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# AUTHOR UNDER SAIL

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## THE IMAGINATION OF **JACK LONDON**, 1893–1902

JAY WILLIAMS

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS Lincoln and London

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Williams, Jay (James W.)
Author under sail: the imagination of Jack
London, 1893–1902 / James (Jay) W. Williams.
pages cm
Summary: "The definitive examination of the early
works of Jack London through London's incorporation
and understanding of the role of imagination"—
Provided by publisher.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8032-4991-2 (hardback: alk. paper)
ISBN 978-0-8032-5683-5 (epub)
ISBN 978-0-8032-5684-2 (mobi)
ISBN 978-0-8032-5682-8 (pdf)
1. London, Jack, 1876–1916. 2. Authors, American—
19th century—Biography. 3. Authors, American—20th
century—Biography. 4. London, Jack, 1876–1916—
Criticism and interpretation. 5. Imagination in
literature. 6. Realism in literature I. Title. II. Title:
Imagination of Jack London, 1893–1902.
PS3523.O46Z9955 2014
813'.52—dc23
[B]
2014020276

Set in Utopia and Geogrotesque types.
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*For Patsy*

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

CHAPTER 1
Spirit Truth 19

CHAPTER 2
From Absorption to Theatricality and Back Again 63

CHAPTER 3
"I Will Build a New Present" 95

CHAPTER 4
Sons as Authors 141

CHAPTER 5
Fathers as Publishers 184

CHAPTER 6
The Daughter as Author 238

CHAPTER 7
Lovers as Authors 287

CHAPTER 8
At Sea with the Family 326

CHAPTER 9
Yellow News, Yellow Stories 365

CHAPTER 10
The Return Home 411

Notes 465

Bibliography 563

Index 577

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have entered a rather exclusive club, not to be desired, that consists of authors who have taken an inordinate amount of time to finish a manuscript. One of the dues of this club is to pay respect to people one remembers being of help and to admit to forgetting an additional number of people who were equally helpful but whose names have been lost partly because one never imagined finishing the book.

An aide-mémoire is place: where I was when people helped me. So, in New York City, Chris Kotowski, Hugh Zurkuhlen, Steve Draper, Robert Peluso, Bridget Moore, John Kilduff, Dee Korz Kilduff, Priscilla Wald, Dave Johnson, Michael Neth, Mark Jones, G. T. Tanselle, and Ann Douglas.

In Glen Ellen, California, Russ Kingman, Winnie Kingman, and I. Milo Shepard.

In Glen Ellyn, Illinois, my mother and stepfather, Joanne and Leo Spector, deserve a very special call out: they financed my attendance at the first Jack London symposium, which started this whole thing (sigh), and many endeavors after, though it was never about the money.

In Chicago, W. J. T. Mitchell, Arnold I. Davidson, Françoise Meltzer, Bill Brown, Tami Wysocki, and all the people I worked with at *Critical Inquiry*, especially Dave Schabes, Jessica Burstein, John O'Brien, Paul Peppis, Kristin Casady, Andrew Skomra, Hank Scotch, Jeff Rufo, Anne Stevens, John Tresch, Robert Huddleston, Siobhan McDevitt, Melissa Oglesby, Jennifer Peterson, Abigail Zitin, Kate Gaudet, Zarena Aslami, Anat Benzvi, Neda Ulaby, and Andrew Yale.

In the world of Jack London studies, Tony Williams, Susan Gatti, Dan Wichlan, Susan Nuernberg, Jeanne Campbell Reesman, Ken Brandt, Joe McAleer, Lenny Cassuto, Jonathan Auerbach, Hensley Woodbridge, Andrew J. Furer, Earle Labor, Sue Hodson, and Cecelia Teschi. Clarice Stasz has been especially critical to my development as a Jack London scholar.

At the Huntington Library, Alisa M. Monheim, Jaeda Snow, Anne Mar, Carrie Saliers, Catherine Wehrey, Meredith Berbee, Sara Georgi, Mona Shulman, Kadin Henningsen, and Juan Gomez. It's not just about taking slips from patrons; I appreciate their kindnesses and support.



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At Utah State University, A. J. Simmonds, Brad Cole, and Clint Pumphrey.

A very grateful note to Matt Bokovoy, who stayed with this project for many, many years at two different presses and provided a crucial footnote to boot. Many thanks to others at the University of Nebraska Press, especially Joeth Zucco and Tish Fobben.

To Karen Brown, who copyedited this beast and became a collaborator.

My largest intellectual debt—and much more—is to Chris Gair, who read this manuscript several times and who argued with me all around the world.

To my siblings—Mark Williams, Anne Williams, Cathie McGowan, Amy Nickoloff (and her husband, Craig Nickoloff, who hosted me in Los Angeles a number of times), and Beth Kostka—and my dad, Mark Williams, and stepmother, Nancy Williams.

