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# Hoboes and Vagabonds: The Cultural Construction of the American Road Hero

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HOBOS AND VAGABONDS:

THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE AMERICAN ROAD HERO

by Jeffrey Scott Brown

August, 1992

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the M.A. in History  
at State University of New York College at Brockport

Signatures of those who have read and approved the thesis:

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**Jeffrey Brown**

**Readers:**

  
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## Introduction

Myth is invention. To invent means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it as imagery--that is how we get realism. But if to the idea extracted from the given reality we add--completing the idea by the logic of the hypothesis--the desired, the possible, and thus supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is at the basis of myth, and is highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way.

Maxim Gorky<sup>1</sup>

Maxim Gorky's comments on the relation of realism and myth might well have derived from his own ostensibly realistic tramp writing, which, in the stormy cultural climate of the United States around the turn of the century, contributed to a larger process of myth-making.<sup>2</sup> This process may be said to have been inaugurated by the 1855 publication of an unusual book called Leaves of Grass, which contained these lines: "Afoot and light hearted I take to the open road/Healthy, free, the world before me/The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose..." It would be several decades, however, before Walt Whitman's whimsical, mystic wanderer would procure a red card issued by the I.W.W., and perhaps a copy of Omar Kayyam's Rubaiyat and a writing tablet, to add to the "rain-proof coat, good shoes and a staff" advocated by the

wise old poet. Of course road heroes of one sort or another have plied Western culture from its beginnings. Moreover, it could be argued that—Whitman aside—the journey motif has dominated an American literature that reflects a history uniquely defined by movement.<sup>3</sup> Yet while drawing from the tradition of Natty Bumppo, Captain Ahab, and Huckleberry Finn, the road hero beginning to take shape in the latter decades of the nineteenth century broke significant new ground. It was ground prepared in a socio-economic and political environment marked by furious industrialization, and tended and shaped in the steamy greenhouses of a rising mass culture. What emerged was a dense, complex, and often ambiguous cultural image.

This image remains resonant today. The road's illusive promise of freedom and adventure sells cars and motorcycles. The road hero has trod through modern literature from John Dos Passos to Jack Kerouac to Edward Abbey. Hollywood heroes have romanced the road—its stretches have delimited the dramas of cops, killers, truckers, rebellious teenagers, modern-day cowboys, space aliens, dust-bowl refugees, liberated conformists, and searching rebels. To ordinary Americans, the road has offered a vision of defiance, an avenue of awareness and experience, a path toward transcendence. The road hero has become an enduring cultural archetype, its representations

broadly accessible, manipulable, and marketable.

Dissecting a myth of such potency and diffusion is no easy matter. Contributors to the road hero's mystique merge from as far afield as Homer's mythic seas, Christ's parched Holy Lands, and Marco Polo's exotic trading routes. Yet if, in the make-up of the American road hero there is something fundamental, something vital to the human experience,<sup>4</sup> there is also something uniquely expressive of an American reality. It is the confluence of this reality with the "desired," the "possible," the blending of life into myth described by Gorky, that I am interested in here.

I want to explore the origins of the modern road hero in the protean span of American culture that straddled the turn of the century. Between 1873 and 1920 the ideal of the road hero was engendered by two divergent—but frequently overlapping and mutually reinforcing—cultural strands: the configuration of the hobo as a heroic rebel, and the making (or re-making) of the bohemian/intellectual vagabond. The hobo was the product of the vicissitudes of an expanding and mechanizing industrial economy. The perception and reality of a closing frontier, the influx of workers from abroad, the rising demand for seasonal unskilled labor, and the succession of serious economic downturns (some have described it as one long depression)

during the last three decades of the nineteenth century all contributed to an unprecedented escalation in transiency among variously disaffiliated working-class males. For the propertied bourgeois and elite segments of American society, the advent of the new "tramp class" triggered a variety of emotions, the most dominant of which were hostility and fear. The emergence of the "tramp problem" in the mainstream press of the 1870s and '80s reflected the variegated anxiety of an established order for which the tramp represented a dire portent of social disintegration.

Nevertheless, the official reproach of the tramp only partly obscured a more deeply rooted ambiguity regarding nomadic outsiders. Drawing from acquaintance with a venerable literature of travel and adventure, the settled proponents of the "tramp menace" were attracted by the tramp's life of footloose wandering and strenuous experience even as they were repelled by its excesses and degradation. The refiguring of the hobo as a heroic wanderer was initially spurred by the documentary narratives of bourgeois "participant-observers," whose accounts of the hobo's "reality" were permeated with a romantic conception of the life of the road. However, the fruition of the hobo as hero would wait the perspective of an avowed proletarian and one-time authentic ("blowed in the glass") tramp: Jack London. London's naturalistic



prose cast the hobo as a warrior in an epic evolutionary and class struggle.

