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“If I were you, I’d change”: Agency, Desire, and the Naturalist Tramp

What is a tramp? The term carries political implications. It came into being in the US increasingly after the Panic of 1873 and reached its maturity in the last decades of the 19th century, when there were millions of men on the streets, looking for work or going from job to job, riding the rails and walking the roads. The conservative, bourgeois reaction to this evident failure of the social contract was to see in the tramp a failure of government, chiefly personal. The solution was to put the tramp to work, in work camps.

But for other bourgeois writers, the tramp captured a Whitmanesque romance of the road, and the fact that Hobohemia, or the “hidden” world of the tramp, was almost entirely populated by men suggested a masculine utopia removed not only from the boredom of daily life but from women. Tramping is lighting out for the territories.

Popular accounts of the tramp, who was perceived as crucially lacking the self control that would preserve him in times of hardship. Indeed, as James clarifies in his *Psychology*, daily practice of a man’s self-control “is like the insurance which a man pays on his house and goods” which will give him the credit to “stand like a tower when everything rocks around him.”

“Self control” “self government” are but synonyms for “will,” and its weakening produces the tramp, who may not have chosen his sorry path but is all the same at fault. He is at fault because he did not exercise his will enough early on, when he had the time. Will, in this logic, is but a disciplinary mechanism.

It is one that, in Jack London's story "The Apostate," and in his novel *Martin Eden*, is seen to be aligned with feminine and feminizing circuit of desire and production. Rather than providing the man with the wherewithal to withstand the stress of modernity, "will" in London's narratives turns men into machines, productive without desire. I would like to sketch out the nodal points of this circuit, which oddly aligns the masculine exercise of the will with a pernicious economy of desire and opposes the tramp, who is neither mechanized nor productive.

Johnny (the "perfect worker of "The Apostate," [who] had evolved into the perfect machine"), comes to lack any "illusion"; as he becomes more perfectly mechanical, he progressively eliminates desire from his life. As the perfect machine, he can bring home more and more money, so his mother, who not only works and keeps the home but is also his taskmaster, can actually make him Floating Island, about which had gained a fabulous dimension in the household. It doesn't matter; when he finally encounters the dish, it means nothing to him; he does not recognize the object of his mother's stories, and he goes "through the meal in moody silence, mechanically eating what was before him" (132). The event is a watershed; it simultaneously marks his utter mechanization and stages his decline into the illness that presages his tramping. In the week of relief his illness gives him, Johnny "figures" out what he's been doing and what he wants. "I'm going away," he tells his scandalized mother, the day he recovers enough to know better than to get out of bed for the factory work his mother wants him to do, and he doesn't care where he goes (132). Tramping gives Johnny the respite from the "moves" that he's been making "since he was born" (133). As a hobo, his actions won't be counted, they will be of no account.

The point of being a tramp for Johnny is to abstract himself from the institutions that force his will, the feminine home, the factory. By tramping, Johnny situates himself in a nomadic space that is irreducible to the machinic, and, importantly, to the

domestic. In aiming the story against child labor, the ostensible focus, London ends up also hitting Johnny's home, which is ruled over by the mother. Less a refuge from the mechanizing mill, Johnny's home is a continuation of the logic of the mill by other means. The story begins, for instance, with the mother waking the small boy for work; and, it's she who throughout the story provides the compulsion, the guilt, for Johnny to work. Distinctions between the mechanical factory and the domestic, between the foreman and the mother, are blurred, miscegenated (to use Mark Selzer's term). And in this miscegenated space, the mother puts in motion a scandal of production that, in London's prose, literally unmans Johnny and transforms him into a "piece of life" (134). It is only ill, when his body can't work, or as a tramp, when he won't (prefers not to), that he can exit the miscegenated industrial space of the home and factory and enter the simple nullity of the boxcar to rest.

At the end of *Martin Eden*, after Martin has become an immensely successful and influential writer in the society he disdains, he encounters his former coworker, Joe, one night. Joe has been tramping, and therefore, living: "I never knew what it was to live till I hit hoboin'. I'm thirty pounds heavier, an' feel tiptop all the time. Why I was worked to skin an' bone in them old days! Hoboin' sure agrees with me" (*Martin Eden* 337). Hoboing—tramping—for Joe however frustrates a heterosexual desire that, covered by female prostitutes, is identical to the desire to enter into propertied relations (something the tramp, of course, *can't* do). Thus, after Martin elevates Joe (by buying the incredulous Joe a *laundry* of all things), Joe changes his mind about the pleasures of tramping:

"No more road in mine, thank you kindly. Hoboin's all right, exceptin' for one thing—the girls. I can't help it, but I'm a ladies' man. I can't get along without 'em, and you've got to get along without 'em when you're hoboin'. ... Me for the laundry and good front, with big iron dollars clinkin' in my jeans.
(342–343)

Money grants desire, gets you girls. Tramping makes one a eunuch; that's London's term, and it means not only that the tramp doesn't reproduce but that it's not clear he even wants to. In giving Joe the laundry (a process incomplete until they work out their homoerotic tension and wrestle), Martin thus moves Joe from an exclusively male homosocial world to one that defined by its visually alluring women who share easy identity with the "big iron dollars clinkin'" in his jeans. But women are not the only ones exchanged here: Joe's desires for the propertied world of women and things is phrased in terms that imply that Joe will simply exchange himself for the laundry ("me for the laundry"), for her ("me for her"). Desire *for* property, *for* women, and the means to realize it, gestures toward a disappearing act of the male subject, and a continuation of the instrumentalism that we saw with Johnny.

Not only can Martin, with his newly got wealth, *buy* women, and get the "finest girl in the land," but his magnificent body (as London never tires in telling us) is itself a sign of biological money. But in the end, Martin rejects all the women who throw themselves at him. As Martin tells Lizzie Connolly ("A beauty, a perfect beauty" [303]) whom he knows to be "his," "I am not a marrying man, Lizzie" (305). Martin isn't telling Lizzie that he is not interested in her because he's not interested in women; he is not "lightly" confessing that he's one of those "sissy-boys" for whom it's "all right" not to "care when women look at you, a man like you" (328). Indeed, to assuage our probable anxiety, London has Lizzie assure Martin—and us—that he's not that way.

The result of such an assurance, however, is only to make Lizzie think that his problem lies with her, and that the right woman might cure Martin of his lack of desire (327). But she's wrong. No expression of desire by a woman can interest the now fairly neurasthenic Martin. For the problem that plagues Martin at the end of the book is that in moving from a veritable tramp poverty and despised anonymity to respectable bourgeoisie he comes to realize that "His intrinsic beauty and power meant nothing to

the hundreds of thousands who were acclaiming him and buying his books” (317). Instead of liking him for his “intrinsic” qualities, people like him because, like Carrie, he embodies the market power of representation itself, money, capital, and he would rather embody something that could not be exchanged for its own representation (as Martin can: me for my books). In contrast, or rather, as a perverse redemption, tramp is outside of the logic of exchange: he is not exchangeable for anything at all, he has no value but his intrinsic value.

ⁱ *The Portable Jack London*, 127. Further references to this work will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.