

horatio alger and american modernism

the one-dimensional social formula

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Imamu Amiri Baraka's story, "The Death of Horatio Alger," is an important overlooked benchmark in the history of American literature because it so consciously marks the end of America's one-dimensional culture.¹ Baraka says even "Poets climb, briefly, off their motorcycles, to find out who owns their words. We are named by all the things we will never understand [and] all the pimps of reason who've ever conquered us." He speaks of the white, majority culture as a "complete and conscious phenomenon." And when Horatio Alger died for him, Baraka experienced his "first leap over the barrier." That is, he began to be free when he saw that serious literature was part of the complete and conscious phenomenon that owned his earlier words. By holding him in Horatio Alger's sort of life, literature, too, pimped his reason. It, too, conquered him. Serious literature was the cultural arm of social oppression. It was war carried on by other means.

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And there is a measure of truth in that claim, because Alger's influence outlived his 107 novels and even the 118 published in his name. Among the "highbrow" authors who kept Alger alive were Dreiser and Fitzgerald—in *An American Tragedy* and *The Great Gatsby*, both published in 1925. Also Faulkner's *Snopes* trilogy breathed life into the Alger pattern from 1925 until 1959. But what sort of life? Alger died, in fact, in 1899. Between that year and the 1960s his formula may be said to have had a transcendent afterlife in the books of American modernism which made

lasting fictions structured on Alger's paradigm. His afterlife terminated in the 1960s with the publication of such works as Baraka's story. Alger's prime bequest to American fiction was the complacent plot of the outsider breaking into society's structure, and its sustaining premise was that the only valuable life was within society. And so even such an expatriate as Hemingway finally falls within Alger's values when Jake and Brett follow the policeman's baton on the last page of *The Sun Also Rises*. It would be merely "pretty" to think they might build an alternative together. In saying that, Hemingway unconsciously illustrates William Burroughs' comment that "A functioning police state needs no police," for living outside society "does not occur to anyone as conceivable behavior." And yet alternative existences had been conceivable before Alger—in Twain, for instance—and they are conceivable again today in the works of post-modernism. Which is to say that the limits of modernism are now available to us as they have never been before, largely because the era is now sandwiched between times of contrast.

Preceding Alger was a period of tremendous ambivalence and consequent rich complexity in American literature. His slightly older contemporaries included Sinclair, Norris, Howells, Twain, Wharton and James. That is, the wide thematic diversity in the nineteenth century included illiterate boys on rivers, educated American girls in Europe, Lithuanian immigrants in Chicago, wheat growers in California and gentility in New York drawing-rooms. The literature reflected the society's genuine pluralism. Alger's novels, however, came at the time when that pluralism began to decline toward the seeming one-dimensionality of modern society and modern literature. After him and after the First World War, by all accounts, American society had gone a long way toward the centralizing bureaucratization of late urban life. These social forms moved increasingly to shunt aside the complex, often confused, but still rich stimuli of nineteenth-century American experience. Alger's novels helped perform the same function in American literature. And they helped provide the comforting mood of mind that would allow Americans to become accommodated to one-dimensionality.

Part of my title comes from Herbert Marcuse's famous book, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), but I use the phrase carefully. Marcuse's thesis is desperate. He suggests that there is no chance anymore in highly integrated—one-dimensional—modern societies for an alternative vision even to be *felt*, much less realized. But his book had the misfortune to appear in 1964—the very year of Mississippi Freedom Summer. SDS, SNCC, SCLC, CORE, RYM, RYM II, PLP and ERA—that whole inscrutable thicket of capital letters—were either on the scene that year, or shortly would be. So Marcuse's theory is not so truthful as it is important. It is important because in extreme form it expressed, or nearly did, the social despair of the modern intellectual. Yet in Marcuse's own year a burgeoning reform movement belied him. So that was Paradox One about Mar-

cuse's book and the idea of one-dimensionality. Paradox Two is that for all his book's dire fears, Marcuse did not go far enough at least in one respect: whereas he thought drastic unification was a new phenomenon, America, in fact, had had a one-dimensional *culture* for at least a century.

Henry James may not have been the first to notice the philistine limits to American culture, but in 1879 he noticed them most negatively: "no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, . . . no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures." And so on. James left the country. Not much after James wrote that, Huck Finn, seemingly a very different sort of person, left the country too. But they both left for the same fundamental reason: so fully had the middle taken over, so fully was the bourgeois figure the one figure America was beginning to support, that no inroads could be made from the top or bottom.

So forceful was the Alger formula in the culture that it excised alternative patterns preceding—and emerging during—his time. Twain's influence, for instance, was relegated to filling in niches in the Alger pattern. That is, modern characters after Alger and Twain have talked in Twainian dialect, but the dialect most often merely expresses Algeresque platitudes. The formula was the same no matter who was pronouncing it and no matter the attitude toward it. If American modernists disliked or hated the formula, they still felt constrained to follow it in order to talk about their country and culture. The Alger formula took occupation in the land. We recognize that occupation only retrospectively because our heroes and our few heroines have been to the reading public just as the psychotic is to the neurotic: the same as everyone else, only a little more so, and a little before us. But what were the laws of that occupation?

