Frustrated by a recalcitrant Congress, President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907 sought to divert himself by playing the role of literary critic. He took as his texts—no surprise—animal tales, among them the dog stories of Jack London. Lumping London together with popular boys' writers such as W. J. Long, Roosevelt dismissed these authors as mystifying "nature-fakers." If London and these others really understood nature, Roosevelt charged, they wouldn't go about humanizing animals in such preposterous and unbelievable ways. Taking on Roosevelt in an essay published the next year, London countered by accusing the President of being "homocentric," a rank "amateur" unschooled in the principles of evolution that insist on an intimate "kinship" or strict unbroken continuity between animals and humans. Early in the article London does admit a crucial difference—that his "dog-heroes" were "not directed by abstract reasoning." But he points out that he "clogged his narrative" and violated his "artistic canons" with such phrases as "He did not think these things; he merely did them" in order to emphasize this difference, rather than cover it up, as Roosevelt implied.1

Teddy and Jack challenging each other's authority about (and over) nature. My aim here is not to settle this rivalry between one of America's most flamboyant and virile presidents and one of its most flamboyant and virile writers, a dispute that is being waged today in more sophisticated ways among sociobiologists, cultural constructivists, animal rights activists, and others.2 Although it is difficult to imagine what sort of representation of nature could avoid being "homocentric," it seems equally naive to attempt to measure London's "dog-heroes" against some absolute standard of verisimilitude, as Roosevelt would. A more central issue
is the peculiar narrative self-consciousness alluded to by London that attends the directing of his animal-protagonists. Reviving the dispute the following year (1909), the critic Frederic Taber Cooper makes the point nicely:

There is a vast difference between thinking of man as a healthy human animal and thinking of him as an unhealthy human beast—and the Call-of-the-Wild school of fiction is tending toward precisely this exaggerated and mistaken point of view. The chief trouble with all the so-called Back-to-Nature books is that they suggest an abnormal self-consciousness, a constant preoccupation regarding the measure of our animalism. Now, it is a sort of axiom that so long as we are healthy and normal, we do not give much thought to our physical machinery. . . . But this, in a certain way, is precisely what the characters in the average Call-of-the-Wild novel seem to be doing, or at least what the authors are constantly doing for them. They seem, so to speak, to keep their fingers insistently upon the pulse of their baser animal emotions—and this is precisely what the primitive, healthy savage is furtherest removed from doing.³

Deftly conventionalizing London's narratives as already part of a literary "school" by means of those three hyphens, Cooper raises the key issue of self-consciousness but mistakes a cause for an effect. Introspection in London is not simply some abnormal, degenerate end-stage alternative to "healthy savage" human animalism but rather a logical prerequisite for such natural primitivism, manifesting itself most starkly (as Cooper's wording suggests) in the confusion between what his characters seem to be doing and what London as narrator does for them. In this sense the entire concept of nature that underwrites the literary naturalism of London is fundamentally "faked," to borrow Roosevelt's memorable phrase.

Tracing the reversion of a domesticated dog to a savage wolf-beast in the primitive Yukon, London manages in fact to address a set of "unnatural" cultural issues in The Call of The Wild (1903): vocational training, the quest for social approval via diligent work, the material conditions of literary production, and the meaning of fame. These complex concerns all center on the practice of writing, I will argue, following the lead of a number of recent studies that seek in various ways to revise the prevailing understanding of American literary naturalism as a mode grounded in deterministic laws of environment and biology. Christopher Wilson, for example, makes a compelling case for Progressive Era writers, includ-
ing London, as participating in an emerging culture of professionalism that treated writing as a discipline and business. Wilson's excellent study does not, however, discuss in any detail how such vocational concerns are enacted in the fiction itself—my emphasis throughout this essay.4

Written at a crucial juncture in London's career, just as his apprenticeship work in magazines was beginning to attract a wider national audience, The Call of the Wild dramatizes London's own struggle to gain recognition as a writer. Reading the dog Buck's "calling" as a mail carrier in the light of his author's aspirations, I further hope to show how London's narrative is important insofar as it renders literal what a trio of influential critics (Walter Benn Michaels, Michael Fried, and Mark Seltzer) have recently identified as a particular thematics of naturalist writing—texts which tend to draw attention to their own peculiar status as material marks. But while these critics treat such writing strictly in terms of its production, I will be suggesting finally that London is more interested in how writing gets published, how the artist/dog makes a name for himself once letters are circulated and delivered in the wild.5

To analyze London's constructing of nature in The Call of the Wild we need to begin by examining more closely Buck's double status as "dog-hero," as well as the related vexed doubling of character and narrator. Most critics rely on terms such as "anthropomorphism," "beast fable," and/or "allegory" to explain Buck, but the technical representation of an animal center of consciousness and the rhetorical effects of such a center are more complicated (and interesting) than these terms generally allow. Look at London's verbs, for instance. It is easy enough to compile a list of mental actions attributed to Buck that would seem problematic, to say the least: at various points in the narrative, Buck is said to "imagine" (7), "decide" (9), "realize" (9), "know" (9), "divine" (10), "wonder" (12), and so on, over and above London's catch-all convenient phrases "dimly aware" (7) and "feel vaguely" (50).6 These relatively innocent epistemological quirks centering on matters of cognition are presumably inevitable, to invoke London's own accusation about Roosevelt's "homocentrism." But very early on in the narrative these verbs are crucial for giving the reader a basis for identifying with Buck as a thinking presence who is on occasion disturbed by dreams and memories, as when the "scene" of Curly's death returns to trouble his sleep (16), or when he stares into a fire and "[thinks] of Judge Miller's big house" (41) and then reviews other scenes of his recent past.

To be fair, London usually takes scrupulous pains to avoid such un-
mediated access to Buck, achieving in the process a far more ambiguous and complex representation of his dog-hero. When Buck is initially caged, for instance, London writes, “he could not understand what it all meant” (8), followed by two interrogatives. As in the case of Norris's *McTeague*, it is uncertain whether these free-floating questions belong to character or to narrator thinking for him; the result is a mental state that belongs exclusively neither to Buck nor Jack, but seems shared somewhere between them. London’s use of the modal “could” in the sentence above reinforces this ambiguity: is Buck’s lack of understanding a structural incapacity stemming from his nature as dog or only a temporary limitation to be overcome by greater force of insight or knowledge when the “meaning” of his experience would become available to him? As we shall shortly see, this sort of question is crucial once we move from the static representation of Buck to consider how he is directed as “hero,” how he and his mind grow and change as London plots for him.

