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Narrative Proximity in the Work of Nelson Algren

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Abstract

Recent critics of the work of Nelson Algren have often worked themselves into the tricky situation of having to “restore” or “recuperate” Algren. Such restorative approaches become concerned with justifying interest in, or arguing for the significance of, their subject. But while this “defensive” approach may go some way to carving out and preserving a critical space for Algren, rarely does it point towards or embark upon new and productive critical pathways. Moreover, while much of the available criticism on Algren is thematic in focus, few critics have considered Algren’s narrative technique.

My article joins an incipient narratological conversation about Algren, arguing that no thematic account can be complete without a nuanced consideration of his narrative technique. I call Algren’s particular brand of free indirect discourse “narrative proximity.” This term encapsulates what I consider the fundamental interlacing of Algren’s aesthetic and social visions; it therefore has deeply ethical implications. Furthermore, “narrative proximity” denotes a technique whereby the very inarticulateness of his characters is rendered profoundly articulate.

Keywords: Nelson Algren, narrative technique, free indirect discourse

Despite the renown he enjoyed at the height of his literary career, Nelson Algren’s critical and popular reputation faded over the last twenty or so years of his life, and despite recent efforts of Seven Stories Press,ⁱ his work is largely ignored today. Although Algren won the inaugural National Book Award for *The Man with the Golden Arm*, and though his work received both praise and derision from Maxwell Geismar, Leslie Fiedler and Chester Eisinger during his lifetime, he has been the subject of very little scholarship since the height of his career, and that which does exist tends to focus

primarily on discussions of plot and the themes of love and guilt. During his lifetime and with his cooperation, Martha Heasley Cox and Wayne Chatterton published the first scholarly analysis of his work, *Nelson Algren*. Bettina Drew’s biography (1989) is an exhaustively researched account of Algren’s life, and each of the three scholarly studiesⁱⁱ of Algren’s work presents a considered introduction to and a case for the importance of Algren’s work. James R. Giles, in particular, makes a case for Algren as an “urban naturalist” and also traces the influence of and parallels to Sartre and existentialism in Algren’s novels. In essence, with so little scholarship before them, these academics have laid a foundation for further Algren scholarship. Each of these studies also performs, to varying degrees, the unfortunately necessary task of rescuing Algren from his detractors.ⁱⁱⁱ This approach, while necessary as part of an effort to rehabilitate Algren’s reputation, also opens the trapdoor of writing against the critics, rather than for the author or text itself. The essays collected in *Nelson Algren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Ward (2007), go some way to rebalancing the general approach to Algren’s work, in particular Ian Peddie’s useful discussion of *The Man with the Golden Arm* from a postcolonial perspective. This essay proposes to open a new discussion in Algren scholarship by discussing at length his narrative technique, which in previous scholarship has been either ignored or discussed only superficially. Adding to this discussion in some detail, I will demonstrate that Algren’s narrative technique is crucial to the thematic power of his novels.

Giles writes in *Confronting the Horror: The Novels of Nelson Algren* that in Algren’s work “narrative voice seeks identification with the victimized characters” and that “narrative voice so identifies with character that the humanness of the middle-class reader is called into question” (17). Giles is right to highlight narrative identification, and right about its function of calling middle-class readers to account. But his assessment stops short and misses out on the opportunity to discuss how Algren accomplishes this identification and what the technique itself achieves in his fiction.^{iv} In a 1957 interview with Robert A. Perlono in the *Chicago Review*, Algren said: “I certainly did not set out to make ‘heroes’ of these people. I do feel, however, that a thinker who wants to think justly must keep in touch with those who never think at all” (92). This sentiment best represents the fundamental goal of Algren’s literary project. Similar to Ralph Ellison, who wrote that a

writer's aim should be to "endow his inarticulate characters, scenes and social processes with eloquence" (xix-xx), Algren lends an eloquence to characters whose inarticulateness—both of thought and speech—hinders their ability to live their daily lives in meaningful ways. Most, if not all, of Algren's characters live lives of extraordinary deprivation and depravity, which makes revealing their intrinsic humanity all the more difficult and delicate a task. By employing a free indirect discourse that seeks out a close identification between narrative voice and his characters' own thoughts, Algren both reinforces the legitimacy of the characters' words and also lends them an articulateness that they are unable to achieve themselves; in this way, the technique then becomes the key means, articulating both the meaning and the importance of Algren's social and literary concerns.

I call this adaptation of free indirect discourse "narrative proximity." Algren uses the technique in sustained and complex ways, and to a variety of effects, in his novels. In *The Man with the Golden Arm*, he uses the technique to control the narrative tension of key scenes, and in particular the Great Sandwich Battle.⁵ In a scene that spans approximately 20 pages, he shifts the perspective from character to character with a light touch, mixing it with an even amount of dialogue and more detached narration. The effect is subtle but also complex. It creates a grotesque and cruel comedy while simultaneously allowing the characters the opportunity to articulate their thoughts and justifications, no matter how erring, simple-minded or downright malicious. It is possibly the scene that most embodies Kurt Vonnegut's assessment of Algren: "Reporting on what he saw of dehumanized Americans with his own eyes day after day, year after year, Algren said in effect, 'Hey—an awful lot of these people your hearts are bleeding for are really mean and stupid. That's just a fact. Did you know that?'" (xx). Mean and stupid these people may be (as will be seen), but Vonnegut's assessment is only partly correct, because it stops short of a crucial point, which Blanche Gelfant makes, namely, that "all the people in this book, the maimed, blind, and lost, are still God's children" (255). In other words, these people are still human beings. Algren manages the complicated literary task of portraying both these aspects of his characters—their mean stupidity as well as their humanity—by exploiting the potential of both narrative proximity and an editorial, omniscient voice in a complex manner.