There have been three central creeds to the literature America inherited from the industrial age and from Alger. The first was: Join America or Leave Her—as Christopher Newman and Huck Finn found out (in James's *The American*, 1877, and Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884). A little later came the second creed: Join America or Die—as Edna Pontellier and Quentin Compson discovered (in Chopin's *The Awakening*, 1899, and Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*, 1929). This second creed developed as it seemed there was no escaping the totality of America, and as it seemed there was no territory to light out to. Then came a third creed: Join America and Die Anyway—as happened to characters as different as Jay Gatsby, Lemuel Pitkin and the eventual Flem Snopes (in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, 1925; West's *A Cool Million*, 1934; and Faulkner's *The Mansion*, 1959). And that was the beginning of the end for one-dimensional literature. Because all the options within society were played out, the pendulum swung away. Post-modernism began in the late fifties when Burroughs went into withdrawal and Ginsberg howled; and it continued in the sixties when Yossarian "took off" for Sweden, Brautigan went trout fishing in his mind, Rojack went to Guatemala and Yucatán, Rabbit ran, Pynchon began digging

under the rose and Baraka ended his *Tales* with a story about a revolution in progress.²

This contemporary literature demonstrates the inevitability of cultural pluralism. There are times when an economy and its culture can tighten like a noose, more and more narrowly defining the ways to be in the world. But there comes another time when everyone climbs down off the motored cycles of culture, as Baraka argues, to see who owns the words, who has been “pimping” reason. As “The Death of Horatio Alger” suggests, the perception that somebody else has been possessing one’s language is a finding of some surprise. By the discovery of loss there is also the plausible repossession of one’s words. And the perception also advises that escape is less spatial than cultural. One escapes not to a Woolfian “room of one’s own,” but rather to a dialect of one’s own.

Every cultural period says both yes and no to its social and economic structure. Sometimes, as with American modernism, the period says No! in thunder, but in the end sighs, yes. The next generation—post-modernism, in this case—has arisen out of that capitulation. For we have not yet had a one-dimensional society, no matter how truly one-dimensional the literature and larger culture have become. Always there has been the profound drama of what America has done to her disinherited and what they have done for themselves. And what is true for the literally disinherited is also true for everyone else. In letting literature give us words which, in time, ossify into shibboleths, we all let literature possess us. One of the highest missions of culture, therefore, is paradoxically to allow people their own words, thus to possess themselves, thus to create their own sub-cultures—which will need to be negated in turn, again and again. For that to happen, however, there must be an understanding of how peoples are culturally disinherited, of how they have been possessed. This paper is a study of the roots of one of the ways literature contributed to that processed, one-dimensional, culture.

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Alger did not determine the largely one-dimensional topic of subsequent modern American fiction, but he prompted and anticipated it. He gave youths agreeable images of what they could expect in life. In over a hundred novels, he defined the sense of what was plausible in America. And though those definitions were bogus in their simplicity, they nevertheless stuck. He recorded the shift in late nineteenth-century American culture from pluralism to monism—from many heroes and heroines, for instance, to a repeated bourgeois hero. Because his novels were so widely read and because the need was presumably so great for authors to address that theme, Alger established the topic. His lifetime was so happily congruent with the mushrooming national communications and transportation systems that his fiction was able to supplant regional folktales. Thus he represents the beginning of the pop industry as opposed to organic

folk sources. In fact, Alger began the urban, national "poptale." It is no accident that Edward Stratemeyer—the later author of all the Tom Swift, Rover Boys, Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys novels (among many other series)—began by pirating Alger's formula and imprimatur. There is a significant line connecting Alger, Stratemeyer and the children's industry today, a pop industry which fixes certain images early so that serious adult literature will have to deal with them later. This is one of the reasons contemporary ambitious fiction now draws so heavily on pop culture. For these historical reasons, then, it is important to pay attention to Alger's legacy. Whether one considers his formula a great sourcepool or a great cesspool of modern American fiction, Alger has been very important.

The American dream was a lode by the time Alger mined it. That perhaps as many as four hundred million copies of his books have been sold is testament both to the reality and fragility of the dream: clearly readers liked what Alger told. Clear, too, is that they needed to be reminded over and over again, as if the clarity he provided did not last long and soon left them confused again in a world resistant to his formula. That he probably wrote 107 novels along the lines of *Ragged Dick*, *Risen from the Ranks* and *Hobart the Hired Boy*, often in periods as short as from two weeks to a month, signifies that Alger worked from a substantial vein, but that it was deliquescent, constantly in need of being rediscovered.³

The social dilemma of a highly mobile society existed before Alger published his first novel, *Frank's Campaign* (1864). Moreover, the convention of self-help literature was as old as America and just as noble since it was well under way with Jefferson and Franklin.⁴ Alger's important function, therefore, was to catch the social stimuli at their great point of change as America became urban, industrial, and nationally conscious. Equally important, he almost monopolized the literary projection of those elements. While sharing substantially in the stream of the Adamic myth, he fixed a new sluice lending the flow its own distinctive features. The literature of the present century has had to account for them willy-nilly.

