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The Drunken Scheherazade: Self-Reflection in Jack London's *The Road*, *Martin Eden* and *John Barleycorn*

> It does not hurt how wrong your philosophy of life may be, so long as you have one and have it well.

For anybody beset with a drinking problem, Chapter XXXIV of Jack London's *John Barleycorn* (1913) is a harrowing reading experience - a realistic, convincing description of how the need to consume alcohol becomes so pressing and constant as to constitute a core threat to the author in the plying of his chosen trade. Back from a long, troubled sea voyage and a stint in an Australian hospital for severe illness, London was once again heavily into liquor. "My program was no drink in the morning; first drink-time came with the completion of my thousand words." [1] By lunch-time he would already have had several drinks, and would continue imbibing fairly steadily until late at night. Eventually there came the need for a before-breakfast bracer. Worse still, the five-hundred word midpoint of the morning's creative activity must needs be marked by a drink. "The gravity of this I realized too well" (p. 298). However, his belated resolution to shun drinking totally until his day's writing was complete was undermined by a new dilemma: "The work refused to be done without drinking .... When, in despair, I took my drink, at once my brain loosened up and began to toll off the thousand words" (pp. 298-99).

The opposition set up here between writing and drinking and the infringement of the latter upon the domain of the former are explored still further in this work. Drinking, by then London's main life-activity for many years, becomes the content of his art; *John Barleycorn* itself is the manifest proof of this encroachment. Liquor, for the moment at least, has shouldered aside fictive subject matter (in the 1909 novel *Martin Eden*, if only by the foil of third person narration, he still pretends to be writing fiction), replacing it with the personal

urgency of an explicitly acknowledged autobiographical instance. How disruptive this fact is of London's ideas, often self-disparaging, about his art is a matter we will deal with presently. In *John Barleycorn* alcohol takes over on a still more shockingly explicit level: the book opens on the narrator "not drunk ... and yet - how shall I say? - I was lighted up, I was feeling 'good,' I was pleasantly jingled" (p. 4). It is in this state that he explains to Charmian, his companion, why he had voted for women's suffrage: "Every thought, in its little cell, crouched ready-dressed at the door, like prisoners at midnight waiting a jail-break.... John Barleycorn was on a truth-telling rampage, giving away the choicest secrets on himself. And I was his spokesman" (p. 5).

The situation is topical in *John Barleycorn:* for the length of two, good-sized chapters (XXXVI-XXXVII), a continued, first-person, dramatic monolog, London documents his reflections, the kind of searing "White Logic" (as he calls it) that he had hitherto declined to write or had entrusted to ostensibly negative, albeit fascinating, characters in his novels, such as Wolf Larsen. If we assume London's usual one thousand words a session, we have something over four mornings of writing in these two chapters. What is to be stressed, if we may take the inception to the following Chapter XXXVIII as a statement of fact, is that the whole piece was written "under the influence":

> The foregoing is a sample roaming with the White Logic through the dusk of my soul. To the best of my power I have striven to give the reader a glimpse of a man's secret dwelling when it is shared with John Barleycorn. And the reader must remember that this mood, in which he has read in a quarter of an hour, is but one mood of the myriad moods of John Barleycorn, and that the procession of such moods may well last the clock around through many a day and week and month. (p. 333)

Along with this opposition, according to which drinking, from being a separate sphere, progressively and ominously invades London's writing (I see nothing to be gained here by straining to keep the homodiegetic narrator from being entangled with the author), a parallel invasion takes place, as the dark truth, no less Biblical than Darwinian, of the vanity of *all* things infects his illusions, threatening such life-giving "figments of man's mind," of London's mind, as "Love, socialism, the PEOPLE" (p. 257).