Both Giles, and Cox and Chatterton highlight the Great Sandwich Battle as a central scene in *The Man with the Golden Arm*, but neither gives a complete account of the scene. Cox and Chatterton correctly point out that "the comic scenes do more than serve as relief or leavening for serious matter," and that "Algren's highly specialized form of comedy, effective as comedy itself, also serves to intensify the mood of horror and foreboding rather than to diminish it" (123). Giles notes that in response to Algren's comedy "one laughs in recognition of the humanness of outwardly grotesque characters; it is a comedy that originates in Algren's harsh compassion" (58). Together, these two descriptions come close to grasping the importance of the scene and Algren's technique, but each stops short of explaining the full importance of the scene. Cox and Chatterton posit the scene as a "meaningful counterpoint to the desperation which characterizes the marriage of Sophie and Frankie" (124), and though this assessment rings true, it makes a mistake by assigning a minor role to the characters and actions of Vi, Stash and Sparrow, therefore restricting the degree to which they should be taken seriously in their own right. The scene is in fact meaningful not only as a counterpoint, but in and of itself. Giles implicitly reads it as such, and writes that "for fifteen pages [Algren] portrays three absurd characters being thoroughly repulsive and then, with the brief reference to Violet's need for love, affirms their humanness" (59). While he is correct to emphasize the mention of Violet's need for love, Giles misses a crucial aspect of the scene; Algren implies Violet's need for love before the scene begins, and through the use of narrative proximity, underscores the humanity of each character even while they are behaving in a grotesque and repulsive fashion. A close reading of the entire scene will demonstrate how this works, and why it is important.

The scene is set up by five short paragraphs, in each of which the narrative voice closely overlaps that of Vi. These opening paragraphs show the aftermath of what has yet to come: in each paragraph, Vi recalls the Great Sandwich Battle before it has been narrated and assesses different possibilities for blame. But the logic of Vi's reasoning makes it preposterous, not only in the literal, but also in the more conventional meaning of the word.

Algren makes the transition from a passage reviewing the relationship between Vi and Stash (also known as Old Husband) to the use of narrative

proximity with a single sentence paragraph: "On the night of the Great Sandwich Battle Stash gave her, she felt, even further cause for separate maintenance" (124). The diction of the paragraph is neutral; it could belong either to Vi's perspective or to the omniscient narrator's. In fact, it belongs to both, and "she felt" signals the transition to a close identification between the two. Vi goes on to contemplate the blame, and begins with the sausage: "Although, if the sausage hadn't slipped out of the sandwich, everything would have been fine and dandy, like sugar candy" (124). Superficially comedic, further consideration reveals the "horror and foreboding" identified by Cox and Chatterton; Vi's attitude—that something as trivial as a sausage hitting the floor can cause such mayhem—suggests a large degree of helplessness in this situation in particular, and in her life in general. In fact, as the scene progresses and narrative proximity shifts to the other characters, the truth of this statement will become clear. Vi, Stash and Sparrow are each so trapped by the dual limitations of her or his poverty and narrow understanding, that a sausage slipping from a midnight sandwich can become the catalyst for violence.

Vi's continuing search for a place to lay blame, and her inability to rest on any single agent, increases the mood of helplessness and claustrophobia she feels, living her entire life within a few blocks of a large city. Following her assignation of blame to the sausage, she considers her own role, and lands, fleetingly, on the truth. She rules out blaming Sparrow and acknowledges that because she brought him upstairs knowing full well her husband was asleep in the bedroom, "It was the one time it was truly all her fault" (124). Of the five paragraphs, this is the only one that isn't qualified; the first contains that "she felt," and the others begin with "Although," "Still," and "Unless." Vi subtly recognizes, then, that blame for the action of direct consequence belongs to herself. Objectively viewed, this is correct—she leaves her sleeping husband to find her lover, then brings him home and deliberately wakes her husband—but she won't dwell on it. And because Vi won't dwell on it, narrative proximity demands that the narrator doesn't either. So Vi considers that "Maybe it was really Stash's fault for going to bed early," and finishes with blaming Stash's boss for working him so ragged that "he couldn't stay awake after supper" (124). Each player here both shares the blame and is blameless (with the exception of the poor sausage, which can probably be excused entirely), although there

is a certain chain-reaction at work as well: if Stash's boss didn't work him so hard for so long, Stash might be able to stay awake and entertain his wife, and she wouldn't feel compelled to fool around with Sparrow. On the other hand, nothing in Vi's behavior suggests that fidelity is high on her list of priorities anyway, nor did she exactly marry Stash for love. She is a woman caught in the consequences of choices she felt compelled to make, with only a limited understanding of the forces that compel her. In this prelude to the Great Sandwich Battle, narrative proximity allows Algren to dramatize this complex combination of private and sociological frustration.