Alger's novels had three common plots: country boy goes to city and thus from rags to riches (*Ragged Dick*); city boy goes West and from poverty to respectability, so he can return to the city (*Joe's Luck*); wealthy city boy loses his luxury and then must provide for himself on the streets before regaining his just deserts (*Strong and Steady*). But in each case the dominant elements are the same. In the city novels, some people (usually, lesser people) go west; in the novels of the West, the heroes are urban and return to the city. The city is the starting and ending point for most of the novels; the focus is there. If only for this reason, the country-boy-in-the-city is the most important version of the Alger formula and would deserve primary attention. But it is also this version which has stuck in the popular consciousness of Alger, the version most thoroughly passed on into the twentieth century.

Like all fiction, Alger's is a departure from reality. If one definition of Romance, as Henry James said, is an authorial world cut loose from actuality like a balloon with severed string floating away from the ground, then Alger's "novels" are Romances. But directly proportionate to his severance from the common ground is his insistence that his novels are guidebooks constituting urban realism. This silent contradiction in his work goes far to account for the success Alger enjoyed in his own time. It is also the fundamental reason Alger is useful to read a century later as we try to understand the problems of the present.

Perhaps the best place to demonstrate his departure from the world then and now is in the populace of Alger's fiction. Always there is a hero with an Anglo-Saxon name, quick wit and appealing features: "attractive," "frank, straight-forward," "a share of pride, and a bold, self-reliant nature"; "if he had been clean and well-dressed he would have been decidedly good-looking." The villain of the story is equally recognizable: "slender and dark," with "a soft voice and rather effeminate ways"; he "never played baseball," was "sprucely dressed," and had "hands encased in kid gloves." The villain is never a poor boy, finally, but always represents scheming effeteness and luxury. When poor boys at first appear evil, as Micky Maguire does in *Ragged Dick*, they eventually knuckle under to the authoritarian system, often as valets to the hero.

This knuckling under and attendant obsequiousness occur, for instance, in *Joe's Luck*, an Alger novel of some importance because Nathanael West transcribed whole sections of it into his *A Cool Million*. Especially revealing are those passages in *A Cool Million* having to do with the "rip-tail roarer from Pike County" who terrorizes West's Lemuel Pitkin, rapes Pitkin's girl and is last seen carrying her off to Mexico on his horse.⁵ Alger's significantly tamer version had had the Pike County man end as janitor and chief bottlewasher in a restaurant owned by the hero. He had become "a reformed roarer . . . remarkably industrious." Likewise, in *Ragged Dick*, Micky Maguire is the poor boy who seems at first villainous. But Dick bests him at every point, verbally and physically. In the sequel, *Mark, the Match Boy*, it turns out that, "by his magnanimity, [Dick] had finally wholly overcome the antipathy of his former foe. . . . Micky had become an enthusiastic admirer of Richard." Micky's villainous threat is tamed, as was the rip-tail roarer's.

Untamed villains are scourged. These true villains, once discovered and shamed from the city, typically move "to Chicago, and perhaps further West." Having failed to dupe New Yorkers, they can always try again in the Midwest, moving successively to older frontiers, where it is easier to make one's way. Thus New York is a trial by fire and the rest of the continent, increasingly as the distance from the City is greater, becomes a fool's green pastures. Alger thus reversed expectations from earlier nineteenth-century popular literature by changing the locus of man-testing hardships from the mountain passes and river valleys to the

alleys and concrete canyons. The change is an important indication of the new dispensation Alger was formed by, as well as forming. It is also a fascinating example of how a culture moves into a new period by inappropriately reapplying past values to new stimuli.

Perhaps because he admired Henry James, Alger included in many of his novels a ficelle, who is normally younger, weaker, "less confident, and not so well fitted as [the hero] to contend with the difficulties of life, and fight his way upward." The ficelle allows authorial comment on the perils of smoking, drinking, and bad company. More significantly, however, he is another of the means Alger uses to place the hero in a setting of the golden mean—this time between the pole of slothful wealth (against which the ficelle counsels) and that of timid ineffectuality (which the ficelle embodies).

The hero normally has paternal problems.⁶ His real father is thwarted, lost or dead. If the father is thwarted, the hero reinstates him; if he's lost, the hero finds him; if he's dead, the hero erects a surrogate. Between the real and substitute fathers, however, there is often a wicked father who takes shape as one of the challenges the hero must overcome to prove himself. And the hero always does overcome these ultimately ineffectual adults. Mothers also appear in this self-reliant world. Whether they are real mothers (and thus good) or false mothers (and thus wicked), our hero finds ways either to protect them or to expose them. Thus Alger manipulates the plot so that society is finally reaffirmed. Heroes spend all their time rejecting parents but not parental values and structure, which they always embrace at the end. The enduring mythic dimension of this resolution is best stated by Ellison's *Invisible Man*, in his Epilogue: "we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built, and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence." All of this is to say that evil in Alger's fiction, and in its heirs, is pervasive but personal: aberrant, not systemic, not structural.

The chief personae in Alger's novels are interesting in themselves. But against the panoply of the minor characters Alger's vision relaxed the largest social tensions, for his resolutions of social conflicts provided for readers a very comforting way of shaping the world. Indeed, there is a formula of enduring dimensions lying in his dramatized social interactions. Ragged Dick is fourteen, admittedly an awkward age. Were he to grow much older he would be an adult—an adult shining shoes. The message of the story is that Dick is an exceptional youth; through luck and pluck, grit and wit, health not stealth, Ragged Dick becomes Richard Hunter, Esq. But whatever happened to the other urchins—the ones who hadn't the stuff of greatness?

