indeed anything besides physical violence, or the legitimation of authority based on it, are implicitly ridiculed by the agitator's unseriousness. After citing a speech in which an agitator suggests that Jews be required to compensate "non-interventionists and political 'isolationists'" for losses incurred in a war "that the Jews themselves promoted," Lowenthal and Guterman analyze the technique in a passage clearly pertinent to Judge O'Neill's _modus operandi_:

> What is serious in these statements is their very lack of seriousness. Going beyond the revelation that law can be a cloak for brute force, the agitator shows here that brute force need hardly be clothed at all, for instead of being discarded as a sham, legality is now exploited as a blatant gesture of defiance. Behind such statements is the outlook which led the Nazi regime to "fine" the

German Jews $400,000,000 when a Polish Jew killed a German embassy clerk in Paris. That a legal justification was given to such a step was not primarily, as it might seem, a concession to hypocrisy or prejudice; on the contrary, it was simply a means of emphasizing the complete arbitrariness of the operation.[20]

One of the strengths of Somebody in Boots, though, and one reason it warrants our attention, is not that it is a "portrait of a native fascist," in a journalistic or serious socio-psychological sense, but that it creates a character in Nubby O'Neill who elicits reactions no less complex than those generated by Dickens's Fagin, or Huck Finn's horrible Pap. As it does so, the incomparable range and depth of the grotesque as a mode of cultural criticism begins to become apparent. Certainly Nubby O'Neill is loathsome, certainly he is fascist in behavior and outlook, certainly he destroys Cass by joining the two of them in a profoundly sado-masochistic alliance against the rest of humanity. But, no less than when the "kindly old gentleman" imitates a victim "in such a very funny and natural manner"[21] for the practical furtherance of his covey's thieving ability, and Oliver laughs till the tears run down his face, there are moments when Nubby O'Neill is partly kind, or disgustingly amusing, or so vividly presented that the energy he represents--even if it is deathly or Satanic--is clearly of greater interest to the author than that packaged in Dill Doak, the politicized Negro that will afford the second and final occasion for Cass to "fall" from the pure-white state Nubby demands of his "friends." Nubby's bewildering conversational jumps are partly indicative of his greater

moral incoherence, but they are also a tactic of entertainment and entrapment. (In the context of jail, one definition of which might be "that place where a constant, crude experiment is underway to determine the line between boredom and insanity," entertainment can be as important to life as food.) Early on in the serving of his time, Cass is led by Nubby to enquire about the Judge's escape plans:

> Judge O'Neill winked broadly.
> "That'd be tellin'. It's fer me to know an' fer you to find out. Say, Red, you want to hear a song I made up once? The name I call it is 'The centypeed an' the scorpyun havin' a intercourse.' Want to hear?"
> Cass expressed genuine eagerness. Nubby wetted his lips and sang. His voice was wholly execrable.
> "Oh, the centypeed clumb on the scorpyun's back
> An' his eyes bugged out with glee.
> He said, 'I'm gonna make you, you poisin sonofabitch,
> Pervided you don't make me.'"
> Sliding easily then into prose, Nubby spoke low and confidentially.
> "Say, Red, ask one of the boys what happened the last time Joe Spokes put a nigger in this tank 'stead of upstairs in tank three where they belongs. Go on, Red, just ask one of 'em once." (SB 130)

One of Algren's most important tasks as a writer was not only to realize the destructive energy this represents--he does that in Somebody in Boots--but also to find a way not to be terrorized, and to present characters who are not terrorized, by the nearly demonic grotesquerie of a Nubby O'Neill. The focus of Somebody in Boots shifts from the victim, who within the constraints of proletarian literature always tended to be mythicized, to an oppressor that defies any single interpretation. The extremely disturbing gloss on fascist behavior provided by Lowenthal and Guterman identifies a way of using lack of serious-

ness to impose domination. In the creation of Nubby O'Neill, though, Algren groped toward an image of authority that would be vulnerable to attack by an audience which had somehow found a way of turning laughter to its own ends. The weapons provided by increasingly rigid political orthodoxies were useless, tending as they did to the reproduction of heroized and villainized class images. The weapons provided by, or at least dimly apparent in, Nubby O'Neill's parody of authority, his embodiment of the negative tendency of Bakhtinian degradation, were shortly to prove more valuable to Algren.

A characterological basis for developing a strategy which made use of, but transformed, the degraded and degrading energy of Nubby O'Neill is perceptible in Somebody in Boots. Nubby is the parodic double of both the savage father, and of his institutional replications, fascist brutalization and a thoroughly corrupt moral and judiciary system. (Algren calls the kangaroo court sessions "the play-pretend of the underdogs aping the wolves, the man-child game at once so terrible and so ludicrous.") While ruling through brutality, Nubby does, though, also have a "charming" side: the inversion of the duly constituted legal culture's hypnotic moralizing and mythicizing about itself. Nubby sings for Cass every day, and in the grey light of the jail Cass "passed whole hours listening to the tinny din of Nubby's nasal tenor" (SB 143). What Nubby sings is a travesty of the authoritative images, and his presentation always contains a labile element of self-mockery:

"On a cozy little chain gang, on a dusty southern road
My late lamentud pappy had his perm-unent abode.
Now some was there fer stealin', but my daddy's only fault
Was an overwhelmin' weakness fer crim-inal assault.
His phil-osophy was simple, it was free from moral tape--
See-ducshun is fer sissies, but a he-man wants his rape.
The list of daddy's victims was em-barrasin'ly rich,
And though one of 'em was mammy he couldn't tell me which.
Now I never went to college, but I got me a degree--
I reckon I'm a model of a perfect s.o.b." (SB 143)

As Cass listened to Nubby's execrable voice, Algren seems to have been searching through this creature's tangle of inversions for a sense of lumpen reality greater than that given to him by Marx. That sense would be realistic, because it would use laughter and the memory of life at the bottom in a combination other than self-annihilating.

This, then, the demonically buffoonish father-teacher-Führer, is the first of Algren's doubling characters. Cass is the first of Algren's suffering heroes, the straight men who are the putative protagonists of all of his novels--except A Walk on the Wild Side. To the degree that Cass is the pathetic mythicization of the lumpen imago, Nubby, himself a lumpen par-excellence, also represents a degraded double of that one-dimensional seriousness.

The grimness of the tragic protagonists is increasingly split off from and contrasted with a fool-figure which, perhaps not in contradiction to the genesis of all foolery, appears first in a thoroughly victimized and pathetic guise. Creepy Edelbaum,

of whom Nubby, his sexual tormentor, says, "'He got only one nut an' the brain of a child. He's a half-spik, half Jew, an' three-quarters Creek Indyun. He's feeble-minded a little bit too I guess" (SB 132), is the second version of this figure. The first is the "Jew high-school kid," David, in Algren's second published story, "So Help Me" (1933). David, utterly adrift in the early Depression, falls in with a pair of Sterno-drinking monsters who pawn his pitiful watch and suitcase, spend the money on alcohol and a handgun rather than food, force him to help them hoist a store, and later shoot him. (The story is strikingly similar to Kafka's Amerika, which appeared in English translation in 1946.) The question of fascism in action was not merely a doctrinal question for Algren in the thirties. I don't believe it has been pointed out in relation to these early versions of the Jewish or half-Jewish sacrificial lamb that Algren was himself half-Jewish, and that his legal name until 1945 was Nelson Algren Abraham.[22] On the road in the early depression, he may have learned quickly that lumpen America wasn't waiting with a warm heart for a young part-Jewish college graduate, and that the Swedish name gave a measure of protection which he could not do without. The victim may have learned in a harrowingly personal way the necessary power of trickster changes, which are deployed more and more frequently in the ensuing works.

Finally, a heavy sense of guilt over violence against women is a constant in Algren's suffering heroes. Nancy McKay and her later--but not parodic--double, Norah Egan, are jointly the focus

of Cass's guilt. As the authoritarian father intimidates with violence, so can a woman, representative of a crippling and unameliorable sorrow, shadow each move for liberation or happiness that the hero makes. Algren mixes with this in increasing measure the sense that the strength which he could admire, and the good that life could offer, were to be found in, and with, women. The later incarnations of Nancy and Norah carry these tensions to a sense of reconciliation that incorporates them, that is, does not forget them, and moves beyond their static opposition.

In his first novel, then, Algren made a set of characters which, like his compositional techniques and his axiological determinants, seems, in light of his later work, destined for decomposition. Unlike the writers of the thirties most similar to Algren, Tom Kromer (Waiting for Nothing) and Edward Anderson (Hungry Men), and unlike John Dos Passos, Algren next moved not into a cranky reactionary mode or into silence, but into the lowest depths of the late Depression lumpen, whom he could no longer speak of solely as such, as close as his increasingly unmythic heart was to theirs.

[1] H.E.F. Donohue, Conversations with Nelson Algren (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 45. Hereafter cited as CNA in the body of the text. The reader who needs help imagining how close we came to perhaps not hearing from Algren at all should look at Danny Lyon, Conversations with the Dead, a book of contemporary photographs of agricultural labor and cell-block life at Huntsville. An old song, which Algren quoted in his first novel, called Huntsville "the back door to hell."

[2] The phrase which so rankled Algren is Henry R. Luce's. For a selection from the book of the same title, and a critical context accompanying it, see Culture and Commitment 1929-1945 ed. Warren Susman (New York: George Braziller, 1973), pp. 318-26 and passim.

[3] Apollon Grigoryev, My Literary and Moral Wanderings, trans. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1962), p. 87. For Grigoryev's drinking habits, see Matlaw's introduction.

[4] Quoted on dust jacket of Nelson Algren, The Last Carousel (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973).

[5] David Theodore Boxer, "Social Allegory in the Novels of Nelson Algren," Diss. University of Washington 1970, p. 56.

[6] Was Nelson Algren then or ever a member of the Communist Party? The F.B.I.'s thirty-year attention to Algren, the results of which are assembled in a 400 page dossier of which I obtained a copy through the Freedom of Information Act, could find no conclusive proof of that. Algren himself said, ca. 1963, "No, I never joined the party, but I did a lot of work for them." For this statement and a discussion by Algren of his relationship to anti-fascism, the CP, and the Spanish Civil War, see Conversations with Nelson Algren, pp. 86-89.

[7] Walter B. Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States 1900-1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 117.

[8] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto, trans. Samuel Moore (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 92.

[9] Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 63. Marx also briefly mentions the lumpenproletariat in The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), pp. 44-45.

[10] Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left: Episodes in American

Literary Communism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), pp. 212 and 425. Aaron also points out the probable stylistic importance of Lenin's "Letter."

[11] Quoted in Aaron, p. 211.

[12] For a discussion of this point, see Warren Susman, Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 194-95. At least one incident in every thirties "proletarian" novel I have read turns on a variant reaction to the perceived situation. See especially Edward Anderson, Hungry Men (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985) and Tom Kromer, Waiting for Nothing (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).

[13] This was a more complex question in the history of the American literary left than I can discuss here. The arguments and counterarguments are found in Aaron, particularly chapters 8 and 9.

[14] T.W. Adorno et al., The Authoritarian Personality (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964), pp. 759 ff. T.W. Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" in The Essential Frankfurt School Reader, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 123-24. See also Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 78 ff. For a developmental role-reversal of this process, see Max Horkheimer, "The End of Reason" in The Essential Frankfurt School Reader, pp. 41-42.

[15] Jean Stein vanden Heuvel, interview with William Faulkner, in Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 137.

[16] Quoted in Arato and Gebhardt, p. 118.

[17] Quoted in Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 178.

[18] See Stanley High, "Star-Spangled Fascists," The Saturday Evening Post CCXI (May 27, 1939), pp. 5-7, 70-72, for a Depression-era mass culture view of Coughlin, Winrod and Pelley. An abridged version of this article appears in The Strenuous Decade: A Social and Intellectual Record of the 1930s, ed. Daniel Aaron and Robert Bendiner (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1970), pp. 339-54. See also the accompanying material on American fascism in Aaron and Bendiner.

[19] Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator (Palo Alto, Cal.: Pacific Books, 1970), p. 31.

[20] Lowenthal and Guterman, p. 31.

[21] Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 54.

[22] Algren's relationship to Judaism had its ridiculous aspects:

> My father's father was one Nels Ahlgren, born to a shopkeeper of Stockholm. When his (Ahlgren's) father died, the son found a much-marked Old Testament. He'd never read it. When he did, it drove him bonkers. He memorized The Book word for word, changed his name to Isaac Ben Abraham and adopted Orthodox Judaism as his faith. That's how it happened that my own father was born in San Francisco. . . . San Francisco was my father's birthplace because Isaac Ben Abraham (now ready for a funny farm for pseudo-intellectuals) was waiting for a ship to take him to The Holy Land. He, his wife and son caught the ship and he preached Zionism to Zionists, in Jerusalem, until his wife lost her job. She had to go to the American Embassy to get passage back to America.
>
> Isaac Ben Abraham came along. The family was so broke, coming back, that the passengers took up a collection for them. The mistake the passengers made was in giving the alms to the husband instead of to the wife. He brooded over the American bills for a while --then threw the money overboard because it had George Washington's picture on the bills.
>
> George Washington was a man, was Isaac's thinking; man is made in the image of God; and the Holy Book commands: Thou Shalt Make No Graven Image.
>
> Yet who am *I* to put that old man down? Haven't I done the same thing with American bills, throwing them into mutuel windows instead of into the sea--and without so idealistic a justification?
>
> ("Poor Girls of Kowloon" in The Last Carousel, p. 162)

After this familial bout with YHWH on his father's side, it comes as quite undramatic that Algren's mother was a German Jewess named Goldie Kalisher.

Chapter Three: Production and Punishment

> Everyday life is the nether world, the grave, where the sun does not shine, where there is no starry firmament. For this reason, everyday life is presented to us as the underside of real life. At its center is obscenity, that is, the seamier side of sexual love, love alienated from reproduction, from a progression of generations, from the structures of the family and the clan. Here everyday life is priapic, its logic is the logic of obscenity.
>
> - Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel"

> people were being kept apart and we were keeping ourselves apart and we were all hurting like a motherfucker   but wasn't no one telling
>
> - Tommy Trantino, Lock the Lock

> Who will exchange his own heart's blood
> For the drops of a harlot's eye?
>
> - William Blake, Poems from the Note-Book (1793)

By the late 1930s, Algren's close fellow-travelling with the Communist Party had fetched him up against a set of his convictions that made him largely unsuitable even as a sympathetic public adherent of the movement. While he retained and professed strong respect for those American anti-fascists who went to Spain, he didn't volunteer for the International Brigades for the most craven and unanswerable reason: "It was assumed that I would go. My defense when asked why aren't you there was that I don't want to get killed" (CNA 73). Staying in Chicago, working most of the time as an editor on the WPA Federal Writers Project,

Algren diligently carried out leg work for a number of CP-influenced groups because he believed in the rightness of the positions the organizations took. The canker for Algren was "a certain kind of rigidity, and a kind of authoritarian attitude" (CNA 87). These unsavory qualities expressed themselves in two ways Algren later discussed: a person, presumably in the movement, reported the drunken and disorderly state of Algren and another member of the League of American Writers to the New York chapter; and the Secretary of that chapter sent Algren a letter admonishing him to "be a little bit more austere" in his conduct. Algren, irritated by the refusal of his censurer to name the source of the information, replied to the letter in a deliberately offensive manner, to the effect that Algren's drunkenness and disorderliness were none of his correspondent's business, and that he wasn't going to let political activities interfere with his continuation of either or both. The fact of informing bothered him, as did the attempt to enforce a single mode of thinking and behavior. Both struck Algren as contrary to the reasons for which the Spanish war was being fought. He later said, "My disenchantment was not an ideological one. . . . my disenchantment was based on the purely personal thing that there was something morally wrong to me about being at anybody's behest. They were simply little bureaucratic functionaries so I simply moved away from them and got started thinking more about writing" (CNA 86 & 88). Disenchanted not only with everyday bureaucratic tendencies that stifled diversity and extracted conformity to

hierarchical etiquette, but also with the prescriptive, narrow attitude of Marxism toward the lumpenproletariat, the machinist's son from Detroit spent more and more of his time with the very class Marx had called "dangerous."

In the early forties, out of the ongoing crime called Chicago, he drew up a damage report called Never Come Morning. The novel concentrates on late Depression ward life in a Polish American "village" in Chicago's Northwest area. The inhabitants of the neighborhood carry the narrative action, but they also "carry," in the sense of an infection, the effects of existing in a larger world, which translated itself to West Division Street through the logic of obscenity. Algren carefully intimates behind each instance of human reduction, damage, distortion and defeat a world which punishes as a matter of course, that is, in the course of "business as usual." The world in which Steffi and Bruno, Benkowski and the Barber, Mama Tomek and Snipes, Catfoot Nowogrodski and Fireball Kodadek, Tiger Pultoric and One-Eye Tenczara are locked is a novelistic representation of the home truth told by Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer: "punishment must be understood as a social phenomenon freed from both its juristic concept and its social ends. . . . Every system of production tends to discover punishments which correspond to its productive relationships."[1] The Marxian positing of the irreconcilable interests of those who own the means of production and those who sell their labor power continued to inform Algren's work to the degree that he saw it as a complete and accurate description of

his society. In the specific case of the lumpenproletariat, however, Marxian valuations began to fall away in the face of the greater lived and witnessed experience of the lower depths. The experiences, which after the late 1930s he was consistently reluctant to consider in terms of ideas, moved Algren to a non-intellectual position which he never abandoned. The vocabulary of this affective position was Whitmanic, not Marxian. Yet even from within that declared adherence, the very thing that distinguished Algren's writing from that which Murray Kempton has called "so many vast burlesques of Walt Whitman presented so seriously,"[2] and from the real Whitman, for that matter, made itself heard. Algren found humor in Adorno's "open air prison,"[3] and saw how his subjects used it, and how he as a novelist might use it. These are the issues, then, on which this discussion of <u>Never Come Morning</u> will turn.

Out of the "purest" urban form taken by early industrial capitalism in America came the Chicago metropolitan area--"pure" because the city had few of the mixed motives and cultural distractions of New York or Washington, New Orleans or San Francisco. Its geographic centrality dictated its economic strategies. Within the American capitalist framework, Chicago became a point of "translation," of the processing of livestock, grain and ore from the West and North, and of the distribution of commodities manufactured in the East to consumers in the West. The representative organizations of the first half of the twentieth century are meat-packing (Swift and Armour), steel-making

(United States Steel and Inland Steel Company) and merchandising (Marshall Field's and Sears, Roebuck). These industries, operating on a scale neither realized nor necessary before, depended on and provided for the colossi of the railroads and the public utilities. The utilities, in the person of Samuel Insull, connived for themselves an open field for the manipulation of domestic and industrial rates. As well as animals, grain, ore and manufactured goods, the railroads incessantly moved people.

Four broad categories of people were carried to Chicago on rails. In rapidly increasing numbers throughout the early post-World War I years, the Illinois Central brought migrating blacks from the rural South.[4] Chicago welcomed them with slums, killing labor or equally destructive unemployment, and, in 1919, the most violent and destructive race riot America had seen. Carl Sandburg wrote a volume of prose on the blow-up; Richard Wright's _Native Son_ and _12 Million Black Voices_ did everything books could do to record the after-shocks. If we can speak of a convergence point for the hobo and tramp army whose history paralleled those of America's wars and railroads, that point was Chicago.[5] By the early twentieth century, the appointments of Chicago's "hobohemia" were the nation's most extensive. The West Madison Street "slave markets," the missions, the flophouses, tattoo parlors, greasy spoons, penny arcades, hash houses and whorehouses, strip joints and beer joints and, for those who had the inclination--or habit--shooting galleries, all were integral with the culture forced on America by Jay Gould, James Fisk and the plethora of

institutional supporters of the robber barons.[6] Somebody in Boots, in its Chicago chapters, catches the pathological energy of this underworld, this underside of the dream of progress. The railroads also brought Sister Carrie to Chicago, to be thrown so hard by so many against a wall of meretriciousness and self-delusion that she, and her sisters from the provincial towns of America, became the kind of boneless dolls that worked and stinted on their own nourishment so that they could buy just the right hat, or the newest shoes, or gloves or dress, and forever missed love.

Along with the hobos and tramps, the Southern blacks and the small-town sweat-shop fodder, the railroads hauled labor from the East, which had in most cases only recently passed through Ellis Island on its journey from Southern and Eastern Europe. Steel-making and meat-packing absorbed hundreds of thousands of immigrants; at what cost to their humanity might in part be determined by reading Upton Sinclair's The Jungle. Sinclair wrote about first-generation immigrants from the Baltic, from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, from Serbia and Romania, from the area that later became Yugoslavia, from Sicily and Southern Italy and Greece and Russia. Added to the Irish, these became Chicago's industrial proletariat, but many of their children, born in America, faced the Depression with nothing to offer other than labor power which was, just then, useless to industries in trouble. The chance to work and "make good" was the exception rather than the expectation for Bruno Bicek's contemporaries.

