

From John Reed to Jane Addams

-or-

What Time Will It Be When the Last El Crashes?

Nelson Algren's Proletarian Roots, the FWP,
And the Granular Naturalism of *Never Come Morning*.

By

William D. Gallagher

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recommend acceptance of this thesis.

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To Nelson Algren - thank you for doing it the hard way.

“The End is Nothing, the Road is All.”

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“My kind of writing is just a form of reportage, you might call it emotionalized reportage, but...the data has to be there. Compassion has no use without setting. I mean you have to know how the law courts work. You have to know how many bars there are in a jail cell.

You can't just say, 'The guy's in jail.' You have to know.”

Nelson Algren in *Conversations with Nelson Algren*, H.E.F. Donahue

A Maker of Music: An Introduction.

As a literary figure, Nelson Algren draws small change. While there is certainly a modestly respectable drip of scholarship that flows down through the decades since the height of his success in 1949, with the publication of his magnum opus, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, it rarely emits more than the babble of a backyard brook. Algren himself, in a 1963 interview with H.E.F. Donahue, referred to his legacy as that of “the tin whistle of American letters” (Donahue 151). It comes as no surprise then that his work pre-*The Man with the Golden Arm* receives all the attention due to a squeaky penny whistle. While Algren's first two novels, *Somebody in Boots* from 1935 and *Never Come Morning* from 1942, received their share of plaudits and support from critics and authors that traveled similar political and literary circles, the timing of their publication did the author no financial

favors – one arriving amidst the Great Depression, and the other during a paper shortage resulting from America’s participation in World War II.

Never Come Morning, more so than *Somebody in Boots*, stands as an often-misunderstood novel, both critically and formally – the New York Public Library currently describes *Morning* as “unique among Algren’s novels [as] his only romance” (NYPL). While arguments about elements of romance within the text of *Morning*, or evaluations of the relationship between Bruno and Steffi yield meaningful discourse on both text and the period from which it comes, to call *Never Come Morning* first and foremost a romance misses whatever mark may exist by a country mile. The story of Polonia, of the “300,000 Poles” living in Chicago’s Near Northwest side” (Drew 117), may feature the stunted, jagged love that grows between the two youths, but the text veers far deeper into the tragedy of this Montague and Capulet than the romance.

Jack Conroy, once one of Algren’s closest friends as well as his one-time publisher and co-editor, described the problem with certain appraisals of Algren’s work as one of perspective. Algren’s work, especially post-*Somebody in Boots*, took on a sociological case-study style, and for Conroy, any criticism or review that did not account for this could do no service to the text or its message. Later in Algren’s career, critics treating *Never Come Morning* as belonging to the tradition of the protest novel, the proletarian fiction movement, the second flowering of American literary Naturalism, or as a poor attempt at mimicking a young Hemingway (Walcutt 289) did their best to box in Algren as a sensationalist, as a man who wrongfully saw humanity and a manner of honor and dignity among the “bums and deviants” (Podhoretz 132). Call it the shifting attitudes towards writers on the left after the disasters of 39’ and the increasing hostility towards anyone deemed too red, or the FBI’s determined efforts to break Algren’s spirit (Asher 313-316), or even the gradual decline into bitterness and hostility of a writer of industrial parables in an increasingly post-industrial

landscape -- whatever the case, at one point, the critics decided that Algren's work, at best, stood as a misguided relic born of an historical oddity.

Scholars like James Giles, Carla Capetti, and Brooke Horvath have done their best to shift the perspectives of Algren's work, to bring his writing, especially his work from the 1930s and early 1940s, out of its relative obscurity. This project intends to add to that effort and present *Never Come Morning* as a unique product of a conflagration of conditions influenced by prominent institutions and attitudes of its time. Born of the Depression, the John Reed Clubs and the literary left's little magazines, the Federal Writers Project (FWP) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the conviction of a University of Chicago sociology major turned journalism student (Drew 28), *Never Come Morning* serves as a window into the literary and historical condition under which Algren produced it, as well as the subjects of his sociological embed, in a way that makes the novel and author valuable sites for critical and pedagogical evaluations and excavations.

Of crucial interest to the project, Algren's interest in sociology and his acquaintance with figures such as Louis Wirth come to the fore during his years at the Illinois Writers Project (IWP), especially considering an essay written by Algren in the fall of 1938 entitled "The Function of Play in a Democracy." Unpublished, uncollected, and at the very least, unmentioned by other writers and scholars whose work covers the ground of Algren or the FWP and IWP, the essay sheds light on what some critics of Algren see as a lack of clearly delineated suggestions concerning the "horrors" faced by the impoverished denizens of the little fiefdoms that made up industrial Chicago. Relying on the work and influence of Jane Addams of Hull House, Algren's unpublished essay operates as a roadmap to the novel that Harper Brothers published four years later - *Never Come Morning*. The creatively archived essay will act as the transition from the excavation of Algren's work at the

IWP and the influence on his work and style and the exploration of *Never Come Morning*, which stands as the final major section of the project.

Part journalist, part case worker, part ethnographer, part proletarian rabble-rouser, with a dash of rail tramp thrown in for good measure, Algren's experience put him in the perfect position to mold a frictious grain of sociological sand into the immersive pearl that is his literary Chicago. Algren certainly is not the first author to write in a case-study style – consider Freud's fear that readers might read his case histories as novels. However, what Algren did with the sociological case study approach, and the level of academic research that went into the composition of his work, borders on the foundation of a micro-genre all its own, a manner of case-study-masquerading-as-a-novel, but that woven with the lyricism of a poet.

Algren published 23 poems over the course of his career, with his poetry appearing in *The Anvil* and *The New Anvil*, as well as *Poetry*, *Esquire*, *The Nation*, and numerous university literary magazines, to whom Algren would often gift unpublished and newly written works, making it exceptionally difficult to ascertain just how many uncollected pieces only published once might be out there (Bales 96). The poems that he wrote and published at the end of the thirties and into the early 40s show a novelist with a poet's touch exploring the possibilities of the Chicago narratives that would cement what legacy he has on a microcosmic scale.

An unpublished version of "Local South," at that point still titled "Home and Good-Night," which was published in the September 1941 issue of *Poetry*, focuses on Pietra Lefkowicz Schmies, who "scrubs [the mayor's] urinal on her knees" (---, "Home and Good-Night"). The speaker asks the reader to

Pity all such on their knees in Chicago

Pity all cabbies without a fare,

Pity the sick thieves seeking bondsmen

Pity city where Kelly is mayor. ("Home and Good-Night")

By the time the speaker asks, "What time will it be when the last El crashes? / What time will it be in the funeral home?" the reader can imagine them observing Pietra and the hatless drunk by the arc-lamp along the walk from Division Street to Evergreen ("Home and Good-Night"). More than figments of poetic ideation, the ghosts of "Home and Good-Night" live and breathe the Triangle. The poem that Algren published as "Home" peeks into the life of a man kneeling for pennies on North Clark Street.

Algren published more overtly call-to-arms style poetry during this period as well. After staging a host of performances of a bawdy temperance-tale style comedy called "The Drunkard's Complaint" with Jack Conroy to raise money for the resurrected *New Anvil* in 1939, "The Makers of Music" appeared in its first issue. The poem bears the mark of Algren's earlier, direct proletarian roots, but now the subject is more familiar, and he appears to be staking his claim as a dyed-in-the-wool Chicago writer, as when the speaker of "Music" opens by asking, "Who will play Lenin to Chicago? Touching faces, touching hands" before again bringing the Clark Street Line to life (—, "Makers of Music")

These miniature narratives served as a proving ground for Algren. The thinly veiled fiction of stories such as "So Help Me," "A Lumpen," and "Biceps" began to harmonize with the lyricism of Algren the poet, and most importantly concerning *Never Come Morning*, Algren as an academic researcher drafting a novel. Published in 1942, though distinctly of the 1930s, Algren's second novel

is neither truly proletarian nor purely within the naturalist tradition, though it draws its steel girding from the forms. Instead, somewhere between Jacob Riis' muckraking and Aleksandr Kuprin's *Yama*, Algren forged his own style, his own sociological undergirding for the modern novel, one that he hoped would reveal the light of humanity to those who think themselves a breed apart from the huddled masses.

A Neglected Tradition: The "Method of Naturalism" and the Strike Novels of the 1920s

Charles Walcutt, in his 1966 monograph on naturalism *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream*, a riff on Dreiser, argues that one stream of naturalism, the optimistic stream that sees nothing but the potential for greatness inherent in the human animal, stands as the true inheritor of the mantle of acceptable literature. In one form, Walcutt argues, the character of naturalism in literature "appears a shabby, apelike monster, in another it appears a godlike giant" (5). The base-born offshoot, the style of naturalism deemed unnecessarily pessimistic and unsympathetic to humanity in its exploitation of tragedy and mischance, for Walcutt, falls short, landing among the reformist literary movements and the sensationalists of his day, merely out to shock people for a dollar.

That the people who live their lives beneath the shadow of the El, whatever shape and form and out of whatever material their own personal El might be hewn, qualify as human, rather than "apelike," and despite their moral failings deserve to be seen and heard at the table of the species, does not offset the sensational and vulgar pall their presence casts for a critic such as Walcutt. For many, when faced with the fact that scores of souls live with all the horrors of society while never knowing its benefits, to paraphrase a man, their immediate reaction seems to blame the messenger

for bringing such blatantly fabricated filth to their doorstep and going about their lives ignorant of the suffering around them.