And especially to Clare Leary, who was there at the beginning, and to Alison Archer, who is sharing another beginning with me.

The last lines go to my daughter, Patsy Williams, whose unswerving love, support, and guidance made this book possible in so many ways. She embodies why writing is worthwhile: the expression of the joy in life.



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# INTRODUCTION

He, by some wonder of vision, saw beyond the farthest outpost of empiricism, where was no language for narration.
— Jack London, *Martin Eden*

Life lies in order to live. Life is a perpetual lie-telling process. . . . Appearances are ghosts. Life is ghost land.
— Jack London, *John Barleycorn*

Any traditional summation of events surrounding the date 1900—a year, like 2000, that draws our attention magnetically—will include the panic of 1893 and the formation and disintegration of Coxey's and Kelly's industrial armies, the Chicago Columbian Exposition, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the discovery of gold in the Klondike, the first public viewings of films, and the war with Spain. In general, it was a time in the United States of three key trends: industrial and financial development through consolidation and incorporation; world power exercised by military strength; and general protest and dispute voiced against the incorporating and military powers. Jack London was personally involved in four of six specific events during this time and a major figure of one of these trends. Perriton Maxwell, at one time the editor of *Cosmopolitan* and later a literary agent, contacted London in August 1916 to see if he would be interested in writing a short message "for one of the foremost and influential of American magazines" and for the "American people" in general on the question of "the significance of Christmas day 1916." Maxwell had been asked to contact "the ten most distinguished and representative citizens of this country." He tells London, "For many obvious reasons I have chosen you as one of this important group."[1] The irony of this request is stunning. First, Christmas was always a day of depression, anxiety, and aloneness for London. Second, by Christmas 1916 London was dead. Third, his writing career is bracketed by references to Christmas: his very first essay on socialism, written in 1895, begins, "Socialism



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and Christmas. How incongruous this specter, stalking forth when all is joy and merry-making!"[2]

What was obvious to Maxwell has been obvious to historians and critics. London's name appears in list after list of men and women who exemplified certain qualities of that time—the virile outdoorsman, the magazine writer, the labor agitator, the adventurer, the Californian, the bohemian. Whether it was a time of excess, or strenuousness, or energy, London seems to embody it. London himself called it the "machine age," both because of the preponderance of new machines that mechanized labor (and thus seemed to diminish the presence and status of the human being) and because of the high speed with which contemporary life moved.[3] Jack London's biographers also tend to focus on his social or political position rather than on his principal occupation as author. He has been a saint, a labor leader, the American Adam, the drunk and drug addict, the sailor on horseback, but not the author. Although there are any number of studies of his work, there is no full-length treatment of London in his principal profession.[4]

The critical studies of London's work deal first and foremost with the question of his position and value within the period of American realism and naturalism. Here I want to emphasize that I am using the terms *realism* and *naturalism* precisely as period markers, not as terms to define a succession of two generations of writers who supposedly shared a set of solutions to problems such as the insufficiencies of romanticism, the representation of reality in general, the representation of the machine age in particular, or other social and/or literary questions. I agree with Michael Davitt Bell that the use of these terms in this way is a falsification of the programs or agendas of the writers who published between the Civil War and World War I. In this, he and I agree with June Howard's more recent theoretical assessment about the appropriateness of the label *naturalism*, all the more telling as it comes in *The Oxford Handbook of Naturalism*. Although she admits to a certain professional investment in the term, being the author of a seminal work on novelistic form at the turn of the century, she nonetheless concludes that the genre is not "stable or coherent," that one cannot draw "a firm boundary around it," but "that it can be useful both as an historical and as an interpretive category." This assessment grows directly from our inheritance of poststructuralism's profound and necessary skepticism of classification: "entities are defined by



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contrast and inextricably involve each other (as Derrida vividly educes in 'The Law of Genre')."[5] Or as Bell says somewhat more darkly, "The ideas of American realism and naturalism, as descriptions of the form taken by significant groupings of novels by American writers, may be little more than figments of our literary-historical imaginations." Further, I also agree with Bell, against Walter Benn Michaels, that although "the only relation literature as such has to culture as such is that it is part of it"—as Bell cites Michaels—"the same thing must be equally true of the relation between *writers* and culture." (Michaels's project of "subverting the primacy of the subject in literary history" represents an incomplete reading of Barthes and Foucault on the disappearance of the author, a reading that Michaels, Amy Kaplan, and others have now balanced in work with which I hope the present book partners.) Historicizing the former (writers) through an analysis of the latter (culture) is Bell's and my project. London, however, represents, apparently, such a distasteful figure to Bell that he could bring himself to mention him only twice. I say this because he himself confesses to a deep antipathy to the subjects whom he does study: William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Henry James, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and Sarah Orne Jewett.[6]