The Poles Algren writes about had nothing to soften the blows of the hard years of the thirties in a land where they and their parents were still strangers. Like a careless beating in a station house, the Depression and the economic system of which it was a consequence left marks all over Bruno's world.[7]

One consequence was often a stylization of the behavior felt necessary to the preservation of both physical life and self-respect. In the late 1890's, Stephen Crane had, in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, set down the first portrait of the American tough guy:

> Down the avenue came boastfully sauntering a lad of sixteen years, although the chronic sneer of an ideal manhood already sat upon his lips. His hat was tipped over his eye with an air of challenge. Between his teeth a cigar-stump was tilted at the angle of defiance. He walked with a certain swing of the shoulders which appalled the timid.[8]

James T. Farrell, a Chicagoan who thoroughly understood not only the forms of this behavior, but their genesis, said in his essay "Social Themes in American Realism":

> The class, group and racial tensions in American society produce frustrations and violence when there is a world or society of isolated and more-or-less estranged individuals who express their natures in a savage personal struggle of vanities. When you do not express your vanity through money or social position, you do it by your fists, by your sexual conquests, and by your language of insult and aggression.[9]

The story of Bruno Bicek, alias Lefty Biceps, alias the Polish White Hope, alias The Modern Ketchel, alias Powerhouse, represents not just the facts of the existence Farrell defines,

but the ultimate logic of that existence. In Algren's most naturalistic novel, the only "connection" between people is put nicely, in Polish, by Bonifacy Konstantine, the "greenhorn" barber and neighborhood crime czar, this novel's Father Fagin. His homily? "_Grzmoty zabili diabla, a diabla zabili rzyda_." The village wisdom translates well into American, so well that it could stand beneath Whitman's lines as a second epigraph: "When the thunder kills a devil, then a devil kills a Jew." Only power connects people in _Never Come Morning_, and the logic of power in this novel is that it always derives from above, is always destructive, and while destroying its possessor, can simultaneously be used to destroy a weaker inhabitant further down in hell: a Chicago "great" chain of "being." This is a hopeless book, because either the appropriation of, or the failure to gain, the only available kind of power means the destruction of the subject. And one has to play. There is no "other" or "new" world to escape to.

So soon, then, after their coming to America as wretched refuse of their teeming shores, tired, poor, huddled _et cetera_, and, as the national mythologists would have it, full of hope at the sight of the lamp lifted at the golden door, the immigrants in Chicago's Polishtown realize the new world endorses the brutal proverbs of the old, not rhetorically, but effectively. The barber has a parrot for a pet, and his "boys" come anxiously to the shop's back room for assignments, to negotiate percentages, and for confirmation of the conviction that "ever'thin's

crooked." After getting beat silly in the course of throwing his last fight, "Casimir Benkowski from Cortez Street, called Casey by the boys and _Kasimierz_ by the girls" (_NCM_ 5) arrives at the Barber's back room:

> The featherweight paused in the doorway grinning in toothless embarrassment. He had seen this room a thousand days of his life and wished he had seen it not once. In it he had become a bicycle thief when he was ten, a pimp when he was fourteen, and a preliminary boy at sixteen. Now, at twenty-nine, he had come, with the alley light behind him, to learn what the room wished him next to become.
> (_NCM_ 4)

The old-country mothers, Bruno's and Steffi's, die slowly in back rooms, or sell "Polish pop" to the young men whose English was gotten in pool halls, jails, and in the caverns under the El; the young men who have seldom or never worked become devious, glib, violent criminals; the young women sell themselves cheap to either the packinghouse owners or to whorehouse customers.

It wouldn't have helped at all, I'm sure, to have had _Democratic Vistas_ translated and given to immigrants as a warning. Whitman, though, had often been as penetrating in his looking at the facts of his present as he wished to be prescient and hopeful about the country's future. _Democratic Vistas_ is either approved of or disparaged, by those who haven't carefully read it, as a kind of extended homage to America, past, present, and future. If it is patriotism, it is not simple patriotism. It expresses hope for what could be in America, and revulsion at what was. Preserved through _imagines_, Algren's memory of those paying for the progress of civilization had as its predecessor

not only Stephen Crane's Maggie, or Upton Sinclair's work, or Jack London's or Theodore Dreiser's, but also a good part of Walt Whitman's. Moments came to Whitman when he saw clearly enough, and demanded that others see, the human products of the energies he sometimes lauded:

> Confess that to severe eyes, using the moral microscope upon humanity, a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics. Confess that everywhere, in shop, street, church, theatre, bar-room, official chair, are pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity--everywhere the youth puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe--everywhere an abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted, padded, dyed, chignon'd, muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity for good motherhood deceasing or deceas'd, shallow notions of beauty, with a range of manners, or rather lack of manners, (considering the advantages enjoy'd,) probably the meanest to be seen in the world.[10]

The condition Whitman identifies, which had only worsened seventy years later when Algren was writing, is precisely "the disintegration of order in a spatially unified social group, the estrangement inflicted upon an entire city."[11] As I have noted, this is a primary sense of the city experienced as grotesque. The disintegration is plural in Never Come Morning, the estrangement is fatal, and the city of Chicago is wholly grotesque. A productive system in collapse thoroughly marginalized significant proportions of every city population in the 1930s, and the ways in which the marginalized would negotiate their continued existence within a disintegrating society made of them stunted, suffocated, punished, and degraded deviants from what Fanger calls, with appropriately punctuated irony, "a conventional ('natural')

norm" (F 231). To be unwillingly excluded from an alienating system of labor is to be doubly estranged, to be further distorted rather than restored to wholeness. In a series of what Bakhtin called "chronotopes," Algren displays the extent to which the monstrous and the obscene hold sway in the lives in the shadows of progress.

The genetic locus of Bruno's urban animality, in itself a grotesque mingling of the human and non-human, is the cave under the platform of the Division Street El station. Bruno's attachment to this spot begins early enough, and the lessons learned there essentially determine the course of his (presumably) short life. The earliest memories most humans are capable of recalling come back to Bruno like this: "through the sickness and heat of his third summer he had slept quietly only under the shadow of the Division Street station. In the heart of the city, in the heat of midsummer, the platform had sheltered him. Now he remembered the sun as a hostile thing coming between El ties; remembered sunlight as others recall it seen first through trees or climbing vines" (_NCM_ 29). Algren presents Bruno's childhood in vignettes as horrifying as those of Dickens's Jo of Tom-All-Alone's in _Bleak House_. The "underfed, shoeless six-year-old of the cageworked city's curbs and walks" (_NCM_ 30) finds in the lair under the El platform a kind of reverse-sacred place, in that the "littered places under the steep Division street steps" (_NCM_ 29) are owned by no one. In the infancy of his consciousness, Bruno acts on the postulate that the corollary of owning nothing, and

of forever "being in the way," is seeking the place in the city that no one owns, and which is wholly out of the way of the normative traffic of "people who lived in houses and not behind stores or above poolrooms" (NCM 29). In this underworld, Bruno and the other neighborhood kids shoot rats with stolen BB guns, sleep and eat in preference to going back to the stove-heated rooms in which they are always "in the way," and, with dice or worn cards, having no money, gamble "for chances to mock each other":

> [T]he loser had to dance foolishly about for a minute with one thumb on the point of his cap and the other on his buttocks, making himself as obscene, before the others, as the light from above permitted. (NCM 30)

It is here that the adolescents comprising the "Baldhead True-American S.A.C."--late the "Twenny-six Ward Warriors Social an' Athletic Club"--learned to shoot dice and drink and "raunch broads." It is here they share their knowledge of the ward, and of the greater world:

> "Ol' Fireball gets this crow t' come up 'n look at his books you--like a Nort'western co-ed she looked, her hair done up in the back 'n ever'thin' --'n dey get in da f_____ house 'n dey ain't a book in da f_____ place 'n she says where's d' books you? Ol' Fireball he just says O dem-- dere out gettin' rebinded. You." (NCM 40)

> "How'd you like to go to that Chink whorehouse?" he asked. "The Chinks send half their money back to the emp'r'r for wars 'n stuff like that-- they're great on that, Left'. Say--Left'-- You wanna talk in Chink? It's easy, Left', I'll learn ya, it's just English backerds is all . . . ." (NCM 48)

It is here, in the waste-place under the El, that youth

forms the lineaments of a gratifying world: "getting jobs and getting married, getting to be big-time bookies and politicians, getting the women and getting the money, getting autograph mitts and free beer at picnics, going to wedding and dances and parties, getting what they wanted and going where they pleased" (NCM 41). In the meantime, before they graduate to jack-rolling and pimping, boot-legging and strongarming, it's penny craps for Bruno and Fireball, Finger Idzikowsky, Knothole Chmura, John from the Schlitz Joint, Corner-Pockets and Punch-drunk Czwartek, penny craps and hunger, hunger for food, for tobacco, hunger for

> Things you couldn't live another hour without, things that were yours and yet not yours: a steady job, a steady girl, a clean place to sleep where you could be with the girl without her whole family and your whole family and every sprout in the block knowing exactly where the two of you were and maybe listening at the partition too. And jeering the girl on the street about it an hour after. (NCM 32)

It is these things, in Bruno's world, "that made you a man if you possessed them, or a wolf--if you were born where such things were only to the hunter" (NCM 32). The crux of this book is its representation of a world, in which space and time are equally constitutive, only a few neighborhoods away from yours or mine, where the conditions of life are such that being a hunter--or being prey--is inescapable, and being a man--or a woman--impossible. The generations older than Bruno's have made a world in the midst of Chicago that Algren renders almost as a village scene, loud, simple and vital:

> In the half-darkened Division Street gospodas

> beer was a nickel a glass and the big bass jukes played only Polish songs. Three oversize Polish piano-accordions played "I Want Some Sea-Food, Mama," at the same time that the juke played the "Po Zawabie Polka," and each trying to drown the other out so that you couldn't hear what the drunk beside you, with his head on the bar, was trying to sing at all. But you could tell what the girls were singing, and if you didn't smile back they stamped their feet angrily at you. (NCM 32)

This genre painting of Polish Chicago is a world of historical experience away from Bruno's shadow-barred half-world. Even this steel-worker's night out, even this neighborhood girl's songful, brassy time before marriage, even this old man's warm, boozy numbness belong to the old world, to the generations that could and would work. Bruno's world grows up under the El, and its efflorescence is criminal, obscene, and cut off from "reproduction, from a progression of generations, from the structures of the family and the clan" (DI 128). For it is under the El that Bruno imbibes The Code, the diseased prescription of brotherhood that compels him, once he has "scored" with Steffi, and against a persisting desire for decency, to pass her around to his "mob." The gang-splash under the El tracks is horror after horror, but in a quite different way than Cass McKay, a frozen, barely-animated sleepwalker, reacted to the rape of the black woman, Bruno responds to Steffi's brutalization and his own humiliation with agony, clownish agony and excuse-making and boastfulness. When all of that, and the booze he downs slug after slug, fails to dull Bruno's senses to the abyss that has opened, he provokes a fight, saying to a Greek in the line on the street above the shed, "'Beat it, Sheeny, this is a white man's

party'" (NCM 73). Bruno's boot catches the Greek's jaw when he's down, the neck breaks, and "they stood, looking blindly down, a dozen bald-headed Poles with a warehouse shadow across their skulls" (NCM 74). Steffi has cried out "'Next!'" all through this scene, drunk, "laughing a laugh like a single drawn-out sob, hard as a man in handcuffs laughs" (NCM 74). When Fireball and Catfoot drag her to the Barber's, for the Barber knows how to make over damaged goods into profit-making machinery, he looks down at "the frail olive thing on the couch" and tells her "'Grzmoty zabili diabla,' . . . as though talking to his mad parrot, 'The thunder killed the devil.'" And years before, the good, gray poet wrote:

> You said in your soul, I will be empire of empires, overshadowing all else, past and present, putting the history of Old-World dynasties, conquests behind me, as of no account--making a new history, a history of democracy, making old history a dwarf --I alone inaugurating largeness, culminating time. If these, O lands of America, are indeed the prizes, the determinations of your soul, be it so. But behold the cost, and already specimens of the cost.
> (W 990)

In the balance of Never Come Morning, the punishment, Bruno's and other's, is realized in two chronotopes, the line-up and the whorehouse parlor, which are new to this novel, and a third, the group of jail cells known as a "tank," which was central to Algren's first novel. These institutions of modern society provide Algren not only with the people whom he cannot deny, if he wishes to be human himself, but also with indications that a wholly tragic, or even wholly serious reaction to their

predicaments is certainly not equal to reality, and probably not helpful in preserving the capacity to react to it as a human.

The line-ups and whorehouse parlors, in this and in subsequent novels by Algren, are chronotopic in that their "spacial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (DI 84). Bakhtin insists on such a fusion both because the resulting chronotopes are identifiable and usable as generic memory, and because their "bodied" time and historicized space combat the efforts of authoritarian conventionality to absolutize its own abstract precepts, and to render material humanity *ipso facto* criminal and obscene. The truths of conventional morality are tested in these chronotopes, and found to be not so much lacking as lying. The logic of obscenity generates, in the alert artist, a corresponding realization of the mendacity to be opposed:

> The vulgar conventionality that pervades human life manifests itself first and foremost as a feudal structure, with something like a feudal ideology downplaying the relevance of spatial and temporal categories. Hypocrisy and falsehood saturate all human relationships. The healthy "natural" functions of human nature are fulfilled, so to speak, only in ways that are contraband and savage, because the reigning ideology will not sanction them. This introduces falsehood and duplicity into all human life. All ideological forms, that is, institutions, become hypocritical and false, while real life, denied any ideological directives, becomes crude and bestial. (DI 162)

The neighborhood translation of this comes when Bruno tells the Widow Rostenkowski "'Ever'thin's crooked, Widow,'" and when

Steffi, being led down the El station steps, replies to Bruno's "'Don't you _trust_ me?'" with, "'I _got_ to trust you now. But it's like animals. It makes me cry you.'" When Algren constructs the line-up chronotope, or the third-degree scenes, the reader must understand that, like Céline, Algren was convinced that "almost every desire a poor man has is a punishable offence."[12] These desires, like Bruno's hungers that could "waken and keep a man in trouble for the rest of his life" (_NCM_ 32), are the assertion of the bodily and the material in the face of the abstract and the instrumental. The line-up, which Algren alone among twentieth-century writers both knew about and realized the significance of, is the time and place of the _agon_ between the inhumanly authoritarian and the desperately human grotesque:

> The vet stepped forward once more.
> "You went home just like he told you?"
> "Yes sir."
> "And picked up a Lueger 'n came back to use it on him--is that right?"
> "Yes sir."
> "You're lucky an officer came along to take that thing off you. You'd be standing up there for murder if he hadn't--you realize that?"
> "Yes sir."
> "You're pretty cool about it."
> "I'm a veteran."
> "What the hell _has_ that got to do with it?" captain asked, exasperated at last, "I saw as much over there as you did."
> The little man seemed to find Tenczara with his eyes at last. And snapped like a mongrel held where it cannot move.
> "It wasn't you who got shoved." (_NCM_ 138-39)

The last line provides the pivot so essential to Algren's dramatic use of these scenes. On hearing it, the interrogating captain "lowered his glance to his desk as though he were the

guilty man." The line-up is used by the police to interrogate suspects and determine guilt; Algren uses it to interrogate the system that produces the criminal, and to make clear the complicity of accusors, interrogators and spectators in that production. The crimes of which Algren's subjects are accused are invariably less monstrous, and in fact flow from, the greater crime of a society organized to produce and protect property. It is a greater crime because the hypostatization of that productive process entails what Guy Debord has called "the perfection of separation."[13] By this is meant the wreckage of even the memory of, and the capacity to imagine, a human community based on humanity's needs rather than the wants of the individuals who profit from estranged labor. The line-up is the stage for the culling of the imperfectly separated, that is, those whose "comebacks" to the interrogator persistently <u>reveal</u> the separative horror of The American Century. The line-up thus becomes a punishing apparatus connected to the productive apparatus; it sorts the citizenry by gradations of defeatedness. Algren assigned himself to this segment of the Big Line neither as a functionary nor a victim, but as a memorialist. His explicit critique of middle class perception, or "dys-perception," was to follow the writing of <u>The Man with the Golden Arm</u>, but already in <u>Never Come Morning</u> he has discovered a way of preserving the memory of those mangled by the machinery of a "progressing" civilization. In doing so, he consciously overturns what Thomas Paine, at the outset of the American nation's experience, called

"good fortune":

> It is the good fortune of many to live distant from the scene of sorrow; the evil is not sufficiently brought to their doors to make them feel the precariousness with which American property is possessed.[14]

To make propertied Americans feel that precariousness was to use the chronotope to write "dangerous" history, in Walter Benjamin's sense:

> To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.[15]

The conclusion of Benjamin's statement should make clear the difference between Algren's works and the essentially defeated and accomodationist "tough guy" novel, whether produced by a Mickey Spillane or a Norman Mailer. While their works may be soaked with criminality, they are nihilistic, implicitly authoritarian, and virtually empty of cultural criticism, that is to say, there are no moments of danger. In these novels the weak go to the wall; women are dolls or vampires, but always victims in the end; chaos is held at bay by a neo-classicist hero-stoic. The extermination of the "geek" is legitimated in this tradition by the culturally-sanctioned scapegoating of the loser. The difference between this tradition and Algren's work lies in the

latter's deep acceptance of Walt Whitman's "profound lesson of reception, nor preference nor denial" (W 298). This distinction is also representative of the exceptions Algren took to almost every "high cultural" tendency and product of the United States, and a good part of mass culture as well. At virtually no point in the consciousness industry could Algren see the endorsement by action of the Whitmanic values of receptiveness and toleration, what Whitman called "solidarity":

> The great word Solidarity has arisen. Of all dangers to a nation, as things exist in our day, there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn--they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account. (W 949)

The suspicion that separation and estrangement were effectively enforced by American civilization was, for Whitman, the shadowed side of his yearnings for the nation to be true to its possibilities: "the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me" (W 935). Even as he saw the cities "crowded with petty grotesques," he extended himself to them in a democratic feast, and did so in language that, as we shall see, shares much with Bakhtin's conception of grotesque realism:

> This is the meal equally set, this the meat for natural hunger,
> It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous, I make appointments with all,
> I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
> The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited,
> The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is invited;
> There shall be no difference between them and the rest.
> (W 205)

Everywhere in his writing, Whitman strove to produce an image counter to the fearful differentiation and "denial" he saw descending on America. Against the lessons of isolation taught in his time, he wanted "adhesiveness," recognition:

> Here is the profound lesson of reception, nor preference nor denial,
> The black with his wooly head, the felon, the diseas'd, the illiterate person are not denied;
> The birth, the hasting after the physician, the beggar's tramp, the drunkard's stagger, the laughing party of mechanics,
> The escaped youth, the rich person's carriage, the fop, the eloping couple,
> The early market-man, the hearse, the moving of furniture into the town, the return from the town,
> They pass, I also pass, any thing passes, none can be interdicted,
> None but are accepted, none but shall be dear to me.
> (W 298)

As this does not, certain of Whitman's prose pieces (e.g. "The Eighteenth Presidency!") make clear his understanding of at least some of the specific forces deforming American society. The general low quality of political party hacks and minor bureaucrats--the back-room boys--made the realization of the democratic promise of health quite impossible. As long as the grip these "exclusives" had on national and local politics held, as long as they served the interests that could pay them, without the encumbrance of a conscience, and with the culturally-inculcated inability to recognize the living connection of human to human, American cities, in particular, would continue to spew up "malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics" (W 939). Whitman's briefest statement of the gulf between an individual, democratic ethic, and the institutionalized cynicism actually

existing in America, is a poem, one of many titled "Thought":

> Of obedience, faith, adhesiveness;
> As I stand aloof and look there is to me something
> profoundly affecting in large masses of men
> following the lead of those who do not believe in men.[16]
> (W 413)

These masses, the most humiliated and excluded part of them, called forth an answer from Algren. In Never Come Morning he declared more than his allegiance to this class, he declared his identity with them. Certainly he sorrowed for the deformations he saw, for the criminality that blighted the life of perpetrator and victim alike. Deeper than his reaction, though, was his conviction that to deny convicts and prostitutes was to reduce his own humanity. In the early 1940s this was, for Algren, an earnest ethical position which demanded that he develop artistic strategies equal to expressing it. But in something of the same way that Marxian thought had proved narrow and heartless in its appraisal of the lumpen, Whitman's "profound lesson of reception," which Algren never repudiated, catalyzed an expressive mode which differed profoundly from the bardic and national-epic character of Whitman's. Algren began to include characters and vignettes which are meant, I think, to elicit something of the same ambivalent laughter from the reader that Algren himself could not deny as an element of his relation to the excluded. At moments in Whitman's work--"To a Common Prostitute" and "You Felons on Trial in Courts" (the source of the epigraph of Never Come Morning) have such moments--he is uncomfortably close to congratulating himself for his gesture. I am not speaking of the

frequently-decried Whitmanic egoism, but of a cultural tendency that slightly taints his writing on the lower classes. Elias Canetti has called this, in another context, "the moral kitsch of the Puritan: in his deepest and most contrite self-accusal, he still presents himself a hundred times better than he is."[17] The antidote for this kind of high-mindedness is to laugh with--or at--sometimes it's hard to tell--the objects of one's tolerance and generosity, and, in so doing, laugh at oneself. Whitman wrote before the age of the social worker, before the time that the bourgeoisie found it advantageous to pay a profession to express sympathy to a class. To the extent that tolerance and compassion had become rationalized by-products of an absolutely divided society, Algren saw that the humanizing, the truly compassionate reaction, had to include laughter.