In the early chapters of *Ragged Dick* they are everywhere on the streets and sleeping in doorways. Yet by book's end and Richard's ascent the streets are purified. In life as we know it, just as boys will be boys, they will also be men. In life as Alger formulized it, boys will be boys;

some boys will be men; but no boys will be visibly poor men. When poor men do appear, it is as thieves or confidencemen, whom the hero always catches and ships to Blackwell's Island, or the Tombs, or sends scurrying westward. When, toward the end of a novel, occasional representatives of the honest poor remain, Alger heroes always lend them a helping hand. Good Samaritanism, therefore, takes care of anything left over from the scourges. Poor men who fail to succeed in the system disappear and rich men who wallow in their luxury are shipped to Chicago. As symbolic action, this rise of one man with concomitant social cleansing action is serious. An ultimate world without threatening villains, without evil adults, without poor people, without problems: this is how the literary contribution to the one-dimensional society is made.

The hero enters manhood by affirming shopkeeper values. The novel documents to the nickel the money he saves, the cost of his room, the value of his accoutrements and furniture. He aims to inhabit an Astor Hotel suite, because in this pattern adulthood is marked by respectability and its furnishings. Unless one has these—otherwise symbolized by a gold pocket watch, a desirable fiancée, and a ticket (to New York City from the West, or up in a business firm)—one is not a man either in the sense of adulthood, or of simple effectuality. It may therefore be that the term “boy” is not entirely a racial slur, but is also class-related, for at least in Alger's fictive world all men worthy of the name are middle-class.

Alger lived in a time when it was still possible to have a distinct middle-class consciousness. No Alger hero ever aspires to or achieves the upper class, for the upper class is divorced from “fighting upward.” Living in lassitude is perhaps the lowest form of life; it certainly is reserved for the sallowest villains. The Old Bowery is a bad place; poor boys squander pennies there to relieve their sordid street lives. But Alger's final scorn falls on the likes of the boys at the fancy Madison Club where, for instance, Roswell Crawford deals down cards and drinks up dollars. Part of Alger's hate for grand wealth results from his Calvinistic doctrine of sin; part certainly stems from the demands of his conscious realism (one can't credibly rise *too* far from rags and bootblack); part is due to a simplistic rendering of finance (“there came a great catastrophe, and I found my brilliant speculations were but bubbles”).

Still, the chief part of his hostility toward wealth is doubtlessly rooted in an unconscious sense that the real danger to an aspiring middle class was the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of an upper class. He had to dramatize such a class as ineffective and had to dismiss its constituents if his formula was to work, if Ragged Dicks were to make it. The novels too repeatedly display the author's animosity toward the very wealthy and too often show the poor boy vanquishing them for any reader to doubt either that Alger had a great anger toward an over-monied class or that he saw them as invincible. In our history, Horatio Alger, Jr. is the first popular partisan of what we now call a managerial class.

The Alger legacy designates the way one makes a heap of money through a clean life and diligent work: from rags to riches through luck and pluck. Such is the shape of the Algeresque experience. But in so pronouncing the phrase we trip past luck, the most submerged but most important part of the cliché. The Alger hero typically shines shoes and sells matches for 153 pages, and then inherits \$50,000. Or he saves a rich man's son from drowning, and is adopted by the newly-found benefactor, who sends him to college. Or he drifts through New York until finally discovered by his father, a rich man the hero thought was long dead. Alger's heroes, although seeming to fight upward, must actually mark time passively until the critical juncture in their lives. Even when he attains success, the hero further hides his luck by maintaining a humble facade for a proper initiative period so that social change, while actually portrayed as fortuitous and saltatory, seems to be oiled and gradual.

Alger carefully suppresses luck's significance because if its importance were apparent, the formula would lose its credibility. But the obvious fact in each novel is that good fortune falls on the hero while mischance rains on villains. Therefore, in direct proportion to the number of incredibly lucky accidents in the novels, Alger obfuscates their necessity by repeatedly and rhetorically underscoring the overwhelming reliability of manly pluck, grit and prudential virtue. In short, Alger was skirting a central problem in his formula. It is luck that makes the man, but not obviously, because the formula and authorial rhetoric hide the luck. Nor is the luck simple—because really random chance would offer opportunity at least as often to pauper and crook as to hero and ficelle. Nevertheless, in Alger's formula, it is always the boy with manly pride who discovers the long-lost father, chances across a wealthy child drowning in the river or discovers that his paupered mother's farm is oil-rich. Unmanly types chance across wallets in other people's pockets; and when they try to capitalize on their discoveries, they are caught and sent to the Tombs. Therefore, although luck is finally necessary to success, only the plucky are lucky. Horatio Alger and his middle class are happy to spread around beneficences—but only to latent versions of themselves.