Before looking at *The Call*’s plotting, it will be useful to consider briefly some precursor texts, the better to zero in on the peculiarities of London’s animal tale. Two extremely popular immediate precursors are most pertinent here: Kipling’s *Jungle Book* (1893) and Ernest Thompson Seton’s *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1898). Drawing on a literary tradition that extends back to Chaucer and beyond, Kipling’s Mowgli stories are beast fables, filled with “Mother Wolves and Father Wolves” commenting wisely about quite complex social rules and regulations—“The Law of the Jungle.” Clearly the effect of having animals speak in their own (human) voices is quite different from London’s narrating for his mute hero. Like most beast fables, Kipling’s talking animals serve to defamiliarize the human world (babies are “naked cubs”); when London on occasion tries such an effect, for example referring to gold in his opening paragraph as “yellow metal” (5), the results are feeble, for he’s clearly not really interested in using his dog to make humans seem strange; if anything, it is the natural realm, not the cultural, which gets progressively defamiliarized during the narration.

Thompson Seton writes beast fables for children as well, often substituting a native American Indian mythos for Kipling’s Orientalism. Seton also writes about animals in a naturalist vein closer to London than London perhaps cared to admit in his 1908 response to Roosevelt’s accusations. Like Buck and his sledmates, Seton’s “wild animals I have known” are heavily invested with character traits such as sullenness, courage, fidelity, and pride. A fierce wolf dies of a broken heart at the loss of his
freedom and the loss of a beloved mate. An abandoned sheep dog spends years waiting patiently for his undeserving master, and so on. But since Thompson's narration depends simply on stringing together anecdotes, we never really see the origins or development of these humanized personalities, nor do we see how these animals interact socially with one another (a strong feature of Kipling's tales). And since he sees himself as a naturalist rather than a novelist, Seton tells his shaggy dog stories by simply attributing personality from the outside without presuming to register any internal mental states of the animals.

Neither exactly beast fable nor sentimentalized anthropomorphism, London's careful plotting of and for the mute Buck might suggest that allegory would be a more accurate critical category. Mark Seltzer has recently made a case for such allegorizing by wittily dubbing London and his animals "men in furs." But it is The Call of the Wild's very resistance to transparent allegory which is remarkable, since we continue to imagine London's hero as a dog despite all his complex mental attributes. London's surprise at his contemporaries' assessment of his tale as an allegorical treatment of the human jungle may very well have been feigned. Yet the fact remains that he does manage to make Buck look and act like a dog-hero until the very end of his narrative, even if at times Buck's nature as a beast needs to be reinforced by simile. When we read at one point that Buck enters camp so exhausted that he "lay down like a dead dog" (28), we are forced to make a dizzying series of negotiations that prevent us from resting easily in either human or animal realms.

How does London manage this effect? First, Buck is powerfully gendered in ways which cut across species lines, so that his maleness allows London to hold onto the animal as a "he." Second, and more complex, is the pattern London sets up in the first half of the narrative whereby Buck is put into a situation not in his control, then invested with a human mentality and morality to evaluate the situation (to give it values that coincide with London's own as narrator), and then represented as reacting to that situation by way of "instinct," a kind of black-box biological explanation that enables London to maintain the doctrinaire survival-of-the-fittest logic that ostensibly drives his plot.

I say "ostensibly" because there are really two plots driving London and Buck, and the far more important one (neglected by most critics who have been blinded by the text's dog-matic Darwinism) has more to do with values than instincts. The central paradox informing the narrative is that Buck must learn to be wild. Wildness in this book is not simply a state
of nature to be gained or regained by a reversion to type, as the naturalist plot of primordial atavism would have it. Attaining wildness entails disciplined education, technical and moral, a distinction collapsed by the representation of work/writing. The famous “call” that Buck heeds thus has more to do with a vocation or professional calling than some mysterious instinctual pull towards nature. *White Fang*, the companion piece to *The Call* that seems to reverse direction by tracing the progressive taming of a wild wolf, is in this sense less a sequel to Buck’s experience than a simple replaying, making explicit what is more covert in the earlier tale. To name Buck’s training a “paradox” may be a bit generous, however, since more accurately there is a massive set of contradictions about Buck at the heart of the narrative, which moves in two seemingly opposite directions at once: towards nature from culture (the standard naturalist plot of decivilization), and towards self-transcendence, a more troubled but also more passionate movement that cannot be fully contained by the conventional naturalist model.10

For one thing, the naturalist plot of decline depends on some clear demarcation between nature and culture, however much a continuum exists between the two poles (as London argued in his reply to Roosevelt). Without some such clear distinction, no linear plotting can make much sense.11 London seeks to keep the two distinct yet linked by three types of mediation, all centering on the vague notion of the “primitive” (12): the “law of club and fang” (15); the representations of Buck’s inherited racial memory during which the dog reverts back to a prior savage state of attendance on now “hairy” (41) masters (examples of London’s “men in furs”); and the curious introduction at a key juncture late in the narrative of a tribe of Indians, the Yeehats, who presumably operate somewhere in between Buck’s world and Jack’s. In the case of all three of these mediations, London draws attention to the very “faking” of nature that he would gloss over. By eliding club and fang under a single primitive “law,” for example, London confuses the means of human instrumentality with its end, in this case training via negative conditioning, as a behaviorist might say. While it might be argued that both club and fang seek to establish dominance, London carefully insists that the man in the red sweater beats Buck to gain obedience, not conciliation. Similarly, why in the world should masters, hairy or otherwise, be dwelling in Buck’s racial unconscious, as if human mastery over nature were somehow natural in itself?12 Such questions point to the cross purposes at work throughout the novel as London tries to negotiate or navigate his dog-hero between the animal world and the human.
Taking stock of his hero at one point during his narration, London himself captures this doubleness quite nicely: "His development (or regression) was rapid" (22). Trying to have it both ways and still avoid commitment (by using "or" rather than "and"), this assertion follows close on the heels of a more extended bit of commentary, a good example of London's self-conscious protesting or of the narrative clogging he pointed out in his defense: "This first theft [of a slice of bacon] marked Buck as fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment. It marked his adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to changing conditions. . . . It marked, further, the decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence. . . . Not that Buck reasoned it out. He was fit, that was all, and unconsciously he accommodated himself to the new mode of life" (21). Unlike a typical character in a realist novel who possesses a highly developed moral nature subject to decay, Buck is a dog from the start; London's fixation on morality immediately triggers his anxiety about Buck's reasoning, or lack thereof. Precisely when moral considerations are introduced, considerations well beyond the issue of Buck's adaptation to his environment, London feels compelled to register some sharp distinction between beasts and men even as he goes on to insist that "civilized" Buck "could have died for a moral consideration, say the defence of Judge Miller's riding-whip" (21). That Buck "civilized" begins life under a judge is no coincidence, especially since it would presumably be the judge's "moral consideration" and not the dog's own that would motivate the animal's defense of the whip—a symbolically resonant piece of his master's private property that functions simply as a sleeker version of the club which disciplined Buck in the wild.