The slyest aspect of this novel is that Algren smuggled a parody of Whitman's "acceptance" into the pages headed with the poet's words. Bruno's cellmate, after Charlie the Dealer, is "a rangy vagrant with a ptomaine eye." This specimen is altogether enwrapped in his own troubles, unwilling to make verbal contact with Bruno until he abruptly interrupts his pacing:

> "Have you got a belt?" he asked. "I'm going to hang myself."
>
> Bruno pointed lazily to his trousers across the cell, depending from a projection in the wall.
>
> "I never seen a guy hang hisself," Bruno encouraged him. "I seen a guy once by Oak Street, he was drowned. His belly was swoll. Go ahead--I'll put the belt back awright."
>
> The fellow looked down at him with a long, melancholy, horse-faced reproach, as though waiting for Bruno to call a guard to advise him to think things over. Bruno eyed him without concern.

"Go it, guy. You're a done man anyhow." (NCM 159)

Despite this tender concern, the fellow elects to reveal himself rather than waste himself. He pities Bruno, almost, that he doesn't know he's in the company of "'the man who's lettin" everythin' go.'"

> "Oh. I didn't know. My name's Biceps. Bruno Lefty Biceps." He held out his hand, but the sad one did not take it. As though he had not heard the name of Bruno Lefty at all.
>
> "Let them airplanes fly," he warned Bruno, his eyes rapt with some inner knowledge. "Let them race horses race. Let them bugs crawl. I'm lettin' 'em all go." (NCM 160)

This character's tune is varied, but the theme is not. He treats Bruno to further advice about the kosmos: "'Let them radios holler. Let them dice shakers shake. Let them boozers booze. I'm lettin' everythin' go.'" Is this a little bit reminiscent of the Whitmanic catalog? Is any case, the introduction of this one-tune obsessive does much to lighten this novel, and does so by playing off the pathos of Bruno's doom, as well as by parodying Whitmanic acceptance. The "rangy vagrant with the ptomaine eye" warmly shakes Bruno's hand when the latter is released, and holds it until his advice is finished: "'Let them monkeys jump,'" he cautioned, "'let them lions roar. Let them telephones ring. Let them camels run. Just let ever'thin' go'" (NCM 160).

Not funny books about human misery, but books which represent the survival of the human by letting human laughter out. The problem can be stated that way, or by simply asking: what would one's motives be if, in writing about people who had had

almost everything of value taken from them, one denied them laughter? Algren wrote <u>Never Come Morning</u> with enough compassion and enough understanding of the harrowing conditions of his characters' lives to <u>not</u> piously cover his ears when he heard their laughter, nor stop his own laughter when he felt it coming on. In Bruno's scene with the Bug Doc, in the back-and-forth jabbing and feinting of the line-up scenes, in the goofy misunderstandings of Mama Tomek's women, which might be just calculated ways to pass the leaden time, in the tank with The Man Who Was Letting Everything Go, there is relief from the machinery of decimation. The machinery gets louder in the next of Algren's books, but so does the laughter.

[1] Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer, Punishment and Social Structure (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), p. 5.

[2] Murray Kempton, Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 144.

[3] Adorno, Prisms, p. 34.

[4] See Robert B. Grant, The Black Man Comes to the City: A Documentary Account from the Great Migration to the Great Depression: 1915 to 1930 (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1972), for a remarkably full documentary, statistical and imaginative record of the huge population shift of American blacks in the early years of the century.

[5] For further information on the relationship of the railroads to the Chicago hobo, tramp and bum scene, see Nels Anderson, The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), passim. This work was originally published in 1923, and was part of the important research into vagrant America undertaken by the Chicago School of sociologists, under the informal direction of Robert Park. Later works of this group, which were an essential part of the background reading for this thesis, focused on criminality in lower class Chicago (Clifford Shaw, The Jack-Roller, and Frederic Thrasher, The Gang were for me the two most informative works). For a popular account of Chicago hobohemia, important because it stresses the connection with the rail system, see Roger A.Bruns, Knights of the Road: A Hobo History (New York: Methuen, 1980), chap. 7. Disaffiliated Man: Essays and Bibliography on Skid Row, Vagrancy, and Outsiders, ed. Howard M. Bahr (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970) is a very valuable reference work which, despite its inclusion of a lengthy section on journalistic and literary accounts, strangely makes no mention of Algren's work.

[6] The quality of this relationship, and of the participants in it, is made clear by the following excerpt from a letter from Richard Olney, the United States Attorney General, to the President of the Chicago, Burlington, & Quincy Railroad. Six years after the passage of legislation establishing the Interstate Commerce Commission, Olney tried to dissuade the railroad executive from pressing for its repeal:

> The Commission, as its functions have now been limited by the courts, is, or can be made, of great use to the railroads. It satisfies the popular clamor for government supervision of the railroads at the same time that the super-

> vision is almost entirely nominal. Further, the older such a commission gets to be, the more inclined it will be found to take the business and railroad view of things. It thus becomes a sort of barrier between the railroads and the people and a sort of protection against hasty and crude legislation hostile to railroad interests.

Quoted in Richard Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 230. Hofstadter's discussion of this sample makes it clear that this kind of relationship between reformist legislation and business interests was not at all unusual. For a critical view of Chicago business development, see Wayne Andrews, Battle for Chicago (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946).

[7] See Stanley Aronowitz, False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 163-66.

[8] Stephen Crane, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, in Three Great Novels by Stephen Crane (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Books, 1970), p. 32.

[9] James T. Farrell, "Social Themes in American Realism," in his Literature and Morality (New York: Vanguard Press, 1947), p. 22-23.

[10] Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: The Library of America, 1982), p. 939. Herefter cited as "W" in the body of the text.

[11] Kayser, p. 67.

[12] The quotation is from Céline's Journey to the End of the Night, but I have not been able to relocate it beyond that. Algren made clear Céline's influence on him: see CNA, p. 95.

[13] Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977), passim. Debord's book has a considerably more complex thesis than a reference to a phrase can indicate.

[14] Thomas Paine, Common Sense, quoted in Wilson Carey McWilliams, The Idea of Fraternity in America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 180.

[15] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in his Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 255.

[16] Gustav Landauer, one of Whitman's German translators and an important figure of heterodox Marxism, makes a similar remark

about the leadership of German socialist movements in the early part of this century:

> Ashen-faced, drowsy men, cynical and uncultured, are leading our people; where are the Columbus natures, who prefer to sail the high seas in a fragile ship into the unknown rather than wait for developments? Where are the young, joyous victorious Reds who will laugh at these gray faces? The Marxists don't like to hear such words, such attacks, which they call relapses, such enthusiastic unscientific challenges. I know, and that is exactly why I feel so good at having told them this. The arguments I use against them are sound and they hold water, but if instead of refuting them with arguments I annoyed them to death with mockery and laughter, that would also suit me fine.

See Gustav Landauer, For Socialism, trans. David J. Parent (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1978), p. 63. Some very suggestive comparisons could be made between Landauer's work and Bakhtin's, particularly in the areas of folk tradition and laughter. The following remarks, from Russell Berman and Tim Luke's introduction to the Landauer book, might serve as a beginning: "He saw the folk consciousness as the generic memory and historical essence of all a people's past ancestors embedded deeply in the common language as well as in the psychic make-up of every individual formed in the cultural interaction of the group with its milieu. Thus, spirit is the cornerstone of Landauer's anarchism, both as his notion of subjectivity and as his alternative to bureaucratic administration." See Landauer, p. 8.

[17] Elias Canetti, The Human Province, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), p. 106.

Chapter Four: Peacetime

> If all the technical forces of capitalism must be understood as tools for the making of separations, in the case of urbanism we are dealing with the equipment at the basis of these technical forces, with the treatment of the ground that suits their deployment, with the very technique of separation.
>
> - Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle

> During World War II Chicago again gave generously to the war effort. Four service centres entertained 17,500,000 service personnel. In seven war bond drives Cook county residents bought bonds valued at $6,667,867,447, and they participated actively in the thrift drives for steel, fat and paper. The people of Chicago contributed 642,392 pints of blood.
>
> - Bessie Louise Pierce, "Chicago," Encyclopedia Britannica 1963

> "'Cause the way it starts is like this, students: you let the habit feed you first 'n one mornin' you wake up 'n you're feedin' the habit."
>
> - Nifty Louie Fomorowski

i

> For this mortuary he has to pay.
>
> - Karl Marx, "The Meaning of Human Requirements"

At the same historical moment that the tendencies of United States culture to amnesia and auto-affirmation culminated in the illusion of an ended war, Nelson Algren wrote a novel which remembered the decades before World War II, and saw little to be

content with in the progress of American civilization. The Man with the Golden Arm is a book haunted by "the years when the world had only gone half-wrong" (MGA 306), and tormented by the apprehension that the forces for denial and separation, the very forces of production which enabled the Allies to win the war,[1] held virtually unchallenged sway in American life. In his conversations with H.E.F. Donohue, Algren spoke of his time in the Army and the years immediately following the end of the declared war:

> Q: Did you do any writing in the Army? Did you want to?
> Algren: No. Nothing but letter writing.
> Q: Did you think that the whole of society was falling apart?
> Algren: No. Not so long as I was holding together, it couldn't.
> Q: You knew it would be over and it would be all right?
> Algren: Overseas I knew it would be over, but when I was in the States I remember one afternoon I resigned myself to the fact that this thing was never going to end, that it was just going to go on.
> (CNA 86)

Algren's introduction to the 1960 republication of The Neon Wilderness spoke of his last days in Marseilles, before he headed home in a troop ship: "Behind the last bivouac, the last sea-bell and the last bar, the ordinary Milwaukee Avenue moon of home shone like a memory for me of people whose peace had always been one more war to go" (NW 10). Back in Chicago, under neon signs advertising new brands of beer, Algren saw that "some of the drinkers had been to the war and some had sat it out; yet all seemed equally survivors" (NW 10). Back amongst "men and women who shared all the horrors but none of the privileges of our

civilization" (NCM xiii), Algren wrote a war novel about post-war Chicago.[2]

In doing so, he captured not only the truth that at the bottom of the Republic's hierarchy, a war of attrition had been going on for a long time, but also a sense of the totality of certain changes in the terms of life, and of the rapidity with which they seemed to have occurred. On the one hand, paralysis; on the other, bewildering speed and novelty: at no point were continuity, evolution or progress perceptible. This relation to time, that it is either perceived as frozen and imprisoning, or as moving too fast to be usable by an individual, imbues the novel with a "reasonless," dream-like atmosphere in which time has different meanings and different rates of passage in different settings, or, more accurately, chronotopes. Within these chronotopes, grotesque characters reflect, and sometimes try to reflect on, the relationship of their fragmented, troubled present to what their sentiments tell them was an organic past. There is a deeper realization in this novel than in Never Come Morning of the institutional attack on the very capacities that would enable one to define and make sense of that relationship, and to make for oneself and others, perhaps even children, a livable world. Broken off from their pasts, the characters in this novel awaken to a state in which every connection of human to human has become parasitic, desperate and compulsive. Those that seem not to be--Frankie and Molly's, for example--are in fact too weak to resist the social forces of cleavage, and use

the tough-sentimental language of Guys and Dolls to mask their impotence. Algren realized by the time he wrote <u>The Man with the Golden Arm</u> that the thing society did best to the people he cared about was to put to them "choices too hard to bear" (<u>NW</u> 14). Always, these choices (e.g. between informing on others or going up oneself) brought about separation, and were put to the accused by a legal system which amounted to an institutionalized denial of the claims of common humanity. Algren felt that, this being so, the writer had only one honorable place to stand: with the accused, guilty or not guilty. To do so challenged not only the self-confirming operations of the judiciary, but also those post-war literary critics whom Algren disparaged as "the new owners." Those critics whose choices were for career, power and property aligned themselves with an "exclusive" (in Whitman's sense) literary fashion that derided the compassion of Dreiser, or Richard Wright, or even the best moments of Hemingway. They endorsed an inwardness congenial to middle class competitiveness and isolation, and mocked or dismissed as naive the tradition of compassion in American letters, which Algren saw as its sole justification. These critics denied that the writer gained dignity from standing with the accused, and denied that the accused were worthy of the writer's concern.[3] <u>The Man with the Golden Arm</u> attacks that social autism with both Whitmanic gravity and a wild, grotesque humor that makes this the funniest book ever written about a society fallen under the spell of production.

Algren deliberately indicates the occasion of Frankie

Machine's two most direct causes of suffering: his own addiction to morphine, and his wife Zosh's psychosomatic paralysis. Both are, of course, bound tightly into Frankie and Zosh's personalities, but war, the effective remedy for the Depression, was decisive in shaping those personalities. In a discussion of two addicts of his acquaintance, Algren distinguished between the first, who "was on it, but he was _for_ it, too; I mean, he really wanted it to be that way," and the other, for whom Algren felt far more sympathy, and with whom he associated the character Frankie Machine, "was on it, but he didn't want to be. He was against it."[4] Frankie Machine, morphine addict, is the unwilling transmutation, by way of the U.S. Army and "shrapnel buried in his liver for keeps" (_MGA_ 9), of Francis Majcinek, Polish American beer-and-whiskey neighborhood roisterer and card-dealer. Frankie's tortured dream about Private McGantic, "the man with the thirty-five pound monkey on his back" (_MGA_ 15), is set in a field hospital tent in which Frankie lies on an army cot. This anxious and sorrowful dream, which comes to Frankie as he lies in the "whitewashed tier" beneath the all-night bulbs of the Saloon Street station-house, has carefully placed in it the artifacts of Army provenance which will continually and damningly reappear in this novel:

> No other soldier lay along that double row of neatly made-up cots, but Frankie could tell that the private squinting into the tent had been sent by the dispensary. The winter's sun on his face revealed a hospital pallor; the eyes looked so bleak below the dim and huddled mass on the shoulders.
>
> "I can't get him off," he complained to no

> one in particular, with a certain innocence where one expected shame: a voice like that of a child confessing an unclean disease without sensing any uncleanliness. "Something has happened to him," Frankie felt. The private was pointing to where, on the ward sterilizer, a GI syrette, out of some medic's first-aid kit, lay with the GI quarter-grain ration of morphine beside it, melting whitely even as he watched. (MGA 16)

Private McGantic is Frankie's parasitic companion throughout this novel, and when Frankie's habit is running heavy he speaks of the monkey-man grotesque as "Sergeant McGantic." Wearing Army suntans, bearing his Army duffle bag with a stolen Army hypo hidden in it, Francis Majcinek comes back to West Division Street with a habit picked up in the service. The obedience exacted from him by drill sergeants and "green-ass corporals" in his thirty-four months of duty remains mobilized by the exigencies of addiction.

But Frankie, in his arrival stateside as in so many other situations, plays normal, and screens from himself and others the extent of change and damage worked by the war not just to his liver, but to his life. He goes through the motions of celebration of the end of the war just as any John Q. Public would. With the photostated discharge in his pocket only two months old, "in a week when every tavern radio was blaring triumphantly of what a single bomb had done on the other side of the world" (MGA 67), Frankie and Zosh and the barflies of Antek Witwicki's Tug & Maul Tavern drink up Owner's "A-Bomb Specials," made simply by pouring a triple shot instead of a double. The last juke-box song of the evening, "the final song of a world that had known

neither A-Bombs nor A-Bomb Specials" (*MGA* 67), the anthem that precedes the smash-up of Frankie and Zosh and the pre-war world, is:

> "There's nothing left for me
> Of days that used to be . . ."

The Majcineks, man and wife in a sense, are finally wed that evening. Frankie's innocent and doomed wish to see "'what the people 'r doin' on Milwaukee'" leads to a drunken tour of Ashland Avenue, Frankie all the way "mumbling some drunken singsong about "'War's over, war's over, war's over for Frankie--drives like he deals, deals like he lives 'n he lives all the time--war's over, war's over--'" (*MGA* 68). Like that of any West Division Street drinker, though, and in not quite the same fashion as John Q. Public's, Frankie's peace will always be "one more war to go." Fighting an army surplus habit, Frankie Machine has brought home his Purple Heart to an urban foxhole, which he unaccountably shares with the enemy. Zosh's dreams of reforming him, and of their having a "normal" life, are earnest, after a particular fashion:

> "I'll make a man of him yet," she'd boasted to Violet shortly before the accident, "just like that Jane Wyman done that time with some goof battlin' the bottle worse'n Frankie. When I'm through wit' him he won't want to look at another deck 'r the inside of a whisky bar." (*MGA* 66)[5]

This celluloid-inspired plan fails, but the accident, the "blessed, cursed, wonderful terrible God's-own-accident" (*MGA* 71), truly marries them at last: "For where her love and the Church's ritual had failed to bind, guilt had now drawn the

irrevocable knot so fiercely that she felt he could never be free of her again" (<u>MGA</u> 66). In the week after the A-Bomb and the A-Bomb Specials, although she is up and around, Zosh is disconsolate and anxious, and says, "'I just don't feel like it's <u>over</u>, Frankie'" (<u>MGA</u> 71). The referent of "it" is multiple, although Zosh speaks only of her own troubles. The war is not just background for this novel. It is so tightly twisted into the lives of the characters that the language Zosh uses to describe her "pre-motion" of bodily catastrophe is identical to that with which Frankie so foolishly celebrates his "release." At the precise moment that the national nightmare of war is ended, the personal warfare of two already damaged survivors moves on to a battleground as strange and desolate as the age of nuclear weapons. On the night of V-J Day, the final victory in the last theater, Zosh shakes Frankie awake, and with an strange, embarrassed, apologetic smile, "not like her smile at all," tells him she can't get up. The treatments fail, all treatments fail, and at the opening of this novel, when Frankie asks Zosh what she likes, she answers:

> "What I like is when I mix that dark beer wit' the light stuff!" She had pinned him to the sink with the wheels of the chair touching his shoes. "It's <u>that</u> kind I like, what I really go for. Oh, <u>godamn</u>it, don't you even know what I like <u>yet?</u>"
>
> When her voice rose in that rattling whine he remembered the distant beat of artillery and the sudden applause of M.G. fire. (<u>MGA</u> 38)

Both Frankie and Zosh lose their bodies in the war years, and whether the body is taken over by addiction or paralysis, it

is equally demanding, equally dependent on an external machine (a hypo or a wheelchair), and equally half-dead. They are both grotesque in that so much of the mechanical, the animal, the baby-like, and the morbid are combined, in images of their appearance and in their behavior, with whatever is still recognizably human in them. Their grotesquerie as spouse-combatants is carefully reinforced by the army surplus appointments of their single room: Frankie's "heavy army brogans," shaving kit, hypo and clothing, particularly his combat jacket with the frayed sleeve ("on the sleeve" was a slang term for having a narcotics habit); Zosh's army blanket wrapped around her lower body; "the heaped army blankets on the bed--blankets stolen from army camps all the way from Fort Bragg to Camp Maxey" (MGA 168). Frankie, when he badly needs a fix, and Zosh, when her loneliness frightens her, complain about the cold, and shiver, and feel they'll never be warm again. Jailer Schwabatski, their landlord, has a simple diagnosis of the Majcineks' problem: "'They want to love each other--but they don't know how'" (MGA 32). It's hard to gainsay the old man, but Algren is as much concerned with what takes the place love should fill as he is with the portrayal of a wretched marriage. Their "solutions," paralysis and addiction, both make use of army surplus; the marriage bed, comfortless and cold, is heaped with the souvenirs of mobilized everyday life.