I have chosen Jack London as the subject of this study in part because I argue that in one crucial respect he was *not* representative of realist/naturalist writers. Unlike Stephen Crane, Edith Wharton, William Dean Howells, Frank Norris, and others, the figure of the author, writer, liar, and tall-tale teller appears in nearly all his work.[7] The presence of this author figure indicates the central concern for London as an author, a concern that goes against the grain of the major literary trend of his time. For the realist/naturalist writers, the question most often asked seems to concern representation: how did they perceive the relation between writing and objective reality? There is, though, another important question concerning representation and one that figures most poignantly for London: how do authors conceive of the relation between writing and inner states of mind? More broadly we are asking how an author conceives of his or her own imagination. How does the unknown, or the unseen, come to be known, come to be seen? Given that this set of questions comprised London's principal preoccupation as a writer, it is no wonder, then, that we find very little in his nonfiction about his generation's response to nineteenth-century writers or a personal concern with upholding his generation's



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conception of what writing should be. I argue that although London was obviously aware of the debates surrounding realism and romance he side-stepped the issue entirely by using a multiplicity of author models and by deliberately blurring the traditional boundaries of realism and romance by focusing on the larger issues of absorption, theatricality, and the representation of the seen and the unseen. London's use of the terms *impassioned realism* and *sincerity*, however, are ways he placed himself within this contemporary debate without conceding its primacy for him. For the most part, London is not representative of his literary generation because he did not feel compelled to address their same concerns in overt fashion. His own concerns were far too personal in nature.

I don't mean to repeat what Michael Fried has called the "standard fare" of literary criticism—that stories are always about the writing of themselves.[8] London's work is in some literal sense a meditation on all facets of the constitution and role of the author. In fact, the continued, obsessive, almost oppressive presence of author figures and fake author figures in London's work—from Malemute Kid and Avis Everhard to Humphrey Van Weyden and Tom the feeb, from Martin Eden to Darrell Standing, from Smoke Bellew to Kohokumu, from 'Frisco Kid to Tarwater—suggests to me that London was deeply troubled by his own creative urge. If London was troubled with his own inner being, one would expect that these author figures would be conflicted as well. This is the case, more often than not. And, more often than not, this inner difficulty is manifested in his fiction, not simply in his creation of author figures but also in his consistent deployment of the theme of the suprarational or, more broadly speaking, the general sense of hauntedness and dream states. London was troubled—that is, haunted—by his own creative power.

This mysterious power of an author's imagination has its effect on the reader as well, and London's work also explores the symbiotic relationship between haunted author and haunted reader. Picture, as London might put it—his novel *Before Adam* begins, "Pictures! Pictures! Pictures!"; chapter 3 of *The Road* is entitled "Pictures"; *The Son of the Wolf* ends with the phrase "many pictures came and went"; and many of his notes for novels to be written begin with the injunction, "Picture"—a reader with a book, say, *The God of His Fathers*, and he or she is reading the short story "Which Make Men Remember." The reader is quiet, of course; one could even say he or she is mute. Somehow from the black marks (are they raised up on



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the page, or are they holes—or even abysses—in the page?) emerges a disembodied voice, replacing the reader's own voice. From an indeterminate place—the page, the marks themselves, the voice of the author from the beyond, the mind of the reader?—a voice is heard, stronger and more real as the reader reads on. The reader's skin pales, perhaps from the effects of the story, but also from the effect of the act of reading itself. From inaction, the reader feels a chill and finds a blanket. The longer he or she reads, the paler he or she gets, until someone tells the reader to go outside and get some sunshine. One might understand London's famous adventuring as an attempt to escape the ghostliness of reading and writing.[9]

Mute, pale, immobile, in touch with disembodied voices: how similar to ghostliness, to death, to, even, a mesmerized subject. In 1844, in Victorian England, a guest at a party was mesmerized, "laid out on a sofa, cold and senseless, her white face the visage of a corpse."[10] In an image reproduced in the British magazine *Belgravia*—home to Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and others until it ceased publication in 1899—a woman with a book on her lap seems to have either fallen asleep, fallen into a trance, or died, while to her right her ghostly self in the company of her newly wedded husband appear dancing in the company of others. Whatever the actual state of the reader, her posture mimics the state of her book: open, emptied, splayed out. Both have become channels for something outside themselves. The longer the spirit of the author's imagination resides in the reader, the more ghostly he or she becomes, and more like the author, in the grip of the imagination.