Focusing on the programmatic aspects of the story's naturalism, Charles Walcutt surmises that London makes his hero a dog because "if Buck were a man there would have to be some kind of ethical responsibility."13 The decay of his "moral nature" can thus be tossed aside without the reader losing respect for Buck. But London is obsessed with his dog-hero's moral nature and the question of "justice" (13); it is precisely Buck's sense of value, especially his own worth in the eyes of others, that wins our respect, as a quick glance at the early chapters demonstrates. The clear succession of emotions that Buck experiences in the opening scenes, cast as a captivity narrative, is quite striking: "a fine pride in himself" ruling over the Judge's ranch as a "sated aristocrat" (6); followed by "rage" once his "quiet dignity" (7) is repeatedly affronted by his captors; followed by "obey[ing]" (12) the law of the club (obedience explicitly dis-
tistinguished from "conciliat[ion]"; followed by feeling "ashamed" (anger turned inward by others' disapproval) when laughed at by "onlookers" (14); followed by "hat[red]" (16) of his immediately recognized rival Spitz.

Pride, dignity, anger, obedience, shame, and hatred, culminating in "imagination," a "quality that made for greatness" (35) which finally allows Buck, perversely enough, to kill his dreaded rival. Animals may have "a logic of feelings," but their emotions are not necessarily structured by a coherent narrative leading to self-fulfillment. Buck's character develops along the lines of a traditional nineteenth-century bildungs-roman, in which identity is a process of becoming via moral education: a portrait of the dog as a young artist, if you will. Compared to the figures inhabiting, say, Crane's Maggie or Norris's McTeague, Buck is not only smarter but has a clearer sense of right and wrong—is more human.

Such acquired humanity casts doubt on a key argument underpinning June Howard's ideological analysis of naturalism. Persuasively demonstrating how the genre's preoccupations with force and fate serve to express middle-class Americans' fear of proletarianization, Howard insists that turn-of-the-century naturalist texts starkly polarize the categories of helpless brute (character) and privileged spectator (narrator). But Buck's education, via work, suggests that for London these class-based antinomies are not as rigid and absolute as Howard suggests, that an upwardly mobile working dog (and his narrator double) can be a humanized beast without necessarily becoming a brute.15

Learning his many "lessons" (12, 15, 18), knowing his proper place, disciplining his body, and struggling for approval, Buck fulfills a higher calling. This calling has less to do with the wild than with the dignity of labor. The Call of the Wild thus strictly follows the dictates of the bildungsroman plot in that the transformation of nature by work leads to self-transformation, leads up from slavery to freedom. For Buck and Jack, work becomes the source of identity, the means to make a name for themselves. Functioning as a path to self-transcendence, labor in London's narrative thus carries enormous philosophical import—Hegelian import, to be more specific.

Hegel, not Darwin, offers the common ground for the oft-noted split in London between his Marxist-socialist side and his preoccupation with Nietzschean supermen. Marking a division between nature and culture, Hegel posits self-consciousness as separating humans from animals—the same sort of crucial distinction that London evoked in his response to Roosevelt's "nature-faking" charge. Self-consciousness can be gained,
according to Hegel, only when animal desire negates itself, that is, moves outside itself to desire something beyond self-preservation. Beyond the instinct to survive there is the desire for desire itself, manifested as a quest for recognition. This struggle to be valued, to be found worthy by others, demands the dominance of one man over another; hence the origins of a master/slave dialectic whereby the conquered slave ("having subordinated his human desire for recognition to the biological desire to preserve his life"), by working, becomes master over nature, and in doing so frees himself from nature as well as from himself, from his nature as a slave. Quite simply, work humanizes, freeing the slave from the master, whose idleness fixes his identity as static.16

This may be a fairy tale, as Marx's historical-materialist explanation for subjugation makes clear, but it is Buck and Jack's fairy tale, nonetheless. Dog recognition, not dog cognition, becomes the central issue in the narrative, first in terms of how Buck is evaluated by humans, then by his fellow dogs, and finally and most problematically by his lover and master John Thornton. Initially valued strictly for his potential for work (size, strength, and ferocity), Buck's "worth" is measured in human terms by money in the marketplace (as in many slave narratives) and by other means of rational calculation: "‘One in ten t’ousand,’" his new owner Perrault "comment[s] mentally" (13) during the moment of exchange.

Once Buck enters into social relations with his fellow sledmates—also the precise moment he enters into work—his "worth" takes on a new meaning. As London introduces his crew of dogs, he gives them each a distinct personality—introspective, appeasing, fair, wise, lazy, and so on—largely in relation to how Buck values them and how they value Buck. More to the point, perhaps, is how intimately these evaluations become linked to Buck's "calling," his learning to pull the sled with his mates. The ability of Sol-leks, for example, to "command respect" is limited by his lack of "apparent ambition," until Buck later sees him at work with his partner Dave and "learns" to value their "even more vital ambition" (17). Like the two "new kind of men" (13) driving them, Dave and Sol-leks on the job suddenly become "new dogs, utterly transformed by the harness. All passiveness and unconcern had dropped from them. . . . The toil of the traces seemed the supreme expression of their being, and all that they lived for and the only thing in which they took delight" (19).

When London tries to give this Hegelian self-transcendence via labor a Darwinian slant, the results are quite peculiar, as in the famous "ecstasy" passage that London inserts right before he has Buck kill Spitz:
There is an ecstasy that marks the summit of life, and beyond which life cannot rise. And such is the paradox of living, this ecstasy comes when one is most alive, and it comes as a complete forgetfulness that one is alive. This ecstasy, this forgetfulness of living, comes to the artist, caught up and out of himself in a sheet of flame; it comes to the soldier, war-mad on a stricken field and refusing quarter; and it came to Buck, leading the pack, sounding the old wolf-cry, straining after the food [a rabbit] that was alive and that fled swiftly before him through the moonlight. He was sounding the deeps of his nature, and the parts of his nature that were deeper than he, going back into the Womb of Time. (33–34)

Buck's ambition to lead the pack, otherwise always expressed in terms of work, suddenly is manifested in hunting a wild rabbit in the heat of the kill. London matches this primal thirst for blood by moving spatially inward ("deeps") and temporally backward ("Womb of Time"), so that transcendence can be converted into, or repressed as, instinct—"the deeps of his nature." But the first half of the passage undermines the latter, insofar as London needs to keep reminding us of our forgetfulness, illustrated by examples of an artist and soldier at work producing, or at least willfully acting—not unconsciously tearing into raw flesh.