Narrative proximity also engenders crucial sympathy for Vi, who, far from serving as a counterpoint to the main action of the novel, is a character of tireless loyalty to others (with the profound exception of her husband). She is in many ways the furthest thing from a bored housewife. While Stash slaves at the ice house and Sparrow steals dogs, while Frankie deals cards, shoots heroin and dreams of drumming, Vi works hard to make sure they all stay alive, without demanding that they give her credit, and without really giving herself any credit, either. Again, Algren reveals these elements as part of the set-up of the Great Sandwich Battle, without leaving the narrative overlap of Vi's perspective:

She just wasn't tired a bit. She hadn't done a thing all day except to wheel Sophie to the Pulaski, return to sweep Sophie's flat and wash up yesterday's dishes while Frankie snored on the bed, sluice the stairs for Schwabatski and sweep the water down four flights into the gutter, then clean up her own rooms and heat up some restaurant leftovers she'd decided were ripe enough for Old Husband's supper. He'd hauled the mess half a mile the evening before and had weighed it before leaving for work to be sure she didn't eat more than her share before he returned. (125)

It's no wonder she doesn't blame herself, doing all the chores for the neighborhood; but the final sentence of the passage reveals another aspect of her situation: while elsewhere she complains to other characters about Stash's stinginess over the food, here in her private thoughts she simply accepts it as a fact of her life, as though it is another chore to be completed, like sweeping and washing. The final section of reflection before Algren turns to the scene itself sees her despairing over her sexual frustration. The scene begins with Vi reading a comic in bed and listening to the revelry coming from the Tug and Maul pub. Over the course of three longer

paragraphs, the comedic touch, heavy-handed in the passages discussed above, drifts from light to nonexistent as Algren relates Vi's attempts to arouse sexual attention from her husband, and the emotional impact of the failure of those attempts. Although the circumstances are different, narrative proximity here works similarly to the climax of the scene in *Somebody in Boots*, conveying simultaneously both the action (here the rather subdued action of a woman dressed in fancy lingerie regarding her own attractiveness while her husband snores on the bed) and internal perceptions. All of this "prelude" to the Great Sandwich Battle is crucial to the impact of the battle itself and to the heartfelt one-liner that, in Giles's words, "affirms their humanness." The sentence that finishes the scene as Vi and Sparrow climb on top of each other in the same bed where Stash had slept previously—"It was better than no love at all" (138)—is not a simple deft turn at the end of epic grotesquery and slapstick. Rather, it is the peak of a mountain that rises from the base of these three pages of close and subtle narrative attention to the psychology and activities of Vi.

The path that winds to the top of that mountain, however, travels through Sparrow and Stash as well. The shifts in focus of the narrative proximity throughout the action of The Great Sandwich Battle not only control the comedy and narrative tension, they also create sympathetic portraits of the other two corners of the love triangle. In the first instance, the technique serves primarily to heighten the farce. As Vi and Sparrow drunkenly negotiate the stairs to her and Stash's flat, she asks him "how come you never met Stash *form'lly*?" which sets Sparrow off on a rambling line of booze-addled reasoning: "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 something to happen to him in his declining years" (128). If Sparrow is somewhat condescending in his drunken thinking, Vi is at this stage just drunk. When they get inside, she takes off her coat, "unmindful that she wore only a sheer nightgown underneath; but then it was so warm and everyone was such old friends" (129). "Everyone" is of course Vi, her lover, Sparrow, and her husband, asleep in the next room. And it is when the drunken wife wakes the husband to introduce her drunken lover that narrative proximity guides the scene away from slapstick and reveals the same sense of anguish in Stash that Vi had exhibited.

Stash is an old man, and not a particularly intelligent old man at that. His English is also limited. Furthermore, he has just been woken from a deep sleep, which naturally heightens his confusion. Through the entirety of the Great Sandwich Battle, Stash never really has a clear picture of what is happening to him (or, more accurately, what the other two are doing to him). When the narration shifts to his perspective, it always does so to register confusion and in so doing, it emphasizes the anguish. The first instance of his perspective comes after Vi has attempted to introduce him to Sparrow, who stands stuffing his face with sausage. Old Husband's obsession with food—its cost and the hoarding of it—has been well-established by this point. Furthermore, Vi has just offered "Lover" (a name reinforced through its repetition in the overlap between narrator and Vi) another sausage sandwich. Stash is seemingly oblivious to the full implications of what is going on, however. He scrapes around for his slippers and scolds his wife for not being dressed, "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*?" (129). The rhetorical question, in particular, emphasizes Stash's confusion and irritation, implying as it does helplessness within the situation. The odd syntax and colloquialism of "big bargain" belongs entirely to Stash.

Stash's pathetic and helpless thoughts, each one a simple complaint at the unjustness of his treatment, expose the utter cruelty of Sparrow's and Vi's actions. The importance of the use of narrative proximity is twofold here. Stash can think things that he cannot say because of his limited English. The effect is both to engender sympathy—for his position, his anguish—and also to demonstrate the gap between what he thinks and what he can do about it, when narrative thoughts such as, "You couldn't treat a hard-working man this way" are juxtaposed against not only the perspectives of others—"Sparrow looked *so* sorry. He didn't like to see food wasted that way" (131)—but also the semi-articulate words he is able to utter aloud, which are ignored by the other two anyway. The moments assigned to the perspectives of Vi and Sparrow throughout the passage are usually both mean and hilarious in their self-centeredness (for example, Sparrow's disgust at the fact that the house is smeared with mustard, ignoring the fact that he wiped the mustard everywhere in the first place: "One hell of a way to run a house" (132) or Vi's, "Yes, it had been just about the finest

sandwich a loyal little wife could make her man but instead of thanking a person he just sat sucking his teeth in front of the first real company she'd had in days" (131). Stash's moments are simply self-pitying, confused and demoralized. They are the picture of a degraded man, the victim of emotional and physical abuse.