The effect can trigger very odd reactions, even or especially in sensitive readers. Alex Kershaw's recent biography begins with a first-person narration of his trip to London's ranch; his goal is to find London's grave, "half-hoping to meet London's ghost." How many other readers have haunted London's grave and books, hoping to meet London in the afterlife?[11] Not that infrequently, rangers at Jack London State Park find human remains scattered about, the ill-advised last wish of a London fan. Reading has the paradoxical effect of both inducing a near-death physical state and yet providing the spark and will to sustain life, to continue on. Readers, given life by their authors, are thus created by their authors, ready but also encouraged to transform themselves completely.

London consistently deploys the theme of the suprarational or, more broadly speaking, the general sense of hauntedness and dream states.



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Thinking himself alone in the world, London was surprised to see a ghostly presence next to him, the "face" of his imagination, and it both intrigued and frightened him. Ghosts permeate his work—from Buck as ghost-dog to the name of Wolf Larsen's ship; from his early horror tales (for example, "The Ghostly Chess Game") to his later work (for example, the shrunken heads in "The Red One": the cover of *The Red One* shows a glowing, ghostly figure); from the White Silence to the disembodied voice of John Barleycorn—and they are very often paired with author figures. In short, London was haunted by his own artistic talent. His work in fact became a kind of ghost itself, as *White Fang* returns to the plot (or should we say graveyard) of *Call of the Wild*, *The Star Rover* returns to *Before Adam*, and so on. He sought to answer two fundamental questions that any artist must ask: what sort of muse was he responding to, and, to get to the bedrock of the matter, was there in fact a muse at all? Was there, in fact, a face in the mirror next to his?

To an extent he answered affirmatively if only because his work took on an undeniable, factual, material existence; and yet another facet of this present book is to examine London's relations with his publishers, editors, and agents. These were crucial relationships that not only provide a solid socioliterary background for my speculations upon London's creative imagination but also reveal much new and necessary information with which to understand London biographically. No detailed, chronological work has been done on London's writing output, let alone his business relations, and my aim is to intertwine the narrative of these relations with the analyses outlined above.

When London had convinced himself—at least temporarily—that the ghosts were real, he had to sort out for himself what models of authorship to follow. His business relations help reveal not merely the practical side of an artist but more importantly the formation of the writer's office of authorship. London was very much aware of professional models, both old and new, and I will argue that his conflict with his own creativity becomes enmeshed with both an acceptance and a rejection of the dominant model of Progressive Era authorship. *Martin Eden*, in fact, is the story of the ultimate rejection of that model.

As much as London wanted to refuse his imagination, he could never deny to himself that he possessed a great amount of creative talent. He was continually at war with it. He abused it, exploited it, and never nurtured it.



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With Ernest Hemingway, he could say, "In going where you have to go, and doing what you have to do, and seeing what you have to see, you dull and blunt the instrument you write with. But I would rather have it bent and dull and know I had to put it on the grindstone again and hammer it into shape and put a whetstone to it, and know that I had something to write about, than have it bright and shining and nothing to say, or smooth and well-oiled in the closet, but unused."[12] When he was at peace with the force that drove him to write, he played with it and tested it. He never exposed it to public scrutiny. He may not have understood what his imagination required of him, but he was not going to let others analyze the problem for him. And if he did not understand it, he certainly was not going to pretend that he did. As a result, he exposed his writerly self infrequently and with a good deal of sleight of hand. It is the task of this present study to bring that self into the light of day and tell the story of its development.

Jack London defined himself as an author in social, financial, political, and legal terms. Without this identity, he would have existed on the margins of industrial America. He would have been a workbeast. He did not write books in order to become a name. He did it to retain and expand his humanity. He created a new and larger self. Criticism and authorial history help us to understand how he sought for and won for himself his own signature. The tangible forms that this name took were in the shape of his notes and books and in the contracts he signed with publishers. In a very real sense, London independently asserted, and the publishers granted him, his identity.

But principally this book examines how one writer experienced the act of writing his own work. Bypassing psychoanalytic theory, this book borrows terminology from Michael Fried's work in art history, specifically *absorption* and *theatricality*, *immersion* and *specularity*, to get at an understanding of an author's interiority and his relationship to his audience. One example from Frank Norris's self-criticism will serve as an indicator of how these art historical terms were applied during London's lifetime. Writing to the book reviewer and friend Isaac Marcosson, Norris summed up his newly completed *A Man's Woman*: "It's a kind of theatrical sort with a lot of niggling analysis to try to justify the violent action of the first few chapters. It is very slovenly put together and there are only two real people in all its 100,000 words. . . . I am going back *definitely* now to the style of MacT. [*McTeague*] . . . The Wheat series will be straight natural-