From the character of the relationships that casually occur—it's nothing for two boys to meet one afternoon and be bed partners that night—to the nature of the social ascent, Alger assiduously presents this society as open. But to consider this openness in a closer look and a comparison is to see something else in these novels. The movement in an Alger novel seems to resemble most closely the mode of the Bildungsroman—with one critical difference. Central to the Bildungsroman is the notion that a man's important period of development takes place in his youth, at roughly the age of Alger's heroes when they walk the streets. In the Bildungsroman, characters struggle with values in their youth and establish a lasting adult relationship to their society. Essentially, the Bildungsroman is a celebration of Pauline values in their struggle with

Corinthian ways; and the struggle is every bit as serious as in the biblical model. Young rogues learn in the *Bildungsroman* to put away childish things, but only slowly and reluctantly, because the childish things are initially attractive. The point of the form is that the rogue tries to remain Corinthian (or childish) as long as possible. The adult society of Pauline respectability must prove its superiority to the skeptical, self-pleased, and Corinthian hero. It does; and he puts away his childish things. In the formula of the Alger novel, however, there is no struggle with values, nor is there an important period of development. Boys struggle with material hardships, then are rewarded by a nice, middle class that was waiting only to see if the boys had gumption. Youths undergo economic transformations, but never develop new values. Boys on the street always knew they wanted to wear starched collars and eat petits fours; boys in the townhouses were glad they had advantages and were respectable, even if it was boring. In fact, only those boys with pluck—native capitalistic competitiveness—are allowed to transform their lives. A struggle with values is out of the question. Everyone who will endure in this Algeresque world is Pauline from the beginning. None of them actually liked his childish irresponsibility; each of them was always plucky.

Indeed, there is an important punning sense to the way Alger's heroes rise on pluck. They have assiduous pluck, yes, but more important is the way the good merchants "pluck" the hero out from a mob of street boys. This last understanding of action in the novels at least accounts accurately for the locus of responsibility and power in Alger's world. Except insofar as he was genetically endowed with gumption, the boy has had little to do with anything in his career. Alger has stood the *Bildungsroman* on its head and written a new genre instead—the *Sky Hook Romance*. But he has concealed the *Sky Hook* in the realistic machinations of his mode. Thus his audience grew up indoctrinated with luck but not knowing it, just as they believed they were reading about a struggle with values when they were actually reading about how a society scourges alien values.

Never do the police, the visible arm of the government, fail to aid the hero and his friends; authority is only appropriately heavy-handed, always friendly, always understanding of the distinction between honest hero and stealthy villain. Consonance exists between the authority of the social elements represented in the story and the authority of the narrative plot. All elements—of the formula and of the social form—dovetail agreeingly: policeman and author agree about who is bad and who is good. For Alger, there is but one possible rapprochement with the flux of society. Despite the narrator's speeches in every novel to the effect that boys make their own way, the obvious plot formulations show that society promotes certain boys. That is, despite the promise of great openness in the content and narrative rhetoric of the novels, the shape of each plot is tightly closed.

Fully continuous with this is the way the names in Alger novels telegraph the outcome before the events even begin to unfold. The characters' names do not individualize them, but class them; the names are as formulaic as the plots. There are contemptuously fancy names for upper-class characters (Roswell Crawford, Randolph Briggs, Philemon Carter); sturdy, monosyllabic names for the boys who will succeed (Dick Hunter, Ben Barclay, Frank Courtney, Joe Mason); and finally the ethnic and/or deprecatory names for "street arabs" whose fate it will be to disappear (Micky Maguire). When there is any confusion of heroes' names with those of villains, Alger calls the "street arabs" only by the surname, i.e., "Travis" and "Hawley." Likewise, Alger is not subtle when he dislikes a business firm which is exploiting the public or treating its employees badly; thus he names a lottery "Grabb & Co." and a publishing firm "Pusher & Flint." In another novel, a carpenter is "Mr. Plank," a detective is "Mr. Lynx" (who "ferrets" out information), and one attractive girl is "Rose Gardiner."

The real social divisions will ultimately dominate despite their apparent shuffling at any random point. Walter Conrad, in *Strong and Steady*, may be thrown into poverty by the death of his father and attendant conspiracies, may have to struggle desperately to maintain himself in a hostile world, but his due will come. He will be restored to his right place above hoi polloi. The hortatory message is that there are no class divisions in this society that cannot be overcome. But the form suggests very differently that the class divisions are absolute and never to be overcome, always to be fulfilled.

Alger's impact is ominous: in the way he grants potency and even existence only to those fully in accord with bourgeois values, while scourging alternative modes of being; in the way he assures solid consensus by closing society, while righteously insisting it is open; and in the personal cost to the few who succeed (to which we shall return). Most ominous of all is that this pattern sold so many books, presumably because it satisfied such great needs, and thus, at least in part, indicated that the reading audience participated in Alger's anxieties. His heroes acted out the resolutions his audience wanted. They were like the boys who bought the books, only a little more so.

iii

How did it happen that Alger's form, with all its imitators and detractors and believers, came so tenaciously to occupy the American mind? A partial explanation worth exploring here is that the dream, for Alger and his readers, was a necessary logomachy—prompted by their position, their guilt and their competition with a vital working-class subculture.