His utter degradation becomes complete when the technique shifts so that the narrative voice alternates between Stash's perspective and a more objective voice, attached to none of the protagonists of the scene. By the time the police show up to enquire about the gun that has been fired (by Violet) at a streetlamp, Old Husband has been harassed out of his sleep, around the apartment, up and down the corridor and (literally) half out the window. On top of this, Sparrow has managed deftly to frame Stash for the shooting. After Sparrow finishes telling the cop that Stash has been terrorizing them all night (the irony goes without saying), the narrative voice actively comments, from a disembodied position (i.e., not from the point of view of any of the characters, one of whom has been adopted for any kind of subjective comment throughout the scene): "Stash gaped and looked to Violet for help. An odd place to look for it" (135). The cynicism and pity are entirely intertwined here, and Stash's total isolation is completed by even the authorial voice abandoning, for this brief moment, its customary identity with and sympathy for the old man. Violet simply asks for her ten bucks (in fact, Stash's ten bucks), so he turns to Sparrow, who completes the betrayal (he's already sleeping with Old Husband's wife; now he's sending him off to jail for the night). The narrative voice at this moment returns to its overlap with Stash. The old man, who clearly does not understand what Sparrow said to the cop, "thanked Sparrow for everything. He could tell that Sparrow was going to make something nice happen for everybody now. So everyone could have secondhand twist bread and go back to bed" (135). Here, the overlap reinforces him as a pathetic figure, completely oblivious to what's happening to and around him. But as he's led down the stairs, the narrative proximity does more than make him look ridiculous. Across two paragraphs he remains absurd, but understandably and humanly so, as the technique confirms both his desperate exhaustion and genuine naïveté:

Was there such a place left in the world where no one woke you up at a quarter to four, plastered you with mustard and ran you onto a fire escape in

your underwear for neighbors to make bad scandals? . . . He just hadn't known you could be arrested for holding out a pay check on your wife. Down the stairwell and by the ace's firm hand on the back of his belt, all the way down, he realized now it was a real bad thing he had done. (137)

The Man with the Golden Arm is correctly seen as the story of Frankie Machine, but while critics (Cox & Chatterton 112; Drew 187-188) make note of the fact that Algren only added the junkie element of the story late in the rewriting process, they neglect to take into account some of the implications that process might have. *The Man with the Golden Arm* is not just a novel about heroin addiction, with all other elements of the story organized to support that central theme. Rather, *The Man with the Golden Arm* is primarily the story of Frankie Machine and his addiction to both heroin and failure, but it is only to a slightly lesser degree the story of the rest of the Division Street neighborhood. To this extent, the Great Sandwich Battle can be seen as the central passage of the novel, revealing as it does the absurd, grotesque but fundamentally human nature of the people and situations in and around the Tug and Maul, and also offering those people the benefit of innocence until their guilt is proven beyond reasonable doubt, as well as what Giles calls "the dignity of [their] creative truth" (64).

Algren handles his task of managing a large ensemble of characters by dipping in and out of this technique of narrative proximity throughout the novel, with the most, but by no means only, attention given to the perspective of the primary characters. Nowhere in the novel, however, does the perspective shift so rapidly between so many characters, and to such complex effect as in the Great Sandwich Battle. The scene demonstrates Algren working at the peak of his abilities, combining the joy and bitterness of desperate lives through his handling of perspective, timing and language. The scene represents indeed what Giles calls "the triumph of technique" (58). Technique, however, only really matters if it is used in service of something, and here Algren's technique serves a key component of his literary project. Gelfant writes that "what has reduced the people of Algren's novel is not simply poverty. Rather it is some inexplicable, irrational destructive force loosed in the world, which drives people on to frenzied and unrelenting acts of self-destruction" (252-253). She is mostly correct; however, the irrational force is not inexplicable. Rather, these people are

driven by a force comprised of a web of personal, social and economic hierarchies to their unrelenting acts of self-destruction. The primary thematic concern of Algren's novels is, in fact, the explanation of this force. His technique of narrative proximity forms a key component of that explanation by using the characters' own perspectives to attempt to show not the "inexplicable force," but rather the explanations that lie between it and the self-destruction it causes.

*

Algren uses narrative proximity in a different manner and to somewhat different ends in his other Division Street novel, *Never Come Morning*. Algren's second novel also concerns an ensemble of characters, but the narrative is guided by the story of two teenagers, the hoodlum and would-be professional baseball pitcher and boxer Bruno "Lefty" Bicek and his girlfriend, Steffi Rostenkowski. The novel tells the story of both characters' quick and steep descents from teenage naivete into hoodlumism (Bruno) and prostitution (Steffi). In his assessment of Algren's work in *Fiction of the Forties*, Eisinger writes that although Algren's characters are on a road to inevitable destruction, he imbues them with "yearnings for love or pride in themselves as separate and identifiable individuals" (74-75). In *Never Come Morning*, Algren creates this emotional power through long, poetic passages that focus primarily on Lefty's experiences in jail and Steffi's in Mama Tomek's brothel. In these longer passages, rather than employing the type of narrative proximity discussed above, Algren affords both Lefty and Steffi an eloquence of thought that lies far beyond their actual linguistic capabilities. In the previous sections of the novel, neither Bruno nor Steffi speaks or thinks in anything much beyond simple declarative sentences. In order to allow this new eloquence to work as the thoughts of the characters themselves, and not just as the fancy words some author has shoved into the mouths of an uneducated thug and an equally uneducated whore, Algren lays a foundation through careful handling of narrative proximity. In so doing, he accomplishes the task of making Bruno and Steffi much more than the stereotypes to which they might be otherwise reduced. This aspect of *Never Come Morning* demonstrates very clearly the relationship between Algren's literary project and his literary technique. Eisinger writes, "I have the feeling that he is more concerned with forcing upon his reader a recognition of the

