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Women's Work and the Logic of Production in *Martin Eden*

I'd like to begin by stating what I want to argue: That the work men do in London's *Martin Eden* and "The Apostate" tends to women's work, or the work that women do. The process by which this emasculation occurs is mechanization. Work turns men into machines, and these are but mechanical vehicles for a desire that is figured as feminine. In end, the difference between being a machine and being a ladies' man vanishes.

My argument depends on the Naturalist concept of the will and to the contested figure of the tramp that populated Naturalist discourse starting around 1870. The tramp, I should add, existed in both popular consciousness and fact within a masculine universe; and he personified both the antithesis of work and, interestingly, of the will.

The Shelley Hot Springs laundry—not far from here, I daresay—where Martin Eden finds work is depicted as virtually a factory. The key point of the laundry is that it mechanizes Martin. As a laundry worker he merely provides the intelligence that runs his body, which is regarded like any other machine. Laundry work, metonym for industrial factory work, produces the worker as an assemblage of manipulable body parts willed into action by a remote consciousness. His body parts can be controlled not because they're his but because, as with Johnny of "The Apostate" (1906)—a story which

provides the scenario for the laundry of *Martin Eden*—he is "in intimate relationship" not just "with machines,"[1] but with his body; he is no longer quite the owner of his own body, merely the disinterested agent. He has turned his will to the service of others.

In the laundry, both the body and the machine become identical to the will, i.e., they are equally prosthetic. From the perspective of the workers that London represents, "will" is something that invisibly but no less powerfully compels behavior. He must will his body into efficiency; and he must subtend his will to the demands of the factory.

"Will" is but another word for yoke, and in this regard *will*, as a defining term of nineteenth-century liberal identity, becomes something objectionable to the factory workers. Rather than allowing for independent, purposeful behavior and thought, it instead is dedicated to the utter disciplining of the body and implies a psychic dismemberment and the internalization of an aesthetics of prosthesis. Will spells not the acquisition of autonomy, but its loss, and the transformation of the worker into the "intelligent machine."

Most of you are probably thinking that my argument sounds an awful lot like Mark Seltzer's. Actually, I'm disagreeing with him. But, to do his argument justice, Seltzer has argued in the "The Apostate," "London's case study in fatigue epitomizes the transposition of the character of the energy-converting machines and the character of the natural body: not the demotion of the living body to the machine but their intimate correlation."[2] Seltzer seems to mean by this transposition the convergence of persons, workers, and machines, and their metallic elements—somehow. This convergence, differs from the earlier and simpler notion that

> machines *replace* bodies and persons (as in, for example, Melville's earlier account . . . .) [Rather, there is] the radical and intimate *coupling* of bodies and machines.
> (12-13; emphasis in the original)

Whereas before people were reduced to being machines, or thought of as being made like machines (manufactured, in factories), now there is the more subtle "miscegenation of the natural and the cultural: the erosion of the boundaries that divide persons and things, labor and nature, what counts as an agent and what doesn't" (21). By "coupling," Seltzer presumably means a joining that is at once mechanical (the coupling of adjacent boxcars), and sexual; the term is both an extension and an alternative to the phrase from "The Apostate": "'There had never been a time when he [Johnny, the factory boy] had not been in *intimate relationship* with machines.'"[3] And the sexual, in Seltzer's account of naturalist body/machines, is presumably like the "machinic" sexuality that informs *La Bête humaine* (a text which evidences the "violent erotics" of the machinic-sexual "crossings"),[4] and is concerned with the erotic destruction of the body, and its equally erotic replacement with the machinic prosthetic.

Seltzer doesn't decode the sexual tension informing "The Apostate," but rather details the structure of identity effected by the "miscegenation" of a body and machine. Yet it is that tension, *produced* by the miscegenation of bodies and machines that compels Johnny, after he falls ill, to give up his factory life and become a tramp. Why should he do that? Seltzer provides no explanation though we might imagine that Johnny, in his illness, is decoupled. But why then become a tramp?

The logic of his apostasy, which is un-read in Seltzer's account, is revealing. Johnny's machined *lack* of desire is the crucial element in the story, and its redemption (coincident with his apostasy) the climax of the story.[5] That redemption is embodied. Furthermore, Johnny's entry into trampland figures the repudiation of the home, presided over by his mother. It's an important repudiation, for it explicitly aligns the factory with the feminine domestic in its work of turning desiring men into desireless machines.