For Walcutt, and others of like opinions, the naturalism of the proletarian authors and the worker-writers, born of the “unfortunate absorption of naturalistic attitudes and beliefs” in the work of those such as Crane, London, Norris, and Zola, clung to the rusty remains of nineteenth-century scientism (Pizer 54). Later, during what Malcolm Cowley termed the second flowering of American literary naturalism, critics complained that writers like James T. Farrell, author of the Studs Lonigan trilogy that shone a light on Chicago’s Irish communities, John Dos Passos with his America trilogy, and the pedagogical flagship that is John Steinbeck, then replaced the earlier obsession with scientism with that of Marxism for daring to evaluate and find some manner of fault with institutions and material conditions surrounding the poor and working-class majorities of America (Pizer 55).

Especially considering Algren’s proximity to Farrell, including Farrell’s working up of Algren’s first novel for the publisher Vanguard, which included 16 pages of notes, Nelson Algren often falls into the latter, somehow tainted school of naturalism as such. Citing the cumulative despair wrought by the Great War, and the greatness of “evil and injustice” in the world outside of America’s curtilage, Walcutt calls Algren’s compulsion “to write so warmly and sympathetically of the ruined lives of bums and addicts [...] people stripped down to the core of survival [with] no strength or use for complicated emotions” a “spiritual condition” (299), and one hardly gets the feeling that Walcutt considers it an enviable or admirable condition. Algren’s writing, for Walcutt, abandons any pretense that society could or might be improved, or as he puts it, lovingly, “purified” (299). This appraisal of a naturalistic approach ignores Algren’s background as a student of sociology as well as his ethnographic training, both of which come through clearly by the time *Never Come Morning* saw

publication, and instead seeks out a tidy wrap-up and a thoroughly didactic call-to-arms conclusion, perhaps complete with a list of actionable suggestions.

To be fair to Walcutt and other scholars of naturalism, particularly those concerned with proletarian fiction, the tendency to offer a clear-cut call-to-arms, either through an individual awakening to the protagonists' material surrounding or the ever-popular arrival of the paraclete at the eleventh hour, ready to steer the workers to revolution, indeed exists within the school – including the seemingly hasty ending of Mike Gold's 1930 novel *Jews Without Money*, often considered the seminal work of proletarian fiction. Indeed, Lee Mitchell in his work on naturalism, admits that “within a traditional poetics of narrative economy and stylistic variation, naturalist texts will always fail by definition” (21). However, the resultant sameness in difference reveals directly through its repetitive patterns how fully character is “wrenched into shape by the indifferent logic of determinism” (Mitchell 22).

Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* utilizes a similar device to Mike Gold, ending the otherwise brilliant novel from 1933 with a rare dead note. In *The Disinherited*, the crudely sketched German exile, Hans, exists “only as a symbol,” a necessary implement of the rough form of proletarian realism (Hickman 596). For Mike Gold and *Jews Without Money*, the “man on the East Side soapbox” (Gold 309) serves as the interlocutor, as the Metatron of awakening class consciousness that heralds the coming revolution. Neither example spoils the text in which it appears. However, the standard appearance of the paraclete highlights the suture between novels in the proletarian tradition and the strike novels of the 20s, and earlier, perhaps rougher forms of thinly veiled radical fiction. Algren, even as early as *Somebody in Boots*, eschews this tradition without denying his connection or repudiating a specific ideology, skewering the notion of the inevitable turnaround itself – sometimes, no one comes to save the day.

Excluding the messianic paracletes that arrive to save the day, the repetition and focus on minutiae of naturalist writers, and indeed, proletarian authors with a sense of style and cadence, confirm a vision of life's endless repetitiveness, with protagonists clamoring for something to "break the old monotony" (*Morning* 25). The tendency might stem from an even earlier form of naturalism or sometimes called a manner of reportage, namely the strike novels of the 1920s. Without splitting hairs, then, to call a work of fiction naturalistic evades the very conditions of its genesis. To dig into what Algren might have meant when he asked the Guggenheim Foundation for a grant to draft his next novel "in the method of naturalism" (Drew 117), then, an appraisal of what we mean when we say strike novel, or proletarian fiction, or worker-writer, or even naturalism proves necessary.

Born of the radical literary tradition of the 1920s that gave birth to radical rags such as *The Blast* and *Masses*, indeed the movements that brought figures such as Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman into the veins of history, the strike novels presented a unique form of narrativizing historical moments in American labor history. Most notable is the example laid down by the six Gastonia novels, written between 1929 and 1934, that chronicle the Loray Mill Strike of 1929. The novels include Olive Tilford Dargan's 1931 novel *Call Home the Heart* (published initially under the pseudonym Fielding Burke), Myra Page's *Gathering Storm* from 1932, Sherwood Anderson's *Beyond Desire* in 1932, William Rollins Jr's *The Shadow Before* in 1934, Mary Heaton Vorse's *Strike!* From 1930 (and an uncollected work titled *Gastonia* from 1929), and Grace Lumpkin's 1930 novel *To Make My Bread*, often considered the greatest of the six. Jack Conroy went as far as to describe Lumpkin's *Bread* as one of "the first proletarian novel[s] born out of the depression" ("Lectures" 14).

With varying degrees of artistry, the novels relate the tale of Fred Erwin Beal and Ellen Dawson of the National Textile Workers Union, a communist labor union, coming to Loray to help

organize the workers and press their demands for a forty-hour work week, a \$20 weekly wage, recognition of their union, and the abolition of the much “hated stretch-out system” (Huber 87). On April 1, 1929, nearly 2,000 workers walked off the job at the Loray Mill, and the strike action would eventually claim the lives of the local police chief as well as organizer Ella Mae Wiggins, who was gunned down after being run out of a tent city with the strikers.

Fay Blake, in her monograph *The Strike in the American Novel*, comments that “there can be no doubt, that in its full bloom the strike novel was less concerned with probing the individual in-depth than with examining the effect of society on him,” though she firmly concedes the importance and relevance of “the strike and the earnest effort to document the strike authentically” (167). Blake also directly ties the strike novels of Sherwood Anderson to Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited*, first published in 1933. The complaint, as it concerns what Blake saw as the shared tendency of the strike novels and Conroy’s first novel, stems from the protagonist or “narrator” finding “[liberation] only when he learns to submerge his individuality in the fortunes of his class [...] when he is no longer tempted by ambition or troubled by shame” (Blake 167).

The strike novels, then, seem painted with a similar brush to Walcott’s appraisal of the wrong side of the naturalistic stream. While interest in the strike novels has risen in recent decades thanks to passionate publishing houses such as the Feminist Press, for most of the intervening period, the strike novels, much like proletarian fiction and worker-writers, existed as historiographical oddities of a more significant period, rather than a movement all their own. As noted, during the same period as the strike novels’ publication, the proletarian moment began to come into its own. After Mike Gold’s initial effort and Conroy’s kingdom of worker-writers and little magazines found their voices, the proletarian fiction movement, an at-the-time already abandoned Soviet nomenclature for socialist realism, began its clock ticking.

Nelson Algren's 1930s: The Proletarian Moment, John Reed, and the Illinois Writers Project.

Algren's experiential combination and the radical, often anarchic world of writers on the left in the 1930s stand as two major facets of *Never Come Morning's* position as indeed a novel of the 1930s, despite its 1942 publication date. By the time Algren began working for the Illinois chapter of the Federal Writers Project, he had participated in or observed first-hand many of the defining moments of the 1930s and called many of the decade's most influential and celebrated literary figures friends and fellow travelers. Algren's poetry and short stories appeared in a wide array of magazines and literary journals, including the short story "So Help Me," published in *Story's* August 1933 issue, which won Algren a spot on the O. Henry list that year. The short story would serve as a major building block for Algren's first novel, *Somebody in Boots*, published in 1935 by Vanguard Press. Algren only published one novel with Vanguard, but his presence in their catalog of authors could not be more appropriate.

Vanguard Press, founded in 1926, stood as a strong independent publisher through the twenties and thirties. While Vanguard "never became a large and important house [,] it continued to publish quality books year after year" (Tebbel 269). The publishing house owed its existence primarily to the largesse of one Charles Garland. During a meeting of the Garland Fund board in 1926, a newly-elected-to-the-board Robert Dunn "allocated \$100,000 to establish the Vanguard Press" with the intention of republishing "left-wing classics at a low cost and to provide an outlet for otherwise unpublishable new books" (Samson 167).

A contributor to *The New Masses*, Dunn was no stranger to the literary left, using his position on the board of Charles Garland's fund to support fledgling writing careers and promote his political

vision. The fund awarded thousands of dollars to striking workers and workers' organizations and delivered "\$5,000 for emergency legal expenses" for the defense of the well-known anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti (Samson 169). Vanguard, then, possessed a clear social stance and sought to work with authors that would reinforce and strengthen that position. Small wonder, then, that Vanguard took a chance on a young journalism student like Nelson Algren, publishing *Somebody in Boots* in 1935, complete with epigrams lifted directly from *The Communist Manifesto*.