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ism."[13] To Norris "theatrical" means analytical, showy, demonstrative, and without psychological depth. One can assume that he would have linked absorption with naturalism and success. Given that Norris spent two years studying art at the Académie Julian in Paris, where William Bouguereau—whom Norris described as a "well-to-do butcher"—and others taught, it is interesting to speculate whether Norris had read Denis Diderot and learned of his valuation of absorption, or if Diderotian aesthetics were circulating in the ateliers of the Académie Julian.[14] Given Bouguereau's abhorrence of the conjunction of photography (which he called realism) and painting (which favored as idealism)—he once told his students, "I detest realism . . . for it is nothing but photography. . . . Well, if you are a painter it is so that you can do better than photography, so that you can beautify nature"—London would come to place himself philosophically as an artist apart from someone like Bouguereau, even if he—like Norris—could appreciate disparate schools of art.[15] In any case, I want to advance beyond questions of commodity production and body theory and return, refreshed by those same questions, to the issue of the solitary author gripped by and seeking to come to terms with his or her imagination.

At the same time, I borrow terminology from what might be called the philosophy of the subject, specifically the work of Akeel Bilgrami. I want to link the terms *absorption* and *subject position* and use them complementarily. The first step in this process is to make the distinction between the identity of the author and the office of the author. One is a matter, though not exclusively so, of personal construction. The other is a matter, though again not exclusively so, of socioeconomic, cultural, and textual construction. When we look at the relation of the subject-author to his or her text, we have to take into account the exchange between the individual act of subject formation and the socioeconomic and cultural forces that are exerting their pressures, on the individual and the texts both, at the same moment. Or to put it a different way, identity formation goes to and comes from models of authorship. Just as authors are able to some extent to create and maintain themselves, so too do others and texts create and maintain them.

To assert the importance, or even the operation, of such a dialectic is to presume that the figure of the author—the living, historical author—somehow matters in the conduct of literary analysis. I contend that the living figure of Jack London does matter, but not in the way that traditional



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author criticism and its most recent incarnations hold it to matter. To put it bluntly, we will never be able to retrieve a pure London presence from the creation of Martin Eden—or, for that matter, from the words of the narrators of *The People of the Abyss*, *John Barleycorn*, and the other semi-, quasi-, or "straightforward" autobiographical works. As Roland Barthes rightfully asserts, "in the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*."[16] There exists a relationship between the living figure of Jack London and his representations of authors and author figures, but it is not the one-to-one correspondence of a code. London's fictional authors must always be regarded in the light of his own practice as near as we can discover it; they are not evidence of that practice.

But if *practice* marks what I mean by the office of the author, what is meant by the identity of the author? Ethical and moral theories of identity and selfhood seem best suited for this task, especially within the context of professionalization. Ethical theory can and often does center on practice, and I find that I can thus make better sense of the dialectic between subject and world. Practice, as a manifestation of authorship, cannot occur in isolation. The keywords for this methodology or path of study are *practice*, *authenticity*, and *fundamental commitment*. These concepts can help us locate London's authorial identity in the world of his texts. In this book I will demonstrate London's choices as an author and show how his sense of authorial self led him to those choices.

*Authenticity* is synonymous with *sincerity,* a keyword in London's vocabulary that he consistently used to describe his authentic authorial self. In a crucial letter to George Brett, president of the Macmillan Company, London writes, "I have always insisted that the cardinal literary virtue is sincerity, and I have striven to live up to this belief. If I am wrong in the foregoing, if the world downs me on it, I'll say 'Good bye, proud world,' retire to the ranch, and plant potatoes and raise chickens." Here is a near-complete statement of what I take to be a fundamental commitment. Sincerity is such a deep value for London that it is synonymous with his idea of the writerly self. London must be sincere to live as an author and not just to make a living as an author. In the same letter he writes, "In *The Road*, and in all my work, in all that I have said and written and done, I have been true. This is the character I have built up; it constitutes, I believe, my biggest asset. . . . I am willing to grant the chance that I am wholly wrong in believing that sincerity and truthfulness constitute my big as-



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set."[17] *Truthfulness* and *sincerity* are the words that he wants to use to describe his very authorial self—"all that I have written."

Further, he asserts that people buy his books because "this is the character I have built up"—a truthful, sincere persona. He does not say that he constructed this persona so that he could sell books, although he would have been safe in saying that to his publisher. So we can take him at his word. And if his books do not sell, he tells Brett, he imagines himself earning money in a new way, living a new life, being a farmer; he does not offer to change his writerly persona. Sincerity, then, is a fundamental commitment. That is, to give up on sincerity or truthfulness as a writer would mean to give up being a writer. Without a belief in sincerity, London concludes he could no longer be authentic as a writer. He would lose a sense of an integrated self and be forced to refashion himself.