The infiltration of civilian life by military objects is comprehensive in this novel. Pig, the "old, blind noseless bummy" (MGA 45) who works for Nifty Louie Fomorowski, and later

takes over his traffic in little brown drugstore bottles, wears a particularly attractive outfit:

> All the filth of West Division Street clung to those fingers and to the frayed ends of the army surplus underwear curling beneath the cuffs. He wore heavy underwear, an army overcoat and the mariner's rolled cap whether it were roistering August or mid-December. (MGA 47)

When Nifty Louie, a.k.a. Fixer, shoots Frankie up in the room above the Safari Club, Frankie lies sweating and shivering and writhing in shame and need on Louie's army cot. Zero Schwiefka, Frankie's employer, keeps time in his gambling room with his PX wrist watch. When Frankie is on the run from Bednar after murdering Louie, he sleeps, and tapers off with codeine, on an army cot in Molly Novotny's cold-water flat on Maypole Street. While the police are tearing up one junkie scene after another in search of Frankie--an unsolved murder looks bad in an election year--they come across a Pole, Frankie's height, in a Lake Street alley. He is "wrapped in an army overcoat, with the marks of the needle like two knotted nipples tatooed into the breasts of a nude on his arm" (MGA 314). At the same time, Zosh, finally altogether mad, is taken to a locked room with a numbered door, behind which a cot with "a familiar-looking khaki blanket across its foot" awaits her.

Not only these souvenirs of a war economy, but militarized language and behavior are rife in The Man with the Golden Arm. Of the many instances of "invaded" life, the most compact and revealing is, when viewed superficially, the novel's most "hopeful" moment. When Frankie does nine months in jail after the

"eye-ron" stealing fiasco, he goes "from monkey to zero" with the help of the jail doctor, an ex-officer called "the major" by the inmates, who himself invariably calls Frankie "soldier." The quasi-military organization of the cell-block is conveyed by Algren's description of the prisoners in Frankie's tier as "good boys . . . the laundry and bakery workers, the printshop typesetters and the boys who sat in classrooms and accepted their sentences with the dry, hard-bitten humor of old contented soldiers" (MGA 203). These are the good soldiers, and amongst them,

> Frankie slipped into a life like the life of the barracks he had known for three years. Orders were given matter-of-factly without threats; and were obeyed complacently. Most of them kept themselves as clean as if preparing for retreat each evening and most, out of sheer boredom, attended services in the pink-and-white chapel on Sunday morning. And each good soldier counted his two days off a month, for good behavior, like money in the bank and well earned. (MGA 204)

The "virtues" acted out by the inhabitants of this tier are an amalgam of those appropriate to the Boy Scout, the altar boy, the schoolboy, the Army "lifer," and the unambitious and uncomplaining industrial worker. Miming them is rehabilitation, or so the middle class might delude itself. The actual difficulty, though, is that while Frankie may be "getting straight" in kicking his addiction, the post-war world which awaits a submissive and drug-free citizen has itself created, through the ongoing process of war-stimulated production, a habit which, after feeding the war machine, now demands to be fed the survivors. The marriage of war production to what Harold Lasswell called "per-

petual crisis and the garrison-prison state"[6] makes not just the lives of one or a dozen or several thousand "frayed unkjays" a nightmare, but an entire nation's. After discussing the "cultural mobilization" of the United States in the 1930's and 40's, during which the popular media constantly reminded citizens that faith in a consumer society would not be ultimately disappointed, Stuart Ewen speaks of a kind of criminal consumerism different from drug addiction:

> With the expanded production called for by World War II, the policy of government spending moved from one of being a stopgap measure to being a policy that would "strike oil" for American business. A wide sector of economic activity opened up--never to be demobilized following World War II--in the form of war ("defense") industries. The ideal of permanent industrial productivity seemed to find its realization in these industries of war. War, programmed obsolescence, stockpiling and the governmental policy of unbelievable expenditure for "defense" all contributed to the notion that here was a sector of industry which could flourish in spite of people's abilities or proclivity to be mass consumers.[7]

The compass in which a "good soldier" could move would be narrow: after celebrating the end of one war and the advent of a new kind of war by drinking Antek's A-Bomb Specials all night long, Frankie "slammed side-wise into a billboard offering everyone in Chicago a spanty-new past-and-paper Nash" (MGA 68). A "bad soldier" had no choice but to return, as Frankie does at the end of his time in jail, to life behind the billboards. It is here, in "the city's littered bivouac," among the tenements of home, that Frankie feels "like an awol private returning to barracks from which his old outfit had long ago convoyed and

scattered for keeps" (<u>MGA</u> 226). Caught between the "bad" behavior of addiction and poker-dealing, and the "good" behavior of wage labor, consumption, tax-paying and submission to the dictates of the garrison-prison state, nothing like genuine differences appear, because the human remains a combatant in either situation. Running into the billboard, his discharge hardly dry yet, Frankie only reflects, but cannot realize, what Debord articulates:

> The economic system founded on isolation is a <u>circular production of isolation</u>. The technology is based on isolation, and the technical process isolates in turn. From the automobile to television, all the <u>goods selected</u> by the spectacular system are also its weapons for a constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of "lonely crowds."[8]

Zosh's whining insistence that Vi wheel her every day to the Little Pulaski or the "Riawlto" so that she might enter the substitute life sold by the consciousness industry is only one of the many indications in this novel that everyday life constitutes what Debord has called "the society of the spectacle." The authority to which Algren's characters regularly submit their disputes, anxieties, hopes, ignorance, and need for companionship is the third-person world of the spectacle, which devastates the individual. The American novelist Nathanael West pointed to the shift in consciousness which attended the development of modern mass communications following World War I when he said: "Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio, and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst."[9]

Algren depicts the betrayal of humanity by a society organized around war production, and the instrumentalization of the consciousness necessary to such production, as a species of bodily paralysis alternating with panic states. These latter propel both Frankie and Zosh into spasms of motion marked by pain and futility. In the midst of this pathos, or pathology, their memories of the pre-war world become more precious, less accessible, increasingly fragile, and thoroughly burdened with guilt and regret. Memory becomes, for Zosh, nothing more or less than the raw material of psychosis. For Frankie, memory is narrowed to the instrumental and the military, and when that fails him, becomes only the reliquary of self-accusal and shame. As he flees from the "military clumping" of the Lake Street aces, he goes "low, assault-course fashion, zigzagging with the girders sheltering his back, thinking 'I done this three times awready--it's all in the Service Record'" (<u>MGA</u> 328). When he is wounded, feverish, and junk-sick in a last anonymous chicken-wire flop, Frankie's last thought before he hangs himself is the self-lacerating memory-formula: "'Have a good dream you're dancin', Zosh'" (<u>MGA</u> 337).

It would be inadequate to see in Frankie Machine's sorrowful tale a simple warning not to shoot up narcotics and deal cards for a living, that is, an admonition to live like a normal person. The futility of Frankie's life is the one thing, though he is an addict and a card-dealer, that he shares with the mass of industrial workers. As I've mentioned, so much of the pathos of

Frankie's situation derives from his essentially "square" nature and aspirations: he is a part of, more than he is apart from, the monolithic hallucination of normality. Although he gambles for a living, his money comes not from winnings, but from his employee's portion of the house's profits. He values his wrists as precision tools, whether he is dealing or drumming. His wish for a musical career is based as much on a craving for star-status and regular salary, accorded big band members such as Gene Krupa, as on a felt need to produce music. Even his addiction, as abnormal as it may have appeared to bourgeois readers, imposes on his life the seeming contradictions of synthetic shock and automatic regularity which Walter Benjamin saw as primary determinants of modernity. Benjamin's essay "Some Motifs in Baudelaire" dilates on the essential similarities between the gambler, the unskilled industrial worker, and Poe's "man of the crowd," that is, <u>homo spectaculum</u>. The following passage from the essay is valuable because it precisely defines the grotesque embodiment in Frankie Machine, who Nifty Louie calls "Automatic Majcinek," of a pernicious rigidification, and also indicates the site at which a toppling wedge might be set and driven:

> The latter [unskilled factory work], to be sure, lacks any touch of adventure, of the mirage that lures the gambler. But it certainly does not lack the futility, the emptiness, the inability to complete something which is inherent in the activity of a wage slave in a factory. Gambling even contains the workmen's gesture that is produced by the automatic operation, for there can be no game without the quick movement of the hand by which the stake is put down or a card is picked up. The jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called <u>coup</u> in

> a game of chance. The manipulation of the worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding operation for the very reason that it is its exact repetition. Since each operation at the machine is just as screened off from the preceding operation as a <u>coup</u> in a game of chance is from the one that preceded it, the drudgery of the labourer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler.
>
> There is a lithograph by Senefelder which represents a gambling club. Not one of those depicted is pursuing the game in the customary fashion. Each man is dominated by an emotion: one shows unrestrained joy; another, distrust of his partner; a third, dull despair; a fourth evinces belligerence; another is getting ready to depart from the world. All these modes of conduct share a concealed characteristic: the figures presented show us how the mechanism to which the participants in a game of chance entrust themselves seizes them body and soul, so that even in their private sphere, and no matter how agitated they may be, they are capable of only a reflex action. They behave like the pedestrians in Poe's story. They live their lives as automatons and resemble Bergson's fictitious characters who have completely liquidated their memories.[10]

In Zosh's life, as in Frankie's, the elements are the same. She too is a gambler, and having entrusted herself body and soul to the mechanism of her particular game of chance, becomes grotesque in her reduced humanity:

> For if she'd made a secret bargain with herself, in that darkened corner of the mind where all such bargains are made, she would stand by the deal. She was bound now by it as irrevocably as Frankie was bound to her and she was bound to the chair: she would not now return to that corner except in dreams. Not to that curtained hide-out, not to that secret place. She had gone to that bookie in the brain where hustler's hearts pay off to win, place or show. She had bet her health on a long one and waited each night to be paid off in her turn. (<u>MGA</u> 122)

The bizarre quality of Mr. and Mrs. Majcinek's existence is an instance of what Debord calls "the pseudo-use of life."[11]

Under the general spell of the production of separation, they can only make choices which maintain their estrangement from their truest (i.e. historical and bodily) selves, and from each other. Algren's epigraph to the novel's first section is from Alexander Kuprin's _Yama_, a novel damning the system--not the act--of prostitution. The words speak of the atrophy of the human capacity to react to the distortion of life: "'Do you understand, gentlemen, that all the horror is in just this, that there is no horror!'" This passage continues: "'Bourgeois work days--and that is all.'"[12] It isn't nice work for Frankie and Zosh either, but they've got it.

> Did I not say before that that face was something separate, and apart; a face by itself? Now, any thing which is thus a thing by itself never responds to any other thing. If to affirm, be to expand one's isolated self; and if to deny, be to contract one's isolated self; then to respond is a suspension of all isolation.
>
> \- Herman Melville, Pierre Or, The Ambiguities

If Algren's novel did nothing more than parade this doleful couple before us, it would offer little more than a repetition of images of pathos. Such images, and in this I concur with Bakhtin, are false, always false, if they are presented "monologically." If no contrasting and contesting voice appears in a work of verbal art, or, since the nature of language makes that impossible, if the author tries to strangle such voices when they threaten to sound, the spectacle, which Debord characterizes as "the opposite of dialogue,"[13] maintains its hold, and separation is enforced. The artistic labor becomes yet another instance of "the concrete manufacture of alienation,"[14] and a tribute offering to "the perfected denial of man."[15] But in a different chronotope than Frankie and Zosh's rented mortuary, Algren depicts a spectacular functionary whose nerves begin to tremble in strange ways. A danger sign, for the captain, but a vital sign for the reader.

Captain Bednar is this novel's "legitimate" half of the pairs of authoritarian nemeses which dog all of Algren's protagonists. The absolute power embodied in Stub McKay and Nubby

O'Neill in Somebody in Boots, and One-Eye Tenczara and Bonifacy Konstantine in Never Come Morning is in The Man with the Golden Arm held--but neither securely nor permanently--by Record Head Bednar and Nifty Louie Fomorowski. In his earlier books, Algren's suffering heroes, with the help of a caring, suffering woman, made a bid for a life that, while neither conventional nor pure, had its own dimensions of decency. In Cass's and Bruno's stories, each takes long, long falls at the end. Neither of those characters can lay hold of or tap any power which would let them shake the stranglehold of their tormentors. Neither can consistently go on the offensive, and the repressive forces represented by the authoritarian-father pairs pulverize their chances for autonomy. Captain Bednar, however, is effectively disturbed by the combined power of Frankie's pathetic heroism, and a newly powerful ingredient--the screwball cunning of Solly Saltskin, a.k.a. Sparrow.

Bednar's troubles open this novel, and as surely as Frankie is destroyed in the course of its action, so is Bednar. Because even though the captain never drank, "toward nightfall in that smoke-colored season between Indian summer and December's first true snow, he would sometimes feel half-drunken" (MGA 3), and lay his tired head on the query room desk:

> Yet it wasn't work that wearied him so and his sleep was harassed by more than a smoke-colored rain. The city had filled him with the guilt of others; he was numbed by the charge-sheet's accusations. For twenty years, upon the same scarred desk, he had been recording larceny and arson, sodomy and simony, boosting, hijacking and shootings in sudden affray: black-

> mail and terrorism, incest and pauperism, embezzlement and horse theft, tampering and procuring, abduction and quackery, adultery and mackery. Till the finger of guilt, pointing so sternly for so long across the query-room blotter, had grown bored with it all at last and had turned, capriciously, to touch the fibers of the dark gray muscle behind the captain's light gray eyes. So that though by daylight he remained the pursuer there had come nights, this windless first week of December, when he had dreamed he was being pursued. (MGA 3)

Immediately, then, this novel sounds a muted carnival fanfare. Bednar's very definition of himself as a servant and embodiment of legitimate authority is beginning to crumble, and as he loses his ability to direct guilt outwards and downwards, the city, in the grotesque mass of the accused, pushes in through the fissures. The power that Bednar serves is an "economic system founded on isolation,"[16] the most essential and self-confirming product of which is reproduced isolation. But something foreign has entered the circuit in Bednar's case, something capricious, something antagonistic. The lights come up that night on Frankie and Sparrow, and the language is moving fast:

> "Ever been in an institution?" the captain wanted to know, returning to the 4-F.
>
> "Sure t'ing. The time my girlfriend Violet hit Antek the Owner wit' the potato-chip bowl I was in a institution: the Racine Street Station House Institution, it looks a little like this one. Only they wouldn't let me stay. I ain't smart enough to be runnin' around loose but I ain't goofy enough to lock up neither." The punk's enthusiasm was growing by the moment. "Any time you want me, Captain, just phone by Antek, he'll come and tell me I got to come down 'n get arrested. I like gettin' locked up now 'n then, it's how a guy stays out of trouble. I'll grab a cab if you're in a real big hurry to pinch me sometime--I don't like bein' late when I got a chance of doin' thirty days for somethin' I never done."
>
> The captain eyed him steadily. (MGA 4-5)

By the time Bednar is through putting a choice too hard to bear to this alley-stray <u>ganef</u> whose "brains are screwed on sideways," he won't be able to eye anyone steadily, least of all himself in a mirror. The captain, like his employer the owning class, has had a vision problem for some time, though. The line-up spotlight hits the accused with "a glare that made any man look like a plastic job with a prefabricated expression grafted on, according to some criminologist's graph or other, to fit the crime of which the captain's charge sheet had him accused" (<u>MGA</u> 192). But, Lombroso and all the bad science of criminology notwithstanding, "the man behind the murderer's mask was under the lights for stealing a bushel of mustard greens and the con-eroo's leer had been picked up for oversleeping in a Halsted Street hallway" (<u>MGA</u> 192). Something is wrong here, but the machine is producing, and the captain can't find the switch to turn it off:

> So the men came on again: the ragged, crouching, slouching, buoyant, blinking, belligerent, nameless, useless supermen from nowhere. "For climbin' a telephone pole at t'ree A.M. wit' a peanuts machine on my back." "For makin' anon'mous phone calls to call my wife dirty names." "Twice as big a crowd as here 'n a woman picked on me." "Went upstairs with a girl 'n came down with a cop." (<u>MGA</u> 190)[17]

How can an honest copper keep his reactions in order? It is vital that Algren's ambivalent descriptions of his characters, here and elsewhere in this novel, do little to help the reader to a simple view. Fanger's characterization of the grotesque as "an unresolvable dualism of narrative attitude toward what is being

presented" is here clearly pertinent. It is easier for the complainants and the merely curious, the spectators who sit and titter in the darkness. Their distance, physical and emotional, as well as their derision, is absolute and absolutely negative. But the captain, on the edge of the glare that puts a mask on all the accused, continually hears voices which undermine his isolation:

> "What do you do when you're drinking light?"
> "Mind my own business."
> "You haven't got any business. For a quarter you'd steal the straw out of your mother's kennel."
> The razorback tossed his tawny shock and his face in that light looked tawny too. "What I'd do for a quarter you'd do for a dime." (MGA 190-91)

This street poetry of retort begins to penetrate the captain, and brings back to him his dream of being pursued. In Bakhtinian terms, it starts Bednar's "discrowning," for at the same time that a direct insult comes at Bednar from the line-up, he is also told that he is no better than any other man, that is, that the pathos of his separation is ultimately false. His dreams and the line-up scenes are pervaded with precisely the relativizing and "degrading" qualities that Bakhtin saw in the thrice-recurring dream of the Pretender in Pushkin's Boris Godunov. The knowledge that all authority is pretension, and the topographical character of its maintenance, are instanced by the passage:

> I dreamed I climbed a crooked stair that led
> Up to a tower, and there upon that height
> I stood, where Moscow like an ant hill lay
> Under my feet, and in the marketplace
> The people stared and pointed at me laughing;
> I felt ashamed, a trembling overcame me,

I fell headfirst, and in that fall I woke.[18]

At the threshhold between rigid self-confirmation and the peculiarly desirable inevitability of his own long fall, Bednar is most affronted by the laughter of the condemned, the ambivalent snickers that he longs to hear sound out loud. Feeling "impaled," the captain hears "a light ripple, half protest and half mockery" move down the other side of the query-room's wall, and feels "somehow appalled that caged men should laugh at anything" (MGA 295). Yet in the scene of Frankie and Sparrow's early morning in the jail amongst "the Republic's crummiest lushes" (MGA 16), Algren set down the secret learning of these men from which the captain wants to separate himself. The descriptions of the prisoners should satisfy Adorno's insistence on the remembering, through imagines, of the ugly:

> Any one of these looked as though all the others had beaten him all night with barrel staves. Faces bloody as raw pork ground slowly in the city's great grinder; faces burst like white bags, one with eyes like some dying hen's and one as bold as a cornered bulldog's; eyes with a small bright gleam of hysteria and eyes curtained by the dull half glaze of grief. (MGA 16)

These are men "seared by that same torch whose flame had already touched" Frankie, and the torch burns away everything but the "great, secret and special American guilt of owning nothing, nothing at all, in the one land where ownership and virtue are one" (MGA 17). These have "failed the billboards all down the line. . . . had not even been a success in the tavern" (MGA 17), and have the stale lives and "certain jailhouse odor" that

> trailed down the streets of Skid Row behind them

till the city itself seemed some sort of open-roofed jail with walls for all men and laughter for very few. . . . And yet they spoke and yet laughed; and even the most maimed wreck of them all held, like a pennant in that drifting light, some frayed remnant of laughter from unfrayed years. Like a soiled rag waved by a drunken peddler in a cheap bazaar who knows none will buy, yet waves his single soiled ware in self-mockery --these too laughed. And knew not one would buy. (MGA 16)

It is at this level that the joke of the system of production is revealed. Those who can't "afford the liquor that lends distinction nor the beer that gives that special glow of health, leading, often quite suddenly, to startling social success" (MGA 17), have spent all they ever had--their lives--to find out a secret that is beginning to worry the captain--and that is that the earth takes us, finally, no longer either cop or robber. Whitman knew that, but to learn it he had to be startled where he thought he was safest, in his separate self. In "This Compost," Whitman interrogated the earth: "Where have you disposed of their carcasses? / Those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations? / Where have you drawn off all the foul liquid and meat?" (W 496). His answer is that the world carries on with its own sweetening chemistry, and that shakes him:

> Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm
>   and patient,
> It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
> It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with
>   such endless successions of diseas'd corpses,
> It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused
>   fetor,
> It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal,
>   annual, sumptuous crops,
> It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts
>   such leavings from them at last. (W 496-97)