If London's original Nietzschean superhumanism had been a life-affirming, animalistic individualism, as against the repressiveness and oppression of capitalistic society, by the time of *John Barleycorn* he had traversed a long road. From the outset he assures us he is no sot whose "brain is bitten numbly by numb maggots" (p.11) - those same maggots which, however, do nibble at him later on (e.g., p. 330) as the distinctions between types of heavy drinking become increasingly problematic - but an imaginative, witty, convivial drinker and, above all, one who, thanks to alcohol, sees clearly "the iron collar of necessity welded about the neck of his soul" (p. 12). As he had conceded from the first, with a typically unfocused, inconclusive and, hence, evasive self-mocking irony, "' -But,' I hastened to add (I always hasten to add), ' - John Barleycorn must have his due. He does tell the truth. This is the curse of it. The so-called truths of life aren't true. They are the vital lies by which life lives, and John Barleycorn gives them the lie'" (p. 8).

What it comes down to is that he is a superman in his drinking, not only in the banal sense of making good his boast to drink any man under the table ("the ape and tiger in me that crawled up from the abysm of my heredity, atavistic, competitive and brutal, lustful with strength and desire to outswine the swine," p. 250), but in the deeper sense that he is willing to brave the awful existential verities his drinking unerringly unfolds to his understanding. In the heroic superiority of his inebriation, "He looks upon life and all its affairs with the jaundiced eye of a pessimistic German philosopher. He sees through all illusions. He transvalues all values. God is bad, truth is a cheat, and life is a joke. From his calm-mad heights, with the certitude of a god, he beholds all life as evil" (p. 14).

Already in *Martin Eden*, in which drinking is not dealt with, the center of balance of the book, which London insisted was an attack upon individualism in favor of revolutionary political involvement, is compromised by the incursions of Eden's nihilism. In standing off critically from his main character, London probably considered him his "Mr. Hyde," once the merciless transforming potion of truth had been drunk. The book chronicles the failure of all three - love, socialism and the people (become a voracious, undiscerning mass readership) - to compensate for Eden's loss of any acceptable class status. He can

belong to neither the proletariat nor the bourgeoisie: a waif, there is no place for him in society or the world. Although in his defense of *Martin Eden* against what he considered a misreading, London pointed out that his protagonist, differently from himself, was not a socialist but an individualist and, for that reason, a suicide, he is more forthright or less equivocal in *John Barleycorn:* "I was Martin Eden" (p. 242).

In the later book, the opposition between the hallowed illusions and the threat of truth is still starker than in *Martin Eden.* Furthermore, a significant shift has taken place: London no longer claims he lives for the sake of his ideals - the love, the political creed and the myth of mass action which had saved him from the slough of despond (the "long sickness" upon which he expatiates in Chapter XXVIII), but rather that he forces himself desperately to believe in these pious untruths in order to stay alive. In short, as the need to drink and to be drunken gradually enthralls his writing, so the ideal content of his writing is menaced by a sense of futility engendered by a self-defeating, undialectical materialism.

Next to the intensity of London's conviction as to the *veritas in vino,* what may strike us as surprising is the inevitable conclusion, if we follow this analysis through, that the typical content of London's writing, in his own view of it, is illusions. Indeed, he would appear to have held the propagating and propagandizing of illusions to be a worthy and commendable, as well as commercially viable, use of art, given that the illusions themselves are life-giving, a way of shoveling back the mounting tide of death and change. In a letter to Anna Strunsky, dated around Christmas 1900, he described himself belittlingly as "writing stories for boys with moral purposes insidiously inserted; hammering away at a thousand words a day ..." [2]

