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The Rainbow Sign of Nelson Algren

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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God gave Noah the rainbow sign.
No more water, the fire next time

Hymn

The Tug & Maul, this winter noon, looked much as it had that Easter Dawn. Frost had gathered on the windows and by night there would be neon rainbows in the snow.

Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm*

We may know Nelson Algren's fiction by the "rain [that] raine th e very day" and the "neon that flickered on forever" (*Twelfth Night* v.i.394; Algren, "Design," 255). In Algren's divided voice we hear both "the wisdom of the Shakespearean fool" in a "neon carnival" and the "moral indignation" of a "prophet in a neon wilderness" (Lewin, 97; Algren, *Golden Arm*, 34). For in Nelson Algren's version of the dark night of the soul it is always raining, day after day, and the rainbow sign is always neon.

Although he wrote about a circumscribed world of bars, brothels, prison cells, and rented rooms, Algren transformed the jukeboxes and neon signs of "the wild side" into an iconography-bearing religious implication and existential universality. A "juke-box running down in a deserted bar" is the way the world ends (*Chicago*, 74). When Owner "[puts] the chairs up on the back bar and the lights in the big brass juke [are running] down like a rain-washed sunset," you see your life reflected and know the anguish of "closing time" (*Golden Arm*, 97, 128). One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but

The Tug & Maul, this winter noon, looked much as it had that Easter dawn. Frost had gathered on the windows and by night there would be neon rainbows in the snow. (*Golden Arm*, 170) **[End Page 393]**

Algren's tropes illustrate the tension between "Earth" and "World" that Heidegger describes as the origin of art (see "The Origin of the Work of Art"). When Algren juxtaposes neon signs of the World against the wind and the rain of the Earthly element, "[a] terrible beauty is born" (Yeats), one that demonstrates a Heideggerian aesthetic:

World, from the Heideggerian perspective, [can] be understood . . . as History itself, that is to say, as the ensemble of acts and efforts whereby human beings have attempted, since the dawn of a human age, to bring meanings out of the limits and constraints of their surroundings. Earth, meanwhile, is everything meaningless in those surroundings and what betrays the resistance and inertia of sheer Matter as such and extends as far as what human beings have named as death, contingency, accident, bad luck, or finitude. (Jameson, 49)

For Heidegger, "[t]he opposition of world and earth is strife," but the conflict between these two aspects of reality can be creative as well as destructive (174). "In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work [of art] is an instigating of this strife" (Heidegger, 175).

The frozen tableau of the Tug & Maul at winter noon looking as it had on Easter dawn summarizes the tensions of Algren's art. In the "Easter dawn" and the "neon rainbows" "[t]he world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world" (Heidegger, 174).

Even the losers who enter a down-and-almost-out joint like the Tug & Maul have not abandoned all hope or meaning, and yet the frightened flesh who once flooded there are gone. The Earth has forsaken them even if their meanings have not forsaken the Earth. A bar, empty of people but full of meaning, sets forth the fears of "death, contingency, accident, bad luck, or finitude" that plague everyone on the ark and the cross of the World. "The Prager legend above the Tug & Maul still came on at the same moment every night," but the signs of the World are only neon legends (*Golden Arm*, 232).

If the sign of great art is to make us feel the unresolvable strife between Meaning and Matter, History and Earth, then Algren's art is marked by...



Nelson Algren on Division St. (1949), photographed by Art Shay. Reprinted by permission.



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MemL, show business semantically illustrates a small southern Triangle, and from cold appetizers you can choose flat sausages "lukanka" and "sujuk".

American Neon Signs: Illumination And Consumerism, given the value of the electropositivity of the elements, it can be concluded that the investment product is

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