Nelson Algren had the unfortunate timing of publishing his first major novel during the Great Depression, and by the time Harper & Brothers took a chance on *Never Come Morning* in 1942, the world was at war. Despite everything, Algren's novels, as well as his short fiction, received a respectable reception. *Somebody in Boots* enjoyed high praise from Jack Conroy in *The New Masses*, as well as the *New York Sun* and the *Washington Post*. H.W. Boynton of *The New York Times* called *Boots* the "book of the hour" and praised the author's empathy for the damned and the hopeless (Boynton 6).

The critical, if not commercial, success of Algren's first two novels ensured him a level of literary respectability. As for *Never Come Morning*, Colin Asher described its critical reception as "a well-executed hook" to his doubters (182). *The Oakland Times* compared *Morning* to the work of Hemingway, Emile Zola, and Charles Dickens, while *The New York Times* waxed poetical, calling Algren a brilliant moralist and a writer of parables (Asher 182-83). The modest trickle of commercial success of Algren's 1947 short story collection, *The Neon Wilderness*, continued the slow creep of Algren's career leading up to his brief rise to fame in the early 1950s.

However, by the mid-fifties, Algren's status as a writer born of the proletarian school became a cudgel for critics such as Leslie Fiedler, who saw Algren as a "museum piece [...] the Last of the

Proletarian Writers” (Fielder 208). Fiedler’s assessment comes from a critic, indeed, a host of critics, who then seemed determined to treat the radical literary movement of the 1930s and anything communist adjacent as a bad dream – something best forgotten. The atmosphere of the country had shifted, and the remnants of hope that for many died in 1939 with the Soviet-Nazi non-aggression pact or the result of the civil war in Spain finally dissipated into a red-tinged paranoia. However, in the early 1930s, amidst the ravages of the Great Depression, a young journalism student saw that world of worker-writers and proletarian revolutionaries sounding calls in the *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses* to “Change the World!” and saw something worth doing.

Before Algren received his all-but-useless card, indicating that he had graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in journalism, he had set out to earn a degree in sociology. However, the job prospects for a recently graduated sociology major during the Great Depression seemed grim, so he decided on journalism. Algren’s efforts to procure a paid position at a newspaper – any newspaper – failed miserably. Nevertheless, his early time at the university gave Algren the opportunity to study the programs built by Chicago School mainstays, such as Robert Park and Louis Wirth (Rotella 50), both of whom had worked with and were influenced by the progenitor of modern social services and social work, Jane Addams of Hull House. Attending college where and when he did, under the auspices of the sociology department, introduced Algren to profound ideas concerning the allocation of federal and state funds to better serve the immigrant and working-class communities within the city and primed the young student for his later work at the Federal Writers Project.

More than other biographical works on Algren, Colin Asher identifies and highlights the deep-rooted connection between Algren and the proletarian writers and novelists of the 1930s. Hugh Iglarsh, a Chicago mainstay and member of the appropriately illustrious Nelson Algren Society

praised Asher's work, pointing out that Asher understood "how nourished [Algren] was, along with his friend and comrade Richard Wright, by the John Reed Club and other manifestations of the Depression-era Communist Party" ("The Nelson Wilderness"). After his failed attempt to find work as a journalist, freshly graduated from the University of Illinois, Algren experienced the hobo life firsthand during his time riding the rails with the dispossessed and forgotten men of the Depression. More than serving as the inspiration for several short stories and arguably two novels, Algren's train-hopping and tramping across Texas and the southern United States immersed him in the world of the downtrodden and the damned. However, it was the John Reed Club, proletarian writers, and worker-writers that encouraged and fed Algren.

In 1935, the year Vanguard published *Somebody in Boots*, fifteen proletarian novels were published, followed by six in 1936, and by 1937, only five arguably proletarian novels were published. Asher notes that Algren "acquitted himself with the confidence of a zealous convert" to the cause, giving a talk entitled "The Culture of the Proletariat" to fifteen people at the Sul Ross Writer's Club in January of 1934 (Asher 91). Ironically, as Homburger notes in his study of the John Reed Clubs and the Proletarian movement in the Soviet Union and America, both Lenin and Trotsky opposed A.A. Bogdanov's suggestion and support of the idea of centralized proletarian culture, or *Prolekult*, and the moniker disappeared from Soviet circles long before the cathartic fizzle of the American movement.

However, in 1934, broke, with no job prospects, and recently released from jail for stealing a typewriter from an Alpine, Texas trade school, Algren found himself needing a change. Algren wrote to Jack Conroy, who agreed to publish some of Algren's work in the *Anvil* and urged him to visit the Chicago John Reed Club. In a letter discovered amongst an unsorted folder of material at the Ohio State University Archive by Colin Asher, Conroy comforts Algren, telling him to seek out

Bill Jordan, who worked on *Left Front*, the official publication of the Chicago John Reed Club, now that Algren was back in Chicago (Asher 99). Before long, Algren himself would be an editor of *Left Front* alongside Richard Wright.

First established in the fall of 1929, the John Reed Clubs, while functionally appendages of the Communist Party in America, provided an outlet and a creative hub for leftist writers, avowed members of the party, and fellow travelers. The clubs took their name from the American journalist and noted Communist John Reed, best known for his book, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, which chronicled the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The clubs operated as the foundation upon which the proletarian literary movement was built, as well as the warm center of a minor cosmos that connected over half a dozen little magazines, like *The Partisan Review*, *Left Front*, *The Anvil*, and *Rebel Poet*. Related to the international communist movement, although not entirely dominated by the American Communist Party (CPUSA), the John Reed Clubs offered support and exerted an undeniable influence on the development of writers, artists, and literature during the early years of the Depression.

The man behind the name, John Reed, symbolized the organic relationship between art and politics which the writers and cultural workers of the 1930s seemed to admire and aspire to. In his work *Writers on the Left*, Daniel Aaron describes the transformation of John Reed from a Harvard “college boy who was at time obnoxiously obsessive and hellbent on extracurricular success to a dedicated revolutionist and Communist party saint” (38), one that by 1918 found himself writing sketches and stories focusing on the Mexican revolution, New York Bowery life, and the wars in the Balkans “in the impressionistic manner of Stephen Crane” (39).

By 1919, John Reed was covering the Bolshevik Revolution for what would become his most famous work, *Ten Days*. Reed tried to capture, in prose, “the rising tide of revolution...the birth pangs of a nation” (Lehman 201). Right or wrong, fifty years after the publication of *Ten Days that Shook the World*, Reed’s legacy would amount to alienation by the West and the East – the West for his sympathy for Lenin and the Bolshevik revolution, and the East for daring to see Trotsky as more than fodder for a refuse heap and for “ignoring Stalin” (Lehman 201). However, in 1934, the spirit of John Reed and his still-remembered ambition of creating a manner of living history through his writing had not yet become unfashionable, and the Party, in its infinite wisdom, had not yet shuttered them.

With “papers and cigarette butts littering the floor [and] vividly colored murals showing giant workers looming over tiny cities (Wisniewski 57), copies of the *New Masses* strewn about, the John Reed Club that Nelson Algren wandered into at Jack Conroy’s urging inspired his development and brought him into contact with intellectuals, sociologists, and other writers, like Richard Wright. Through Richard Wright, Algren had access to the Chicago intelligentsia and to the radical literary community, since Wright served as the Party secretary of the Chicago John Reed Club, a position which necessitated his party membership. The unaffiliated were encouraged to participate, with the understanding that the door was always open, though not without some gentle suggestion that membership and loyalty to the party would bring its rewards. That said, participation, for a time at least, did not necessarily mean that a writer, publisher, or editor found themselves bound by party doctrine. Indeed, with Jack Conroy and the *Anvil*, the relationship between the Moberly, Missouri worker-writer and the Communist Party extended little beyond nods to the party’s influence and mission and the enjoyment of their distribution networks.

The Anvil, while not an official product of a John Reed Club, like the more commercially attractive *Partisan Review* that came from Philip Rahv, Wallace Phelps, and the NYC JRC, certainly enjoyed the access to writers and readers afforded by the club. However, the *Anvil's* sidestepping of the “polite fiction” of independence of an official organ, led to its merging with, and subsequent devouring by the party-favored and glossy-bound *Partisan Review*. The initially proposed title of *The Anvil-Partisan Review* lasted less than a season before Jack Conroy’s Midwestern microphone for mill workers, failed journalism students, and anyone else who had something to say about life in America as a worker or a would-be-worker fell to the ravages of internal divisions among the left and the exigencies of a potential war during a national economic depression.

Algren was himself a member of the party, though like Conroy, appreciated the distribution networks afforded by party affiliation while avoiding or ignoring directives concerning the necessities of socialist realism, real or imagined by enthusiastic, yet poorly informed American supporters of the complementary Soviet movement (Homburger 223). After years of adorning the walls of the John Reed Clubs with their official slogan in direct opposition to the influence of “the decadence of capitalist culture [and] the sterility of heart and mind in the works” (---. *The Mike Gold Reader* 1640) of individualists like Eliot and Hemingway, many members of the clubs and supporters of the movement took the slogan “Art is a Class Weapon” deeply to heart, only to be let down in the end.