We should not be too surprised at this, however, for the original matrix for this disarmingly mendacious aesthetic is to be found in an earlier work, *The Road.* There, a distinction, in itself hardly original, is made between truth and realism; the hallmark of realism is verisimilitude. What *is* original is the specific way in which the need for realism is linked, on the one hand, to a reader-oriented rhetoric of persuasion and, on the other, to the narrator's need for the wherewithal to survive. Somewhat of a hobo Scheherazade, the narrator, his life

endangered by hunger, murderous railroad police and the hazards of boarding moving freight trains, tells how he had to invent one convincing tale after another about himself and his troubles, true or concocted, in order to get hand-outs and con sheriffs and train personnel. He makes an explicit connection between this hyping of gulls and his career as a writer of books: "Realism constitutes the only goods one can exchange at the kitchen door for grub." [3] Whatever the truth of this connection mayor may not be in terms of London's formation as a writer, its function in the immediate context is to suggest, with metatextual playfulness, that *The Road* itself is - or aspires to be - the fulfillment of that narrative strategy, viz. to tell the reader presumably autobiographical tales which have the ring of truth, thus making the writing salable and enriching the author.

In *Martin Eden* it is pretty much the same story: Martin aspired to write because he was "tortured by the exquisite beauty of the world" and wanted to describe it for Ruth, his angelicated tutor, and for a wider audience as well: "Fame was all very well, but it was for Ruth that the splendid dream arose. He was not a fame-monger, but merely one of God's mad lovers.".[4] Indeed, he "would be one of the eyes through which the world saw, one of the ears through which it heard." But what this came down to for him was a dream of power and, above all, of commercial success, selling his work to publishers at a good price. Fame *was* all very well indeed! In this ultimate ambition, motivated by the goal of winning Ruth, the question of realism or truth was more a means than an end (pp. 114-15). "By God, and I was hungry and in rags, he thought to himself. Why didn't you give me a dinner then? Then was the time. It was for work performed" (p. 449). *John Barleycorn* offers a similar picture: London is perfectly clear-headed as to what he considers the non-pertinence of academic literary theory and history. The works of a Whittier or a Carlyle have nothing to say as to the "trick of successful writing in the years 1895 and 1896" (p. 241).

What we have developed to this point is a four-squared grill in which drinking is associated with existential truth and, correspondingly, writing is associated with life-sustaining illusions. At the same time, there are evolving oppositions between drinking and writing and between truth and illusions. As we have developed these inter-rela-

tionships, metaphoric and antonymic, other elements have intruded with such regularity as to suggest that the model could be profitably expanded. For instance, life and death are two themes which have woven in and out of our discussion throughout.

At no point do London's working-class origins come out more clearly than in his capacity for toil. Like many early proletarian socialists, he was no less proud of his ability to out-work other men than of his ability to out-drink them. The working life was the only life realistically imaginable, to the point where "work" and "life" became synonyms. In spite of the fact that one of the prime motivations behind his desire to succeed was explicitly that of evading from the life of pointless, ceaseless drudgery he had led and seen his family lead, once he had begun marketing his literary work, he became a work-aholic, a John Henry of the pen, as if idleness, including the serene *otium* of the cultured aristocrat, were, in its turn, a synonym for death. By means of various investment follies, such as the Snark and Wolf House, London artificially boosted his expenses beyond his considerable earnings, justifying a habit of pushing his productive powers to the limit and beyond. Thus, drinking and writing confronted one another, literally splitting London's day up between them, like two powerful drugs, each demanding his whole-hearted allegiance, each promising relief from the overbearing claims of the other.

We have seen in *The Road* and *Martin Eden* how writing, telling tales, is life-sustaining, both subjectively and objectively. The tale-teller supports himself by spinning realistic yarns for the ears and eyes of others, propagating healthy illusions, such as love, socialism and the myth of popular revolution:

> I knew the illusions were right, and I exalted the illusions. Oh, I still turn out the same sort of work, stuff that is clean, alive, optimistic, and makes towards life. And I am always assured by the critics of my superabundant and abounding vitality, and of how thoroughly I am deluded by these very illusions I exploit. *(John Barleycorn,* pp. 276-77)

That close analysis and, in many cases, even a casual reading of his books show London's nihilism coming out on page after page, changes nothing. He himself conceived his work in the way we have described, as the propagating and even propagandizing of healthful illusions. The

split between his own declared intentions and what readers and critics found in his works, such as in the interpretation of *Martin Eden,* exemplifies our meaning. Martin is never more ecstatically alive than when he is toiling madly in the composition of a literary work, expending creativity without any thought of husbanding his intellectual and artistic strength.