depths to which men can sink and the dank horrors of the society they make than he is in solving his aesthetic problems" (80). The closest Eisinger comes to defining what Algren's aesthetic "problems" might be is in a passage linking him to the tradition of naturalism: "In trying to imitate the formlessness of experience, they had surrendered to matter instead of mastering it" (63). But precisely because he parcels aesthetic and "social" concerns, Eisinger misses the crucial relationship in Algren between the two; it is that relationship with which I am concerned, and that "narrative proximity" encapsulates. Technique and subject matter are inextricable in Algren's goal of insisting upon and making vivid the humanity of the people who occupy the social ladder's bottommost rung. Indeed, as Eisinger himself notes only briefly, "What looks like an awkward incongruity between style and matter is seen to be an organic relationship" (75).

Again, it will be useful to examine closely how Algren makes use of the technique to see how "awkward incongruity" becomes "organic relationship." Much like *The Man with the Golden Arm*, *Never Come Morning* concerns itself a great deal with ostensibly secondary (and even tertiary) characters. Algren employs narrative proximity to convey the thoughts of everyone from the various hoodlums to the cop Adamovitch (who decides that "This sort of kid kept spoiling things for the high-class Polacks by always showing off instead of just being good citizens like the Irish" [127]), to the fairground barker at Riverside, and Bruno's Street Relief caseworker (who decides that "If this hunky thought he was going to be able to deny any of this later, he had another think coming" [14]), to Meyer Shapiro, M.D., the whorehouse doctor (who sees one of the prostitutes reading a comic and feels "troubled to learn that Miss La Rue wasn't a woman after all, but a child whose pain was a child's pain, as sharp as it was bewildered" [200]). Here, the use of narrative proximity functions differently than in the preceding discussion. Whereas in *The Great Sandwich Battle*, the narrator almost becomes a character in the moment that he abandons Stash, in these instances, the narrator's position is more aloof: rather than relying on the sympathy of the narrative voice, the character whose thoughts the narrator provides displays not only his or her own attitude and thought patterns; he or she also characterizes further the people with whom he or she engages (more often than not Bruno; in the case of the barker, both Bruno and Steffi).^{vi}

In the case of the barber, Bonifacy Konstantine, this dual nature of narrative proximity plays a particularly important role. Bonifacy is the meanest and most small minded character in the novel. He controls both the local thugs, sending them out on various criminal jobs, and the brothel,^{vii} and he works hard to control the hierarchies within his organization to ensure that no one can usurp him. As Cox and Chatterton acknowledge, the barber "lives every moment . . . to outcheat the cheaters" (98). He is a man of extreme paranoia and of no redeeming quality, exploiting, with violence when necessary, the youthful vulnerability and dreams of the kids in the neighborhood in order to keep himself top of the meagre pile. However, Algren treats him with the same narrative proximity as his more sympathetic characters, allowing Bonifacy's twisted paranoia and petty cruelty to reveal themselves without extraneous authorial commentary.

The barber habitually deals himself hypothetical hands of backroom poker, in which he takes a hypothetical cut, but doesn't (hypothetically) deal himself in. "But the fellow kept cheating; they were all trying to cheat him here" (78). Paranoia saturates even his self-controlled fantasies. It spills across his entire thinking: "From where he sat he could watch the curtained windows of Mama Tomek's second-floor parlor. Traffic had been light all night. They were trying to cheat him over there too" (78). At this point, the narrative proximity simply depicts the barber's paranoia. However, this is the scene in which Catfoot and Kodadek, his most loyal henchmen, bring Steffi, half-unconscious from alcohol and gang-rape, to him. The scene unfolds from his perspective; what Bonifacy doesn't know, is not revealed. Steffi is never called by name; she is at first "a brown-haired girl," thereafter "the girl." Here she is reduced by the perspective of the barber to an object, a girl who is nothing more than a helpless body:

He stood over the girl on the couch, and a desire he had not felt in years shook him. Her helplessness, the very pallor of her and the disarray of her clothes roused the barber; as weakness had always roused him. It had been so long since he had seen anything so young, so helpless. So wonderfully lost. (78)

The barber in his element, away from his fantasy world and in the reality of facing someone completely vulnerable, shifts from simple paranoia to an altogether more invidious sadism. He stays away from healthy and strong

women unless he judges that they're "stupid enough to trick in some easy way" (78). But anything that presents an easy victory, such as the girl presented to him here, becomes an object for domination, and in the present case, a long-forgotten, perverted sexual desire.