Shuttering the John Reed Clubs in 1935, the interest of the party in America shifted from the proletarian writers, worker-writers, the little magazines, and the John Reed Clubs to “the more immediate need to establish good working relations with writers like Archibald MacLeish and Ernest Hemingway” with the American Writers Congress (Homburger 244). By the 1950s, even Mike Gold, the editor of *The Daily Worker* and former hardliner who denied any whiff of an idealist tradition, moved on from the bald attempts to inject party ideology into creative literature and, as

noted by Barbara Foley, admitted that “proletarian writers had lessons to learn from modernists” (–, *Radical Representations* 59). Algren never fully embraced a hardline stance like Gold’s, commenting that Gold had a tendency to “slug a guy who should absolutely remain unslugged,” and criticizing Gold’s pugilistic approach to the bourgeois, since the idea “is to win them first, then slug them later” (Algren, Nelson Undated Letter to Richard Wright, Richard Wright Papers). So, while Algren criticized the plan to close the John Reed Clubs and the sociality, spirit of cooperation, and social justice that they represented, he also stood as an inaugural member of the American League of Writers, even serving as the secretary of the Chicago chapter.

In the eyes of the other participants in Chicago’s John Reed Club, Nelson Algren earned the status of a figure of some importance, a man to be reckoned with – he already had a major novel to his credit with *Somebody in Boots* by the start of 1935. Likewise, the man who would be his mentor, and help him work through what would become *Never Come Morning*, also stood out among the members of the working man’s literary group. Algren still tipped his hat to Richard Wright, who, by the mid-thirties, had already published several major works, and those more successful than Algren’s *Boots*. The two became fast friends, both personally and professionally, and Wright went as far as to introduce Algren to Louis Wirth, a sociology professor at the University of Chicago and a marquee name among the famed Chicago School of Sociology. Both men, as well as Jack Conroy, also found themselves working under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration and the Illinois Writers Project before long, sharing ideas and working on the herculean task of chronicling America’s land, its people, and their stories told in their own voices and with their own words.

The WPA, as David A. Taylor notes, “faced heavy skepticism from both ends of the political spectrum,” where many conservatives saw it, the Project especially, as “a haven for people who were too lazy to work,” and “on the left, radicals decried the Project as hush money” to preempt more

radical pamphleteering and publishing (Taylor 12-13). With the popularity of little magazines like *New Masses*, *Partisan Review*, the *Anvil*, and the *Daily Worker*, among others, the argument, if not entirely convincing, does not seem entirely far-fetched. The world of radical literature, proletarian fiction, and worker-writers seemed poised to stake its claim within the mainstream of American literature, indeed, the mainstream of American culture.

Communism and the allure of what the Soviet experiment promised made the radical world of writers on the left an enticing community. Indeed, from Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and Jack London among the established literary community, down to the up-and-coming prizefighters like Richard Wright and Algren, whether card-carrying members or fellow travelers, many writers of the time connected themselves with the party. Given the contextual atmosphere, even if somewhat exaggerated, the logic behind observing a more dubious and anti-leftist motive behind the project does not seem unfounded.

However, if the hoped-for effect of the Project included the stymieing of radical, leftist, or populist sentiment in publishing, then the result could scarcely have been more disastrous. Aside from providing the material support necessary for works like *Native Son*, *The Disinherited*, and *Never Come Morning* to find their way from mind to table, works like James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, publications like *The New Anvil*, and what Frederick Gutheim of the *Saturday Review of Literature* saw as "the profuse disorder of nature and life, the Dadaist jumble of the daily newspaper" (Taylor 11) that was the American guidebook series all claim to have partially, or wholly gathered support from the WPA's Federal Writers Project. In fact, Jack Conroy, that "veritable Johnny Appleseed of the proletarian literary movement" (Mangione 31) alone claimed responsibility for three separate worker-writer/proletarian-style little magazines before, during, and after his

involvement with the project, starting with *The Rebel Poet* in 1929, a distinctly traditionalist and anti-modernist publication.

In total, around 7,500 writers found employment with the project at its height in 1936, each adding what they could in what way they could, making up the mosaic of sketches, notes, published works, and archives that “[held] up a mirror to America” (Taylor 5-6), revealing an often “irreverent portrait that revealed the eccentricity, humor, brutality, and ingenuity of the American people” (Taylor 11). If there was anything that stymied the organic growth and ripening of a proletarian or leftist culture, at least a literary culture, the closing of the John Reed Clubs in favor of the League of American Writers, shifting the focus from intellectual and cultural stimulation and support to direct political gamesmanship, stands to blame more than government patronage of writers, and that with full Party support.

Algren began at the Project as a field interviewer, gathering the material that would make up short pieces such as “When You Live Like I Done,” and serve as the inspiration for longer works, as when “When You Live” makes its way into *Never Come Morning* as Mama Tomek’s backstory, shared with her confessor, Snipes. Algren submitted the piece in question to his superiors at the IWP as an “occupational narrative” (Wixson 570 n65), which speaks volumes concerning his perspective and the throughlines that connect his body of work – social acceptance is not a requirement of life as lived. Thanks to the literary detective work of Carla Capetti in her study *Writing Chicago*, the reader can draw a straight line between field interviews conducted by Ralph Ellison as well during his time at the Project that made their way into American letters via *The Invisible Man* (Capetti 166-67). Algren would also go on to write “much of the Illinois guide text on the city of Galena,” eventually becoming a supervisor for a folklore project (Taylor 67, Penkower 170).

In his extensive interview with H.E.F. Donohue, Algren speaks of the Project as saving writers' lives, giving them the means to keep up the fight and "put [writers] in touch with people again" (Donohue 65). Despite his occasional claims that the Project was a less-than-serious enterprise, Algren often spoke of his time with the FWP with fondness. Aside from giving Algren the financial security to move on from jobs like door-to-door sales and trucking, the first-hand experience fostered Algren's sense of ethnographic and sociological research where first-person knowledge and observations are paramount. In their fashion, Algren and Conroy often spent their fieldwork looking for bars with grandiose names serving whiskey specials in the daylight to gather material from the people, with Algren seeking out the "racetracks and Chicago's night court" as well (Wixson 439).

Under the auspices of Ben Botkin, who worked in conjunction with Alan Lomax of Folkways, Algren directed the creation of a series of "studies of folklore according to occupational groups" (Penkower 149). The historical collection of "living lore" was never published, but samples of "A Tall Chance of Work" found their way into Botkin's *Treasury of American Folklore* which was published in 1944. Despite the lack of immediate success of such collections, the involvement of figures such as Lomax made it easier for the American Folklore Society to work with the Writers Project. Under leaders like Ben Botkin and Nicholas Wirth, and with the trust and help of sociologists like Howard Odum and Morton Royse, the work of the Folklore Section of the Federal Writers Project "became closely linked to the social ethnic studies," with Royse seeking to "produce intensive studies on single groups and cross-section analyses of whole communities" (Penkower 150).

While the Washington office of the Writers Project "called for a file on racial groups," which led to workers for the New York City Guide discovering that "90 percent of basement ice dealers

came from Apulia, Italy, and almost all of the city's window washers were of Ukrainian stock", Royse remained unsatisfied and substituted "social-ethnic" for "racial" in his approach after his appointment in April of 1938 (Penkower 150). At the same time, "a few project workers initiated a study of Chicago neighborhoods, in conjunction with Louis Wirth and two of his colleagues at the University of Chicago, to cover ethnic groups and foreign community newspapers" (Penkower 151). The project, sadly, did not last, as it required a significant amount of specially trained personnel, and Royse could not keep up with the amount of material coming in. The states involved wanted to publish material quickly but had little interest in either the necessary training and material required for "mastering specialized techniques" or an ethical ethnographic outcome (Mangione 280-82).

While the industrial folklore project did not last, it was not the only project Algren worked on with the FWP. Penkower notes that "Algren took his supervisory role relating to Chicago industrial folklore seriously and wrote most of the Galena Guide" (170), which, while not the ideal creative outlet, stands out among the published volumes of the state-produced guidebooks. Henry Alsberg, the national director of the Project, "envisioned these guides as hybrids, combining a state encyclopedia and a conventional travel guide with tour routes," though the nearly five-pound books were of "dubious use for travelers, perhaps, but they were comprehensive" (Taylor 137). Between 1935 and 1939, the Project published over 200 volumes, with "many manuscripts piled up, never to be published," just like the stacks that doomed Royse (Taylor 137).

Much like Richard Wright, Algren used his time at the Project to practice his craft in whatever way possible. Wright quit his job as a postal worker to join the Project. After some "work on some ethnological aspects of Chicago's Black Belt for the Illinois Project" and a pair of outside publication credits, Wright won the five-hundred-dollar prize offered in a contest put on by *Story* magazine for project employees, submitting the short stories that would become *Uncle Tom's*

Children (Penkower 177-78). The five hundred dollars gave Wright the opportunity to continue working on his next endeavor, separate from his Project work. It was that collection and the recommendation of the Project director and founder, Henry Alsberg, that won Wright a Guggenheim, the result of which became *Native Son*.

Algren's time at the Project seemed to mirror his friend Dick Wright's as well as Jack Conroy's. All three authors would apply for Guggenheim grants based in part on their work and time at the Project, though Algren would not receive one. Wright had *Uncle Tom's Children* to his credit, Algren had *Somebody in Boots*, and Conroy had published *The Disinherited* and *A World to Win*. In Algren's case, despite the lack of grants, the case made by his earlier work received the recognition and recommendation of another figure from the Project - Louis Wirth.