By looking at his career as a whole, I believe that there are at least six ways in which London practiced this fundamental commitment: locale, mobility, documentation, continuous production, dual publication, and publicness. To give up any one of these would have been to be insincere, that is, inauthentic. These are the nonnegotiable details of his authorial identity.[18]

From London's point of view, the totality of these practices did not fit one single, preexistent model of authorship. By *model*, I mean to employ a keyword to work in dialectical relation to those keywords that describe subject formation. *Model* points to the system by which one can organize and marshal one's individual practices of authorship. A model grants one a protocol for dealing with publishers, agents, and editors. It gives one a method for submitting one's work. It may even actively determine the content of the work, how one composes, how one revises, or whether one should do so. Martha Woodmansee, in her study of the relation between the formation of the author-subject and copyright law, usefully delineates three general models: the craftsman (who is "inspired" by the market), the poet (who is inspired by the divine), and the genius (who is inspired from within).[19] London studied, considered, chose, and rejected from among these three categories, which he encountered in his extensive reading in fiction, poetry—especially Milton and the British aesthetes—writers' manuals—L. A. Sherman and Herbert Spencer among others—and writers' magazines—for example, the *Writer* and the *Editor*.

However, none of these models were sufficient for London, for he came



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to each of them needing more than they offered. He encountered them not just in books and magazines but in letters from and meetings with editors and publishers. In these encounters, a conflict often developed, based not merely on financial matters but primarily on questions of status, power, and identity. At times, when London felt that he was being forced to write in a way he did not wish to, he experienced an identity crisis; foreign practices clashed with his sense of self. In the end, however, he stuck to his nonnegotiable commitment to sincerity and its six manifestations in the practice of writing.

Locale is a defining characteristic, a formative practice. London chose to be a western author. He consciously rejected European and East Coast models of authorship. According to the latter, a western writer should graduate from local color, journalism, humor, and small-magazine publication and proceed to mature novel and magazine writing in the East. Frank Norris, Gelett Burgess, Bret Harte, Condy Rivers, and others all followed this path. Rivers, the hero of *Blix* (a novel that climaxes with the hero's departure to New York to take a editorial job with the Centennial Publishing Company), most emphatically wanted to "arrive": "Of all the ambitions of the Great Unpublished, the one that is strongest, the most abiding, is the ambition to get to New York. For these, New York is the *point de depart*, the pedestal, the niche, the indispensable vantage ground."[20] S. S. McClure offered both Norris and London the same kind of job in the same time period at almost exactly the same moment in their careers. Norris took it, and London emphatically rejected it. The physical frontier may have closed, but London re-created it in the psychological space of the author's identity.

Travel had served him temporarily to escape poverty and jail and became synonymous with observation, thought, and ultimately writing. Further, faced with dilemmas of choice—for example, McClure's offer of a guaranteed income coupled to the requirement to work in an office in New York—he chose mobility. George Brett understood how writing and travel worked together for London when he wrote,

> You are the most energetic man with whom I have ever had to do: not content with the execution of a programme the life of which the world has seldom seen in the way of navigation and exploration [he is referring to the *Snark* voyage], you are in addition able to keep your mental



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> faculties constantly at work on your books, and now you tell me of the beginning of a new novel of a hundred thousand words. Personally I have always found travel most inimical to the prosecution of any sort of continued mental effort. Apparently your own faculties are merely stimulated thereby.[21]

This choice worked into his writerly way of life in another way: as physical activity, especially sailing, camping, and traveling of all kinds. The many photographs of London writing outside testify not so much to his "naturalness" but his decision to be a writer on the move.

Tied into mobility is documentation. Much of London's work finds its origin in what he called *human documents*, a complex term used principally by the staff of *McClure's Magazine* to designate sometimes photographic, more often textual re-creation of the past. London himself used the phrase not to describe photographs but to explain the photographic veracity of the sources for his fiction. In doing so he was using writing as a kind of photography—literally, "writing with light"—and photography as a kind of writing. The phrase "human documents" was another, more complete way of expressing what he had Martin Eden express by the phrase "impassioned realism" or what he himself called "idealized realism."[22] The idealization or passion came out of the real, and however slippery these terms were—and he was quite conscious of their ambiguity and tendency to overlap—he nonetheless insisted that what was known as real was that which could be documented.

London chose to sell his work to magazines first and then had the work republished in book form. In this sense dual publication—I mean the phrase to work in two distinct ways—is one indicator of London's confluence of roles, that is, of author and agent. However, it was not simply a good business maneuver. It was a choice he made that guaranteed an income without a sacrifice of artistic integrity. For example, in the second period of his career, Brett agreed to publish him as he wished, and Macmillan published at least one book a year from 1902 to 1916. London was assured that his writings had a permanent home in book form, and this security allowed him to demure to magazine editors who invariably wanted to cut and rewrite his work to fit a more limited audience and format. Without Brett's backing, London would have been forced to choose



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between the lucrative contracts magazines offered and the necessity of publishing exactly what he wrote.