Alger's public was decidedly middle-class. The internal evidence indicates such an audience: the polite and formally written diction, excitement about schooling and the attention to details of clothing. And the

external evidence also indicates a middle-class audience: Alger books were selling at the price of a dollar a copy at the turn of the century (A. L. Burt Company). Alger's books were not penny pamphlets, nor were they distributed gratis by churches or other philanthropic organizations; try as he might, Alger was no Dickens. Tax-supported libraries were flourishing in American cities throughout the nineteenth century. Like the bookstore, theater, music hall and fine restaurant, however, libraries "could for the most part be enjoyed only by the few."⁷ This question of middle-class readership is of some significance because Alger has often been seen as a man writing guidebooks for the poor on how to get rich. For example, one recent critic has said of Alger's intentions, "Youngsters surrounded by poverty and sickness needed something to sustain them in their early years. Deprived of virtually all material comforts, they must at least be given the hope of a better future."⁸ Nevertheless, it was precisely because they were deprived of all material comforts—in addition to the fact that a great many of the poor did not even speak or read English—that "youngsters surrounded by poverty" did *not* read Alger. He wrote about the poor, and perhaps for them, but he was read by youngsters who resided in at least moderate comfort.

Equally insufficient to explain Alger's extraordinary popularity and his name's later crystallization into a household word denoting special success is the kind of blurb with which his publishers promoted him: "books that are good and wholesome, with enough 'ginger' in them to suit the tastes of the younger generation . . . healthy and elevating" (from the last page included in the Hurst & Co. reprints). However, James Otis, Edward Ellis and G. Harvey Ralphson ("The Great Nature Authority and Eminent Scout Master . . . of the Black Bear Patrol") also wrote healthy and elevating books with ginger in them. Yet there are no James Otis societies or Edward Ellis Awards presented annually, no G. Harvey Ralphson success stories headlined in the newspapers, although there still are Alger societies, awards and headlines. To explain the prominence Alger held in his day and his name's persistent appropriateness for a part of the American experience, it is important to review the needs of his audience.

The social facts of the years between 1865 and 1914 are familiar. It was the age when the city rose and the railroad too, when the West filled, when America developed a national to replace a regional consciousness, when centralization became possible in education and media and government. There was a tremendous rise in wealth; between the Civil War and 1890 the number of American millionaires grew from a handful to four thousand. In 1865, America was predominantly agrarian, but by 1914 only thirty percent of the population lived off the land. Between 1860 and 1910 the proportion of the population living in cities and towns increased from less than a quarter to almost half. Jay Martin reports that: "By 1890 a third of all Bostonians were of foreign birth. New York

held as many Germans as Hamburg, twice as many Irish as Dublin, and two-and-a-half times as many Jews as Warsaw . . . four of every five residents [of New York City were] of foreign birth or parentage.”⁹ The thirty thousand miles of railroad track in 1860 had become one hundred ninety-three thousand miles just thirty years later in 1890—a growth of six hundred forty-three percent. Growth in industrial output was similar. Surely, these are figures of seeming growth and openness.

There was, however, another side to the coin of growth. In 1885 there were nearly a thousand foreign language newspapers in the United States, signifying, among other things, large pockets of as yet “unmelted” ethnic audiences—people who either resisted or were repelled by open assimilation. These were also the early days of labor organizing—with police, industrial and labor violence probably more widespread than it has been since. These were the years of the AFL, IWW, ILGWU, ARU, railroad and coal strikes, Haymarket Riots, Knights of Labor, Prohibition Party, Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Greenback and Socialist-Labor and Socialist Parties, Mugwumps and Populists. In short, growth was making some people satisfied, angering others, but hardly providing consensus. Restlessness and discontent were growth’s flipside. Indeed, even at this period of great productive leaps, there was a strong feeling that for many Americans opportunity was closed. This central paradox in American history is central also to the appeal Alger had, for he silently spoke to it.

From our perspective in the next century, these conflicting versions of what it meant to live between the Civil War and the First World War seem hopelessly irresolvable. Nor are historians, for the most part, much help. Liberal scholars like Eric Goldman and Richard Hofstadter have emphasized the period’s opportunity, its “sheer vitality,” “unbridled ambition and audacity.”¹⁰ Directly opposed to them, however, has been the solidly entrenched theory of historical sociologists (and sociological historians) which is argued by scholars like the Lynds and Lloyd Warner. They argue that industrialization rigidified class lines and implicitly, therefore, the whole notion of social mobility in America is a sham. Fortunately, there is a somewhat recent resolution in the iconoclastic historiography of Stephan Thernstrom.¹¹

Thernstrom dismisses the dramatic rags-to-riches paradigm as “absurd” on two counts. First, it is “clear that growing up in rags is not in the least conducive to the attainment of later riches, and that it was no more so a century ago than it is today.” Second, that a few people rose from poverty to grand wealth is no indication of an authentically open society, only that “organizers and manipulators” come from all its segments. Like Alger, Thernstrom is more interested in the moderate success pattern, in the man who rose from laborer to the middle levels of the class structure. Thernstrom’s surprising findings are that there were three types of mobility—geographical, occupational and propertied—with a different dynamic for each.