Recognizing Algren's sociological approach to his work and the centrality of Algren's focus on the urban Polish community living within the Polish Triangle, or Polonia, to his own work as a sociologist, Louis Wirth offered his name in support of one of Algren's numerous attempts to get a Guggenheim grant for his second novel (Rotella 50). All told, Algren would go on to apply for the prestigious grant at least fifteen times (Donahue 189) with recommendations from the likes of Carl Sandburg, Ernest Hemingway, Louis Adamic, Richard Wright, Edward Aswell, and Millen Band (Drew 131, Wisniewski 92). At one point, after another rejection by the foundation, Algren, along with Jack Conroy, found work "on what they called the Syph Patrol for the city's Board of Health," which no doubt provided a unique sociological fieldwork experience (Wisniewski 92).

The work of both Robert Park and Louis Wirth's as influential members of the Chicago School of Sociology share similarities with Algren's casework-style approach to fiction and with his chosen subject matter - the urban mode of life. Wirth, on top of working closely with the Folklore

project at the FWP during Algren's tenure, also visited and spoke to the John Reed Club of Chicago during Algren's active participation in the club between 1935 and 1937, making for several direct opportunities for Algren to engage with Wirth's work.

Algren also worked on research projects with a more direct sociological bent on at least one occasion during his tenure at the Illinois Writers Project. In his 1951 love-laden prose poem, *Chicago: City on the Make*, Algren attends to the rolls of Chicagoans to leave their mark upon the hustler's city, including Jane Addams of Hull House. However, when Algren croons that "Jane Addams too knows that Chicago's blood was hustler's blood," that Chicago, and indeed America forever keeps two faces, one for winners and one for losers" (—, *Chicago* 31-32), it would be at least the second time in his career that he would sit down to write with Addams on his mind. During the fall of 1938, Algren set out to investigate what role that play might claim in a well-functioning society. In October of that year, Algren completed a draft of an essay titled "The Function of Play in a Democracy," an essay that, while never published or collected, offers a significant window into Algren's focus on the role and treatment of juveniles in and by society.

Never Come Morning: A Sociological Case Study and the Importance of Play

Within the endless night-calls of the El, and the gray thrum of the industrialized Chicago of the late 1930s, the core narrative that guides the reader through *Never Come Morning* stands as the intertwined lives of Bruno and Steffi – a story of juvenile delinquency and prostitution. Directly prior to the composition of *Never Come Morning*, an initial nugget entitled "Biceps" appeared in *The Southern Review* Spring 1941 edition and would later appear in the collection *The Neon Wilderness* as "A Bottle of Milk for Mother." The short sketch is an early version of Bruno's interrogation at

the hands of Comiskey, and Tenczara, and it highlights Algren's tinkering with his Chicago narratives, as with his poetry Studying the necessity and effect of play, athletics, and media consumption in the juvenile population of America - and thus adding a sociological layer to the novel as well as Algren's preparation and process. Algren's published works show an author searching for a usable form. Notably, within the notes concerning the magazine's contributors, the reader also learns of one of *Never Come Morning's* many working titles. At the time of publication, the note explains, Algren "[was then] preparing his second novel, *He Shoulda Stood in Bed*, for early publication" (*The Southern Review* 3).

As discussed earlier, the role of the ethnographer does not include the immediate amelioration of a social problem or the heavy-handed demand of a call to action, as found in the more classically vulgar proletarian works. The notion of the "neutral observer" seems especially relevant to the discussion of an author influenced and personally acquainted with the Chicago school of sociology and its methods and how that author might express what they might like to see done. With the evaluation of "The Function of Play in a Democracy," one can almost see Algren begin his work for *Morning* backward - that is, beginning with the solutions and working his way toward the problems and potentialities that the refusal to accommodate those solutions might bring. From play, to athletics, and media consumption, *Never Come Morning* seems to operate as the shadow-self of the essay that leaned hard into Jane Addams and her belief in the importance of the act of organized play, the space in which to play, and the public fiduciary duty to support and invest in that play.

Algren described his intentions for his second novel in one of his fellowship applications, likely around the same time that he composed his essay concerning play and society's role in encouraging it. In the application, Algren described his intended project as an "attempt to relate the economy of a representative cultural pocket to incidence of delinquency therein" and "through the

methods of naturalism” to present the economic and political factors behind the juvenile criminality among the 300,000 Poles of Chicago’s north side (Asher 136). Before donning the mantle of *Never Come Morning*, Algren at times wrote of the work as *The Elephant Graveyard*, *Below the Belt*, *White Hope*, *Bicek’s Blues*, and the distinctly sociological case-study oriented, *The City*.

In *Somebody in Boots*, Algren tried to render, with limited success, the natural cadence and colloquialisms of a Texan dialect he experienced for a limited time. However, in *Never Come Morning*, Algren worked with the English spoken by the people that he lived among for most of his life. During his years of field interviews and constructing narratives from oral history and tall tales, Algren refined his ear and his skill at reproducing its testimony on the page, and the results yielded in his post-WPA work stand as far more convincing than his first novel. In one passage of the novel, for example, Bruno and a neighborhood regular named Bibleback, the name illustrating Algren’s contempt for the church more than the boy’s religiosity, discuss the notion of faith:

“Oh, I see – God been around a thousand years ‘n’ you been around seventeen ‘n’ you know as much as He does awready – Boy, Lefty, *you’re* sharp – you learn faster’n Him even!” The boy’s breath smelled like that of a nervous woman to Bruno.

“How come you know so much, Polack?” Bruno countered, an idea dawning in him – “How come you’re so sure I been here only seventeen years? How you know I didn’t have a *in-car-nation* somewheres before – How you know I wasn’t Jesus Christ before I was livin’ in this neighborhood? How you know? Maybe I was *Adam* even.”

He was carried away, as well as was Bibleback for the moment, by his own possibilities; his good nature began returning as Bible appeared to be floundering.

“Kelly-Christ! Maybe you *was* Adam!” (---, *Morning* 47)

The natural cadence comes through the passage, intimating the rhythm and colloquialisms of casual speech. Algren captures the subtleties of the speakers' idiolects without crossing into the realm of exaggerations and campy vernaculars. The presence of "Kelly-Christ" gives the reader a taste of a local vernacular, one rooted in a Polish-Catholic lexicon, while the substitution of the labio-velar approximant, /w/, for the alveolar lateral approximant, /l/ reproduces a common feature of the urban variations of the inland north and midwestern accents. The subtle variations in the use of determiners, such as when Bruno says, "a *in-car-nation*," highlight the informal register of Bruno's idiolect and act as a marker for him and those he considers his peers.

Algren uses his familiarity with the idiom of "punks, cranks, and petty gangsters" (Geismar 314) to further isolate Bruno from a Main Street culture that he so desires, one in which "a steady job, a steady girl, a clean place to sleep [...], things that made you a man if you possessed them" seemed possible (*Morning* 32). Bruno's idiolect contains numerous Polish phrases as well, and his ability to speak and understand some Polish highlights both his connection as a heritage speaker to the microcosmic Polish kingdom north of Division and Clark and the frayed and torn nature of that connection.

When the police bring the young hoodlum in for questioning over the alleged shooting of a drunk, Bruno describes the old man's pleas, which are issued in Polish. Bruno understands when the old man offers his little bottles of alcohol and "tells [him], in Polish," that he can choose which he likes (*Morning* 120). In Bruno's attempt at a version of events, he also mentions that while he was gently holding his hand over the old man's mouth whilst asking him for some change, he spoke "polite-like in Polish in his ear" to calm him down and assure him of his intentions (*Morning* 121). However, beyond friendly requests and nouns for common things, like the *gospodas*, a deep

and maintained connection to the Polish language seems unlikely – something closer to a memory of a language spoken than one practiced.

Bruno belongs neither to the older generation of Polish immigrants that maintained a semblance of social order and expectation among the New World neighborhoods nor to the larger world beyond the Triangle. The lack of generational continuity and the marked dialect Algren renders as Bruno's idiolect sets the troubled child up as a member of a diasporic revenant of "culturally isolated ethnics" (Clontz 27). As Clontz remarks, Bruno, as well as Steffi and the rest of the Baldheads, remain "imprisoned in their urban environment," marked by their habitus and geographically specific idiolects, somewhere behind the billboards that decorate that main street culture, "where the coming postwar prosperity will never find them" (24).

Algren's focus on the linguistic aspect of his reportage stems from and places *Morning* firmly within the naturalistic paradigm. However, Philip Rahv describes Algren's practice as "realism" over naturalism. Writing in *The Nation*, Rahv praised *Never Come Morning*, claiming:

Algren's realism is so paced as to avoid the tedium of the naturalistic stereotype, of the literal copying of surfaces. He knows how to select, how to employ factual details without letting himself be swamped by them, and, finally, how to put the slang his characters speak to creative uses so that it ceases to be an element of mere documentation and turns into an element of style. (Rahv 467)

That the praise came from Rahv, a fellow traveler of the little magazines from the *Rebel Poet* and the physician who pronounced the proletarian moment deceased, calling it "a comedy of mistaken identities," speaks volumes (---, "Proletarian Literature") stood as one of many critics and peers

of Algren's who praised *Morning* in their reviews. However, those effusive critical plaudits did not translate into sales during wartime, and once the Polish Roman Catholic Union declared war on Algren due to what they perceived as work on par with Nazi propaganda (*Morning* x). Shortly after the release of the PRCU's statement, the Chicago Public Library removed *Never Come Morning* from its shelves. Algren's novel waited as long as twenty years to make its way back on those shelves (*Morning* xiv, Drew 146).