In an interesting footnote to his influential reading of Hegel, Alexandre Kojève remarks that animals do have "techniques" (a spider's web), but that for the world to change "essentially" and become "human," work must realize a "project" or, as he says a bit later, be activated by an "idea." 17 Through a regimen of service and self-discipline, Buck's "idea" embodied in work is to become the leader of the pack by conquering "the disciplining" (17) Spitz, his rival for mastery. Once he defeats Spitz in this "war" (29) and gains from both dogs and humans the recognition and respect for which he has struggled, then what is there left for him to do? Since Buck is part of Jack's plot, since London in the act of narrating is himself working for Buck, we are able to see glimpses of a larger project informing the labor of narration. That idea or ambition is writing itself.

Buck has been associated with writing from the very first sentence of the story: "Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing" (5). This is certainly a strange way to introduce a dog-hero, making Buck's (not) reading at first seem a matter of mere
preference rather than possibility (using “did” vs. “could”) and thereby establishing a kind of subjectivity via a reference to the materiality of writing, which fades away by the end of this opening paragraph. Before it is clearly fixed that his protagonist is an animal, London’s little joke here is to make us imagine the act of reading, and then immediately negate that reading by embodying the reader as a dog. The result is a trace or residue leaving the possibility of Buck’s comprehension of print, as if the news of the Klondike gold strike that occasions his subsequent captivity is somehow available to him. Literalizing in this way the operations of the unconscious, London positions Buck midway between a passive sign to be read and a reader of signs himself. ¹⁸

The most important link between Buck and writing concerns his work itself, his toiling in the traces to deliver letters. It is quite extraordinary, though hardly ever noticed by critics, that in a tale ostensibly devoted to representing the howling blank frozen white wilderness of the Yukon both men and dogs serve a noble civilizing function, bringing mail to the remotest outposts of progress, “carrying word from the world” (40). Even more pointedly, these “new men,” François and Perrault, act as official agents of the state, “couriers” carrying various “government” (Canadian) “despatches” (16, 19). It is the very “important” (19) and “urgent” (32) nature of these dispatches, moreover, which accounts for the urgency of London’s own labor as writer, the need to get his message out, be recognized by others for his work, and make a name for himself. As in the case of Poe’s purloined letter, we never see the contents of these important dispatches, for London’s emphasis falls on the delivery of mail, how writing gets circulated, distributed, and published after it is initially composed. Toiling in the traces that leave their own marks on the white landscape, both Buck and Jack fulfill their calling.

In a long footnote to his discussion of London, Mark Seltzer anticipates my claim about the inscription of writing on landscape, only to reject such an interpretation by insisting that a mechanics of literary production under what he calls naturalism’s “body-machine complex” forecloses such a “traditional” notion of writing as a means to self-identity. ¹⁹ Here Seltzer is implicitly interrogating the work of Walter Benn Michaels, who has brilliantly argued that for the naturalist writer self-possession via the work of writing entails a self-consumption leading to a themes of writing that can neither be reduced to its material marks nor transcend its materiality, just as the writer’s person is neither identical with body nor independent of it. Seeking to challenge Michaels’s positing of self (and
totalized market) as a closed circuit of exchange, Seltzer tends to over-emphasize the role of technology in literary production, at least in the instance of London, whose understanding of writing is less mechanistic than organic, drawn from the animal realm, as Seltzer's own powerful reading of "men in furs" shows. As my reliance on Hegel indicates, I would argue that London in fact holds very traditional assumptions about work and writing; in response to Michael's thesis, however, I will be making a case for London's modernity by suggesting how he understands that an author's circulated name can ultimately carry more weight than the production of marks themselves.

Working like a dog finally is not enough, then, and by implication neither is writing like one. Once Buck vanquishes Spitz to achieve his highest ambition as top dog, he is soon after sold (by "official orders," 40) to a new (nameless) master, also a mailman but not apparently a government courier. London's plotting here begins to grow less urgent. The dis-enchanting of work actually begins shortly before Buck becomes leader of the pack. In a long, self-conscious, overheated passage celebrating "that nameless, incomprehensible pride of the trail and trace" (30), London conflates Buck's "desire for mastery" (30) over Spitz with the pride that all these dogs take "in the toil to the last gasp," the "ordained order that dogs should work" (31). But for Buck to gain supremacy over the pack, he must disrupt work, must break down "discipline" (32) to "destroy the solidarity of the team" (32). Describing this "challenging [of Spitz's] authority" (32) in terms of an "open mutiny" (30) or "revolt" (32), London points to a gratification beyond work: "He [Buck] worked faithfully in the harness, for the toil had become a delight to him; yet it was a greater delight slyly to precipitate a fight amongst his mates and tangle the traces" (33). It is surely no coincidence that in the very next paragraph London allows Buck and his fellows to go off chasing that wild rabbit. Working gives way to hunting, an activity more akin to play or sport that celebrates blood lust (desire) more than eating for survival (need).

While London does his best to offer the spirit of defiance as a means of transcendence that surpasses discipline and servitude, Buck is finally no demonically driven Ahab, for the problem seems rather more mundane: sheer disgust and exhaustion with work itself. With Buck now at the lead, London suddenly remarks that "it was a monotonous life, operating with machine-like regularity. One day was very like another" (40). Pages later his last desperate effort to restore the nobility of work has precisely the opposite effect. In London's most extended treatment of
another dog, something goes “wrong” with that wonderful worker Dave, who becomes “sick unto death” (43), suffering from a mysterious “inward hurt” (44) that would not go away despite his overwhelming “pride of trace and trail” (43). London settles this existential crisis as best he can, celebrating in reverent tones the fact that “a dog could break its heart through being denied the work that killed it” (44), and then finally putting Dave out of his misery with a pistol shot whose meaning Buck “knew” (44). So much for Hegel.