There was extensive geographic mobility, but it did not mean vertical mobility, except for people who were already middle-class. At “the lower reaches of the social order, getting out of town did not ordinarily mean a step up the ladder somewhere else.” This type of keeping on, but not moving up, was the dominant feature of life in the nineteenth-century American city for the very poor, who were “buffeted about from place to place, never quite able to sink roots.” However, for those working-class people with property who were able to stay in one place—usually skilled laborers—there was “very impressive upward mobility, though not always of the kind we might expect.” Here the claims become very complex; there are differences in success patterns between native-born and second-generation workers, for instance, and between WASP families and those of other ethnic origin. But Thernstrom suggests “the most common form of social advance for members of laboring families . . . was upward movement *within* the working class, mobility into the stratum between the lower middle class and the floating group of destitute unskilled families.” Also, “the sons of exceptionally prosperous laborers did *not* enjoy generally superior career opportunities; the sacrifice of their education and the constriction of their occupational opportunities, in fact, was often a prime cause of the family’s property mobility.”¹² Which is to say, a Ragged Dick’s new job hardly meant he could bequeath a nest egg, as a new job traditionally meant that a middle-class person could. Although there was enough mobility in Alger’s day to suggest his faith in an open society was plausible, the mobility entailed very different possibilities for different groups. Today it may be true that “Once families escape from poverty, they do not fall back into it.” And that “Middle-class children rarely end up poor,” as Christopher Jencks claims.¹³ But Thernstrom demonstrates that very often the opposite was true in the nineteenth century. In fact, the parents’ rise frequently lowered the children’s chances. There was a cost to moving up for working-class people. This point marks not so much where Alger contradicts the historical record as where he unconsciously most submits to it.

The symbolic expense of success in the Alger formula is parallel to the material expense described by Thernstrom. A fundamental attraction of every Alger hero is the way each behaves so colorfully, so self-reliantly, during his period on the streets. During his street days he is as witty as he will ever be. For instance, while he was on the street, one of his companions told Ragged Dick he had seen Dick “before”; Dick replied, turning around, “Oh, have you? Then p'r'aps you'd like to see me behind.” If such is not the zenith of humor, it is still enough to make adolescents chuckle. Dick faced danger, and coped; he fought sin, and won; he faced poverty, and succeeded. In the success, however, he changed by definition.

To succeed is to become middle-class, and that necessitates effacing the features that made him interesting all along. To succeed means to

change from Ragged Dick, boy of colorful diction, to Richard Hunter, Esq., man of correct rhetoric. Here is the key moment when a merchant offers Dick his first position in a mercantile establishment:

“How would you like to enter my counting-room as clerk, Richard?” [the merchant] asked.

Dick was about to say “Bully,” when he recollected himself, and answered, “Very much.”

When it had sunk in that he was really to be a clerk in a respectable establishment,

Dick was so elated that he hardly restrained himself from some demonstration which would have astonished the merchant; but he exercised self-control, and only said, “I’ll try to serve you so faithfully, sir, that you won’t repent having taken me into your service.”

It is no coincidence that the novel ends just two pages later. The reader’s cathexis has been to Ragged Dick: that is, to a figure who is spontaneous, clever, textured, and empowered to elicit excitement precisely because he is working-class. When Dick becomes Richard, that interest stops; and so must the novel.

In literary terms the paradox is simply that the shopkeeping society that one is urged to join will not sustain emotional commitment. And the lumpen society one is urged to leave, while exciting millions of readers through several generations, is so self-embarrassed that it repeatedly represses itself. Each Alger novel defuses its own lively conflict: it arouses then souses itself.

That essential contradiction is why the historiographic controversy is significant to the literary issue. Even Thernstrom’s sophisticated answers to the question of nineteenth-century social mobility thornily retain the ambiguity of the historical debate about an open society. And his answers suggest the suspense of living through that experience. Therefore, both current scholarship and the covert conflicts in nineteenth-century literature tell us that American social agreement was superficial during the nineteenth century and that the culture was embedded instead in profound conflict. Alger’s fictions were one way that the middle class assured its youths that theirs was an open, fair world, in which all might make their way equally if they had proper pluck.

But then Alger’s readers, his middle-class adolescent boys, must also have felt that tension. They must have sensed the difference between their world and the working-class world, between the couplings of middle-class material possibilities and emotional effacement, on the one hand, and working-class material privation and emotional vitality, on the other hand. Such are the clichés Alger unconsciously dealt in and to which his readers subconsciously assented. His audience must have sensed the excitement, too, in the promise that some working children, if diligent enough, would fall heir to luck. Surely Alger’s young readers, free to visit libraries and given allowances by parents to buy books, realized the

difference between their own condition and that of the working children they passed on the way to the library or the newsvendor's. Here were children dressed in poor clothes and talking "low," as Alger describes them, who offered to sell matches, newspapers, or shoeshines to well-dressed rich children talking Standard English. There must have been an anxious distance—even guilt and fear—between the "vagabone" and the "respectable" child. The Alger novel laid itself over that gap between the two. It posed as a bridge but was more a rampart.