This is the truth of "degradation," then, this is the ground of grotesque realism. It suffuses and makes ambivalent the laughter of Algren's people, "the luckless living soon to be the luckless dead" (MGA 18). The dispossessed wakening in jail know full well the details of the pauper's burial that awaits them, but their material realizations are, in a strange way, more comforting than the abstract trick their accusers play on themselves:

> This was all a part of their secret knowledge as they touched the jailhouse water to their foreheads, this was why they laughed so lightly from time to time. For they had had the ultimate joke played upon them prematurely: more ambitious men would have to wait a bit to find out. It was why they grinned so knowingly at the most casual jailhouse companions; they'd all be taking the same road, down the same littered street, to the same single trench together. It was why they nudged each other familiarly and leered a little: "Take my advice, buddy. Don't die broke." (MGA 18-19)

Under the lights that mask humanity in plastic, the captain can't any longer see just the criminals that are supposed to be there. In the line-up men change "to look less like plastic men and more like some plastic zoo: animals stuffed for some State Street Toyland before Christmas" (MGA 193). Algren's language has a carnival-barker's ring to it as he parades before the captain the men "manacled by steel or circumstance" (MGA 196), and the line-up itself threatens to engulf the captain, to penetrate him, to break him down, to commingle with him:

> Yet they come on and come on, and where they come from no captain knows and where they go no captain goes: mush workers and lush workers, catamites and sodomites, bucket workers and bail jumpers, till tappers and assistant pickpockets, square johns and

> copper johns; lamisters and hallroom boys, ancient pious perverts and old blown parolees, rapoes and record-men; the damned and the undaunted, the jaunty and the condemned. (MGA 196-97)

Out of this endless carnival of "unlucky brothers with hustler's hearts" (MGA 197) steps a "gaunt wreck in a smudged clerical collar" (MGA 198). This brother, in the lights for a minute and then swept away, says what the captain can never admit and remain a captain:

> "Are you a preacher?" The captain sounded puzzled.
> "I've been defrocked."
> "You still preach pretty good when it comes to cashing phony checks. What were you defrocked for?"
> "Because I believe we are all members of one another."
> That one stopped the captain cold. He studied the wreck as if suddenly so uncertain of himself that he was afraid to ask him what he meant by that. "I don't get it," he acknowledged at last, and passed on, with greater confidence, to a little heroin-head batting his eyes and coughing the little dry addict's cough politely into his palm. (MGA 198)

Yet the captain eventually does "get it," even if this grotesque wisdom has to be voiced to him by others before it finally pulls him down. The defrocked paper-hanger, true to the carnival re-processing of the sacred, is almost quoting Ephesians iv.25: "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are all members one of another." The Pauline text, which is given at greater length in 1 Corinthians xii.14-26, here has nothing straightforward to do with Christian dogma. Pulled out of the Bible, put into the mouth of a renegade priest, it is an image of grotesque articulation, of Whitman's "profound lesson of reception," and of Bakhtin's "indivisible whole . . . gay and gracious" (RW 19). Given Algren's estimation

of organized religion--"I'd say the church does gently what the police do roughly"[19]--his dialogic use of Christian texts does not betray the crypto-ecclesiastical urge so beloved of his literary contemporaries. Against the suffering and isolating pathos of officialdom, though, even St. Paul can be used by an irreverent "conscience in touch with humanity" (CCM 81). The longer passage from Corinthians includes the following:

> And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon those we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

In the captain's loneliest hour, as he works late at his honest copper's duty, the "carnival of rogues he had long forgotten" (MGA 296) comes back as faces and voices rather than as names on a charge sheet. It is Sparrow's face, "that steerer's small white face, exhausted like a child's from crying in his cell" after Bednar forces him to betray Frankie, that most disturbs the captain. These phantoms people him, and he struggles against their secret: "for if everyone were members of one another--he put the notion down. That would mean those on the other side of the wall were his own kind" (MGA 296). The culmination of this official's trouble is strikingly similar to the Pretender's dream in Boris Godunov. Bednar, so shaken by "the murmurs beyond the walls . . . like the voices of friends he had

denied ever having known. . . . listened in fevered hope of hearing them call out to all the world that he was the very worst of them" (MGA 297). The answering silence forgives him everything, though,

> So that suddenly the captain wished to do something so conspicuously noble, something at once so foolish and so kind, so full of a perfectly useless mercifulness toward the most undeserving of all, that prisoners and police alike would laugh openly at him. Would laugh without pity as at an old enemy gone balmy at last. (MGA 297-98)

Algren leaves the captain weeping "crocodile tears," for his redemption depends on his hearing with his heart "the wisdom of some ancestral dream, news of salvation to policemen and prisoners, dealers and steerers and captains, blind men and hustling girls, cripples and priestlike coneroos alike," and as yet, "he belonged to no man at all" (MGA 299). The only redemption is "through tears or laughter" (MGA 299), and it can only come to the captain in a carnival hell, when he realizes with a laugh just what that "ancestral dream" is saying.

But who had the power to cast down the captain?

> A former suburban Ste-Foy police officer serving a life sentence for the shooting deaths of two other officers testified yesterday that the thrill of putting thieves behind bars drove him to steal.
>
> Serge Lefebvre, who had earlier admitted to between 300 and 400 thefts during his 16-year police career, told a Quebec Police Commission inquiry into the operations of the force that an arrest "excited" him and gave him the urge to steal.
>
> "I don't understand why," he testified. "It put me in a trance to see their faces, to see the reaction of those guys. The guys being arrested were laughing at us."
>
> \- Toronto Globe and Mail, July 10, 1986

Through the logic of doubling and parody, so much a part of the carnival tradition, Algren generated grotesque counterparts for every important character in The Man with the Golden Arm.[20] Sparrow, a.k.a. Solly Saltskin, "half-Hebe 'n half crazy," plays Sancho Panza to Frankie's Don Quixote. In the course of his carom through this novel, Sparrow tests every sort of pathos, and shows the way out of the valorization of suffering by which Algren was occasionally taken in. He pulls into this novel, like one of his reluctant stolen dogs, the powerful folk humor traditions of the rogue, the clown and the fool, to bite authorities. Bakhtin calls the importance of these roles to folk consciousness "enormous (in fact, incomparable)" (DI 165), but stresses that a specific, local and historical view of their various images is essential.[21] Thus Sparrow, with Frankie as his straight man in the book's opening line-up scene, works from vaudeville and burlesque traditions, Mutt and Jeff foolishness, Laurel and Hardy

anarchism, and one-hundred-percent-Chicago wise-guy-ism rather than from Aristophanic or Lucianic models of Menippean satire. Algren is creating not a scholar of the carnival tradition, but an heir and user of it.

The profound use to which Algren puts the fool figure is--recall Benjamin's comments on the engraving of the gamblers--to depict the breaking of the spell of mechanized behavior and spectacular automatonization. To do so implies the destruction ("degradation") of all authoritarian and isolating pathos through the revelation of material, actual humankind. Bakhtin says, "It is characteristic [of carnivalized novels] that _internal man_--pure "natural" subjectivity--could be laid bare only with the help of the clown and the fool, since an adequate, direct (that is, from the point of view of practical life, not allegorical) means for expressing his life was not available" (_DI_ 164). Sparrow accomplishes this, from beneath his baseball cap and from between his flaring ears, by polemicizing with the historical values of post-war spectacular America. Frankie is a stricken hero, that is to say, an allegory, and his life is made up of humiliating capitulations to the conventional images of husband, employee, husband-cheating-on-wife, and tragic junkie. From behind the mask of the fool--and we are given to understand that it is a mask--Sparrow uses an antique tradition to subvert contemporary rigidities. Bakhtin might well be speaking of the "off-balanced" one when he writes:

> In the struggle against conventions, and against

> the inadequacy of all available life-slots to fit an authentic human being, these masks [clown, fool, rogue] take on an extraordinary significance. They grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right not to be taken literally, not "to be oneself"; the right to live a life in the chronotope of the entr'acte, the chronotope of theatrical space, the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks, the right to rage at others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage--and finally, the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets. (DI 163)

Bakhtin is thoroughly attentive to the age of the roles of rogue, clown and fool: "If one were to drop a historical sounding-lead into these artistic images, it would not touch bottom in any of them--they are that deep" (DI 158-59), and contrasts to it the recent, denominable literary history of the essentially bourgeois and private character. Frankie Machine is built on the stresses of the latter tradition, as is his apparent "opposite," Captain Bednar. In contrast, the folk collective, organic humanity in organic society, was "utterly exteriorized" (DI 135), and, in Bakhtin's view, the artistic performances of such pre-industrial worlds knew nothing of the disparity between the public and the private (there was no significant "private" as we have come to know it). With the ascendacy of mercantile Europe in the Middle Ages, however,

> man's image was distorted by his increasing participation in the mute and the invisible spheres of existence. He was literally drenched in muteness and invisibility. And with them entered loneliness. The personal and detached human being--"the man who exists for himself"--lost the unity and wholeness that had been a product of his public origin. Once having lost the popular chronotope of the pub-

> lic square, his self-consciousness could not find an equally real, unified and whole chronotope; it therefore broke down and lost its integrity, it became abstract and idealistic. (DI 135-36)

The overwhelming number of American novelists who received widespread critical and public attention in the early 1950's were thoroughly enraptured by the historically more recent image of *homo solitarius*, and their books could have been waved like surrender flags before the power of spectacular reality.[22] The prose writers who significantly contested the hegemony of the bourgeois image of humanity by drawing on the heritage of the rogue, the clown and the fool were two: Nelson Algren and Ralph Ellison. It was a good deal for Algren's Sparrow to take on, but he had help from his girlfriend Violet, and, in a funny sort of way, from her husband Stash Koskozka. These three pull their masks and scripts, and their contemporized costumes, from the trunk labelled *commedia dell'arte*. As these three Chicago orphans play a variant on Arlecchino, Colombina and Pantalone, we see again that the use of the forms and traditions of the carnival grotesque, whether in the work of Moliere, Swift, Diderot, Melville, Djuna Barnes, Nathanael West or Nelson Algren, has a consistent purpose:

> to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements [say, mustard and bed sheets] and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (RW 34)

The Great Sandwich Battle immediately follows the scene in which Zosh, left alone all night by Frankie while he sleeps downstairs with Molly Novotny, interrogates herself and her circumstances. She has prevailed, she thinks "with a certain self-derision," and secured a "victory . . . sweeter than all the dances she had missed through that perverted victory" (MGA 122). Yet, in her world, "'It's just the way things would be if that Nifty Louie was God 'n Blind Pig was Jesus Christ, . . . it's just about the way them two'd run things'" (MGA 123). These are painful and desolate reflections, but they repeat the "inverted world" motif of carnivalized literature, and sweep the stage for the comedic triad of Sparrow, Vi and Old Husband. Stash Koskozka, saddled with the conflicting misfortunes of a taste for day-old bargains, a hard job in an icehouse, a randy young wife and her latest romantic acquisition, begins, like Captain Bednar, to find life on the straight side insupportable. The Great Sandwich Battle, in which Rabelais, provided with a translation of the Chicagoese, would have delighted, is a kind of mock-heroic agon waged with mustard and Polish sausage, panting sexual desire and amazingly funny local dialects. What is being tested, though, in this thoroughly disarranged chronotope, is the conventional wisdom that North American humankind should live and breathe to work, that is, reproduce isolation. After another of his hard days at the icehouse, after scoffing up the "moldy stuff" the dutiful Violet prepares for his dinner, "Old Creep Stash" lies abed, recuperating for yet another hard day, snoring

"with a low warning rumble as if the Garfield Park Express were running straight through the house" (MGA 130). The unappreciated Vi has little choice but to pull on her winter coat over a sheer nightdress and the "lacy black Suspants the punk had stolen for her from Nieboldt's" (MGA 126), and head downstairs to the Tug & Maul (Antek, his family, his tavern, Vi and Stash, Molly Novotny, Frankie and Zosh, Blind Pig and Rumdum the beer-drinking mutt all live at 1860 West Division Street). After consorting and cavorting with what Algren calls "all our most ignorant people" (MGA 127) until early morning, Vi and Sparrow stumble up the stairs, past Molly's where Frankie sleeps guiltily, past Zosh in her desertion, past Poor Peter Schwabatski, Jailer's "horse-faced dimwit" son who "passed the creaking midnight hours by planting paper daisies. Two of these grew out of a long crack in the desk to embroider the dusty old legend, Quiet or Out You Go Too" (MGA 129). When in the course of their ascent it comes to Vi that Poor Old Stash's problem is that he works too hard, she and the punk are so convulsed with hilarity that they nearly fall back down the stairs. Vi's desire is that Sparrow and Old Husband should meet "'form'lly.'" This sets off a peculiar reaction in Sparrow that might have something to do with something called a "social conscience":

> "How come I'm s'pposed to--form'lly?"
> "How come you ain't s'ppose to, what I want to know," she insisted, feeling the whisky move. When she put it that way Sparrow realized he was supposed to meet Old Husband all along. It seemed then that Old Husband had been waiting politely to meet Solly Saltskin a long time and now was his big chance to give the old man the break he deserved. Old Man

> worked too hard, he deserved soemthing to happen to him in his declining years. All the people worked too hard, all the people deserved something nice in their declining years. He ought to do more for the people, they had such a hard way to go. (MGA 129)

Made considerably harder, we see, by the arrival of the merry two with such an ambivalent feeling about work. "'Dronk t'ings,' Old Creep disapproved. . . . 'Is bad, not drassed,' he added, reddening at the spectacle of his own wife cavorting about before a stranger in nothing but a sheer nightgown. What kind of big bargain was that?'" (MGA 130). Blows are exchanged before too long, Vi venting her anger over her "unconsummated honeymoon" by smacking Old Husband with her carpet slipper, Old Husband throwing a perfectly good Polish sausage sandwich (prepared for a peckish Sparrow) "straight into Violet's face and down the hollow of her gown" (MGA 132). Before Sparrow can retrieve the "sandrich," Vi attacks again, and reduces Old Husband to tears. His plaint:

> "Work all day, seven days, no days off, buy nize t'ings by howz," he sobbed brokenly, "pay grocernia, pay buczernia, pay mens I don't even know what's for, comes time to sleep everyt'ing all paid 'n nize clean howz so ever'body sleep--who comes by howz from whisky tavern?" A drop of blood mixed with sweat and tears dropped down the point of his tiny chin. "Mrs. No-good wit' dronk pocket-picker! Should be in bed by hoosband, hits by hoosband instead on head 'n makes funny: 'Is Christmas, now we fight all night!' Is somethin' got to happen, is all." (MGA 132)

A good deal happens, none of it to Stash's liking. After he clubs Vi with the butt of his .38, after he is in turn routed from the apartment to the freezing fire escape (the whole scene works its way out of the bourgeois chronotope of the room), after

the Chicago police arrive, Old Creep's world is so thoroughly topsy-turvy that he is taken by the ace as the abusive father of the two benighted children who so piously register their innocence. Chicago's strange dawn sees Old Husband carted away in a squadrol, and, arms around each other's waists, the Christmas bonus check Stash had hoped to stash securely in their possession, Vi and Sparrow see "the little red taillight wink up at them once. To warn them to be good children so _they'd_ never have to go to jail" (_MGA_ 138).

Now Algren included this scene of laughable lacerations as more than "comic relief." It strikingly parodies every source of torment that makes Frankie's life hell, and contests the monologic pathos of his story. Frankie's addiction to drugs becomes, in the figure of Sparrow, an insatiable appetite for Polish sausage (Bakhtin dwells on the Rabelaisian significance of sausage); and Frankie's torn sleeve, as a badge of that addiction, is mirrored by the sausage string that dangles from Sparrow's mouth throughout the battle. Frankie's anguish over his infidelity to Zosh is comparable only in quantity, not quality, to Vi's unconcern over her cuckolding Stash. Zosh--the rhyme should tell us something--is repeatedly pictured as prematurely aged, cold, sexless, a withered child in her wheel chair. In Stash, the grotesque combination of old age and childishness reflects and makes ridiculous Zosh's state, and precisely that in him is the source of some of the scene's funniest moments: "Stash turned in the dim-lit hall in all the chaste white pride of his long

drawers and told her, like a saucy child, 'Who _wants_? _I'm_ not tell Mrs. No-good where at is chippest restaurant-baker_ee_ on _Div_ision. Ha! _Ha_!'" (_MGA_ 134). The alert reader will also have noticed the parodic symmetry of the ways in which Frankie and Vi take leave of their snoozing spouses. As Vi steps out on her way to Antek's, she "gently" tells Old Man: "'Go to sleep, Stash, have a good dream you're winnin' a turkey raffle'" (_MGA_ 127). Two echoes occur in the book, both from Frankie's mouth, and the reader who recalls Vi's gentle words to Stash before she takes herself off to Sparrow at the "whisky tavern" will be faced with a deliberate authorial carnivalization of Frankie's abject self-torment. When he returns to his querulous mate after nine months in jail, and immediately falls into the traces of contrition, he comforts Zosh, in her "brief half sleep of invalidism," "softly" telling her: "'Have a good dream, Zoschka. Have a good dream you're dancin' again'" (_MGA_ 231). Much later, Frankie's final words, "whirled like leaves in a dead-cold wind" in the moments before he hangs himself, are: "'Have a good dream you're dancin', Zosh'" (_MGA_ 337).

Sparrow so neatly evades any question of interior pain that Frankie's agonies are refracted as melodramatic self-absorption.[23] The punk mourns only the loss of a good sandwich to such messy domestic strife, and, after wiping the unwanted mustard off a reassembled sandwich and onto Vi and Stash's sheets and "a handy corner of the dresser scarf," his feelings for Old Husband, who is holding his head and whimpering by now, extend precisely

as far and deep as Bakhtin's zone of degradation--the lower bodily stratum: "Must be crying because he was so hungry, Sparrow reasoned. 'You want a bite, Old Man?' he asked consolingly" (<u>MGA</u> 133). Sparrow is shamelessly puzzled about "'what makes that old man so mean in the first place'" (<u>MGA</u> 139), precisely to the degree that he has guiltlessly plundered the fruits of Old Creep's labor: a healthy young wife and string after string of good Polish sausage. Sparrow accomplishes with grace and taste the immediate projection of blame onto others, so necessary for survival in Today's Modern World. After spreading mustard over a good part of Vi and Stash's nest, the punk takes a fastidious look around: "Sparrow felt a twinge of disgust at the way everything in the joint, bedclothes, underwear, curtains and walls, was daubed with fresh mustard. One hell of a way to run a house. 'Bein' unsanit'ry is worse'n bein' goofy,' he philosophized softly while recovering the remains" (<u>MGA</u> 133). Sparrow <u>philosophe</u> is as far away from Frankie--"'I'm no good. Here. Hit me'"--Majcinek as a sausage is from a hypodermic needle. Even the figure of the cop, when he enters, has the same questions for Stash as Bednar had for Sparrow:

> "You ever confined to an institution?" the officer turned on Stash professionally.
> "He means where you work, Old Man," Violet translated loosely. (<u>MGA</u> 136)

With the arrival of the nameless ace, Algren offers Bednar's double. What are we to make of this deranged cop on the lookout for any fiver he might be offered to forget the uproar?

"I'll have to book this old sot for drunk 'n disorderly [Algren's two old friends], creatin' a nuisance of hisself, malicious mischief 'n attemp' to do great bodily harm. Besides, who's going to pay for that arc lamp, cowboy?" He flashed the light briefly to surprise anyone reaching for a five-spot.
But caught no one reaching for a thing.
"The courts are very severe on these cases of late," the ace went on regretfully, "it might be assault wit' attemp' to tap a gas main for immoral purposes for all I know. Seems to me you answer the description of Firebox Phil, the fiend who's pullin' boxes for the purpose of pickin' the fire chief's pocket when he hangs his coat on the hook-'n-ladder." (MGA 137)

After such a depiction of authority in action, is it conceivable that we could take Bednar, who as he enters this novel "hang[s] his coat neatly over the back of the chair in the leaden station-house twilight" (MGA 3), entirely on his own fearful terms? Can we continue to believe that his power of isolation and decimation of the individual is absolute, and that his image warrants our terror, as his victims deserve nothing but our hottest tears?

Algren didn't--Frankie hangs himself on April 1.