Speaking for Buck, why should Jack in the end also find that “his heart was not in the work” (50), even as this “heart” can still remain “unbreakable” (54)? A significant clue to the answer can be found in a curious little essay entitled “How I Became a Socialist” that London first published in March 1903, just as he was negotiating the book publication rights to The Call of the Wild.20 The most productive and important year of his life, 1903 also saw, among other personal events, the publication of London’s book The People of the Abyss, an account of his journalistic foray the previous summer into the East End of London, where he poignantly charted the conditions of the British underclass.21 In both essay and book London’s central metaphor for this underclass is an abyss or bottomless pit; what he makes clear in his essay is that “socialism” primarily serves simply to keep him from falling into such a pit. London begins autobiographically by remarking that as a young “MAN” he used to be “one of Nietzsche’s blond beasts,” “one of Nature’s strong-armed noblemen” who proudly believed that “the dignity of labor was . . . the most impressive thing in the world.” Associating such “orthodox bourgeois ethics” with “rampant individualism,” he claims that this “joyous individualism” was “hammered out” of him as soon as he began to come in close contact with “what sociologists love to call the ‘submerged tenth’”—the underclass that industrial capitalism uses up and discards. Conveniently forgetting his own (illegitimate) birth in the pit of the working-class, London ends his little story with an italicized vow strange enough to merit quoting in full: “All my days I have worked hard with my body, and according to the number of days I have worked, by just that much am I nearer the bottom of the Pit. I shall climb out of the Pit, but not by the muscles of my body shall I climb out. I shall do no more hard work, and may God strike me dead if I do another day’s hard work with my body more than I absolutely have to do” (1119). This oath is remarkable for at least three reasons. First, in disavowing his own beginnings in the pit, London “confesses” that he is primarily motivated by the “terror” of joining the underclass. He
expresses absolutely no solidarity, the working-class consciousness that
Marx and Engels saw as necessary for revolution. Second, given his ter-
ror of the pit, work itself becomes terrifying; the goal is not to struggle
to make work less alienating and thereby rehumanize it, but merely to
“run away” and escape it altogether. Third, and perhaps most remark-
able, London simply equates manual labor with “hard work.” I take “hard”
here also to mean “difficult,” so that he is by implication suggesting that
brain work would somehow necessarily be easy. But then trying actually
to imagine his “reborn” life without such deadening hard work, London is
forced to admit, “I was running around to find out what manner of thing
I was,” a state of being that he rather optimistically labels “socialist.”

London’s essay might have been more accurately titled “How I Be-
came a Successful Author,” for it carries enormous implications for my
previous discussion of the presence of writing throughout The Call of the
Wild. Earlier I emphasized the physicality of writing for both Buck and
Jack: hauling the heavy letters inch by inch through a blank white wilder-
ness. Writing’s materiality thus renders nature immaterial. But London’s
distinction between hard work and easy work suggests a second more
abstract notion of writing in which the author controls and manages the
deployment of letters but does not actually carry them himself. In the
scene of writing that informs the narration up to this point, London is
both slave, figured as Buck toiling in the traces, and simultaneously fig-
ered as master, the plotter who directs the course of the sled and the
beasts he uses (buys and sells) to pull it. The writing master thus hopes
to gain some control within a potentially degrading capitalist market. But
once hard work is fundamentally called into question, starting with the
death of the dog Dave, how can letters be moved at all? That is, how can
writing be strictly easy? Commenting on Hegel, Kojève notes that the
bourgeois worker under capitalism has no master but nonetheless freely
accepts his enslavement by the idea of private property, of capital itself.22
London turns this fear on its head by imagining “socialism” as a state of
mastery without slavery, without any hard work, so that the writer is
now free to roam in search of “what manner of thing” he has suddenly be-
come. In the end London is left looking for a kind of easy work to replace
the hard work that he has given up.

Given this disenchanting of hard work and hard writing, London would
seem to be abandoning his dog-hero’s project for self-transcendence as
well, so that it is difficult to imagine how Buck’s education can proceed.
With the sacrifice of Dave, the plot threatens to stop dead in its tracks.
One clear possibility is to fall back on the Darwinian model of instinctual regression, which, we have seen, has so far consisted mainly in Buck and the other dogs chasing rabbits. I am perhaps being flippant here, since there are clearly key moments in the narrative when London powerfully evokes a sense of a “dominant primordial” (24)—manifested as “ancient song” (22–23), “wild fathers” (32), “blood-longing” (77), and so on—pulling the beast Buck back into his primitive past. But these passages are quite literally *lyric*, in that they are almost always detachable from the plot, neither closely following from prior events nor leading to others. The relationship between chasing rabbits and the “ecstasy of living,” for example, is tenuous at best. Such ecstasy is powerful, in fact, precisely insofar as it can effectively escape London’s plotting.

Powerful and dazzling, such intermittent evocations of nature most importantly keep Buck an animal and are therefore precisely the points of resistance that prevent the type of transparent allegorizing I earlier rejected but might now seem again to be bordering on: Hegel in furs. Insofar as London depends on his role as plotter deploying and delivering letters to give him his status as writing/publishing master, such ecstatic moments threaten to sever the ties between Jack and Buck. At the risk of slighting the dog’s ostensible return to the wild, I want to pursue for the remainder of this essay the problem of authorial mastery—a growing concern for London that manifests itself in his partial disengagement from Buck the dog as a primary source of identity in the later stages of the novel and his increasing identification instead with human characters.

What remains for London then, before letting go of his plot, letting humans “pass out of Buck’s life for good” (40), is to comment on the writing of the story itself through a series of cautionary tales with interesting consequences. Instead of development or reversion we get a kind of stasis or holding pattern, as London presents a pair of moral lessons about bad masters and good masters. This structure of alternating bad and good masters bears a close resemblance to many animal tales for children (such as *Black Beauty*), as well as to episodic slave narratives. More important, from this point on in London’s narrative, morality will no longer be rooted in Buck’s nature, or even in his masters’, as the plot begins to take on decidedly theological overtones.

First, the bad masters, an unlikely trio of husband, wife, and wife’s brother. They appear on the scene immediately after London alludes to “congested mail” (46)—a striking homonym punning on the impasse in his plot and the thwarting of Buck’s manhood. New “official orders” (46),

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from nowhere, suddenly demand the sale of the dogs, who are said to "count for little against dollars" (46). Up to this juncture in the narrative, Buck's continuity of identity depends on carrying letters, but Charles, Mercedes, and Hal are not couriers with urgent dispatches. What they are doing venturing through the North, in fact, remains to the end a "mystery of things that passes understanding" (46)—a New Testament echo (Philippians 4:7) that seems to refer as much to London's uncertainty about their motives as to Buck's uncertainty, just as the subsequent paragraph's narrative commentary—"a nice family party"—seems to capture Buck's ironic disgust as well as London's.