Alger's novels participated in that underlying dream of a loving fraternity between boys and among races (Irish and "Arabs" representing people of color) brilliantly identified by Leslie A. Fiedler.¹⁴ When Micky Maguire eventually becomes valet to Richard Hunter, or the Pike County Man washes dishes faithfully for Joe Mason, there is a manifest dream of racial understanding that is, in Fiedler's and Huck Finn's words, "too good to be true." It is, in other words, self-serving for the (white) middle class. But Alger's imprimatur was to make the dream not adolescently, innocently, beautiful (as in Cooper, Twain, Melville, Dana), but vicious. There is no period of equality between Richard and Micky as between Ishmael and Queequeg, no sense of Richard's learning from Micky as Leatherstocking learned from Chingachgook, no sharing of terms nor mingling of ethnic values. Richard and Joe conquer Micky and the Pike County Man. The Irish boy and the bluff barbarian meet the WASPs only on WASP terms. Their options are to knuckle under or be erased from existence in the Alger world.

Alger addressed the problem of a closed society by projecting a fictional world which he thought was open. At least in part, guilt prompted his novels. But he soothed guilty feelings in his middle-class readers by showing what he thought was a world in which all could rise equally. In fact, he even gave a kind of advantage to the street boys because he showed them going through the "school of hard knocks." He took the felt sense of distance and difference and defused it. We have seen how the actual contemporary predicament was chock full of profound disagreement. But Alger's process of defusion is rooted in the way conflicts *in his novels* is only superficial, and is, Alger claims, embedded in profound agreement.

That so many of America's best novelists—among them, James, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Dreiser, West, Mailer, Ellison and Baraka—have written in Alger's vein shows that Alger suggested parameters which have held sway persuasively through the first half of the twentieth century. But, impenetrable as those parameters may have seemed, they and literary modernism in general are presently under attack—an attack that has begun to look like a real alternative. A good test of the novels now billing themselves as post-modern is this final question: Do they avoid the tracks Alger laid down?

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footnotes

1. LeRoi Jones, "The Death of Horatio Alger," in *Tales* (1967; rpt. New York, 1968). LeRoi Jones has since changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka.

2. The references in this sentence are respectively to: *Naked Lunch* (1959), *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), *Catch-22* (1961), *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), *An American Dream* (1964-65), *Rabbit Run* (1960), "Under the Rose" (*The Noble Savage*, No. 3 [1961], incorporated into *V.* [1963], chapter III), and *Tales* (see note 1). For a discussion of the social formula of post-modernism, see W. T. Lhamon, Jr., "Break and Enter to Breakaway: Scotching Modernism in the Social Novel of the American Sixties," *boundary 2*, 3 (1975), 289-306. The distinction between modern and contemporary literature is now widely assumed by literary critics ranging from Leslie Fiedler to Frank Kermode. Current disputes are over the terms of difference and elements of (dis)continuity between the periods. My assumption in this paper is that the root of the issue lies in the period preceding both—in the popular culture of the late nineteenth century.

3. Both the number of copies sold, and the number of novels Alger wrote are variously estimated. The most careful bibliography is the revised one by Ralph D. Gardner, *Horatio Alger, or The American Hero Era* (Mendota, Ill.: The Wayside Press, 1971). My figures are from this edition. But for another account, see Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes* (New York, 1947), 153. Edward Stratemeyer added eleven more volumes to Alger's 107, making a total of 118 "Alger Novels." For information on Stratemeyer, see Gardner, 21-23, and Arthur Prager, *Rascals at Large, or, The Clue in the Old Nostalgia* (Garden City, N.Y., 1971), 101-02, and throughout; also see Russel Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York, 1970), 76-87.

4. For this early history, see John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-made Man* (Chicago, 1965).

5. For a sense of how very much of *A Cool Million* West appropriated from Alger, see Douglas H. Shepard, "Nathanael West Rewrites Horatio Alger, Jr.," *Satire Newsletter*, 3, No. 1 (1965), 13-28.

6. For an analysis of Alger's oedipal content, see Norman Holland, "Hobbling with Horatio; or the Uses of Literature," *Hudson Review*, 12 (1959), 549-57.

7. Charles N. Glaab and A. Theodore Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York, 1967), 101-02.

8. Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success* (New York, 1969), 55.

9. *Harvests of Change* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967), 55. My sources in these paragraphs are Martin, Glaab and Brown (cited above, footnote 5), and Ray Ginger, "Introduction," in *The Nationalizing of American Life, 1877-1900*, Ray Ginger, ed. (New York, 1965), 1-27.

10. This is especially true of Goldman. The quoted phrases are from his *Rendezvous with Destiny* (1952; rpt. New York, 1956), 3.

11. The most concise summary of his work is in "Urbanization, Migration, and Social Mobility in Late Nineteenth-Century America," in *Towards a New Past*, Barton J. Bernstein, ed. (1968; rpt. New York, 1969), 158-75. This article is the source for my account of his work in the following paragraphs, except where separately noted. Also see his full-length book, *Poverty and Progress* (1964; rpt. New York, 1969); and his paper, "Immigrants and WASPs: Ethnic Differences in Occupational Mobility in Boston, 1890-1940," in *Nineteenth-Century Cities*, Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, ed. (New Haven, 1969), 125-64.

12. These last two quotations are from Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress*, 160 and 155, respectively. The italics are his.

13. "Inequality in Retrospect," *Harvard Educational Review*, 43, No. 1 (1973), 139.

14. "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" in *An End to Innocence* (Boston, 1955), 142-51.