There is one more element to Bonifacy's outlook, however. Mama Tomek arrives from across the street, and he can't help sizing her up with the same sexual leer, albeit one without the same desire and intentions as towards the girl. "The barber decided, watching her hefty hustling walk, like that of a circus elephant hurrying home to supper, that had she been a frail thing, like the frail olive thing on the couch, he would have had more than a business relationship with her" (79). While Mama Tomek has a (not yet revealed) weakness for heroin, she is not a weak woman, and the barber does not hold as much sway over her as he suspects; although she needs his heroin, he needs her control over the brothel to keep his position in balance. Arguably, he needs her more than vice versa. In any case, the barber does not have the power to decide whether or not she would enter into "more than a business relationship." Rather, he uses his disgust over her physical appearance to convince himself that he would have decided. In other words, he deludes himself, and if this disgust is the product of the paranoia and sadistic tendencies that consume him, it also leads him further into their grips by clouding his judgement and understanding:

It had been for the best that she was such a horse of a woman, he concluded. She would have cheated him right and left if he hadn't had sense enough to stay out of bed with her. But had she cheated him nevertheless? Had she been cheating him year in and year out like all the others? (79)

Throughout this scene, the narrator allows Bonifacy a version of Giles' "dignity of his creative truth," though with little dignity, and certainly without the comedic aspects involved with characters such as Sparrow, Stash and Vi. Events both preceding and following this scene demonstrate the extent to which Bonifacy is incorrect and deluded. Nonetheless, it remains the narrative work of the barber's perspective to characterize both himself and to some extent Steffi, and to dramatize and explain Gelfant's "inexplicable force."^{viii}

Eisinger writes that "Algren is compassionate with all his characters—compassionate to a fault, since he extends his sympathy to the meanest

among them who do not justify it" (83). This judgement is incorrect, because it ignores the crucial and complex effects of using narrative proximity to extend compassion to characters such as Bonifacy.^{ix} In addition to the control it exerts over the tension of the scene, the barber's own perspective condemns him as paranoid and sadistic, but also utterly pathetic, without anyone else ever saying he's any one of these, and without the narrator spelling it out. This effect is familiar from the preceding discussion, but in the barber it reaches the zenith of Algren's approach to the combination of Vonnegut's "really mean and stupid" and Gelfant's "God's children." It presents Bonifacy as not simply mean, not simply cruel, not simply evil, but rather malevolent in a complex way. He is disgusting, but he is human, motivated by conflicting and confused thoughts and urges. Another, and more important effect will be seen when the focus and compassion turn from this mean character to the brown-haired girl.

Steffi is introduced as a seventeen year old who is "one of those women of the very poor who feign helplessness to camouflage indolence" (Algren 1996: 26). From the outset she is by no means unintelligent. However, behind her feigned helplessness and hidden indolence lies a young vulnerable girl. As Eisinger notes, "She is not a decent and generous girl; she is selfish and indolent; but she is not a degraded and utterly promiscuous girl either" (78). Her vulnerable and girlish aspects reveal themselves in the scene of her date with Bruno at Riverview fairground, which immediately precedes her gang-rape at the hands of Bruno's cohorts. When they enter the fairground gates, the narration notes the first and only time Steffi had been on a Ferris wheel, when she was ten years old, and that "she'd longed for the sight of Riverview ever since. Now she was going inside with Bunny and ride anything she liked, just as though both of them still had papas" (51). This first instance of narrative overlap with Steffi's voice portrays both the nascent independence and childishness of adolescence and subtly reveals the twinge of inner loss that gnaws at her. Algren accomplishes the portrait of her adolescence both through what she thinks of—that she's there with her boyfriend, that she can do what she wants, which stakes out her independence—and the diction she employs to do so—"Bunny," "anything she liked"—which reinforces her lingering childishness. The last phrase reveals, almost in passing, the pain that Steffi feels over having no father, and also, the bond she feels with Bruno because his mother is also a widow.

The paragraph consists of three sentences, this one of narrative proximity bookended by sentences of more detached narration, the neutrality of which serves to reinforce the legitimacy of her perspective. This reinforcement is important, because at the end of her first proper date with the boy that this insecure teenage girl calls Bunny, she will be gang-raped and handed into prostitution. The light touch of narrative proximity here contrasts with the rape scene, in which Steffi is reduced to only her own voice shouting "Next!" abandoned as a human being by everyone, even the sympathetic overlapping narrator.

When the narrative proximity returns to Steffi, it conveys important changes to her perspective. Discussing Bruno, Giles writes that "[b]y adopting a narrative voice which affirms the humanness of his character, Algren can give Lefty a dimension of horror Algren does not view Lefty with Sartrian regard as an object—he is a self-aware subject. The sum of his brutal actions do not negate his humanness—he is often savage, but never an exotic" (49). Though she is brutalized and savaged, rather than brutal and savage, the same statement applies to Steffi. Again, it is not simply the narrative voice, but how that voice positions itself—its narrative proximity—that achieves the horror and compassion that Algren seeks for his characters. Section I of Book III, "The Hunted Also Hope," is a series of portraits of the prostitutes, Steffi among them, who work for Mama Tomek. The narrative overlap with Steffi, who has been a prostitute for about a year and is now halfway down the road to losing the last of her hope, contains none of the girlishness of the early passage, and the inner griefs that it describes are more complex than the emptiness of being fatherless. Algren here faces the "aesthetic problem" that the change in emotional content demands a change in narrative style, and in these passages he solves the problem by imbuing Steffi's thoughts with a previously unseen eloquence and lyricism; but that eloquence needs to work as the thought processes of a young, uneducated and relatively inarticulate woman. Algren solves this second problem with a different type of narrative proximity, which is essentially an inside-out version of the variations on narrative proximity already discussed. The narrator cannot, as previously, use the character's diction to shape the scene in various ways, and to various ends. Rather, he needs to find words for emotions that Steffi feels, but cannot necessarily articulate. To solve this problem, Algren's narrator will speak for her, but

with her world, and her point of view, firmly in focus; the voice is not one that pulls away from the character to provide omniscient authorial comment, but rather, a narrator who lends his vocabulary to the emotions that the character feels, but, again, cannot express in words herself.⁸