Johnny (the "perfect worker [who] had evolved into the perfect machine"[6]), comes to lack any "illusion"; as he becomes more perfectly mechanical, he progressively eliminates desire from his life. The brief love for the "daughter of the superintendent" (127, 126) has disappeared, as has his desire for other bodily pleasures and appetites, the most telling of which is his desire for the Floating Island, the dessert: "[f]or years he had looked forward to the day when he would sit down to the table with floating island before him, until at last he had relegated the idea of it to the limbo of unattainable ideals" (128). 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 the fabulous dessert. 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 (literally) "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 hardly be under his willed control, and he can extend the desirable immobility of his body, its resistance to work, indefinitely.

The point of being a tramp for Johnny is to abstract himself from the institutions that limit his desires—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. That is, in aiming the story against child labor, London ends up hitting not (or not merely) the depredatory mill that employs Johnny and his underage coworkers but, more importantly, Johnny's home, which is ruled over by the mother. Less a refuge from the mechanizing mill, that domestic space is more a reminder of the compulsions of work; in fact, it's 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. The emphasis is on the system of production and reproduction that miscegenates (to use Seltzer's term) factories and homes, and that blurs the distinctions between the mechanical factory and the domestic. And in this miscegenated space, the mother, who is presented not in an entirely unsympathetic light, puts in motion this scandal of production that, in London's prose, literally unmans Johnny and transforms him into a "piece of life" (134), evacuating, in the process, the home as a space of respite. It is only ill, when his body can't work, or as a tramp, when he won't, that he can exit the miscegenated

industrial space of the home and factory and enter the simple nullity of the boxcar to rest. The miscegenation of bodies and machines that Seltzer describes works here more accurately as the miscegenation of spaces (factory/home), and to the detriment of the worker. Both the home and factory produce the same result, that is, the perfect worker.

In *Martin Eden,* the connection between the domestic, the female, and the mechanical is also clearly drawn: women represent a slavery of production and reproduction; the connection is even biological. Thus, in London's description Ruth, his bourgeois girlfriend, succumbs to Martin's animal force despite herself and becomes an "automaton."

In effect, Ruth acts under a mechanical compulsion that comes before desire and constitutes it. Her subject comes after the fact, and she might as well be Johnny, subtended to the mechanical will of the machines.

In *Martin Eden*, as in "The Apostate," the male subject is held between two strong attractors, the instrumental and governmental will on the one hand and the animalistic urge on the other; both produce automatic behavior, both alienate the subject from himself. In the case of the worker, he doesn't so much internalize the will as he is constituted by it; constituted by it, he wishes to exercise it, to show that he is in fact, possessed of a will. But exercising the will makes one even *more* like a machine. Joe the laundryman is proud that he built the laundry machinery that makes him work even harder, that turns him even more into a machine. And Martin, intent on proving that he is *not* a machine, that he is a "man" with interests, romances, outside the automatisms of the mechanical, only further (and splendidly) proves the opposite when he rides his bicycle to

see Ruth. But his bicycle trips do not redeem his manhood; they do not strengthen the "spark of something more in him," the element that makes him something other than a machine (136). Rather, the "glimmering bit of soul" in him that compels "him each weekend, to scorch off the hundred and forty miles" are instead "super machine-like, and [help] to crush out the glimmering bit of soul that was all that was left him from former life" (136).[7] Less the confirming gesture of the "mad lover," who responds to love or beauty, the "super machine-like" act of riding the bicycle the seventy miles there and back continues the same effect of the will that renders the doings of the body in the laundry manageable. Hardly the quintessence of autonomy, Martin's insistence on a Nietzschean will, and his excessive exercise of that "will" is instead but an instrument of servitude.

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 we saw 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)

In effect, tramping makes one a eunuch. That’s London’s term. In giving Joe the laundry (a process incomplete until they wrestle), Martin thus moves Joe from an exclusively male homosocial world to one that defined by its visually alluring women who share odd 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 in the laundry.