[1] Rather than put quotation marks around such phrases, I will ask that the reader keep the following passage in mind:

> What does it mean to win or lose a war? How striking the double meaning is in both the words! The first, manifest meaning, certainly refers to the outcome of the war, but the second meaning--which creates that peculiar hollow space, the sounding board in these words--refers to the totality of the war and suggests how the war's outcome also alters the enduring significance it holds for us. This meaning says, so to speak, the winner keeps the war in hand, it leaves the hands of the loser; it says the winner conquers the war for himself, makes it his own property, the loser no longer possesses it and must live without it. And he must live not only without the war per se but without every one of its slightest ups and downs, every subtlest one of its chess moves, every one of its remotest actions. To win or lose a war reaches so deeply, if we follow the language, into the fabric of our existence that our whole lives become that much richer or poorer in symbols, images, and sources.

Walter Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism," trans. Jerolf Wikoff, New German Critique, 17 (1979), p. 123.

[2] This sense of domestic reality was shared by Richard Wright, who in 12 Million Black Voices wrote:

> While we are leaving [the South, for work in the North], our black boys come back from Flanders, telling us of how their white officers of the United States Army had treated them, how they had kept them in labor battalions, how they had jim-crowed them in the trenches even when they were fighting and dying, how the white officers had instructed the French people to segregate them. Our boys come back to Dixie in uniform and walk the streets with quick steps and proud shoulders. They cannot help it; they have been in battle, have seen men of all nations and races die. They have seen what men are made of, and now they act differently. But the Lords of the Land cannot understand them while they are still wearing the uniform of the United States Army.
>
> Our black boys do not die for liberty in Flanders. They die in Texas and Georgia. Atlanta is our Marne. Brownsville, Texas, is our Château-Thierry.

See Richard Wright, 12 Million Black Voices, in The Richard Wright Reader, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 201.

[3] Algren's polemics against the Commentary and Partisan Review critics, as well as a host of others such as Dwight Macdonald, Leon Edel and Edmund Fuller, are found in the introduction to The Neon Wilderness, and most tellingly, in the amazing Notes From a Sea Diary: Hemingway All the Way. In the former, Algren refers to "Leslie Fleacure," "Elvis Zircon," "Lionel Thrillingly," and "Justin Poodlespitz." We know them as Leslie Fiedler, Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling and Norman Podhoretz, but might wish we didn't know them at all. Notes From a Sea Diary is dedicated to Maxwell Geismar.

[4] Terry Southern and Alston Anderson, interview with Nelson Algren, in Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 238.

[5] In his description of the nature of mass culture, Leo Lowenthal incidentally provides an accurate characterization of the forces bearing on Zosh: "What on first sight seems to be the rather harmless atmosphere of entertainment and consumption is, on closer examination, revealed as a reign of psychic terror, where the masses have to realize the pettiness and insignificance of their everyday life." See Leo Lowenthal, "The Triumph of Mass Idols" in his Literature, Popular Culture, and Society (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 131.

[6] Harold D. Lasswell, "The Universal Peril: Perpetual Crisis and the Garrison Prison State" in The 1940s: Profile of a Nation in Crisis, ed. Chester E. Eisinger (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1969), pp. 145-51.

[7] Stuart Ewen, Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 205. See also John Morton Blum, V was for Victory: Politics and Culture During World War II (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), chapters 3 and 4; George Lipsitz, Class and Culture in Cold War America: "A Rainbow at Midnight" (South Hadley, Mass.: J.F. Bergin Publishers, 1982), introduction and chap. 6; and William Appleman Williams, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1959), chaps. 5 and 6.

[8] Debord, Society of the Spectacle, par. 28.

[9] Nathanael West, Miss Lonelyhearts (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 50. West's and Debord's analyses are of ensemble social relations, though, not simply mass communications.

[10] Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in his Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), pp. 134-35. Benjamin probably assumed his readers' awareness that the French coup can mean "stroke of a hammer or machine."

[11] Debord, Society of the Spectacle, par. 49.

[12] Alexandre Kuprin, Yama, trans. Bernard Guilbert Guerney (New York: The Modern Library, 1932), p. 100.

[13] Debord, Society of the Spectacle, par. 18.

[14] Debord, Society of the Spectacle, par. 32.

[15] Debord, Society of the Spectacle, par. 43.

[16] Debord, Society of the Spectacle, par. 28.

[17] The reader who thinks that these are aestheticized lumpen-proletariat might consider the following:

> Of all the writers I know, [Algren] is the Grand Odd-Ball. Once he took me to a line-up in Chicago, and I could have sworn the police and the talent on the line had read The Man with the Golden Arm for they caught the book perfectly, those cops and those crooks, they were imitating Algren. Yet all the while Nelson laughed like a mad tourist from Squaresville who was hearing these things for the first time.

See Norman Mailer, "Some Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room" in his Advertisements for Myself (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 418.

The reader who doesn't trust Norman Mailer might look at what the dean of American dialect and slang study, David Maurer, had to say about the accuracy of Algren's ear. Maurer was speaking as a linguist, not an artist or critic. See David W. Maurer, Language of the Underworld, ed. Allan W. Futrell and Charles B. Wordell (Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1981), p. 389.

[18] Trans. Paul Schmidt, quoted in Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, p. 169. See also Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, p. 474.

[19] Robert Perlongo, interview with Nelson Algren, Chicago Review, 11 (1957), p. 96.

[20]

> "Does this mean that [Algren] proceeded directly and consciously from the ancient menippea? Of course not. In no sense was he a stylizer of ancient genres. [Algren] linked up with the chain of a given generic tradition at that point where it passed through his own time, although the past links in this chain, including the ancient link, were to a greater or lesser degree familiar and close to him . . . . Speaking somewhat paradoxically, one could say that it was not [Algren's] subjective memory, but the objective mem-

ory of the very genre in which he worked, that preserved the peculiar features of the ancient menippea."
(PDP 121)

I have substituted Algren's name for Dostoevsky's.

[21] In his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ralph Ellison takes issue with some of the questionable application of a non-specific, color-and-culture-blind, "archetypal" trickster notion to any and every available text. The primary determinant of a fictional character's identity, says Ellison, is:

> the implicit realism of the form, not . . . their relation to tradition; they are what they do or do not do. Archetypes are timeless, novels are time-haunted. Novels achieve timelessness through time. If the symbols [or character types] appearing in a novel link up with those of universal myth they do so by virtue of their emergence from the specific texture of a specific form of social reality.

See Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (New York: Signet, 1966), p. 71. For an analysis of the mythological and archetypal approach typified by Northrop Frye's work, see John Fekete, "Northrop Frye: Parameters of Mythological Structuralism," Telos, 27 (1976), pp. 40-60.

[22] See John W. Aldridge, After the Lost Generation: A Critical Study of the Writers of Two Wars (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), pp. 239-40 and passim. Aldridge, in this work, does not even mention Algren's writing as an alternative to the emptiness he decries, though he spoke highly of all of Algren's novels in a review of The Devil's Stocking. See John W. Aldridge, "Two Realists from Chicago," New York Times Book Review, October 9, 1983, pp. 9 & 32.

[23] Other characters in the novel, Nifty Louie and Applejack Katz, for example, see that Frankie's addiction to remorse is stronger than to morphine. When Frankie is kicking in jail Katz admonishes him: "'You're toughin' it through the hardest sort of way, Dealer. . . . Quit stonin' yourself. You ain't that sick (MGA 224). This is not simply a book about drug addiction, in accordance with its fading popular reputation. Rather it puts to us a problem: Find, if you can, the effective difference between the chemical action of morphine and the culturally-encouraged capitulation to self-accusal.

Chapter Five: Ashes of Soldiers

A U.S. Supreme Court ruling arms teachers and administrators with new disciplinary powers to promote what the court calls the "values of a civilized social order." The high court said on Monday that public school students in the United States may be suspended for using vulgar language. The court, voting 7-2, upheld the 1983 suspension of Matthew Fraser, a Spanaway, Wash., high school senior who gave a speech that contained sexual innuendo.

- Toronto Globe and Mail, July 9, 1986

Lovers engaged in fornication sometimes experience a miss-fire reaction. This can come about through failing to take the azimuth correctly. Failing to take the azimuth correctly affects the morning erection or Asamara, as the Japanese prefer to call it. As a consequence the spermatozoa are apt to go astray in the stratosphere. Such occurrences need cause no alarm if the participants are penitent and endeavor to remain in a state of orgiastic fury.

Nature takes no notice of human miscalculations. The world of monsters and misfits falls under the sway of cosmic law just as does the world of saints, eunuchs, and bedbugs.

What the artist struggles to depict is a state of mind. He knows that lovers are never losers. At the worst there is regression to the autonomic level where zero is equated with infinity and no questions asked.

- Henry Miller, "Asamara"

It would be criminal to take the energies of popular piety and misdirect them toward a purely earthly plan of liberation.

- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation quoted in The Vancouver Sun, April 5, 1986

The new possession of historical life, the Renaissance, which finds its past and its legitimacy in Antiquity,

> carries with it a joyous rupture with eternity. Its irreversible time is that of the infinite accumulation of knowledge, and the historical consciousness which grows out of the experience of democratic communities and of the forces which ruin them will take up, with Machiavelli, the analysis of desanctified power, saying the unspeakable about the State. In the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the art of the festival, life is experienced as enjoyment of the passage of time. But this enjoyment of passage is itself a passing enjoyment. The song of Lorenzo di Medici considered by Burckhardt to be the expression of "the very spirit of the Renaissance" is the eulogy which this fragile feast of history pronounces on itself: "How beautiful the spring of life--which vanishes so quickly."
>
> - Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle

i

In what sense is Walter Benjamin's statement that "there is no better start for thinking than laughter"[1] true? It shares with Mikhail Bakhtin the conviction that thinking suffers or stops when it cannot free itself from an atmosphere of rigidity, piety and fear. Oppression seeks the death of mind; oppression maintains itself largely by physical and psychic terror. Benjamin, Bakhtin and Nelson Algren were all aware of the particular conditions of their respective societies which could make laughter and thinking impossible, but none of the three developed the radical distrust of laughter, as an essentially complicit reaction to terror, which stamped the work of T.W. Adorno. It would be stupid to say that because Adorno became an agelast, he is less useful to humanity than those who could still laugh. That problem asks for a full and specific treatment in another work than this. I would, though, by way of returning to Algren's

work, ask the reader to consider the following: while Bakhtin speaks of "grotesque realism," and while I have taken the grotesque as the primary analytical and descriptive term to this point, "realism" should now emerge as having anything but a casual relation to the grotesque. The sense of doing this work, of reading Algren, Benjamin, Bakhtin and the others, is that the world, against every lie and coercion and terrorization, be real to us. Can it be so, in an artistic, critical, historic or scientific work, if laughter is expunged? Bakhtin was characteristically direct when he addressed the question:

> 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. (DI 23)

A useful sense of "realism" was articulated by Bertolt Brecht in an essay countering some of Georg Lukács's formulations. In defining the realism at issue, Brecht spoke--in the style of the Party "we"--of what resources could serve to create such work:

> Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstractions from it.
>
> These are vast precepts and they can be extended. Moreover we shall allow the artist to employ his fantasy, his originality, his humour, his invention in following them.[2]

Insofar as it can be assigned a place in an order of operations, Brecht's realism comes after, and depends upon, the fearlessness which Bakhtin emphasizes. The way to this fearlessness, what we might speak of as an approach to realism, or as the best beginning of thinking, will be a central concern of this discussion of A Walk on the Wild Side. To a greater extent than the previous chapters, this chapter will focus on the text, demonstrating Algren's use and transmission of the carnival legacy. I would have the reader remember the world outside the text, though.

A Walk on the Wild Side is the result of a man looking at his writing past, and making it over into work that spoke to his and his nation's present situation. On the strength of the reputation Algren gained through The Man with the Golden Arm, the Doubleday publishing firm gave him an advance to prepare Somebody in Boots for republication. As he worked his way through his first novel, Algren saw its faults and pretensions:

> It was deadly. It was such schoolboy poetry, you know, very consciously poetic, and inverted sentences, and I thought, "Oh, boy!" So I corrected the first page--you know, I crossed out this and then I crossed out that, and then I started pasting in. I didn't even know I was writing a new book. And then it began to strike me as very funny; in every chapter some child had her head cut off, and you know I was really laying it on, and twenty years later it was silly, and so--pompous. So I kept making it funny. And this guy that was so grim in there at the beginning just became a big stud, a big, silly stud.[3]

Algren recognized that A Walk on the Wild Side, the result of his irreverent metamorphic activity, was "something entirely different. . . . a kind of novel that, so far as I know, has

never been written before."[4] What he accomplished, though, knowing neither a literary precedent nor a name for his method, was the carnivalization of Somebody in Boots. This came about not through the direct depiction of carnival scenes, but through the absorption of the world-view of carnival, which is materialist, impious and is shot through with ambivalent laughter directed at all and sundry, including its perpetrator. While indications of Algren's sympathy with this view and its methods were sporadically apparent in his earlier novels, A Walk on the Wild Side is a remarkably full realization of the carnival outlook. Everywhere we turn in this work we encounter echoes and extensions of the anarchic horde of forms, images, characters and values upon which Bakhtin has constructed a theory of the novel.

We would do well, however, before discussing the particularities of this book, to reiterate Bakhtin's distinction between what a writer as an individual consciously knows of generic tradition (that is, what a writer uses), and "the objective memory of the very genre" (PDP 121), which we could speak of as "that which uses a writer." Of course, critics should note direct and demonstrable influences, but it is equally vital to take into account the humours of a given author which would predispose him or her not just to grudgingly tolerate, but to revel in "heteroglossia" as a condition of composition.[5] In defining these relationships, Bakhtin says:

> Cultural and literary traditions (including the most ancient) are preserved and continue to live not in the individual subjective memory of a single indivi-

dual and not in some kind of collective "psyche," but rather in the objective forms that the culture itself assumes (including the forms of language and spoken speech), and in this sense they are inter-subjective and inter-individual (and consequently social); from there they enter literary works, sometimes almost completely bypassing the subjective individual memory of their creators. (DI 249)

This is of primary importance, not because it permits me to mention the resemblance between commedia dell'arte and the Great Sandwich Battle without demonstrating that Algren had even heard of the former, but rather because it stresses the central significance to cultural memory of the genre-creating power of carnival. Precisely because the carnival view is fearless, it is omnivorous and all-inclusive. As the literary genre most thoroughly carnivalized, the novel "remembers more" because it is not in the thrall of fearful, dogmatic, exclusive and authoritarian cultural elements. It wants all, it wants to "degrade" all, it is as thirsty as Pantagruel and as hungry as Panurge. Using it and being used by it, Nelson Algren found an authentic way of remembering his own writing, and the plenitude of historical and contemporary voices that sounded within and around it. At a time in United States history when denial or recantation were the approved methods of dealing with one's past, Algren's novel was truer to his experience, without being enslaved by a reified image of it.

In A Walk on the Wild Side, the transformation of the character typology (discussed in Chapter One above) is immediately apparent. The quite horrifying authoritarian father becomes "poor crazy pappy,"[6] a deranged buffoon of a lay preacher of whom

"the more understanding" citizens of Arroyo, Texas, say: "'He's just a pore lonesome wife-left feller . . . losin' his old lady is what crazied him'" (WWS 3). Although Algren takes great care to trace Fitz Linkhorn's descent, which he ambivalently holds out as a justification for his character's eccentricity, the book's first sentence is a simple, penetrating statement of the effect of the loss of a woman's loving company.[7] Fitz, who is the transmutation of Stub McKay, has in his past the solid, profane, sexual love of the woman who becomes Dove's mother. Instead of the eerie absence of maternity that characterizes Cass McKay's upbringing, Algren supplies the half-forgotten phantom of Dove's imaginings with a raucous, real and passionate past. Fitz the "wild boy" and a dance-hall girl generate this novel's hero-fool in the bluesy atmosphere of the Davy Crockett Hotel, and love is a kelson of that creation. It is mutual, this love, shared:

> . . . he sat one night on the redhead's bed putting the last of the bottle to her lips. Eyes shuttered against all light she drank as long as whiskey would pour without once lifting her red-gold head. It had burned her throat inside and out--then his mouth had been sweeter even than that. Till the whole room rocked in the looking light and had locked them heart to heart. (WWS 20)

All the imagery of this extended scene (which is imaginatively, not chronologically, Dove's conception), coalesces in plenishment, satisfaction, sweetness and exhaustion. It moves across time to the time when lovers' bodies, "brandy, silver comb and wine" become dust, saying: "All was well. They had breathed each other's breath. All was well: they had drunk of each

other's lips. All was well, for what was dust had when living been loved" (WWS 21).

This sort of rhapsody is elbowed out of the way by the issue of the union it celebrates. Dove Linkhorn, the figure of Cass McKay degraded and reborn, and his brother Byron, Bryan McKay's parodic double, disrupt the stream of romance with their versions of foolery (Fitz Linkhorn, the father and ex-lover, has no small part in this as well). Byron's lung trouble derives not from poison gas but from tuberculosis aggravated by the smoke of the "potaguaya bush," and the smoke doesn't do wonders for his mental stability either. The contempt, hatred and violence that characterized Stub and Bryan's relationship is altogether transformed, becoming a parody of learned doctors arguing over questions of time, space and religion. By the opening of this story, Fitz Linkhorn sermonizes on the public square to save his soul, but pumps out cesspools to pay his earthly expenses, and senses "no mockery in being greeted, hip-boots streaming, with a 'Hiya, Preacher!'" (WWS 6). Outrageous parodies of protestant evangelism replace the cruelty and paranoia which defined Stub McKay, and "drunk as a dog or broke as a beggar, Fitz could spout religion like a hog in a bucket of slops" (WWS 6). Algren continually attacks any pretense to high-mindedness in Fitz, often by way of Byron's derisive obscenities. Fitz is as much clown as preacher, though, and as he climaxes one of his sermons in the midst of the usual ironic commentary of the public square crowd, several carnival motifs are evident:

For how Fitz leaped then--literally leaped--clapping his hands above his head and barking triumphantly--

"Just as I am though tossed about
With many a conflict many a doubt
Fightings and fears within, without
O lamb of God, I come! I come!
Just as I am! Just as I am!--

--in the name of Jesus, now come as you are!"--and would skip down the steps, his sermon done, to take anyone's bottle and everyone's praise, mocking or sincere.

"Keep your boots on, Preacher! Come just as you are!" (WWS 9)

Fitz leaps and skips like a child or a jester, he barks like an animal, and descends into the ambivalent praise and mockery of the public square crowd, having "degraded" a hymn dealing with ascension to heaven by witlessly revealing its material, earthly sexual overtones. He is rewarded for this exercise in grotesque realism, both by the gratitude of his audience--for salvation or the show--and by the mention of one of his congregation that "'a bit of a job'" waits for him out their way:

> That was all right with Fitz. If Protestant privies lined both sides of the road to the City of Pure Gold, by God he'd shovel his way to Salvation. But before he'd take money from papists rapists he'd go the other route. He was playing the whore to no man. (WWS 10)

Bakhtin's analysis in the second chapter of the Rabelais book of "marketplace language" emphasizes the bi-polar aspect of public square, carnivalized imagery. As in all grotesque realism, the abstract and lofty is cast down to earth, to the lower bodily stratum, and is thereby regenerated in a new and better state. He discusses the Rabelaisian occurrences of drenching in urine or excrement, the prevalence in Antique literature of such

scenes, and the apparent universality of such formulae as "I shit on you," with their somewhat less offensive variants "I spit on you" or "I sneeze on you." Even the ever-popular "Fuck you" or "Shove it up your ass" could partake of the imagistic logic of this language, did we not live in times which have lost the awareness of these phrases' original, ambivalent nature, times which so rabidly and compulsively express the wholly negative and annihilating in their verbal abuse. But Algren's use of urinary and excremental images in A Walk on the Wild Side is not, in this sense, contemporary at all. He is quite aware of the regenerative power pervading scatological formulae, and it is in this sense that we must understand the world he seeks to create through the use of this ancient tactic. Thus Byron's immediate undercutting of a wish for salvation (an insincere one at that) with his own view of what is important for the crowd to hear is not meant simply to destroy his father, but to save him from all the abstractions of his religious obsessions, and to reveal their essentially false nature:

> "Tell the rest of us how to be saved, Preacher," one hypocrite pleaded.
> "Or the time you fell in the cesspool," Byron stayed in there. (WWS 8)

Clearly, this is a different kind of struggle than that carried on between Stub and Bryan McKay. There was nothing regenerative in Stub's tearing off Bryan's genitals with his boot-tips; there is a strong regenerative aspect to the abuse the Linkhorn father and son heap on each other. Byron's very proximity to the grave is the occasion of Fitz's hymning in a tho-

roughly ambivalent and carnivalesque spirit:

> O lovely appearance of death
> No sight on earth is so fair;
> Not all the gay pageants that breathe
> Can with a dead body compare (WWS 9)

In an atmosphere of earthiness and impiety, Algren can establish the falsity of yet another object of his scorn: the Father Coughlin-style mixture of religion and fascism that was a part of the ominous atmosphere of both the thirties and the fifties. Fitz is wholly set against Catholicism, but that is in fact a detail which hardly bears mentioning in the midst of his ridiculous apocalyptic ravings. Algren makes them ridiculous not only by degrading them *via* scatology, but also by so thoroughly surrounding and penetrating Fitz's already hyperbolized fits with contending, mocking, undercutting voices that thoroughly "dialogize" the populist Jeremiads:

> "Mothers to eat the flesh of their new-born! A time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation *even unto the same time*!
>
> "*Hailstones big as blocks* of ice! Tawr'nts of bloody fire! Fountings 'n rivers turnen to foaming blood! El Paso buried under red-hot lava! *Now* you poor sorry buggers you're really going to catch it."
>
> "How about New York?" Some people never wanted to go anywhere alone.
>
> "Buried in a rain of toads! Toads as big as cats to Wall Street's topmost tower!"
>
> Wall Street had all the luck. (WWS 38)

Fitz hits his stride in this eruption when he finds his real matter: the Antichrist, "'the *Pope* of Wall Street!'":

> "Already he is spreadin' the *Doc-treen* of evolution, the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man. Already the Wall Street labor unions are armin' to help him, preparen for the day when no man will be able to earn his bread by the

> sweat of his face unless he has the mark of the beast--A-F-L--upon him. Neither will he be able to buy or sell. City unions teach you that Chinamens are your brothers! Ayrabs! Mexes! (WWS 39)

The preacher forthwith bursts into a precise, non-dialectally rendered transcription of William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech, which is undeniably dramatic despite its irrelevance to what he has just been ranting about (whatever that is). His frenzy upon repeating the closing lines of that oddly-imported verbal artifact impels him to leap straight up and come down "barking like a gibbon" (WWS 39). After a snatch of a hymn venerating "'the bloodstained cross!'" Fitz screams "'--O! Look yander! Comen down the streets of gold! I do see a great blood-washed throng all robed in white!'" (WWS 40).