Dual publication has another meaning as well. It is one of the peculiarities of London's oeuvre that his books seem to repeat themselves at least once, the second version an attempt at a deeper, more fulfilling version of the first; as I said earlier, some works can be considered as ghosts of other works. Not every work is doubled, but most are, and it seems to have been London's intent to work out ideas and characters over the course of a number of stories or novels to get them just right. *Call of the Wild* pairs with *White Fang*; "To Build a Fire" (1901) with "To Build a Fire" (1907); *The Iron Heel* with *A Farthest Distant*, one of his uncompleted projects; *Before Adam* with *The Star Rover*; and so on.[23]

To understand the public nature of his authorial identity, we need to recognize that his writings, even his most overtly political ones such as "Revolution," are not easily categorized as either political or nonpolitical. Nevertheless, we need to risk that distinction in order to see how his so-called political writings engaged his readers in a way different from his fiction. Fried's concepts of absorption and theatricality give us the opportunity to take this risk by focusing on the author-reader relationship. We can align London's fiction with the concept of absorption and his nonfiction with theatricality. By risking this separation of fiction and nonfiction, by using Fried's twin concepts as, so to speak, forceps, the distinction becomes less about the presence of a political message or lack of it than it does about London's engagement or withdrawal from his audience. In his political work, London addresses his reader directly instead of lulling him into a ghostly torpor. London insisted on waking his readers up from political apathy and ignorance. He wanted to provoke, to anger. Also, these writings were composed exclusively against the desires of the marketplace, against what readers presumed they wanted most from reading. He sought to engage and persuade (or browbeat, for the public good) his readers even if it risked permanent alienation. And although he did lose many of his readers over the course of his career, he never lost his status as a principal figure in the public sphere of early twentieth-century America, as Perriton Maxwell recognized.

His writings were not the only texts that kept him politically engaged with America. We need to analyze not just his appearances in advertisements, on the lecture circuit, in scandalous newspaper stories, and in the



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guise of London imitators or doubles, but also the wide impact of his catch phrases—"the call of the wild" and "the iron heel"—an impact that lasts to our day. The domestication of London's radicalism occurs in our time when we see titles of books such as *The Call of the Mall*. Part of the task of this book is to renew his radical nature and to keep alive his critique of American society.

London's so-called overproduction can be seen not as a sign of egotistical domination of the external world but as a ritual to maintain his authorial identity. Bailey Millard, an old-time friend and editor, recalled in his memorial of London in 1916 his last meeting with the author: "He was proud of his industry. While in his library the other day he pointed to a long row of books and said to me: 'These are all mine—more than forty of them—no two alike.'"[24] It was necessary for him to produce so much because he sought constantly to experiment with form. It is this particular practice that brought about a challenge from Brett that prompted London to write the "sincerity" letter quoted above, the letter that so clearly documents a crisis of identity. That is, Brett had asked London to postpone the publication of *The Road*, which London had just informed Brett was nearing completion. Brett's request, which does not survive, was preceded by his 23 January 1907 letter, which sets the context of London's "sincerity" letter. Brett wrote apropos of a change in the framing he had suggested for *The Iron Heel*, "You must bear in mind always that any suggestions that I take the liberty of making to you are made always from the commercial standpoint and that I say it with a view to your commercial interest as much as to our own."[25] In this spirit, he suggested that the near-simultaneous publication of *The Road* and *The Iron Heel* would overburden London's readers; Brett later sent London a clipping from the *New York Times* that purported to support his case. London, in turn, upped the stakes. It wasn't a question of sales; it was a question of authorial identity: "No," London emphatically wrote in his "sincerity" letter, "if you put before me good evidence that the publication of *The Road* would be likely to damage the sale of my other books, it would not affect the question of my desire for you to go ahead and publish it. . . . And while it is possible that just immediately the sale of my other books might be slightly damaged, I believe ultimately there would be no damaging effect at all." London was then moved to make his larger claim about truth, sincerity, and authorial self. In other words, if Brett wanted to publish the person



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of Jack London, he must take the risk of market saturation. The two could not be separated.

Market saturation may seem like a risky business practice (which is why Brett questioned it), but to London, conducting business in this way gave him the freedom to write as he was moved to write and the freedom to publish a work as soon as it was completed. He told Brett, "I look back on my life and draw one great generalization: IT WAS MY REFUSAL TO TAKE CAUTIOUS ADVICE THAT MADE ME," and of course the idea of making oneself is not limited to monetary success; authorial identity, not the matter of caution, is the subject in this and in every sentence of the letter.[26] He chose to write according to his fundamental commitment to sincerity, and overproduction, as well as locale, mobility, documentation, continuous production, and dual publication, was an essential practice and manifestation of it.