Here then is Buck and Jack's worst "nightmare" (53), toil without writing, toil without project, toil without meaning. Not only are their motives uncertain, but these new masters are technically incompetent to boot: "They were slack in all things, without order or discipline" (51). In the most prolonged departure from Buck as a center of consciousness for the narrative, London gives us an unsubtle satire about the dangers of domesticated irrational feminine disorganization (the sin of "dishes unwashed" mentioned twice). Confronted with an alien environment, the overcivilized family registers chaos, whereas the state of wildness clearly depends on strict regimentation, possible only through regulated work. Given the absence of such service, at once ennobling and enabling, nature can be represented only by negation: what it is not. The two men unwisely overburden the dogs, the family quarrels, Mercedes gives in to "the chaotic abandonment of hysteria" (57), and all three finally and foolishly fall through thin ice, taking with them all their dogs, except for the presciently stubborn Buck. A kind of providential punishment for their poor mastery, the "yawning hole" (58) that they leave in their downward plunge serves brilliantly to literalize London's fable of negative transcendence. Hal and Charles and Mercedes have truly become the people of the abyss.24

Once the bad masters drop out of the picture, we might expect Buck to respond immediately to the call of the wild. But before he can be free of all encumbrance he owes a debt of gratitude to his savior, John Thornton, a debt he will pay back in spectacular fashion. Entitled "For the Love of a Man," the John Thornton chapter seems totally out of place, contributing to neither Buck's working education nor his instinctual regression. The episode instead functions as a religious parable of sorts in which Love as a single unifying transcendental signifier is meant to subsume—
in effect cancel out—both the dignity of labor and the law of club and fang. And what a love it is—“feverish and burning, that was adoration, that was madness” (60)—that emerges out of nowhere and strains, if not absolutely bursts, the boundaries of London’s plot.

As the repetition of “adoration” makes clear, Buck’s passion is religious and therefore presumably not a form of slavery; perhaps the dog-hero will find his true “calling” as a disciple. London seems to be working on the analogy that Buck is to other dogs as Thornton is to other men. Buck thus can meet his match only by worshipping a god, an “ideal master” (60). As perfect master, however, Thornton grants Buck an all too perfect freedom, letting him do nothing and consequently, in Hegelian terms, forcing him to be nothing. Even though Buck cannot overcome bad masters without some providential aid, at least his passive resistance to the family trio allows London to maintain his dignity. But dignity becomes a problem for both Jack and Buck once Love dissolves all such resistance, freeing them from work instead of freeing them to work. Trying to sustain an oxymoron (ideal mastery) by an imposed religious analogy (Christ incarnate), London ends up constantly operating at cross purposes, oscillating wildly, as Buck does, between elevating Thornton and ignoring him so that he can heed his call.

Thornton’s progressive diminishment manifests itself in two connected ways: his odd assumption of various gender roles and his equally strange simulations of work. In keeping with his status as ideal master, he is initially figured as a benevolent father seeing to “the welfare of his [dogs] as if they were his own children” (60). The problem is that Buck is no ordinary pet but a special being, closer to his master, closer to humans (if other dogs are dogs), closer to a god (if other dogs are just human). Portraying the intense intimacy between Buck and Thornton, London is compelled to level the difference between man and beast, to make them share the same ontology. First London equalizes their respective powers of verbalization: the moment Thornton rescues Buck, he is said to utter “a cry that was inarticulate and more like the cry of an animal” (57); a few pages later Thornton sees Buck’s “throat vibrant with unuttered sound” and gushes “God! you can all but speak!” (60). When letters disappear, “with the mail behind them” (42), sounds will have to do. The communion between the two grows more problematic once London gives their mutual love a physical basis; in addition to Buck’s religious “adoration” by way of his respectfully distant “gaze” (61), we are privy to a more cor-
poreal sort of love play where the two males “embrace” (60) and caress each other until Buck’s “heart would be shaken out of his body so great was its ecstasy” (60).

From god the father to male lover, Thornton more and more plays the part of wife, and a badly treated one at that. London first introduces Thornton in this chapter as “limping” (59) and home-bound, a condition that reinforces Buck’s growing sense that his love for John “seemed to bespeak the soft civilizing influence” (61). In the wake of the bad masters satirized in the previous chapter, this influence is clearly feminine and domestic, “born of fire and roof” (61), and therefore to be avoided at all costs. Lest I seem unduly harsh about London’s opinion of the female here, a brief review of the four “shes” in the novel should set things straight: 1) Curly, who is savagely ripped to shreds by the other dogs and thereby conveniently becomes the source for Buck’s hatred of his (male) rival Spitz; 2) Dolly, “who had never been conspicuous for anything” (28) but suddenly goes “mad” (dog hysteria?); 3) Mercedes, who “nurse[s] the grievance of sex” (53); and 4) finally Skeet, Thornton’s “little Irish setter” who “as a mother cat” nurtures the wounded Buck, whose “dying condition” prevents him from “resent[ing] her first advances” (59). He is mercifully saved from the threat of a same species, heterosexual relationship only by finding a higher love in John. Once Buck starts to feel the pull of the primitive, then Thornton’s domesticity becomes a decided nuisance, as the dog more and more takes to hanging out with his wolf companions, “sleep[ing] out at night, staying away from camp for days at a time” (76). Prone to sentiment and tears (56, 70, etc.), the wronged Thornton can meanwhile only wait at home for the straying, unfaithful lover now “seIZED” by “irresistible impulses” and “wild yearnings” (74). A vulnerable victim finally unable to defend himself in the wilderness, Thornton is anything but lord and master by the time he meets his fate.

Thornton’s “calling” as a worker follows a similar trajectory. Like the previous bad masters, this good one does not deliver letters. Nor does he do much of anything else. A wounded god, he lazily waits, as Buck does, to heal himself. Love of course is the means of healing for both, but this mutual passion soon begins to resemble suspiciously a curious kind of work whereby Buck must prove himself all over again. Their love turns into a series of perverse tests (edited from the story’s first serialized version); while defending his master against a legendary desperado and then saving his life (tests #2 and #3) can be explained in terms of Buck’s gratitude, a payback, how do we explain Thornton’s command that Buck
jump off a cliff (test #1)? Fortunately not carried out, this “experiment,” which Thornton calls “splendid” and “terrible” (63), may strike the reader as not simply “thoughtless” (63), but downright sadistic, especially once we imagine (as we have been invited to do) that Thornton and Buck are human lovers.

Perhaps even stranger is Buck's final test (#4), yet another “heroic” "exploit" (66) that explicitly takes the place of work. Boasting like a proud lover about the prowess of a mate, Thornton borrows money to bet heavily on Buck's ability to haul a heavy sled against a famous “Bonanza King” (67). Here the hard work of Buck as sled dog delivering letters is mocked as a kind of “free play” (69), especially when Thornton actually wins the bet, which is made for hard cold cash ($1600), rationally calculated, not for honor or dignity. By means of an empty gesture (the sled goes nowhere and is filled with dummy weight), Buck's worth is converted into market speculation. We have come full circle, since London's plot is initially triggered by betting as well: recall that Buck is sold in the first place to pay off the lottery debts of the Mexican gardener whose “faith in a [gambling] system . . . made his damnation certain” (7). For both Manuel and Thornton, Buck equals bucks.