The focus on ethnographic detail, such as with Algren's ability to turn transcription into lyrical narrative, does not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, a more careful scrutiny of documents from Algren's time working for the WPA, including Algren's "Personal History of Informant" transcriptions, reveal a stylistic progression from proletarian naturalism to "personalism," or a "local realism" that demands room for individualized interiority seems clear. In one interview with a youth by the name of Davey Day, the self-proclaimed "fast-stepping Jewboy on his way up, all fight and fancy footwork" ("Interview with Davey Day" 4), Algren talks boxing and lets the boy puff himself up. He gives the young man the latitude to speak as he wishes, detailing his seemingly herculean efforts in the ring, listing the names of local "[housemen]" like fallen Trojan heroes at his feet because Davey is "on his way up and he got that ol' confidence" ("Interview with Davey Day" 4).

The cadence and tenor of Davey Day's conversation with Algren echoes through the conversations that Lefty has with Steffi and the other Baldheads, even with himself after he winds up in jail, pacing his cell and disassociating into his fantasy world where he, Lefty Biceps, rules the ring. Consider the final paragraph transcribed from Algren's interview with Day:

“Say, you come around when I fight Montanez. That one’ll be in ball-park too I hope. Then they’ll give me another crack at that Armstrong. If they do, Plan [sic] is going to make them let me have him here. O I’ll beat him awright the next out, less’n Angott gets him first. Angott got that ol’ confidence. I got it too, that old determination, that’s why I get along. Any time you want a story for your newspaper you just drop in here an’ tell the ol’ man you want it an’ I’ll come down. I don’t live in this neighborhood o’course. I live in a hotel up on the northside. But I’ll come over awright. Every little bit helps you know. Say, a dame write me a fan letter. I looked like George Raft she said. He used to be a pug too. I guess somebody must of told her I was punchy awready, I would believe anything. Say, I don’t look like no George Raft. He got a interest in Angott though.” (8)

The emphasis in Day’s interview on his first-person perspective as the center of his own world, the repetition of “I” and his ability to turn every defeat into a coup, and every victory into an affirmation of destiny, highlight the theatrical nature of the young Northsider’s presentation. From the outset Day sees Algren as a reporter from an unnamed newspaper and assures the interviewer that “I always come down for a newspaper man – I guess there’s a story in this alright. Aint there?” (3). Day knows that he is a small-time fighter scrapping for a shot at a local fame, but who wants to see or write about a middle-of-the-road pugilist? The overt performativity we witness here supports the endeavor, which Day, reminiscent of Bruno’s jailhouse scene in *Morning*, looks to as his manner of survival. Day speaks with his whole chest, right or wrong, not because he knows what he says to be true, but because he knows what he says to be necessary.

When Bruno decides to “show these schoolroom sprouts” at the fair a thing or two and win Steffi the kewpie doll, the would-be boxer reassures his doomed lover, “I got that ol’ confidence,”

before he thumbed the laces of the baseball and let the “croosical toss” fly (*Morning* 53). The phrase rears its head again when, released from prison into the shaky hands of Casey Benkowski, Benkowski stresses the need for Lefty to regain his confidence and tries to get him to agree to a low-risk, low-reward fight. Lefty responds to Benkowski’s suggestion that he should avoid the fighter named Tucker for now with “I got the ol’ confidence back. What’s the matter with Tucker?” (*Morning* 160).

Furthermore, while minute details, the use of phrases such as “must of” in Day’s interview pepper *Never Come Morning*, like when Lefty, talking to the police, says “It must of been the harp come up behind me” (*Morning* 112) – the harp being the Irish officer present. Davey’s use of “houseman” recurs in *Morning* as well, in the mouth of Casey Benkowski, early on, as he reminisces about beating “the Greek in Hammand [...] ‘N him the houseman at that” (*Morning* 7). The boxing-specific term identifies a fighter who exists to clear a venue’s dance card when necessary, making the informal position one that belongs to seasoned and reliable fighters. While certain phrases and idioms seem easy enough to hear on any street corner on any day in any city, that Algren collected these interviews, such as Davey’s, highlights the direct connection to idiolects anchored in the living neighborhoods -- Davey hails from the “northside,” despite his reluctance to “divulge details” about his residence, likely none too far from Lefty and Steffi on Potomac Street (“Interview with Davey Day” 1).

The reliance on details as lived comes as little surprise considering Algren’s enthusiasm for what “the people on the New York Project [were] doing” (“Staff Conference” 1). In the meeting notes for a staff conference held on July 13th, 1939, Algren, the supervisor for the department at the time, opened the minutes by praising the “almost straight dialogue” that stemmed from the

confidence of the New York office staff that “realism in American letters will become increasingly documentary [sic]” (“Staff Conference” 1). For Algren, the best approach to achieve the realism that would usher in the “new way of writing” in America imitated the way one gathers folklore for the Industrial Folklore project – “Sometime [sic] if you just let them ramble, they might say more than if they feel you’ve got an idea in your mind” (“Staff Conference” 2). The strategy paid dividends with Davey Day, and while more than Day went into Bruno “Lefty” Bicek, like [the Sawicki murderer], Day certainly makes his presence known as someone on the way up.

In addition to the insoluble suture between interviews like Davey Day’s, as well as the passage featuring Mama Tomek and Snipes noted by Carla Capetti, the essay written by Algren in 1938 mentioned above, entitled “The Function of Play in a Democracy,” acts as a kind of roadmap to the dire warning that is *Never Come Morning*. The essay sits between assorted papers, forms, and transcriptions included in the Douglas Wixson Research Collection at the Newberry Library. The Wixson collection exists as a repository for material from various sources, including other collections belonging to the Newberry, which Wixson collected in the research that went into his massive Jack Conroy biography, *The Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990*. As one of Conroy’s close friends, at least for a time, Algren and his work and letters offered a back window into Conroy’s past, and, in his zeal, Wixson collected whatever he could that related to Algren’s time working with Conroy at the IWP. Among the documents he found, though did not reference in the biography, was an essay by Algren clearly stamped “Not for reproduction, sale, or release to any other persons or institutions” and bearing the seal of the now defunct Illinois State Historical Library.

The form of the essay offered Algren an opportunity to write in a polemical style unsuited to his fiction and poetical works. Similar in verve to “Do It the Hard Way” and Algren’s state-of-the-union address, *Nonconformity*, Algren’s call-to-arms rhetoric serves him well in “Function,” without crossing the line from vigor into bombast. In *Entrapment*, editors Brooke Horvath and Dan Simon highlight the prescience of his published essays as well, citing a 1953 article published in *The Nation*, warning against what Algren saw as the domination of American foreign policy by oil and its related interests (7).

“The Function of Play” opens by calling attention to the current “moment when the democracies are daily adumbrated by Totalitarian successes” and begging the reader to recognize that under that duress, there is no “time when the task of making lives more abundant through play was more relevant [... or] period in which the perspective, the sanity and sense of justice derived from organized play, was more indispensable” (“The Function of Play” 1). In a world of such abundance, a world where “we throw coffee in the sea and kill hogs and close factories because they produce more than the workers can buy,” Algren laments, there exists no tenable explanation as to why funding and support for organized play cannot materialize (2). The idea of play for Algren in the essay includes drama, crafts, music, municipal play, literature, athletics, and the direction, balance, and hope for the future that these enterprises can inspire.

Algren did not come to this all on his own, at least not bibliographically. Algren cites Jane Addams and her conviction that “certain forms of play might not only bring charm and something of beauty to industrialized neighborhoods but could also serve to connect such districts with the arts of the past as well as with the vigor and renewed life of the future” (3). Given Addams’ conviction that there exists a tangible and basic level of decency owed to the workers of America

in the form of state-funded and managed support, and the life she dedicated to helping others and establishing Hull House as the birthplace of what we know as social services, Algren's appreciation for her as a figure to draw inspiration from seems a sure thing. Furthermore, the form of the essay offered Algren an opportunity to write in a polemical style unsuited to his fiction and poetical works, somewhat reminiscent of his earlier style. Similar in verve to "Do It the Hard Way," Algren's call-to-arms rhetoric serves him well in his essays.

Without the necessary support and experience of forms of organized play, with only the "harshest, most violent forms of play – play that expended excess energy swiftly, but failed to enhance an understanding of causality in the modern world" available to the adolescents of industrialized urban poverty, Algren argues that those youths stand open to victimization by and conversion to a life of predation and vice (3). The essay focuses on Addams' signature achievement, Hull House, as an example, not only of successful social support, but also of recognizing the importance of "continuous play" undominated by what Addams saw as the "speed, violence, and individual carelessness" of games played on narrow streets with one eye looking out for the brewery wagon (4).

Without indicting the sport of boxing, the "harshest, most violent forms of play" are the only possible avenues of release for Bruno, as the boy tries to escape the Triangle with his fists from the outset. The organized sport that he participates in devolves into a preparatory hedge school for youths making the leap from vandalism and hoodlumism into outright criminality and violence under the steady tutelage of the mangled and hateful Barber Konstantin and his failed boxer-turned-beaten cur, Casey Benkowski. There is no escape untouched by the corruption engendered by the isolated conditions of life in the Triangle and the lack of any manner of service

that comes from or, at the very least, respects the neighborhood as inhabited by living, breathing human beings.