> A dozen heads turned quickly to see God only knows what, but all they saw was Dove Linkhorn looking forsaken. As though wishing his poor crazy pappy would come down off the courthouse steps. When the crowd's eyes moved toward him he turned away to follow his brother into the dark. (WWS 40)

And thus the already weakened spell of the religio-fascist clown is broken on the simple image of Dove "following his brother into the dark." Dove may be discomfited by his father's antics, and pity his distance from the good of the flesh, but he is in no sense intimidated by the old man's yelling. It's craziness, that's all. Something to laugh at, and then go join your brother.

It is in Dove that the parallel developments of both the suffering hero and the dimwit-trickster climax, merge, and become something altogether rich and strange. Algren realized in the

writing of The Man with the Golden Arm that terrible suffering is no less terrible because it inevitably has something of the foolish mixed with it (this makes Frankie Machine's story the most Dostoevskian of Algren's novels). Even Sparrow's suffering, which is as real and as harrowing as Frankie's, ends on an ambivalent note: he tells Owner he'll be back on the street in a year and a day "'like a little wooly lamb,'" but he looks "'you'll never know how sick'" as he says it. To make one artistic step forward--to the merger of the hero and the fool--Algren moved back to his most unhumorous, thoroughly tormented protagonist, Cass McKay, and turned him into "a stud, a big, silly stud."[8] He did this not to whitewash the genuinely terrible sufferings of the thirties; that is, he was not abasing himself before a revisionist idol that demanded he render what was grim in the 1930s, funny in the 1950s. The question was whether the historical pathos of the Depression was true in exactly the same way twenty years later, and could be expressed by using the same artistic strategies. Algren took the opportunity afforded him by the publisher's advance to register and enjoy the passage of irreversible time, and not to simply replicate the static valorization of his and his nation's past. He created what he called "an American fantasy, a poem written to an American beat as true as Huckleberry Finn,"[9] and in doing so made the imaginative habitation of the Epic Depression as untenable as he could. His whole intent, from the disarming of the authoritarian father, to the amalgamation of the hero and the fool, to the unutterably

strange and lovely ending of this book, was to overcome epic distance, and, through laughter, to bring his material--<u>all</u> of it--into what Bakhtin calls "the zone of familiar contact." This method is a profoundly effective way of remaining true to Whitman's "profound lesson of reception," because it abjures all distancing and all exclusion by its refusal to "buy into" the lie that truth and pathos are eternal, and that the forms of their expression are fixed. Against that repressive piety, the artist has "only" a lie to counter a lie, in the sense that Bakhtin qualifies the word. In discussing the valuable developments of the minor low genres, the itinerant stage, public squares on market day, street songs and jokes (<u>DI</u> 40 ff.), Bakhtin maintains that all objectifications of discourse are there called into question, because all are seen as self-interested, conditional pronouncements of specific social roles (obviously the royal court, the scholars' meeting room or the cathedral are chronotopes in which only one voice can be heard, and thus remains uncontested). In the market square, on the small stage, and in carnival consciousness the high and mighty personage is just another schmuck with his own line of goods to push (Bakhtin's phrasing differs slightly). The implications?

> We see the ground being prepared here for a radical skepticism toward any unmediated discourse and any straightforward seriousness, a skepticism bordering on rejection of the very possibility of having a straightforward discourse at all that would not be false. This finds its profoundest expression in works by (among others) Villon, Rabelais, Sorel and Scarron. Here too the ground is being prepared for that new dialogical category, verbal and effectual response to the lie of pathos, that has played such

> an extremely important role in the history of the European novel (and not only the novel)--the category of *gay deception*. Opposed to the *lie of pathos* accumulated in the language of all recognized and structured professions, social groups and classes, there is not straightforward truth (pathos of the same kind) but rather a gay and intelligent deception, a *lie* justified because it is directed precisely to *liars*. Opposed to the language of priests and monks, kings and seigneurs, knights and wealthy urban types, scholars and jurists--to the languages of all those who hold power and who are well set up in life--there is the language of the merry rogue, wherever necessary parodically re-processing any pathos but always in such a way as to rob it of its power to harm . . . . (*DI* 401-02)

This "verbal and effectual response to the lie of pathos," then, steals humanity back from the emperor. It is part of the work of the rogue, one of Bakhtin's three "dialogical categories" which have been of immense importance to the development of the novel. The other two masks are the clown and the fool, and Dove Linkhorn wears them all. Earl Shorris has indicated the always-renewed challenge of this merry and bile-powered tradition of refusal, and in so doing has made the most historically conscious and critically acute remark on Algren's contribution that I have encountered:

> There is no place in this society or any other society for a man made of W.C. Fields and Francois Villon; there would seem to have been no choice for Algren but to become a novelist, the inventor of a world that is, if not reasonable, at least possible, [not] to say beautiful. By the same unhappy logic, it follows that Algren would become a most misunderstood novelist, a hero to hack reporters and jejune sociologists, an inventor who is seldom credited for his inventions, a dreamer of words who is presumed never to close his eyes. So his time is thought to have passed, when in reality the time of a true fictionist is always beginning.[10]

A Walk on the Wild Side shows these categories of incompre-

hension not merely as images or influences, but in their "radical" character as "the basic style-shaping forces of the novel" (DI 402). The sort of stupidity, clownishness and roguery evidenced by Dove is an instance of what Bakhtin calls "a polemical failure to understand someone else's discourse, someone else's pathos-charged lie that has appropriated the world" (DI 403). In a recollection of the hipster comic Lord Richard Buckley, Algren mentions one small-stage instance--which might recall a line-up--of this "degraded" refusal to respond on cue:

> He . . . had a kid he called Junior who resembled Jackie Vernon. Junior would stand, with a spotlight on him, looking through a toilet seat at the audience with the blankest grin conceivable. Buckley would say, "Register despair, Junior." Junior's grin would freeze right there. "Now register happiness, Junior. Now register hate." Buckley would go through the gamut of human emotions from love to terror. The emptier of all emotion Junior appeared, the funnier the act became.
>
> Well, I thought it was funny anyhow.[11]

A Walk on the Wild Side is, we should remember, an author struggling with his own "lie" of 1935 as well as the legion untruths that each seek to "monologize" (a Bakhtinian term connoting the self-interested nature of straightforward discourses) the novel. The convergence--or collison--of the rogue-clown-fool with the pathos of victimhood, which latter Algren was never comfortable with, but could never altogether dismiss, leads Dove to New Orleans in the worst years of the Depression, and all along the way he cheats truly simple people ("The People"), eats all he can, even if his companions do without, schemes to "rise"

in the world, and quite blithely coasts by any and every grotesque evidence of the age's damage:

> [E]asily and unseeing, past broken men and breaking ones; wingies, dingies, zanies and lop-sided kukes; cokies and queers and threadbare whores. Ulcerous panhandlers lame and cancerous, tubercular pencil peddlers, staggering lushes. Old sick cats from everywhere yowling as they went.
> All was right with the world. (WWS 97)

In its musical disguise, though, this is the artistic work of "the historical consciousness which grows out of the experience of democratic communities and of the forces which ruin them."[12] Dove's foolishness and blindness, his incomprehension of the pathetic human situations before him, is immunity to the doctrinaire proletarian discourse of the thirties, but is also Algren's novelistic means of carrying on "the analysis of desanctified power, saying the unspeakable about the state."[13] A passage ridiculing "Little Round Hoover, wiping chicken gravy off his little round chin" (WWS 97) immediately follows the "All was right with the world" passage quoted above. Even the fool's position is being tested here, and that is of great significance to the particular nature of this novel. The testing does not invariably conclude that "jokes about serious things" (a fundamental organizing principle, in Bakhtin's view), are in themselves a final word, carrying as they must a certain "inappropropriate" relativizing character. Dove is on the road in the United States in the early 1930s, true. He is also, however, part of a traditional plot scheme, at least as old as The Odyssey, and later parodically re-processed in The Satyricon and

The Golden Ass, in which an initial offense against a god or goddess, or a principle such as eros, sends the "hero" on a journey which at the same time follows a familiarized, historical road (in the non-epic versions), and an expiatory path through a carnivalized underworld. Dove's offense, which in this parody of The Odyssey is the motor incident of the plot, is his rape of Teresina Vidavarri, the Mexican American woman who steps into the place of Nancy McKay (and Steffi Rostenkowski and Sophie Majcinek, to a certain extent, as well). Against every conventional moral stricture, and in the face of her own past nightmare experience of "married love," Teresina turns her back on Jesus and gives her love, body and soul, to "the browless, raggedy boy with the streaky red hair." Overcome by guilt and shame as intense as was her sexual pleasure with Dove, she uses the excuse of Dove's one-dollar theft to bar him from her sight, her body, her love and her premises (Teresina's chili parlor on the edge of Arroyo, La Fe En Dios, is the former Davy Crockett hotel). The whole crush of factors--loss of love, pleasure, companionship, and the chance to read (Dove is illiterate and Teresina begins to teach him "'how letters make words'" using the Sunday funnies and Andersen's fairy tales); the differences of age, race and culture; Dove's inability to comprehend the terror of sex that would drive a beautiful and mischievous woman into Jesus's abstract arms; his hurt pride--all of these bearing down on him compel Dove to the stupidest, most desperate and hurtful act he can manage. He rapes Teresina, and hops on an eastbound freight.

His offense is triple: he injures the only person in his life who has to that point sought his affection; he brutalizes sexuality, his own and Teresina's, by raping rather than making love; and he replicates the arrogance and violence which had consistently defined the character of the relations of white male Americans to any non-white, particularly women of color (as Dove heads toward the Southern Pacific tracks, "the freight whooped like a Sioux who has seen too many westerns" [WWS 64]).[14]

On the road, in jail, in whorehouses and bars, Dove tests and is tested by a multitude of discourses of pathos. The novel becomes a retort, in both the experimental and dialogical senses, which through Dove's incomprehension evaluates the genuineness of the voices which speak to him, and in the last analysis is both a word against false pathos, and the establishment of a ground for a new, valid, historical pathos. Algren's orchestration of these voices is a major achievement of the novel.

Thus when Dove slides by the human wrecks on Canal Street, with nary a twinge of conscience (i.e. conventional response), he both replicates (i.e. tests) the response of those in power who should see and act on the devastation, but do not; and reveals the basis for a just condemnation of his violation of Teresina. When his lower stratum drives him to a railroad station's men's room, the door of which is barred by an elderly black porter, the mask of the fool is used to test not only the convention of racial segregation, but also Dove's own dismissal of his share of bigotry (he thinks of Teresina as a "wetback" and a "Pachuco"

when she rejects him). The exchange also recalls Teresina's early dream in which she is importuned for a drink of water, and replies "'Only Jesus may drink here,'" wakening "with a sense of dry loss clutching her throat" (<u>WWS</u> 30). This dialogue, penetrated with echoes and intentions which turn it into something beyond simple farce, makes clear the connections between consciencelessness, asceticism and racism as different forms of denial. In it, Dove again becomes a figure out of a dream:

> "Excuse me, pappy," Dove tried to get past.
> "Country boy, you got colored blood?" Pappy demanded.
> "Naturally it ain't white," Dove told him.
> "No funny business," the old Negro warned him, "I'm responsible here."
> Dove didn't know what was wrong. He just <u>felt</u> wrong. And left the REST ROOM FOR COLORED in retreat.
> He was bending above the water-fountain when he saw the porter coming at him again. The old man had been searching for someone like this in dreams for years.
> "You got colored blood, you caint drink this water."
> "Ain't everybody got colored blood, mister?" By this time Dove really wanted to know.
> "You think you make a fool of me with fool questions," the old man answered, "but all you make a fool of is yourself. Boy, if you white, stay white. If you black, stay black and die. Now get out of my station and out of my sight."
> "It purely wonders me," Dove brooded thoughtfully. "Why, a Christian don't scarcely stand a chance for a drink of water in town no more. Looks like my crazy little pappy was right after all." (<u>WWS</u> 103)

There are big and little pappies throughout this story, and they're all crazy. Luke and Fort, Rhino Gross, Oliver Finnerty, and even Achilles Schmidt share a paternal aspect which is, happily enough, tested and discredited by Dove's morosophic responses. As Dove waits in a soup line outside a city shelter,

and a Marine recruiter tries to play on every desire a drifter might have for three meals a day, Nicaraguan beauties, two pairs of shoes and a chance to defend his country, Dove so adroitly produces the wrong answers to the jarhead's questions that he quite unwittingly ruins his chances to see the world. It may be, though, that he all to clearly sees his chances to ruin the world, which is, true-to-fool's-form, himself:

> "Put it this way. Your outfit of one hundred men is surrounded by bloodthirsty Nicaraguan bandits but you can save them all by sacrificing your own life. Which would come first with you? The lives of ninety-nine others or your own?"
> Dove needed no help on that.
> "My own, naturally." He beamed.
> Dove was a little sorry to see the sergeant shake his head and move off.
> "Wasn't that the right answer?" Dove wanted to know. (WWS 68)

The inversion of the conventional is, in A Walk on the Wild Side as in all carnivalized literature, a major motif, and it provides the method of entry to the grotesque underworld in which the greater part of the book's action occurs. This world is introduced both by Dove's constant reiteration of his desire to "rise," when what he does best is rise and rouse sexually, and by the specific historical circumstances which look suspiciously like a completely topsy-turvy capitalist world:

> In the cheery old summer of '31 New Orleans offered almost unlimited opportunities to ambitious young men of neat appearance willing to begin at the bottom and work their way up the Ladder of Success rung by rung. Those with better sense began at the top and worked their way down, that route being faster. . . . The Ladder of Success had been inverted, the top was the bottom, and the bottom was the top. Leaders of men still sporting gold watches were lugging baby photographs door to door with their soles flap-

> ping. Physicians were out selling skin lighteners and ship captains queued in hope of a cabin boy's mop and pail. (WWS 117-18)

We are here solidly within the precincts of a carnival hell. Bakhtin discusses the significance of Epistemon's visions of the underworld (from Gargantua and Pantagruel, Book 2, Chapter 30). In this account, the earth's emperors are brought low--"discrowned"--and one evidence of this is their lowly occupations in Hades: Philip of Macedonia mends rotten footwear, Tarquin is a porter, Xerxes a crier of mustard. The elevation to luxury and eminence of the previously powerless and despised (philosphers, in Rabelais's instance), is the logical concomitant in a reversed world. Algren, in much the same spirit, carries out his reversals by bringing down the contemporary emperor-Babbits, and elevating a raggle-taggle clutch of pimps, prostitutes, criminals and madames above the newly-descended "squares." As stock brokers "began jumping off rooftops with no greater consideration for those passing below than they'd had when their luck was running" (WWS 118), pimps--the businessman's double--become fantastically successful by putting out-of-work women to work, that is, by filling the social role previously occupied by the Captains of Industry. The peculiar conjunction of prohibition and prostitution leads to a further reversal, or rather to the revelation of the reversal:

> Negro bellboys had gained a virtual monopoly on the delivery of illicit alcohol and had found that white male guests either wanted a woman with their bottle or a bottle with the woman. This errand boys' work evolved into soliciting. . . . He saw now at first hand, that what his Mama had told him wasn't true

> after all: that the "good" white folks never acted like bad black ones. For he saw men and women with the best names in town, the do-right names, howling like wolves in the Saturday stews, panties on the bedpost and pants on the floor, yet knew Do-Right Daddy would be back with his family, come Sunday morning, in the pew with the best name in town.
> (WWS 119)

(Notice that this passage is not liberal propaganda: "bad" black folks, and probably "good" ones as well, howl with the best of us. As Captain Bednar says--and immediately shakes himself--"'Well, . . . we all feel better if we fool around a little'" [MGA 191].)