So Steffi R., now also known as The Duchess, watches from her window the cold night-time street, an internal monologue unspooling warily in reaction to each detail of the tableau. She watches an Eastbound express train, and as it passes, a young cripple hobbling towards her. She makes a comparison between his walk and the barber's: "he lurched toward her eagerly; but passed, with a peculiar skip and bounce of the good leg, entirely different than the barber's lurch toward her, and with averted eyes" (187). Steffi now sleeps nightly with the barber, in his apartment above the bar, the same apartment to which she was brought following her rape. But she works and watches from the whorehouse opposite, and she has quickly learned to watch for details, of how a man walks (her word: lurch), and where he looks. The overlap in narrative voices grows stronger in the next paragraph, quoted here in full:

Even in the brief moment of passing he had wearied her; now there was just one cripple the less in the world to deal with. Let there always be one less and one less in the world forever. Until this moment she had not known it was possible to be so tired that the sight of men passing into open hallways or turning corners out of sight or hurrying absently past in cars, of empty schoolrooms and abandoned churches and darkened bars with the chairs on the tables, boarded windows, for-rent signs on deserted streets, weed-covered walks and windowless places, could give her a twinge of pleasure: for each time she felt she had one less man or car or darkened bar to contend with. They were all trying to cheat her here. (187-189)

The girlish excitement and fear about the carnival rides have been completely erased and replaced in this girl only a year older, but now, her thoughts make clear, much further than that from her childhood. The heroic list of the types of empty and abandoned buildings that compose her dilapidated neighborhood functions also as a metaphor for the ennui—no longer the indolence of youth—that consumes her. Her pleasure is not of riding a Ferris wheel with her boyfriend, for it is defined entirely in negative terms; it is the pleasure of not having to perform her job. The list also works to give this poetic voice to Steffi, to present it as her own, or as closely

identifying with her own; for the images are all of buildings familiar to her, and also abandoned by her—the school she no longer attends, the church that only reinforces her fear and self-loathing,⁹ the bar at which she can only ever be another whore, the house she'll never rent. A sentence such as "Let there always be one less and one less in the world forever" too poetic to be Steffi's construction, provides an example of the narrator lending his vocabulary to her emotions; it works because the sentence preceding it sits much closer to her own diction, and because the list that follows enumerates the things of her world.

But the unfunny punch line comes with that final sentence. It is not Steffi's own language, nor is it a case of the narrator lending his own voice. The sentence belongs to the diction and perspective of the barber, for whom "they were all trying to cheat him" is a kind of refrain, from his imaginary and real card games, to his dealings with Mama Tomek and the local hoods. Steffi, forced to sleep in his bed night after night, has adopted his psychology as well, at least in part. Narrative proximity here overlaps in triplicate: the perspectives of Bonifacy, Steffi and the narrator all converge. Although psychologically she hasn't slipped to the same levels of brutality and sadism around which he organizes his life, Steffi, the victim enslaved to it, has begun to adopt part of the viewpoint—the feeling of being cheated and helpless—that represents its earliest stage. The compassion afforded Bonifacy's twisted thinking is now carried by citation to the girl he has enslaved; the compassion is different, however, and the quality and meaning of the barber's statement will transform on Steffi's lips, with the support of the narrator's eloquence, which clings to her perspective through this long section of the novel. As she watches the outside world from the room in which she works, she will struggle to believe the course of events: "Had it been only a year since the night at Riverview? It seemed like twenty. And yet seemed no time at all, but only the natural ending to the same night. Or to any night that begins with lights and music" (190). Here a hint of not unfounded cynicism—that all nights are the same—shades her weariness. She will also reflect specifically on the street outside and the metaphor implied in the long passage: "The world was a street like Potomac Street, with shuttered windows on either side. And only a smoldering dump at either end. All men, all women passed in darkness, like the shadows on the parlor wall, each on a separate journey" (194).

Again, close attention to Steffi's perspective combines with the narrator's lyricism in this new version of narrative proximity, but the earlier attention to Bonifacy provides yet another layer of complexity to Algren's technique, turning the cruelty and paranoia of the barber into the despair of his victim, Steffi. This last point is crucial, because creating this kind of complexity is crucial to Algren's attempt to explain dramatically the similarly complex forces behind his self-destructive characters.