Algren's sense of humor abounds in the novel in his understanding of the way an immigrant community such as the Poles in northside Chicago might view a caseworker in her "pince-nez" (*Morning* 12) frames as she attempts to diagnose and ameliorate the cracking foundations of Bruno's life in the back of the derelict day-old bakery that once supported him and his mother, who herself lays forever regretful of her decision to move her family to America, unable to leave the bed in the back of the store. There can be no understanding or reclamation of potential when the institutions that claim to exist for such things do not understand or participate in the communities they serve. Jane Addams understood this as well, calling for social service embeds, wherein each community would have members designated as delegates and providers of the very services that their communities required – hubs, from which the necessary social services emanated.

That Algren authored this essay concerning the necessary social programs and responsibilities of a government to its poorer citizens, especially in this case, poor immigrant communities facing the erosion of their connection to the old world and not yet wholly a part of the new, while he began researching and applying for grants to write *Never Come Morning*, binds the core idea of the essay to the kernel at the heart of the novel. Peppered throughout the text, especially during interrogations at the hands of Comiskey, Tenczara, and the other officers questioning Bruno, the phrase "breaking the ol' monotony" offers a key. While seemingly an appropriately flippant response coming from a teenager to a figure of authority, any authority, the meditation on the passing of time in an industrialized urban environment hits at an essential truth and an

undeniable connection between Addams, the Chicago School, Algren, and the Poles branching out from Division Street. With nothing to do, no guiding figures, and no reason to see any hope in a future place at America's dinner table, Bruno, and others like him and Steffi, will find things to do, and find their own guiding stars. Sometimes those stars turn out to be stunted, hateful little archons, offering nothing but the cold light of a cosmos of ash.

Refusing a host of speculative what-ifs, Algren's novel denies us the existence of a single resource, a single form of support or guidance outside of the crabs pulling each other from the top of the bucket, that might have offered some recourse or alternative that prevented Bruno and Steffi from finding themselves in the lean-to that served as the club's, read gang's, meeting house. From the time that Bruno "was almost old enough for long pants," he and the neighborhood children "stole apples and potatoes, and what they couldn't eat they stored in fireplugs," afraid to return to their "stove heated rooms" for fear of getting in the way (*Morning* 30). Home was the last place one went, and the first place to leave when the sun rose, in favor of the gray and blended mass of the shadow of the El. The cold sense of want and lack cultivates a life-or-death urge within Bruno that Algren describes as,

a ceaseless series of lusts: for tobacco so good he could eat it like meat; for meat, for coffee, for bread, for sleep, for whisky, for women, for dice games, and ball games and personal triumphs in public places. Day and night, one or all of these erode him, and was never fully satisfied even for a while; they could no more be satisfied than they could be evaded. (*Morning* 31)

Bread and sleep exist between the pincers of vice in the narrator's rendition of Bruno's lament, between the conflagration of tobacco and flesh consumed as kind, and the drive for whiskey,

women, and games. What is most toxic to Bruno surrounds and dissolves that which is most necessary to his survival. The internalization of the toxic, fresh-ground vice reflects the deterioration of Bruno's self and the damage done to his ability to operate within any moral framework that is not kill or be killed. The stakes of the game take their toll and leave the player unable to fold, forever waiting for the final turn.

When every need, saying nothing of luxury or comforts, comes tinged with the potential for violence and loss or imprisonment and punishment, the sense of desperation that accompanies fulfilling the most basic of needs turns every venture into a microcosmic transaction of fight or flight. Anything offered out of hand appears suspect, much like the offers and promises of aid and work proposed by the social worker in the "black bombazine" (*Morning 12*), contingent as the hope was on the sale of Mama Bicek's failed and bankrupt day-old bread bakery, and what the social worker sees as Bruno's eligibility for relief work – though she mistakenly believes Bruno to be eighteen when he is a mere seventeen, and thus ineligible for such work should the paperwork ever find itself filed. Despite Bruno's internal sneer at the worker's supposed belief that all the troubled boy needs is "a little Social Guidance" (*Morning 12*) and the way Algren convincingly constructs the boy's rote memorization of the woman's questions and suggestions, the early revelation strikes at the core mentioned above – if only there had been something, anything related to an available social service not contingent on a poor immigrant woman understanding the process of qualifying for relief, or a petulant young man grappling with the moral cowardice inculcated by a life of shadows and petty theft.

Bruno, despite the power of his left hook, is a child and acts like one. Despite due criticism of the social worker and her repetitive attempts to convince Bruno that Mama Bicek needs more

oranges and time outside, saying nothing of the feasibility of procuring fresh oranges, she means well. The disparity between Bruno's perceived age and his actual age may seem trivial, but the difference between 17 and 18, even by a year, is the legal difference between a child and an adult, and Bruno is still a little boy afraid that someone will take what little he has for himself away – even if only his pride. The absence of stimulation that does not involve violence, sex, or criminality, blares louder than the thrum of the El in *Morning*, especially for young people and children. Jane Addams understood the importance of play and other more artistic forms of recreation. Writing in 1909, Addams noted that “aside from its educational possibilities, one never ceases to marvel at the power of even a mimic stage to afford to the young a magic space in which life may be lived in efflorescence” (Addams 165). Algren also stresses the importance of drama and the arts in his essay for the Writers Project, and the connection to *Morning* comes through most clearly during Bruno's stint in prison, as he pantomimes his stunted childlike fantasy.

The fantasy, touched on above in reference to its connection to the Davey Day interview, occurs as the product of a child who tries to live his life convincing the shadowy world in which he lives that he is not afraid – recall Davey Day puffing himself up to a level of grandeur he knows to be a ruse. Despite Bruno's first stint in jail, a brief overnight affair at age fourteen for which his mother swore him off and took “no pleasure in him since” (*Morning* 16), the cold and filthy cell in which Bruno could neither see nor hear marked the moment where “for the first time in his life the boy felt fear” (*Morning* 85). Upon reviewing his situation and discovering that “he had been placed in an abandoned corner of the basement” (*Morning* 87), Bruno realizes that all his taunting, all the vitriol spewed between the bars towards Old Adamovitch went nowhere and he realized just how alone, how “loud and empty” he sounds (*Morning* 87). The only person, Lefty realizes, that could ever get him out of this situation is the very man who sent him out to pick off a slot

machine on the outskirts of town in order to keep the boy pliant and obedient should he ever pose a threat – the barber and would-be suzerain of his corner of the Triangle, Bonifacy Konstantine.

The only comforts that Bruno receives are a bundle, slipped through the bars containing everything that the boy owned, consisting of “a faded blue bandana holding a box of snuff and a ragged copy of *Kayo: World’s Foremost Boxing Magazine*” (*Morning* 88). More than any of Bruno’s rationalizations that the screws kept him in the basement out of some vague fear that the boy might foment a jailhouse rebellion, the magazine serves as the crutch on which he leans. The only media available to him, with little else that he would choose outside of the cell, the boxing magazine inspires a brilliant “technicolor movie being reeled a little too fast” (*Morning* 89). The “stirring drama of one Powerhouse Bicek, the Near Northwest Side’s new 195-pound white hope [...] Modern Ketchel” (*Morning* 89) stands no doubt as one of the scenes that gave Barbara Foley cause to describe Algren’s prose as “at once documentary and surreal,” a manner of “surreal proletarianism” (Foley 130-31).

Completely disassociated, Bruno’s fantasy of fighting “Pinsky, the Jew who had taken the title of Tiger Pultoric,” one of Bruno’s Polish heroes, goes on for seven pages, including Pultoric himself coming in to congratulate Powerhouse Bicek on his success and to urge him to win the belt back from the “Jew callin’ himself th’ white hope now,” pressing that “seems to me we still need a white hope t’ get that title back” (*Morning* 90). The fantasy ends when the blonde bombshell that walked him into the ring transmogrifies into Steffi, shattering the vision and bringing Bruno back into the hateful damp of the cell and the thrum of the El. Though vivid, Bruno cannot conjure a vision beyond what he knows, and what he knows is a violent and hateful game with violent and hateful rules.

Algren paints the technicolor boxing dream that seems to border on hallucination with the same realist attention to detail as the rest of *Morning's* prose, making it seem as though Bruno truly experiences this drama. Once the vision “swamp[s] (87) Bruno’s mind, the rest seems involuntary, from the emblazoned shorts and robes at the ringside to the announcer crying “And in this cawneh [...] POWERHOUSE BICEK THE MODERN KETCHEL FROM POTOMAC STREET!” (89-91). One gets the impression that Bruno might be reenacting this vision himself, yelling down the empty corridor as he calls the fight of the century.

Algren’s sense of humor comes out during the scene as well, as when the narration of Bicek’s stagecraft references the write-ups of the phantasmagoric fight published the night after and the next day, or when Pinsky “caught Bicek a full two inches below the belt” and “the Polish girls in the field glasses in the back of the park began screaming for fear he might be hurt seriously” (93). But when the ref starts to look like the Greek and suddenly Steffi emerges, reminding Bruno of his guilt, the vision fades and returns him to “the growing cold along the floor” (*Morning* 93). And thus, Bruno’s body “began jerking as the nerves began relaxing from their triumph and slept, distressed by many dreams” (93).

