Book Review

Male Call: Becoming Jack London


In writing about authors like Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and especially Jack London, all of whom carefully shaped their larger-than-life exploits to fit recognizable personae for public consumption, it is difficult not to begin by reading the works through the master text of the life. Resisting this temptation to move from the life to the works, which is, according to Earle Labor, a familiar starting point for earlier critical studies of London, Jonathan Auerbach instead reverses the process. Male Call demonstrates that the elaborate and purposeful self-portraiture that London undertook in his early works (1898-1904) allowed him to create a "trademark" self to circulate in the competitive turn-of-the-century literary marketplace. In this complex, well-researched, and rewarding study, Auerbach analyzes the material conditions of the works' production and of the texts themselves through the mediating ground of London's changing self-representations.

In Male Call, Auerbach argues that this self for London is not the basis for but a "consequence of the very quest for public approval," a "corporate entity" that guarantees the production of certain qualities--authenticity, celebrity, personality, and authority among them--in London's writing. In a similar way, the punning multilevel trope of mail/male delivery from which the title is drawn suggests literally and symbolically the transmission of letters and writing, professionalism and masculinity. Drawing on the work of contemporary critics of American naturalism Walter Benn Michaels, Mark Seltzer, Christopher Gair, Lee Clark Mitchell, and June Howard, Auerbach investigates "the interrelated ideologies of race (the Northland stories), labor (The Call of the Wild), socialism (The People of the Abyss), marriage (The Kempton-Wace Letters), [End Page 1001] and sexuality (The Sea-Wolf)" with an eye toward revising conventional critical views. Thus the second chapter of Male Call indirectly
engages troubling questions of London's racial attitudes by using nineteenth-century concepts of totemism and kinship to claim that London reinvents the concept of race altogether. Tracing London's creation of a conceptual field of "trail" and "white silence," Auerbach contends that within this field white male characters paradoxically affirm racial identity by claiming kinship with their "red fathers," a kinship enacted through intermarriage with native women.

A similarly thoughtful and revisionary perspective informs the other four chapters and epilogue of the book. One of the most notable chapters, "Congested Mails: Buck and Jack's 'Call,'" which appeared in an earlier form in American Literature, challenges allegorical and Jungian interpretations to read The Call of the Wild as London's meditation on authorship. Paralleling the orderly and obsessive brainwork of writing later chronicled in the semi-autobiographical novel Martin Eden (1909) with Buck's own education in the discipline of working for good and bad masters, Auerbach sees the novel as affirming labor as a means to self-mastery, a transformation that for both Buck and London results in fame and "a transcendent unitary identity." In the next chapter, "The Subject of Socialism: Postcards from London's Abyss," Auerbach shows how the act of achieving this identity as writer enacts a transcendence that distinguishes London-as-writer from London-as-class-subject. In visiting the abyss of poverty in London's East End, London focuses on his own writer's body as sanctuary and organizing principle to resist capitalism's disfiguration and "brutalizing effects."

After carefully tracing the relationship between public and personal in London's epistolary relationship with Anna Strunsky, his collaborator in The Kempton-Wace Letters, Auerbach tackles the notoriously tangled gender politics of The Sea-Wolf. Retrieving the issue of master/slave relationships central to his earlier discussions and historicizing London's use of "Wolf" and "mate" as homosexual slang, he reads the novel as a tale of social mastery with orality and sexuality as its means of expression. Thus the effete critic Humphrey Van Weyden becomes "mate" to powerful Wolf Larsen, only to "reduce Wolf Larsen to the ontological status of a character . . . [and] trope him to oblivion" when joined by female author Maud Brewster for the novel's conventional romantic ending. On one level selling out to the demands of magazine editors, London on another level achieves his aim: the mass-marketing of the "popular author's stamp of self" that Auerbach contends drives his work. Seen as acts of self-impersonation, London's later use of popular genres and sequels, like his explorations of his own celebrity, represent not maddening inconsistencies but experiments in "marketing designed to gain the widest possible audience when viewed in light of late capitalism's postmodern culture."

Through its careful and insightful examination of well-known works as well as its exploration of relatively neglected ones, Male Call both continues and significantly advances the study of London's body of work. Integrating meticulous scholarship with rigorous interpretation, Auerbach provides a valuable service to London scholars and general readers alike in this challenging, provocative, and highly original book.