Algren uses the chronotope of the brothel in much the same way that other writers have used the public square, the ballroom, the deck of a ship, or a bathhouse: as a place of public revelation of the private, and often illicit, core of an individual or of a class. The "muteness and invisibility" (DI 135) of bourgeois life are contested through carnivalized place (public, "low," unprotected), characters ("low life" types, inversions of the conventional), and language (coarse, mocking, parodic, dialogizing).[15] Dove is so skilled (and dependable) at "rising" that he becomes not only a parvenu, a young careerist on the make, but in his role in the peep show (he is paid to "rape" "virgins" in front of a one-way window), a kind of prostitute as well. Bakhtin speaks of the analogous functions of these two roles--the revelation of the hollowness of convention--and to them Dove adds the rogue-clown-fool masks, which "play deaf" to standard, hypocritical moral formulae. While this complex is used to great effect throughout Dove's journey through the New

Orleans underworld, there is one particularly ridiculous and slanderous scene, parts of which were deleted before the publication of the novel, that in its concentration of these motifs of degradation merits our close attention.[16]

Although one vital character and several details, either blasphemous or indecent or both, were cut from the scene of the black mammy-freak's evening at Spider-Boy Court, Algren later published a reconstructed version of the scene as a short story called "The House of the Hundred Grassfires." This piece was included both in Nelson Algren's Own Book of Lonesome Monsters (1962) and The Last Carousel (1973). The original excision of the offending material may have been legally prudent; it was artistically stupid. The imagery of grotesque realism, and the heteroglossia toward which Algren had been moving throughout his career, climax in this scene much more forcefully if Bag-of-Sand stays put, and if Warren Gameliel can carry out his time-honored outrage. This rendering of degradation deserved to remain whole, and in the following section I will treat it as such.

ii

Instead of "Once upon a time," this Perdido Street story starts:

> It was that slander-colored evening hour before the true traffic begins, when once again the sheets have been rationed; and once again for blocks about, pouting or powdering or dusting their navels, each girl wonders idly what manner of man--mutt, mouse, or moose--the oncoming night will bring her. (*WWS* 216)

The first of this evening's "lonesome monsters" to break through the steaming heat into the parlor of The House of the Hundred Grassfires smells of violet talc, "a small man wearing a clerical collar, under a face favoring a racoon's . . . built like a bag of sand and somewhat favor[ing] a badger, too" (*LC* 193). His peremptory challenge to the house, after tearing off his collar and flinging it across the room, is: "'*Bring on your beasts of the wild*!'"--which recalls, and degrades even further, the favored hymn of the crazy Floralee, one of the house's inmates:

> The beasts of the wild
> Will be led by a child
> And I'll be changed from the thing I am

In the uneasy air of Spider-Boy Court, all is due for a change, and although it will in a sense be led by a child, it will be hard to describe in liturgical language. No matter, for the defrocked priest has more on his mind than hymns:

> "*Exactly* what do you think you're geared to, mister" the apprentice pimp wanted to know, stepping closer.
>
> "Exactly what am I *geared* to?" Bag-of-Sand glanced up. "My dear young man, I'm exactly geared to the girlies; *exactly*. Otherwise why would I be here *exactly*? Or is this a hardware store?" And

> turning his back on the slow-witted macker [who else but Dove?], he began an explanation of the Immaculate Conception that not even Mama, the mulatto madam of The Hundred Grassfires, had ever heard before.
>
> "Parthenogenesis is scientifically possible," he explained as though the question had been troubling him for some time, "but it can only occur in the haploid chromosomes. As these are only half the size of the somatic chromosomes, they result in dwarfism. *That* was what happened to Mary."
>
> (*LC* 194)

As this battered urban grotesque recites his obsessions, he not only travesties Christian myth and the vocabulary of science, but also might recall the criminal Vautrin, alias Abbe Carlos Herrera, Balzac's fiend who at the end of *Lost Illusions* says: "'There are two kinds of history: official history, all lies, the history which is taught in schools, history *ad usum delphini*. Then there's secret history, which explains how things really happened: a scandalous history.'" Like Vautrin, this priestly caricature is caught up in the resentments of the latter:

> Bag-of-Sand began pacing up and down, in a sweat from more than the climate; one hand on his belly and one on his head--"and furthermore I'll tell you how the Church covered up the scientific truth that Jesus Christ *was* a dwarf. Every time the Church fathers came to a biblical reference to Jesus as 'tiny,' 'little,' 'undersized,' or 'small,' they changed it to 'humble,' 'meek,' 'gentle,' 'modest,' or 'sweet.' I've done research all over the world on this and I can tell you: the Church has perpetuated a *hoax*! (*LC* 194)

This "ghee" hasn't limited himself to research alone. As Dove's patience wears thin, he demands of Bag-of-Sand "'Are you for action or *aren't* you, buddy?'" and sets loose this reply:

> "Well, in May, 1929, I wrote C-U-N-T on a convent wall in red chalk--how's *that* for action?"
>
> Big Stingaree clapped his hand to his forehead and staggered backward to show that the mind boggled

> at the very thought.
> "Not only *that*"--Bag-of-Sand seemed anxious to paint as black a picture of himself as possible--"*I was wearing the cloth at the time*!" (*LC* 194)

Mama, a procuress with a strongly sentimental Christian streak in her, has to know if this "young man" has squared his sin with the church:

> "Not formally," Bag-of-Sand explained, "but later in the same year, while passing the same convent, I wrote *Jesus Saves* where I'd written that other."
> "What were you wearing," Mama wanted to know, "when you wrote *Jesus Saves* where you'd written *that other*?"
> "A sports jacket and huarachos."
> "I see," Mama said sorrowfully. "You write something like *that* while wearing the cloth and then come back six months later dressed like Bing Crosby, scribble *Jesus Saves*, and think you've missed purgatory. It isn't as easy as all that, young man." (*LC* 195)

Bag-of-Sand will remain in hell, though, since "[t]witchet-struck and pussy-simple, snatch-mad and skirt-sick" (*LC* 195), he will never recover from his institutionalization by his family. Proceeding on the assumption that a "man who didn't want to be a priest was obviously out of his mind" (*LC* 195), they had had him put away, and,

> What had thereafter emerged, obsessed by myths, was no longer of either church or the world, but the ghost of a ghost who roamed a curious twilit land between the world and the church.
> A land where a thousand images of sex stood transfixed like stone ruins in a desert place. Lost in a world where sex had gone blind, deaf, mute, cold: and alone as a seaward stone. (*LC* 195)

This genuinely terrible state is subjected to such gross mockery in Algren's depiction of it that its grotesquerie derives as surely from the ambivalent presentation as from the parodic-travestying nature of the dialogue. Dove must remain deaf, or

have only "inappropriate" reactions to this obsessive-compulsive pseudo-sexuality (and also to the incessantly-expressed misogyny of the male grotesques) during the whole course of his expiatory journey if he is ever to return to a human world. The impatience he displays with Bag-of-Sand's nonsense is analogous to the compassion he feels for ex-abortionist and present condom-czar Rhino Gross's prisoner-wife, Velma the Vulcanized Woman; to the guiltlessness alternating with misery that color his time in Luke and Fort's chivvying company; and to the disgust that grows in him as he struggles away from Oliver Finnerty's cynical cashing-in on the hate-trade masquerading as the "love" trade. All of these recognizable human emotions, as well as guilt over Teresina, continue to percolate behind Dove's foolishness. This tension is well-maintained, and Algren needs it in order not to create a trivial and heartless book. Pathos is tested, yes, but it isn't mechanically junked--even Pantagruel squeezes out one real tear, after all.

While Algren still uses this novel to fight the ascendancy of the military, the judiciary, the constabulary and the blind, deaf and dumb middle and upper classes, he sees more clearly than in his previous books the institutionalized links between denial, violence and the thoroughgoing perversions attendant on hate and fear of women. It is only through the carnivalized presentation of these pathologies, though, that he undercuts the editorializing which marks his books, first to last.

Bag-of-Sand doesn't exhaust one evening's worth of wrecks.

From a "cab that appeared out of nowhere, like a cab in a misting dream" (<u>WWS</u> 217), a "naval lieutenant in full regalia, a sea-going executive in rimless glasses, a hero of sea fights yet unfought" (<u>WWS</u> 218) steps forth into the greenish light. This, then, is The Hero, who bears "like a rainbow across his sky-blue breast all the ribboned honors a peacetime navy could pin" (<u>WWS</u> 218). This paragon, laboring in the toils of American history, simply cannot make his desire known simply; it is not a simple desire. What he seeks is orgasm by ritual, and the ritual is a re-enactment of his first ejaculation. This he attained under the strong paddling hand of his "Black Mammy," that loving old Southern fixture. A commander of men, a Virginia gentleman, all this character wants is to be "'made to behave'" again and again, because "'what happens when a man is having a girl, <u>that's</u> what happened. And I've never been able to make it happen any other way since'" (<u>WWS</u> 226).

The Hundred Grassfires mobilizes to accomodate the state of emergency; that is, Algren organizes its resources for the degradation of this pure product of America. Navy immediately encounters the "cast" of the house, and their voices which compete for his attention and wallet are an illogical medley which yet sounds something like "America the Beautiful." The Commander meets ("form'lly," as Vi would say) Mama's grandson, "the six-year-old black boy with the mind of a forty-year-old pimp, the one his grandmother called Warren Gameliel but whom the women called the King of the Indoor Thieves" (<u>LC</u> 197). The young man is attired

in a navel-high shirt and a grown man's shoes, and nothing else but three hundred years of resentment:

> "Meet my grandson," Mama introduced him to the Commander. "Ain't he just _fine_?"
> Turning his head proudly upon his iron-colored throat, the King fluttered his lashes modestly at the woman's flattery. . . . The big overdressed man saluted the small naked one.
> "Pledge allegiance, Boy-Baby," Mama encouraged the King to perform his single accomplishment. But the King simply planted his black toes wider, as though saying he'd have to know more about this gold-braided wheeler-dealer before he'd pledge his teething ring.
> Then Reba honked with hollow glee: under the shirt the boy was reacting to the scent of the half-naked woman like a baby bull.
> "I do it _back_," the King made his intention known.
> "Ain't you _shamed_," Mama reproved him in a voice that simply _donged_ with pride, "gettin' a _upper_ right in front of _ladies_?"
> "He'll be a pimp like everyone else," Kitty prophesied. (_LC_ 198)

The scene gathers a deranged momentum as the whores compete for the Commander's cash, as Mama alternately threatens to send the King to "'the nigger school'" and orders him to pledge allegiance, as the King threatens more than once and more than twice "'I do it back,'" as the juke floats its worried commentary through the smoky air. Mama is tricked out like Aunt Jemima for Navy's pleasure, and as she tries to recite her upside-down life, married to three thieves and one square ("'I'd never marry another legit' man'"), he begins misbehaving, swearing his innocence all the while "in that same unbearable small-boy whine that in itself entitled him to a thrashing" (_WWS_ 229). He gets just that, and his gold braid ripped off, the women cheering Mama on and looking for a chance to get in a smack themselves. In the

censored version, the commander dives under a table, and when the women pull him out he lies on his stomach, "rump elevated to invite kicks, eyes closed with rapture" (LC 206). Drenched by Floralee with pitchers of beer and Coke, he lies "licking his big ox-tongue like a Coke-dripping Lazarus too languid to rise" (LC 206), even after a light kick from the apprentice pimp. All the while, defeated in his struggle to free himself from the Navy headgear, Warren G. slumbers:

> Beneath the ruin of the commander's gold-braid hat, the King of the Indoor Thieves had collapsed at last; his undershirt tangled about his throat as if someone had tried to improve his manners by finishing him off altogether. He snored till his toes were spread; he stretched till he creaked in dreams. Dreams of some final assault for an earth about to be his for keeps. (LC 203)

Battered, soaked, mocked, reviled, and satisfied in his own way, "this hero of sea fights yet unfought" poses a problem to the house in his post-ejaculatory lassitude. No one quite knows what the next move is, what to *do* with this wrecked dignitary. Excepting Warren Gameliel, lately risen:

> "I do it *back*," he repeated. And with no further ado, straddled the fallen leader and began urinating upon him with solemn delight. "I'm a sonofabitch," he explained, "I *do* do it back!" And fluttered his lashes above the torrent.
>
> "Why!" Mama came suddenly to herself in a burst of sunrisen pride, "Why! Listen to *that*! A child of six using the language of a child of *ten*! Hear this! Salute the Atlantic fleet!" . . . .
>
> Mama came to attention, eyes straight forward, her palm to her forehead in the hand-salute and began the Pledge of Allegiance. The King brought his own hand up to his forehead and stood at attention as well as he could while continuing to urinate.
>
> The big man on the floor looked up. He opened his eyes so blue, so commanding. "That was the

nicest party I've had in eleven years," he announced, rising at last.

Someone handed him his crushed hat and his soiled coat. (LC 206-07)

The prevalence in the scene of motifs of festive degradation is striking. To as great a degree as in any scene in Algren's work, we here see the continuance of the heritage of folk humor.[17] The sense of performance is strong throughout the incidents at The House of the Hundred Grassfires, but specifically as carnival spectacle: "carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators" (RW 7). The atmosphere is, for the purpose of breaking down dogmatism, authoritarianism and fear, artistically superior to the line-up, which while depicting the erosion of the pedestal of authority, tends to hypostatize the material separation of the participants, and remain on the verbal and metaphoric plane. The brothel parlor chronotope stimulates the "bodily and popular corrective to individual and idealistic spiritual pretense" (RW 22). The anti-dogmatic and profanizing aspect arrives with Bag-of-Sand, and is played off Mama's sclerotic and ridiculous piety (much as her respect for the uniform of the Navy inhibits her from thrashing the commander). The ex-priest's tirade is heteroglossic in nature, and thoroughly "upside-down and inside-out" at that. It establishes immediately the atmosphere of license, travesty, familiarization and disclosure typical of carnival scandal scenes. With the arrival of the commander, the attack shifts from the degradation of religiosity--a bad myth for the body--to the degradation of national, secular,

military seriousness. The reversals and transformations of Navy and the inmates of the house are consistent with the accumulated forms and values of folk humor: they render a "monster" funny, and thus disarm him. The sense of the commander's renewal (although, as I will stress, it is a partial renewal) is carried on in the grotesque mésalliance of the "big overdressed man" and the "small naked one," the Commander of Men and the King of the Indoor Thieves. Consistent with carnival hyperbolization, the commander is decorated to the highest possible degree, and his double, Warren Gameliel (Harding, a corrupt and bumbling U.S. President), is:

> not exactly high yellow, . . . actually closer to being high-brown. He was even closer to dark-brown. As a matter of fact he was as black as a kettle in hell. He was so black you'd have to put a milk bottle on his head to find him in the dark. He looked like a cross between a black angus calf and something fished out of the Mississippi on a moonless night. One tint darker and he would have disappeared altogether.
> (WWS 219-20)

All of which is to say: the King is as black as the "seagoing executive" is white. The pretense to superiority (which the commander alternates with his weird dialectal renditions of Black Mammy's angry speeches) is brought low--topographically, socially, bodily, chronologically (he whines like a child)--by the incarnation of his other: the exact counter-perfection to his white lie, a six-year-old black boy with the mind of a forty-year-old pimp, who is more sexually responsive to women in his childish state than Navy can be in his heroic manhood.[18] These

two "change places" in the course of the scene: the commander, thrashed and verbally abused, elevates his rump; the child finally does pledge allegiance, but only while carrying on with the carnival motif of drenching authority in urine.

And yet, as powerfully ambivalent as the carnival heritage is, it is manifestly unable to regenerate the likes of Bag-of-Sand or the sea-going-executive. The tendency of lesser and more recent artists than Rabelais has been towards narrowing and formalization. Such artists--and inevitably Algren is one such--emphasize the negative, annihilating pole of carnival energy, as if unable to realize, in a material and sensible way, utopian and regenerative images when faced with their enemies. On the threshhold before the street, the commander smiles, but no one returns the smile--it was <u>his</u> party after all. Both the ex-priest and the sick hero have some infinitesimal, infinite distance to travel before their celebrations are fertile, inclusive and laughing. Before these phantoms or icons--included are all the male monsters of this text--can again be human, there is a pathos that needs renewing, having been tested. In "Ashes of Soldiers," Whitman spoke of the agent:

> Perfume all--make all wholesome,
> Make these ashes to nourish and blossom,
> O love, solve all, fructify all with the last
>   chemistry.
>
> Give me exhaustless, make me a fountain,
> That I exhale love from me wherever I go like moist
>   perennial dew,
> For the ashes of all dead soldiers South or North.
> (W 600)

"O love"--it's a fool's wish, isn't it? Of the fairy tales Dove reads with Teresina's, and later, Hallie's help, the most terrifying to him is "The Steadfast Tin Soldier." Remember: the soldier falls in love with the dancer, she standing with one leg raised at the open door of the castle, and he supposing, because he cannot see her legs, that like him she has only one. The black goblin warns the soldier to keep his eyes to himself; the next morning the wind, or the goblin, pushes the soldier off the window ledge, down into the streets. Still clinging to his gun, still at attention, the soldier's journey in a paper boat some children make for him takes him past a savage rat who demands to see his papers, to the edge of rapids in which he would surely drown, through the belly of a fish that swallows him and, by way of the fish market, back to the very room where the dancer, who loves him as he loves her, still stands before the castle. She is unbending, though, and the soldier, who is so much moved that he is ready to shed tears of tin, cannot give way, and stays at attention. They look at each other with yearning, but cannot speak. Without rhyme or reason, one of the little boys in the room takes up the tin soldier and throws him into the fire.

Teresina and Hallie help Dove with this lesson. Teresina is a Mexican American woman whose single night of marriage to an "ancient wet-lipped orgiast in an American Legion cap" leaves in her blue-black bangs a triangular patch "the freshness of white snow." Hallie is white enough to pass as a white teacher for a white school, and as a white wife for a white husband. After

small-town gossip drives her out of the school, genes betray her in marriage, and the pure-white husband rejects Hallie and the child. She finds her way to Perdido Street, where some men pay more for "dark girls," and to Dove's lonely arms. After his journey, after stupidly hurting Hallie, after his beating and blinding by Hallie's goblin lover Achilles Schmidt, Dove returns to La Fe en Dios to learn more from Teresina, a fool's wisdom on his lips: "'If God made anything better than a girl,' Dove thought, 'He sure kept it to Himself.'" Algren closes this story about the United States saying: "That was all long ago in some brief lost spring, in a place that is no more. In that hour that frogs begin and the scent off the mesquite comes strongest."

> "And they lived happily ever after," says the fairy tale. The fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest. This need was created by the myth. The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest. In the figure of the fool it shows us how mankind "acts dumb" toward the myth; in the figure of the youngest brother it shows us how one's chances increase as the mythical primitive times are left behind; in the figure of the man who sets out to learn what fear is it shows us that the things we are afraid of can be seen through; in the figure of the wiseacre it shows us that the questions posed by the myth are simple-minded, like the riddle of the Sphinx; in the shape of the animals which come to the aid of the child in the fairy tale it shows that nature not only is subservient to the myth, but much prefers to be aligned with man. The wisest thing--so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day--is to meet the forces of the mythical world with

cunning and high spirits. (This is how the fairy tale polarizes _Mut_, courage, dividing it dialectically into _Untermut_, that is, cunning, and _Übermut_, high spirits.) The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man. A mature man feels this complicity only occasionally, that is , when he is happy; but the child first meets it in fairy tales, and it makes him happy.[19]

[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in his Reflections, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 236.

[2] Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," in Aesthetics and Politics, ed. Fredric Jameson (London: NLB, 1977), p. 82.

[3] Nelson Algren, quoted in Martha Heasley Cox and Wayne Chatterton, Nelson Algren (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 33.

[4] Nelson Algren, quoted in David Ray, "A Talk on the Wild Side: A Bowl of Coffee with Nelson Algren," The Reporter, June ii, 1959, p. 32.

[5] Bakhtin characterizes both heteroglossia and dialogue, two of his key terms, in the following passage:

> The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and language, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization--this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. (DI 263)

[6] Nelson Algren, A Walk on the Wild Side (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 40. Hereafter cited as WWS in the body of the text.

[7] The Linkhorn clan history which Algren weaves in and out of the plot is essentially quoted from W.J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), and there are numerous instances of Algren's relying on Cash for interpretations of history and for "voice" (i.e. as a contribution to the novel's hetroglossia), as well as information about Southern culture, in A Walk on the Wild Side. The novel is a rich instance of inclu-

sions of varied language and speech types, from Lord Lytton on the fall of Pompeii to the typology of cottage-industry condoms.

[8] Cox and Chatterton, p. 33.

[9] Ray, p. 32.

[10] Earl Shorris, "Literary Life Among the Dinka," Harper's Magazine, Vol. 245, No. 1467 (August, 1972), p. 107.

[11] Nelson Algren, "Previous Days," in his The Last Carousel (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 219. Hereafter cited in the body of the text as LC. An interesting article dealing with some of these issues is Lawrence E. Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," American Quarterly, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring 1985), pp. 71-80.

[12] Debord, Society of the Spectacle, par. 139.

[13] Debord, par. 139.

[14] For documentation and discussion of these issues see Thomas R. Frazier, ed., The Underside of American History: Other Readings vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971); Ronald T. Takaki, Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1979); and Benjamin B. Ringer, "We the People" and Others: Duality and America's Treatment of its Racial Minorities (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1983).

[15] The chronotope of the parlor is, in relation to prostitution, more revelatory than the street in much modernist writing. In Bakhtin's terms--heavily folkloric terms--the street is not a thoroughly modern phenomenon. Walter Benjamin's observations below clarify the spatial-historical significance of an urban, public, and therefore anonymous thoroughfare:

> In the form which prostitution took in the great cities woman appears not merely as a commodity but as a mass-produced article. This is indicated in artificial disguise of the individual expression in favour of a professional one, such as is brought about by the application of make-up. That it was this aspect of the whore which was sexually definitive for Baudelaire is borne out not least by the fact that in his many evocations of the whore the brothel never forms the background, as the street so often does.

Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," trans. Lloyd Spencer and Mark Harrington, New German Critique 34 (1985), pp. 52-53.

Obviously the aspect of the whore that was sexually or otherwise definitive for Algren was quite different: it preferred first names and intimacy. For a feminist view of the issues

Benjamin raises, see Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity," Theory, Culture & Society, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1985), pp. 37-46.

[16] From the copyright page of The Last Carousel: "'The House of the Hundred Grassfires' constitutes the material deleted before publication from A Walk on the Wild Side . . . ." (LC x).

[17] Algren's connection with folklore was expressed in part by the editorial and "re-telling" work he undertook as a WPA project. There is a sample of his folk tale practice in A Treasury of American Folklore, ed. B. A. Botkin (New York: Crown Publishers, 1944), pp. 540-42. Algren was the editor of a project gathering Chicago industrial folklore, and his story "How the Devil Came Down Division Street," from The Neon Wilderness, is a wonderful example of urban folk forms in the hands of a sly narrator.

[18] A remark Adorno made in relation to stereotypy and prejudice against Jews may have some bearing on the way in which Algren uses Mama, Black Mammy, and Warren G. in this scene: "the whole complex of the Jew is a kind of recognized red-light district of legitimatized psychotic distortions." See Adorno, The Authoritarian Personality, p. 617.

[19] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in his Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 102.

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