This is the fear that besets Martin: that he will disappear the more his image becomes visible in the sheltered world of women and things. 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. But to readers in 1909, Martin clearly evidences the impotent lassitude of neurasthenia, a condition that would bring him close to the category of "sissy boy," by virtue of being outside the economy of desire.[8]

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). As if the embodiment of that belief, Ruth, in the very next scene, enters Martin's hotel room (where he sits in a stupor of melancholia) and stands, repentant of being bourgeois, before him, "waiting for him to accept" her (335). Of course, it's a little strange that Ruth should so humiliate herself in such a fashion, more, that she should claim to have come to him incognita. In fact, Martin learns, her brother Norman, in a gesture that confirms Martin's suspicions of the whorishness of the bourgeoisie, has walked Ruth to his hotel room. But Ruth, from Martin's perspective can't help but prostitute herself. Ruth may have loved Martin (as she claims) but she didn't love him enough for himself; now that he is famous, and admired by all, and rich, she loves him precisely for his exchange value, not, as he complains, for "himself."

And that's the problem that plagues Martin at the end of the book: in moving from a veritable tramp poverty and despised anonymity to respectable bourgeoisity 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, in the terms of a certain movie, he's "money"; that is, he embodies the market power of representation itself, and he would

rather embody something that could not be exchanged for its own representation (as Martin can: me for my books). And, to remind, the tramp is outside of the logic of exchange: he is not exchangeable for anything at all, he has no value but his intrinsic value.

To sum up, if we can align on one side tramping, materiality and a homosocial desire, on the other we can place the market, the mechanical and heterosocial desire. The former produces and consumes little; the latter produces and consumes, and in the logic of the novel, the things it produces and consumes are the images abstracted from the material "real." Thus, in replacing the "real" Martin with his commodified market image, the market parallels the logic of the instrumental we saw earlier that replaces persons with prosthetics.

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[1] Jack London, "The Apostate,"in *The Portable Jack London,* ed., Earl Labor (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 122. Further references to this work will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.

[2] Seltzer 13. Further references to this work will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.

[3] *The Portable Jack London,* 122.

[4] "There is perhaps no more powerful registration of *une langue inconnue* of the railway system, its logics and its erotics, than Zola's novel *La Bête humaine.* Zola's novel *La Bête humaine* tracks not merely the understanding of bodies as thermodynamic mechanisms (from the start, the body as a steam engine and heat exchange system) and not merely the understanding of persons in terms of 'human-machines systems'—what Zola calls 'human dolls' and 'metal beings.' *La Bête humaine* maps the relays and exchanges between control-technologies of transportation and communication . . . and, above all, the crossing-points between these technologies and the violent erotics these crossings generate. If it seems that everyone in the novel works for the railway, has a connection with the legal system, and has recently planned or committed a sexual murder, what this indicates are the violent desires incited by the systemic, the repetitive, and the automatic: desires constituted by the obssessional and the machinic, by the 'tinklings of the apparatus' and by 'obsessions [that] ticked on like a clock'" (Seltzer 18-19). But, as I show, the point of London's tramping (on the railways) is that it imagines a respite from the obssessional, mechanical movement.

[5] Seltzer uses the insight by Anson Rabinbach that "Neuraesthenia was a kind of inverted work ethic, an ethic of resistance to work or activity in all its forms" (Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992], 167). In the logic of the story, however, Johnny's inability to work (what the doctor calls "la grippe") reflects more the exhaustion brought on by his excessive work: a work, that is, that is not so much devoid of the exercise of the will (what Seltzer calls "volition") as the opposite. Johnny's rest, which restores his body and mind—his will—is involuntary but for all that enables a definitively voluntary move into tramping.

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

[7] London ironically repeats "glimmering bit of soul."

[8] John H. Smith provides a schematic analysis of the figural identity between nineteenth-century neurasthenia and homosexuality. Following Smith, one might plausibly read Martin's terminal neurasthenia as a sign of his realized homosexuality, and his deflection of acting on it, a deflection that would seem to make "decision impossible": doing nothing means in effect he won't commit to being a "sissy boy." Martin would thus be situated in what Smith describes as the "double-bind" of abulia, or, broadly, neurasthenia, which Smith calls (somewhat injudiciously), "the male counterpart of hysteria" (John H. Smith, "Abulia: Sexuality and Diseases of the Will in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Genders* 6 [Fall 1989):102–124112]). But Smith too formulaically genders hysteria/neurasthenia; in fact, plenty of men were hysterics, and

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named as such, by S. Weir Mitchell and other psychologists. But in any event, Martin's lack of will does indeed, I have been arguing, reflect a sexual grievance against the heterosexual social economy: i.e., it "queers" him.