Though Bruno eventually leaves that cell, too many people have too much on Bruno – including the killing of the Greek and the mob-connected slot machine from the novel’s beginning for the release to seem final. The murder of the Greek serves as leverage for the Barber, and though Bruno avoided the immediate consequences of his crime, Bonifacy Konstantine is not man to let good leverage go to waste. For a moment, after refusing to take a fall and winning his boxing match, Bruno nearly realizes his jailhouse fantasy, with Steffi waiting for him to get her out of the life that Mama Tomek laid out for Snipes. However, the moral cowardice required of sticking to

the code, of staying “Foursquare Bicek” who is always regular with the guys, leads him slinking away like a wounded creature from Steffi’s rape and brings about the wildly unnecessary murder of the Greek, waiting in line.

When convenient for the local authorities, formal and otherwise, the murder of the Greek serves to clip Bruno’s wings after his final victory over Tucker in the ring. The fight that was supposed to serve as Bruno’s shining moment, in which he escaped the fate decided for him by the Triangle with Steffi at his side, instead turns into his damnation. The Barber will have his due and Bruno cost him money, so the boy must pay. The only figure of organization and repute in Bruno’s life, the Barber cultivated the boy as a source of revenue and power, the same as he had done and likely will do with every baldhead that walks through his shop for a clip. The solitary game without an opponent in which the Barber immerses himself, along with his bird, replays itself daily on Division Street.

As the police lead him away from his all-too-brief glimpse of another world, Bruno soothes his damaged pride and the all-too-familiar fear welling up in his gut with a final tough guy puff up, informing no one in particular, “I knew I’d never see twenty-one anyhow” (*Morning* 284). The Barber, no doubt, knew the same and relished the thought as his lecherous and hateful eye appraised its prize, and Steffi felt the final chill of hope escape like steam through a Clark Street sewer grate. In the final disgrace of the novel, the police bring in Steffi, and Algren provides the transcript of their interview. Resigned now to her fate, Steffi stands primed to replay her own version of Mama Tomek’s rendition of “When You Live Like I Done” where “the world was a street like Potomac Street, with shuttered windows on either side [,] and only a smoldering dump at either end” (*Morning* 194). Bound to Chicago, to their micro-nations between train stations, the

El continues outlining the ecumene of the city's impassable border, while the people of Potomac dream tawdry, yet potent dreams.

Doing It the Hard Way: Concluding Thoughts

Shortly after the publication of *Never Come Morning*, Algren published an essay in the March 1943 issue of *The Writer* entitled "Do It the Hard Way." Republished in a collection of essays, unpublished works, and fragments, including what remains of the lost novel that gives the collection its title, *Entrapment*, the essay offers a final window into Algren's literary approach and a word of warning to would-be writers and readers alike. While Algren was no stranger to notepads and street corners, he tells the reader that it is "not necessary to go about haunting street corners with a notebook in your pocket and an amplifier in your ear. It is necessary only that you do not stop your ears with smugness or indifference or indolence" (---, *Entrapment* 71). On any day, in any city, "going about your workday rounds, assuming you're neither in solitary confinement or a hermit," the sounds that constitute the words of life will find you, "and if you listen long enough, the commonest speech will begin to ring like poetry" (---, *Entrapment* 71).

Despite the later enmity between the two, Nelson Algren cared deeply for Simone De Beauvoir. As noted by Capetti, Algren's public rebukes of De Beauvoir after the publication of her 1963 effort, *Force of Circumstance*, centered on a sense of betrayal at the use of his letters and their relationship as the basis for a study on "contingent love" (Capetti 145). Algren explained in one of the published letters, "I am stuck here, as I told you and as you understood, because my job is to write about this city" (De Beauvoir 251). Algren viewed his profession as a writer as a binding agreement, the terms of which forbade his ever leaving Chicago, his city, regardless of whatever life

he might dream of with his great love. Duty to the city, his city, came first, at least while he believed there were those out there who were still listening. To be fair to De Beauvoir, what she wrote might be described as a form of reportage, which seems like something Algren might appreciate, or at least understand.

For many years, Algren could not leave Chicago any more than Bruno or Steffi, or even Mama Tomek or the Barber could. Calling himself a freelance journalist, Algren continued to write for local newspapers and magazines, still pounding concrete on his chosen beat along Division. Walking the route from the Clark and Division Street Station, after a stop for pierogies at a questionable Polish eatery, onto Potomac Street and past St. Stanislaus Kostka's Parish and Nelson Algren's long-time apartment on Evergreen Street, the sense of closeness, of incredible claustrophobia of Bruno's world, is unavoidable - his entire world consisted of a single neighborhood. Algren's dedication to presenting a slice, his slice of the world, down to the most granular detail is the product not of a bitter man, but of a man who thoroughly believes in the people around him and wishes to God that everyone else did the same. When Algren did finally leave Chicago, his career as an author of novels and poetry had long since passed.

To return to Leslie Fiedler's opinion of Algren's position as a museum piece, despite the contempt with which the original quote soaked its page, Fiedler had a point - Algren's career, his writing, and the life he navigated through the miasma of the radical thirties, the Great Depression, and on to his time serving in Europe during World War II, as well as the successful black market operations that he set up in the European theater, are indeed a museum piece, just not in the way that Fiedler meant it. To trace the path of Algren and a host of other writers of his time, such as Conroy and Wright, is to trace a path backward through history, much like Algren traced his novel back from a golden possibility. As Cormac McCarthy once said, his "books are made of books"

(Woodward 38), and traveling along Algren's leyline into the world of literature during the 1930s opens the door to a forgotten and neglected moment that includes a polyphonic yawp made possible by those such as Algren, Wright, Conroy, Jessie Redmond Fauset, Nathaniel West, Robert Cantwell, Agnes Smedley, Meridel Le Suerer, Henry Roth, as well as Mike Gold and the little magazines that called to the bourgeois with the clear message of "Sinners, Save Yourself."

Little room exists for the authors in many textbooks and collections, with editors instead choosing works by the likes of John Steinbeck and Ralph Ellison to mark the period, and who could blame them? However, the literary movements that took shape in the 1920s and 1930s did not occur in a vacuum, and Langston Hughes appeared in *The Anvil* and *New Anvil* alongside names like Algren and William Carlos Williams. Multiple traditions fed on one another and supported one another in an era marked by disaster and war, though characterized by many, including Malcolm Cowley, as an era of hope and an "apocalyptic and millennial" faith ("The 1930's Were" 155). *Never Come Morning* hovers between the seemingly parallel dimensions of the pre- and post-war world - halfway between here and there, between the pugilistic world of proletarian naturalism and the new what next of Algren's lyrical reportage, perfected in 1949's *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

In a manner of case-study-masquerading-as-a-novel, *Morning* offers a glimpse into the mind of an author desperately clinging to the remnants of hope that brought him into the movement that set out to change the world. With opinion turning against what many saw as the wasteful bloatware of the ancillary programs managed by the WPA, projects that Congress had already threatened to cut several times (Mangione 108), *Morning* tolls a warning bell for the perpetual prosperity to come, desperately cautioning against shrinking the social programs initiated by the New Deal. For all of his projected cynicism and aloofness, Algren possessed a sympathy for human beings burdened with a sense of guilt that they can neither identify nor expiate by choices arranged outside of their agency,

likely due in no so small part to his time spent cornered, hiding from the sound of the local train bull's boots. The horrors and devil's bargains that Bruno and Steffi must face all come to pass beneath the recurring sign, admonishing its readers that "I have only myself to blame for my fall" (*Morning* 128). The spiritual and moral implications present in *Never Come Morning* deserve a study all their own.

Algren stated from the outset, shortly after composing the essay, "The Function of Play in a Democracy," that he intended to write a sociological-oriented novel, one that employed the methods of naturalism. Through dedication to a meticulous level of sociological and ethnographic research and a poet's ear, Algren moved beyond the traditions that inspired him and found a new variation on naturalism, one that understood days of want and the primordial necessity of maintaining a personal sense of dignity in the face of failure and predation. Sometimes called a protest novel, others, an insult to people who would rather not know, *Never Come Morning* is a personalist novel written by an author who did not see the point of sitting in a room and imagining when the world of everyday life contained such multitudes, and so many ignored.

To Algren, all the pretty words in the world could not add an ounce of human dignity to any of the world's flotsam and jetsam if it did not use the tool of art to direct society's gaze toward the poor souls huddled beneath a neon rainbow sign. Without crossing into the mere didacticism of straight-cut proletarian fiction, nor the ideological fervor for doctrinal acceptance, Algren's literature stands as an attempt to do the writer's work. For Algren, the work of the writer, the "peculiar responsibility of writers of all ages," is to bring "the judge on the bench down into the docket" (—, *Chicago: City on the Make* 4) and display the frayed hemming of their robes and the chipped, foxed pages of their hierophantic tomes to the public – a worthwhile endeavor in any age, and worth being remembered.

In his “Notes of the Month” column in the September 1930 issue of *The New Masses*, Mike Gold spoke with his whole chest when he predicted that the proletarian literary movement would produce its Shakespeare within ten years, boasting, “We promise you a hundred Shakespeares” (“Notes of the Month” 4). Despite the announced death of the movement, and the collective act of amnesia on the part of the literary community without and within the movement, Algren never forgot, and in 1942 delivered his application for the position outlined by Gold during proletarian fiction’s auspicious beginning, presenting a novel conceived and born among the tawdry, yet potent dreams of America’s forgotten sons and daughters.

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