In *John Barleycorn* we still hear the hobo talking, but this time the old truth he had once accepted with a frolicsome, youthful cynicism is rediscovered as a dire revelation borne by the White Logic of drink: "Life"- says John Barleycorn - "lies in order to live. Life is a perpetual lie-telling process" (p. 316). To live is to tell stories. To live is to lie. This is why London considers the encroachment by drinking into the morning hours designated for duly knocking out the thousand daily words such a grave matter. An attack on his creative force, his ability to work, is an assault on the ultimate bastion, beyond which he has no other defenses.

The opposition between writing and drinking buoys forth a basic existential conflict between life-force and a death-wish which, as has often been pointed out in critical literature on London, is present in many of his works. Staying with the three autobiographically oriented texts we have chosen for our discussion, the specificity of *The Road* lies in the fact that, in spite of the mortal danger of being crushed by a moving train or even done in by a "road kid" or a "bull," death is no more an issue in this text than drinking is. Young London's life-script is still veiled in obscurity here, and the road he travels is as seemingly aimless and varied as youthful roads are apt to be. All *The Road* affords us is an association-identification between story-telling and survival; it is only with the hindsight of *Martin Eden* and, above all, *John Barleycorn,* that we can extend our grill by concluding that whatever force opposes London's ability to do his creative work must be a death-force in the network of symbolic relationships which pattern his life.

John Barleycorn is not really a work of self-questioning, although it sometimes pretends to be so. From the start the bleary-eyed narrator knows what he wants to say, and the rest of the book is just his saying it. John Barleycorn's secret identity is exposed from the first: "He is the frankest truth-sayer. He is the king of lies" (p. 4). The solution to

this apparent paradox is that John tells the truth about life but seeks to hide who he really is. "He is ... in league with the Noseless One. His way leads to truth naked, and to death. He is the enemy of life, and the teacher of wisdom beyond life's vision" (p. 5). This is that same wisdom which Eden achieves in the final satisfaction of his will to be annihilated: "At the instant he knew, he ceased to know" (p. 482). John, as his very name suggests, is Jack's alter ego no less than Martin.

The association between drinking and death is also established early in the book by two episodes: Jack is a five year old toddler when he accidentally gets high on beer, falls before his father's plow and "it was by only a matter of inches that I escaped disembowelling" (p. 18). At seven years he gets drunk on wine, falls senseless into a ditch, and is taken home where, in his delirium, "I suffered and died a thousand deaths" (p. 33). Significantly, he recalls that he cursed his father. Other instances are recounted, confirming the link between drink and death, culminating in a youthful attempt to drown himself one night by swimming drunk out into the bay off Benicia (Chapter XII), and in another risking of death by an overdose of liquor during an election parade (Chapter XIV).

What London has gradually learned during his life about the life-threatening potential of toping and intoxication, he already knows thoroughly by the time he starts writing his temperance treatise; the writing itself apparently does nothing to enrich that knowledge. From the heights of his superiority, the tipsy superman "knows his one freedom: he may anticipate the day of his death ... suicide, quick or slow, a sudden spill or a gradual oozing away through the years, is the price John Barleycorn exacts. No friend of his ever escapes making the just, due payment" (p. 15). Ultimately the one Jack drinks under the table must be himself. The revelation is made anew in the final pages:

> And I laugh my defiance; for now, and for the moment, I know the White Logic to be the arch-impostor of them all, whispering his whispers of death. And he is guilty of his own unmasking, with his own genial chemistry turning the tables on himself, with his own maggots biting alive the old illusions, resurrecting and making to sound again the old voice from beyond of my youth, telling me again that still are mine the possibilities and powers which life and the books had taught me did not exist. (p. 331)

This is indeed a strange, hollow victory: fear of the drunkard's death sends him groveling desperately after the broken dreams and beliefs of his youth. All of which leaves the terms of the question of drinking, and all the related existential issues, precisely where they were at the outset of the book. In terms of his reaction to contemporary philosophical and scientific thought (pessimism, materialism, the concept of entropy, the survival of the fittest, the subconscious mind), London's fear of it was reflective of the sentiments of a vast public.