"When Buck earned sixteen hundred dollars in five minutes for John Thornton, he made it possible for his master to pay off certain debts and to journey with his partners into the East after a fabled lost mine, the history of which was as old as the history of the country" (71). So begins the final chapter of the novel. Given the narrative's prior emphasis on work, the devastating irony of that term “earned” is a bit troubling, as is the perfunctory nature of the rest of the rambling sentence, as if Jack simply wanted to get his story over and done with, swiftly make his own Big Buck, and go home to enjoy the fruits of his labor now that those “certain debts” have been discharged, thanks to Buck's five minutes of love.

Here the autobiographical and vocational dimensions of the narrative become most apparent, for John Thornton clearly doubles for John “Jack/Buck” London, as the recent excellent edition of London's letters helps us to see. Linked by London's obsessive concern with the material conditions of his craft, the writer's life and fiction tend to merge. The $1600 that Thornton wins by gambling on Buck, for example, almost matches the $1800 that London sought (and got) as an advance from his book publisher, Macmillan Company. In an extraordinary pair of letters to his editor George Brett (dated 21 Nov. and 11 Dec. 1902), London lays out
an absurdly ambitious scheme to write six books in one year, plans filled
with word counts, dollar amounts, debts, profits, market values, financial
risk, and production timetables—the stuff of rationalized capitalism.
London at this time (like Thornton) enjoyed “doing credit on a larger and
Napoleonic scale” (letter to Clodesley Johns, 27 Jan. 1903), in effect
trading on the promise of his name.26

Yet despite London’s heavy investment in the writer’s market, the
heroic deeds that Buck has performed for his master suggest another
sort of economy operating in the end, an economy that depends less on
Buck’s work as a mail carrier and more on the spreading of his “reputa-
tion” and “name . . . through every camp in Alaska” (64). That is, the sign
that Buck finally produces for himself is not the mark of writing but the
mark of fame—a difference that entails a shift in the narration from work
to adventure. Heroism suddenly leads to a “wander[ing]” (72) search
for that “fabled lost mine”; although the Lost Cabin remains a mystery,
Thornton’s fabulous get-rich-quick scheme of course succeeds; London
briefly narrates how “like giants they toiled, days flashing on the heels
of days like dreams as they heaped the treasure up” (73), while “there
was nothing for the dogs to do” (73). This self-conscious modulation into
legendary fame and fortune looks forward to Buck’s eventual apotheosis
as immortal “Ghost Dog” (85), a kind of concluding emblem for London’s
career aspirations as a writer.

If this novel is an allegory at all, it should be read as an uncanny
anticipation of the course of London’s professional “calling,” his great
popularity—starting with the publication of The Call of the Wild!—as
well as his subsequent struggles to maintain and manage his success in
the literary marketplace. Striking it rich, London’s revenge on his public
is not to stop writing, as Buck stops working; instead London becomes
driven, drives himself, to write more, to write about himself, about his
own fame, over and over again until he eventually breaks down. In this
respect his fate as a writer closely resembles the fate of the workaholic
dog Dave, whose chronic “inward hurt”—“something wrong inside” (43)
that cannot be fixed—ultimately kills him. Imagining the career of Buck,
London traces a more satisfying path. As totemic leader of the (wolf)
pack, Buck is obliged only to “muse” (86) dutifully at the final resting
place of his beloved master, nature’s own altar of the dead, sometimes
bringing his wolf companions along with him. In this way we are reminded
that from start to finish, Buck has never lost touch with civilization.

During the novel’s concluding wish-fulfillment in permanent celebrity,
London makes one final effort to sustain some moral tension in his narration by representing Buck as torn between his allegiance to his adored human master and his increasing kinship with his wild wolf "brother" (76, 85). But this growing conflict within Buck is conveniently cut short by the sudden introduction of a band of Indians—the Yeehats—who render the question of the dog-hero's moral choice moot. Without a "trace" (83), Thornton's exit from the narrative as sacrificial victim is as surprising as his entrance as perfect master and lover. While Thornton's abrupt departure allows London and his readers to return at the end to Buck as a primary source of identification, such a reaffirmation of the wild's call exacts its own price.

A kind of parody of the primal horde of sons whom Freud imagines as slaying the father in *Totem and Taboo*, the Yeehats kill Thornton and his mining partners while Buck is off enacting his nature as primordial beast by tenaciously stalking a "great" (81) old bull moose. London thus offers an astonishing series of displaced murders: while Buck is killing the moose, primitive Indians kill his white master; the Indians are in turn killed in a rage by Buck, who must revenge the master's murder "because of his great love"—a love, London adds, through which Buck "lost his head" (82). With "reason" (82) now conflated with instinct and "passion" (82) located in civilization, London's booby-trapped naturalism finally explodes, forcing us to scramble for other sorts of supernatural explanations. Having tasted men's blood, "the noblest game of all" (83), the dog-hero is finally free to become Top Wolf, leaving both the human world and nature behind for good (or at least until he reappears as "White Fang").

The difficulty is that in Freud's version of this sacred myth Buck (the son) must kill Thornton (the father) directly, in order to resolve the problem of authority by and for himself. Nietzsche's retelling similarly demands that Buck (the human) directly kill Thornton (the god). But by introducing middlemen, London chooses for his animal-hero a weaker resolution that would seem to beg the fundamental question of Buck's moral transcendence. The savage Yeehats in effect allow the dog to remain civilized, thereby draining Thornton's sacrificial murder of its sacred power. Although he may be a "Fiend incarnate" (82, see also 10, 37, 58, etc.) when it comes to killing the Indians, Buck doesn't appear man enough to do the real job himself.