A few brief quotations and explications do not do justice to the poetic power of this long—almost 70 pages—section, most of which focuses on Steffi, all of which focuses on the prostitutes of Mama Tomek. It is a passage that succeeds entirely in rising to and meeting the challenge posed by Ralph Ellison of “endowing his inarticulate characters, scenes and social processes with eloquence” (xix-xx). Having begun by documenting her childishness, continuing through her dehumanization and then, in its aftermath, lending eloquence to Steffi, Algren depicts not only an eloquence of character and scene, but also—the critical element, both to Ellison and to Algren—of social processes. In Steffi, the plights and drives of Bruno and Bonifacy, of Mama Tomek and indeed the rest of the neighborhood, become physically and psychologically embodied. This will become clear a little more than halfway through “The Hunted Also Hope.” Two paragraphs must be quoted in their entirety to make the effect and importance clear:

Steffi had learned how, overnight, everything could be lost to a woman. A woman could go to sleep with all things before her, and waken with nothing left but a useless youth snoring beside her. When that happened a woman's face hardened and turned cold.

And whoever wanted it so? The barber wished only not to be cheated. Bruno? He wished only to be a man. Benkowski? Catfoot? Mama T.? The laundryman or the housekeeper, the little Jew who hauled out ashes or the judge of the Woman's Court? They were all careless of what became of the place, not one of them wished it to be so in their hearts. They were all trying not to be cheated. (209)

These people, from the judge on the bench to the thug in the dock and all the people in between, are stuck living lives that force them to protect themselves against being cheated. It is not a lesson that is happy or pleasing, nor is it one that is easy to look in the eyes. But it is, to the characters and to Algren, the most important lesson, because it is the lesson that takes a step

towards explaining the “irrational destructive force” that degrades these characters relentlessly and destroys them; it is also the lesson that makes his control of narrative proximity and the compassion that it lends not a fault, but both a necessity and ultimately a triumph. These are human beings trying to survive, human beings reduced to little more than trying to survive, and even the most paranoid utterance of the basest individual carries wider truths when it escapes from the lips of an eighteen year-old girl.

Unlike the scene in *The Man with the Golden Arm*, here there is no laughter in the triumph of technique. Rather, the triumph is in the use of the technique to produce a recognition of the gap between the middle class perspective and that of the characters, as well as of that between the characters and the “irrational destructive force” that impresses itself upon them, and that in the recognition of that gap lies the beginning of the explanation of what that complicated force actually is. Indeed, that same recognition and explanation sits at the heart of the humor of the Great Sandwich Battle: the reader may laugh, but only at the expense of the characters, who don't utter so much as a giggle. Through the variety of means and applications of his technique of narrative proximity, Algren is able to create fiction that, to paraphrase his statement to Robert A. Perlongo, keeps in touch with those who never think at all; it is in that point of contact that Algren's work becomes an embodiment of his goal of thinking justly. Narrative proximity is not mere technique, but rather, it is an encapsulation of the entwining of narrative and aesthetic technique with the moral imperatives that drive Algren's literary ambitions.

Notes:

ⁱ Seven Stories Press has brought all of Algren's work back into print in recent years, including the previously unpublished (and unfinished) novel, *Entrapment* (2010).

ⁱⁱ Cox & Chatterton (1974), James R. Giles (1989), Brooke Horvath (2005); see Works Cited for full information.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fiedler and Norman Podhoretz were the most vocal of Algren's critics during his lifetime; the common charges against him are that he only portrays whores with hearts of gold and thinks that bums and criminals are more noble than the middle classes. Lawrence Lipton's 1957 essay, “A Voyeur's View of the Wild Side: Nelson Algren and his Reviewers,” presents a spirited defence of Algren against such charges.

^{iv} In his 2007 essay, “Making Nakedness Visible: Narrative Perspective in Nelson

Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm*" (Ward 95-105), Giles balances this middle-class accounting function against the twin effects of voyeurism and "affirmation of the inherent humanness" (99) of Algren's characters.

^v Algren was already using and developing the technique in his short fiction and first novel, *Somebody in Boots*, though space prevents a full discussion of his early work in this essay.

^{vi} In the brief scene with the caseworker, narrative proximity is also used to control narrative tension in a similar, albeit scaled-down manner to the scene from *The Man with the Golden Arm* discussed above.

^{vii} Mama Tomek has something of an upper hand on the barber, although he also supplies her with the heroin to which she is addicted. The complicated power structures that operate in Algren's communities are worthy of an entire book-length study.

^{viii} The scene is not without its irony, even if that irony is only lent to it retrospectively; it will be later, during a real—not hypothetical—card game dealt by Bonifacy that this same girl will help Bruno to cheat him out of his money at the same time that his erstwhile protégé Casey Benkowski reveals that he's cheated him out of representing Bruno's boxing interests.

^{ix} Little compassion—or certainly not compassion to a fault—exists in the Great Sandwich Battle scene either, for that matter. Eisinger's judgement also ignores the irony that Algren's technique often produces.

^x Algren uses this same device with respect to Bruno; the narrator articulates thoughts that Bruno expresses mostly through violence. The various aspects of Bruno's character have been much discussed in the existing criticism of Algren's work, so I will focus primarily on how narrative proximity works in drawing out Steffi's character, which has been given much less treatment (Eisinger, curiously, refuses in his discussion of *Never Come Morning* even to call her by name, referring to her as "the girl" throughout, which creates the effect of diminishing the importance of her character, which is every bit as vital as Bruno's to the emotional center of the novel, if somewhat secondary in terms of plot). For further discussion of Bruno, see Geismar 79-80; Bluestone 30-33; Cox & Chatterton 99-100; Giles 46-49.

^{xi} "The Hunted Also Hope" ends with a scene of Steffi praying the Rosary, Hail Mary and Our Father in church, and finishing by blaming herself for everything, and "forcibly [making] herself think: *mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*" (228).

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