A study of London's processes of writing and his conception of himself as an imaginative artist would be incomplete if his authorial life were not placed within its historical and social context. So we return to the beginning of this introduction and the major trends and events in which London participated. *John Barleycorn*, for example, seems to be simply an early prohibitionist tract. It is that, but it is also a central text of American bohemianism. Written in 1913 (that is, ten years after what biographers assume was London's brief exposure to and involvement in Californian bohemian culture), *John Barleycorn* was not an aberration in London's work or simply another realization of his autobiographical output. It represents the fullest expression of another strain of London's work and thought. Bohemianism embraces both hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure and idleness as the fundamental goal of human existence (as argued, for example, by George Russell and David Hume), and a counter-communitarianism. Both of these principles are of course alternatives, like socialism, to the work-a-day world of mass consumerism. One illustrative point: London's scheme of producing a set amount of words a day—that is, during the days when he intended to work—was a method to empower him to be idle—hedonistic—the rest of the day. His regimen—often mistakenly placed by biographers and critics within the contexts of machine culture, theories of the body, and national concerns with time, labor, and recreation—is actually a response to the local, Californian bohemian movement to which London was very much drawn. Yet he could never commit himself entirely



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to the bohemian life. His work regimen was a self-protective device. His insistence against a belief in inspiration, in part, was a way to keep him from what was so attractive about bohemian life. These tensions between the extremes of work and the extremes of leisure must be taken into account in any consideration of what London meant by authorship.

Other contexts exist in which to situate London's work, and each of them finds a partner among the six manifestations of his nonnegotiable commitment to writing. Besides socialism and bohemianism, which tie into locale, mobility, and documentation, I look at spiritualism and photography and how they inform and contrast with London's practice of writing. I also look at the emerging consciousness in California of a Pacific world, a world in which Californians see themselves, not just as American West Coasters, but as members—sometimes exploiters—of a world community that encompasses Hawaii, Alaska, South America, Australia, Japan, China, and others.

One other context, and the one that gives the overall structure to this book, is London's relation to his editors and publishers. With the writing and blissfully quick publication of "Story of a Typhoon off the Coast of Japan," in 1893 in the *San Francisco Call*, Jack London began his writing career. He was seventeen. Franklin Walker has noted that "it was going to take a long time to become a good writer (over five years were to elapse before he would start publishing regularly) but never for any length of time after the appearance of the *Call* article did he stop taking notes or scribbling sketches and stories."[27] London finished his last short story on approximately 2 October 1916. On 21 November 1916, he wrote another portion of a new novel, titled *Cherry*. That night he was in a coma, and he died the next day. Between the onset of adulthood and the day before he died, therefore, London never stopped writing. His life, therefore, took shape as his career took shape. Further, the amount of his production poses the first great obstacle in organizing that career in a coherent fashion, and small wonder that those who have looked at his life and career as a whole have used the major events in his life to structure and give meaning to his writing. The closest thing to an accepted division of London's career into distinctive stages is the one proposed by James McClintock: a sudden burst of creativity and then a gradual decline and glorious but aborted rebirth.[28] However, any organization of London's composing history is artificial if it relies, as does McClintock's, on the relation between how he lived his



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life and a reading of the content of what he wrote. My alternative is to look at the series of transactions London made with the business world of publishing that helped him make the next choice in what to write. These transactions—his first published work, his first book contract—work as objective markers for organizing a massive amount of writing, and they help us avoid the biographical pitfall of coloring the quality and choice of his work according to the nonauthorial events of his life: the marriages, the loss of children, the adventures, his move to Sonoma, the burning of Wolf House, and so on. And so I assume in the story that follows that the major events of his life are sufficiently known to all. In this way I hope to make more clear three important characteristics of London's career: first, his complex attitude toward the relationship of career and money; second, his prominent position in the history of American magazine and book publishing during the early twentieth century; and, third, his consistent attempt to produce his best work in response to acts of good faith on the part of his publishers, which invariably took the form of multiyear contracts.

These six contexts—bohemianism and socialism, spiritualism and photography, a Pacific consciousness, and the world of publishing—together with the three general models of authorship—the craftsman, the poet, and the genius—and the six manifestations of London's nonnegotiable commitment to the formation of his authorial identity—locale, mobility, documentation, continuous production, dual publication, and publicness—provide a way to talk about London's conflict with his own creative imagination, his attempts to both embrace it and disown it. When he incorporates author figures into his work—even Martin Eden, who dies because he no longer writes fiction—the principal battle these figures fight is with themselves—not the marketplace—and the issue is always the author's interior life: its content and meaning, its validity, its very existence. Stunned by his gift of imaginative power, Jack London searched for one true narrative of a man living at peace with that power. That is his story of living the life of an author.



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