Buck's masculinity has been a central issue throughout the entire narrative—on Judge Miller's ranch, in captivity, at work transmitting mes-
sages, and finally as a “killer” in the wild (77). In the end, then, perhaps Buck’s true calling depends less on whom he murders than on the spectacular way he does it, given the crucial transformation in the novel from toiling in the traces to instant success during the staged sled pull. London’s progressive disenchantment with work in the story registers the growing fear felt by many turn-of-the-century American men that the market, increasingly abstract and rationalized, could no longer offer the grounds to define manhood, particularly in terms of those ideals of self-reliance, diligence, and mastery at the heart of nineteenth-century liberal individualism. Once the workplace diminishes in significance in the new century, masculinity threatens to become primarily a performance or pose displayed for its own sake, like the theatrical shows of passion which characterize the Thornton-Buck relation (“as you love me, Buck”), and the dog-hero’s equally melodramatic final conquests of bull moose, Yee-hats, and wolf pack (just prior to which Buck is said to stand “motionless like a statue” [84]). Buck’s toil as a letter carrier gains him respect and recognition, but his intense killing ultimately grants him the iconographic status of Ghost Dog, an awe-inspiring totem far more powerful and lasting than civilized man’s paler version, fame.

Seeking to test manhood in noneconomic arenas (the wilderness, war, sports), turn-of-the-century Americans such as Teddy Roosevelt struggled to combat a mounting spiritual crisis in masculinity by trying to naturalize dominance. In one of his earlier excursions into literary criticism, an 1892 review of Kipling and other writers praising war, Roosevelt remarks that “every man who has in him any real power of joy in battle knows that it feels it when the wolf begins to rise in his heart.” London’s own wolfish quest for power is a bit more subtle than Roosevelt’s, less patently “homocentric,” to reinvoke the terms of his counterattack against TR’s “nature-faking” charge. Taking Roosevelt’s glib metaphor literally, London in his naturalist masterpiece imagines himself becoming—through captivity, delivering letters, and ritual slaying—the very male-creature Roosevelt can only superficially conceive of as a man in wolf’s clothing. In contrast to TR’s imposed metaphoric pretense, Buck under London’s direction does work as a highly charged cultural carrier. For this reason The Call of the Wild continues to merit our attention. Simultaneously on extravagant display and buried deep, like a bone, within his animal-hero, Jack London’s mail manages to affirm his own public calling—to make his bold mark for all to admire.

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Notes


2 There has been a recent rash of popular accounts of this still controversial issue. See, for example, Marian Stamp Dawkins, Through Our Eyes Only: The Search for Animal Consciousness (Oxford: Freeman, 1993); Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, The Hidden Life of Dogs (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993); Vicki Hearne, Animal Happiness (New York: HarperCollins, 1994); and Stanley Coren, The Intelligence of Dogs: Canine Consciousness and Capabilities (New York: Free Press, 1994). For a highly original view interrogating the way modern science has historically construed the relation between humans and animals, see Donna Haraway, Primate Visions (New York: Routledge, 1989).


7 The comparison to Kipling and Seton is frequently made, but often in rather

8 *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 166.


10 Christopher Wilson briefly notes the same paradox, but perhaps too optimistically claims that the two plots work in “counterpoint.” See *The Labor of Words*, 104.

11 For an important discussion of naturalist plotting, see June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1985). Emphasizing the binary opposition between nature and culture, Howard admits that such antinomies are “unstable” (53) in London’s *White Fang*. Yet she goes on to rely on a structuralist model (Greimas’s semiotic rectangle) in a way that too readily accepts London’s constructed oppositions as given.

12 In a footnote Walcutt briefly ponders the same sorts of questions, which he leaves unanswered. See Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism*, 311 n.22. It might be argued that Social Darwinism works precisely to naturalize the notion of human mastery, but Buck’s atavistic reversion to savagery would more logically remove him from the human realm entirely.

13 Ibid., 106.

14 This striking phrase is used in a series of 1880s essays on the relation between human and animal psychology written by George John Romanes, a professor and popular explicator of Darwin whom London cites in his Collier’s reply to Roosevelt. See George Romanes, *Essays* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897), 71, 75.

15 June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, chapters 3 and 4.

16 This brief summary of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic is based on Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction To the Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), 3–70. The quoted passage can be found on page 42. By seeing Hegel (as read by Kojève) as the source for London’s Nietzsche and Marx, I am not making claims for direct influence; while to my knowledge Hegel is not mentioned by London in his letters or essays, Hegel powerfully informs American literature’s conceptual foundations, as a recent collection of essays has suggested. See *Theorizing American Literature: Hegel, the Sign, and History*, ed. Bainard Cowan and Joseph G. Kronick (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1991). For a fleeting allusion to Hegel pertaining to London, see Joan D. Hedrick, *Solitary Comrade: Jack London and His Work* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982), 138.

17 Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 52, 64.

18 London’s joke is even more pointed in the serialized version of the story,
which was first published in The Saturday Evening Post, a mass-circulation magazine with a large format closely resembling a daily newspaper. We thus begin the story by reading the news of Buck reading the news.

19 *Bodies and Machines*, 224–25.


21 London started writing *The Call of the Wild* sometime during December 1902 and was finished by the middle of January 1903; the novel was serialized the following summer (beginning June 1903) in *The Saturday Evening Post*. In addition to writing the novel and the essay on socialism and preparing *The People of the Abyss* for publication the following fall, London during this remarkably productive period also published the novel *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (published anonymously, co-authored by Anna Strunsky), bought the sloop *Spray* to sail around the San Francisco Bay, began writing *The Sea-Wolf* (virtually completed by the end of the year), separated from his wife and children, and fell in love with his future wife, Charmian Kittredge.

22 Kojeve, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 65. Basing class distinctions on the difference between mental and manual labor, London uncharacteristically falls prey to a vulgar Marxism, an argument all the more surprising since his essay was published by the prominent socialist editor John Spargo, who in other contexts criticized such confused and unscientific thinking. See Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 219–20, 229. Presumably securing London’s famous name for the socialist cause was more important than the depth of his analysis.

23 See Charles N. Watson, *The Novels of Jack London* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 36, for a brief comparison between *Black Beauty* and *The Call of the Wild*. Watson also offers an interesting comparison between *The Call* and *White Fang* that shows the structural similarities between these two plots, despite the latter’s ostensible reversal of direction (85). For the suggestion that *The Call of the Wild* functions in some ways as a slave narrative, I am indebted to my student Benjamin Diamond.

24 Earlier in the narrative Spitz falls through the ice, leaving Buck on the slippery edge, straining in a panic with Dave and François to pull Spitz back and thereby save themselves, since they are all linked to the sled by the traces (27–28). The writing of these two fictional passages about the abyss is clearly informed by London’s terror of falling into the social Pit.

25 Later in the narrative, in describing Buck’s newfound “pride in himself” as a killer, London remarks that this pride “advertised itself . . . as plain as speech” in Buck’s physical swagger (77). The shift from pride in work to pride in killing is thus matched by the shift from writing to public (advertised) speaking.

26 Like Thornton, London was wounded, maimed during the writing of *The Call of the Wild* in a manner almost too good to be true: “A heavy box of