The treatise ends on a pledge of moderation which no self-respecting Transactional Analyst would accept as a therapeutical contract: "I would drink - but, oh, more skillfully, more discreetly, than ever before" (p. 342). This final chapter is so thoroughly undercut, not only by the self-mocking "oh" but by all that has gone before, that one can scarcely believe that the author was not fully aware of and accomplice to the operation. As is well known, he did not stop or significantly moderate his drinking - just three pages earlier he had said that he would only do so when there was no more liquor available, the attitude of the true dipsomaniac. His death three years later, although not a premeditated suicide, certainly marks the final assertion of a prolonged death wish.

Here, as in *Martin Eden,* London is close to self-understanding. One is not surprised to learn that, at the end of his life, he was finally reading Freud and Jung and becoming interested in religion. So clear and tense have the oppositions been drawn and so patently unconvincing is the solution proposed in the last chapter, that one might imagine Philip Roth's psychoanalyst popping in at the very end: "Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" [5]

Up till *John Barleycorn,* London's attitude toward self-analysis had tended to be defensive. Overcoming his earlier shame about his experiences on the road, he reasoned, in a letter to George Sterling: "I can't get a line on why you wish I hadn't written *The Road.* It is all true. It is what I have done, and it is part of the process by which I have become ... Is it because of my shamelessness? For having done things in which I saw and see no shame?" [6] Among the typical activities narrated in *The Road* were such things as rolling drunks, conning his comrades in Kelley's Army by dipping into the solidarity fund and profiting from his role as trusty in prison to extort money from the

regular convicts. His simplistic logic, devoid of dialectic, constitutes a rejection of the whole Christian, psychological machinery of guilt, repentance, penance and redemption which, beyond its theological underpinnings, affords a procedure which allows the individual to transform him or herself. Refusal to examine the past is a refusal of direct, critical confrontation with one's memories which, although rooted in the past, are a part of the living present.

Most essays on London would end here, having documented the stages by which his life-force, renowned for its intensity, or at least for its sustained rhetorical force, succumbed to a superior death-wish. A final observation might be to note that, just as the obsession with writing was relieved by drinking and vice versa, so the life-force and the death-wish were tied by a relationship of reciprocity. There is something certainly morbid in his definition of life, in *John Barleycorn,* as the mere fear of its opposite, better said, of its cessation: "I am aware that within this disintegrating body ... I carry a skeleton; that under the rind of flesh which is called my face is a bony, noseless death's head.... To be afraid is to be healthy. Fear of death makes for life" (pp. 314-15).

We are concerned, however, with effecting a further enlargement of our interpretative grill. The opposition between the two trinary series, "life-writing-illusion" and "death-drinking-truth" can be enriched by reference to another opposition, that of male to female.

In *Martin Eden,* as we have seen, Martin learns grammar, pronunciation and many other important technical matters from his beloved Ruth. He writes for her, because he believes that if he can make a success of himself as a writer, then he will have proved himself worthy of her confidence in him and be in a position to woo her. If writing is his life work, the activity by which he aspires to support himself, he likewise thinks that it will enable him to support a wife and family and make a home. His loss of faith in Ruth and his loss of interest in his readership and its opinions are two sides of the same coin. In spite of his reverence for Ruth, the stories he wants to tell her about his South Seas adventures and the rest, hoping for her approval, were all one with the ones the picaresque hero of *The Road* relayed to the kindly, middle-aged woman in Nevada to whom, as he confesses in the opening to that book, he lied steadily for two hours in order to be

fed. To Blanche Parkinton he wrote, "When I do obey the urge of the red blood toward women, I do so dreaming of the 'deathless creature of coral and ivory' - illusion, I know it is illusion; but for the time, at least, I must cherish the illusion if I would live."[7] *John Barleycorn* is told primarily to Charmian and secondarily to a public which is conceived of generally as female:

> "Why not write all this up for the sake of the young men and women coming?" Charmian asked. "Why not write it so as to help the wives and sisters and mothers to the way they should vote?" (p. 9)

Women, especially a secretary, looked after the marketing of London's writings and took care of his finances. He invested much of his earnings in creature comforts, especially a home, presided over by Charmian, and a boat, a floating compromise between home and the adventurous boundlessness of the sea. Charmian herself, offering a mixture of feminine nurture and male-like comradeship and work-sharing, was an ideal shipmate.

If the propagating of illusory, life-giving values in writing has connotations of the distaff for London, the opposite or negative side of the ideological ledger is decidedly male. It is repeated over and over again in the course of *John Barleycorn* that the protagonist got started drinking and continued drinking because it was a way of being "in with the fellows," being accepted and liked and admired by them, gaining admission to the rituals of male bonding, and breaking down interpersonal defences against manifesting sentiment, especially fondness. There is no sex in *John Barleycorn* and very little of it in any of London's books, but there seems to have been quite a bit of it in his life. Although tolerant of homosexuality, London, his biographers feel, would appear to have been predominantly, perhaps exclusively heterosexual in his practice; at the same time, George Sterling was a major love in his life. Homosexuality is neither suggested nor implied in *John Barleycorn,* but it remains intriguing that male comradeship should be at once so desirable and so dangerously connoted with drinking oneself to death, while love of woman represents the comfort of a life-sustaining illusion.

At the risk of over-psychoanalyzing, one is tempted to follow the lead of other scholars in centering London's malaise on a search for father figures. We have already seen him as a drunk little boy bawling

his curses against his father; his illegitimacy and the fact that he was not, strictly speaking, an Anglo-Saxon, were life-long sources of discomfort and embarrassment to him. We have noted that his certainties about himself, especially about his inner states, are never the end result of soul-searching but the starting point for ostentatious manifestoes. He posits himself from the outset as fully knowledgeable of his trouble. One of the most oblique passages in *John Barleycorn* is London's description of his depression:

> It was a torment to listen to the insipidities and stupidities of women, to the pompous, arrogant sayings of the little half-baked men . . . . In my case it does not matter which was my trouble. The trouble itself was the fact. The condition of the fact was mine. For me the life, and light, and sparkle of human intercourse were dwindling. (p. 259)
>
> It was immaterial which was my situation. The situation is what counts, and the situation was that social intercourse for me was getting painful and difficult. (p. 260)

A priori certainties and obtuse refusals to discuss certain matters are sure signs of psychological malaise. Ultimately, the outermost truth of our texts is that the narrator refuses to reveal what is hidden. Love of woman, linked to creative productiveness, is a vital lie; love of man, linked to John Barleycorn, is a deadly truth. In a writer with a cuirass as thick as London's, it is not easy, and perhaps would not be critically legitimate, to try to thrust beyond these facts.

[1] *John Barleycorn* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1913), p. 296. All further quotations are referred to this edition.

[2] Quoted in Andrew Sinclair, *Jack: A Biography of Jack London* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978), p. 84.

[3] *The Road,* in *Novels and Social Writings,* ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Viking Press, 1982), p. 194.

[4] *Martin Eden* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 116.

[5] *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 274.

[6] February 17, 1908. *Letters from Jack London,* ed. King Hendricks and Irving Shepard (New York: Odyssey Press, 1965).

[7] Quoted in Sinclair, p. 111.