The emergent imagery of the hobo hero was paralleled by the rehabilitation of the intellectual vagabond. Though grounded in established literary idealisms, the resurgent intellectual vagabond was vitalized both by the neo-romantic backlash against the perceived "feminization" and "overcivilization" of late Victorian American literature, and by the surge in bohemianism, non-conformism, and anti-materialism among young, educated, urban aesthetes in the 1890s. Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman, the authors of the popular, Songs From Vagabondia, promoted vagabondage as a vigorous alternative to the enervating domesticity of bourgeois existence.

While issuing from a radically different social and cultural sphere than the swaggering proletarian hobo-wanderer created by London, the well-heeled intellectual vagabond of the 1890s nevertheless shared important elements of heritage and character with his<sup>er</sup> unrefined cousin. On the broadest level, the shaping of both images ensued from the diffusion of diverse psychic and cultural energies unleashed by the momentous material and institutional changes accompanying modernization. Both the hobo hero and the intellectual vagabond adopted an oppositional stance toward society--an attitude of

alienation and defiance that ran the gamut from innocuous unconventionality to thoroughgoing revolutionary activism. Moreover, for both figures, the road offered the prospect of personal transformation: physical and spiritual liberation, masculine self-creation, and the seductive illusion of infinite possibility.

The hobo as hero and the intellectual vagabond were established in their purest forms roughly between 1890 and 1910. Within this temporal region, I have concentrated on a variety of relevant cultural "sites." These include documentary, fictional, poetic, autobiographical and social scientific texts published both in the major periodicals of the day and in book form. Though literary materials comprise the primary substance from which investigation has proceeded, other mediums of culture have also been considered. The indigenous cultural productions of the hobo "community," for instance, document both the tenuous self-consciousness of a severely marginalized social group, and the halting transmission of idealized notions of tramp life from the hobo's "wilderness of rails" to broader avenues of culture. In addition, various aspects of an evolving popular culture functioned as vital tributaries to the wide currents that fed into the making of the road hero. The evolution of the mass-circulation cartoon tramp, for instance, both drew from and fed into this larger

process of image formation and re-formation.

The first part of this investigation, by considering a diversity of cultural forms and viewpoints, attempts to paint a broad backdrop from which more focused study may proceed. As such, disparate phenomena such as the undertone of ambiguity behind the "tramp menace," the image of the comic tramp in popular culture, and the generation and resonance of an indigenous hobo subculture will be examined coextensively. The second section grapples with the formation of the hobo as hero, beginning with the writing of Walter Wyckoff and Josiah Flynt and proceeding with the work and persona of Jack London. This is followed, in section three, by a discussion of the intellectual vagabond. Reaching back to consider the spiritual forebear of this genre, Walt Whitman, the section culminates with an exploration of Richard Hovey, Bliss Carman and the "Vagabondia" poetry. The final section addresses the consolidation of the two major images already delineated. More suggestive than comprehensive, this discussion links the germination of the modern road hero to the parallel politicization of the hobo and the bohemian/intellectual vagabond during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 1780-1950, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), 279.

<sup>2</sup>Translations of Gorky's stories of tramps and outcasts on the Russian steppes first began to appear in the United States in 1901.

<sup>3</sup>See Janis P. Stout, The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures, (Westport, Conn.: The Greenwood Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>See Eric J. Leed, The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism, (Basic Books, 1991). Leed argues for "the centrality of travel as an activity creative of the human experience."

<sup>5</sup>My use of the masculine pronoun here, and periodically throughout this study, is consistent with the historical phenomena under investigation. Though I do not wish to diminish the significant fact that a small minority of those on the road during the period considered were women (a number which would multiply during the 1930s when transiency became something of a family affair), I do wish to emphasize the overwhelmingly masculine forms constitutive of the attendant idealization of the road. Indeed, the formulation of a suitably masculine identity, while a principal motivation for those men taking to the road by choice, was also a driving element behind the subsequent mythopoeic representation of this experience. There is some sketchy primary information on women hoboes in contemporary social scientific studies such as Nels Anderson's, The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923). The most useful primary source is Box Car Bertha's account as related by Ben Reitman in Sister of the Road, (Harper and Row Publishers Inc., 1937). For information on a later variety of female traveler for whom the road offered an unprecedented liberation see, Virginia Scharff, Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age, (Toronto: Collier and Macmillan Canada, 1991). Finally, Lisa St Aubin de Teran (ed) offers a valuable collection of female travel accounts in Indiscreet Journeys: Stories of Women on the Road (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990)

<sup>6</sup>I have sought primarily to establish the cultural roots of the modern road hero. As such, political, social, economic and literary considerations have been addressed within the context of an encompassing cultural sphere. This approach will, I hope, suggest something of the complex dialectics (the interplay between spheres of culture and political, economic and

social structures and forces) that constituted the creation of culture, myth and meaning at the dawn of the present century. In particular, I am interested in the formation, confrontation, and consolidation of oppositional and hegemonic modes of culture. My theoretical orientation in this effort has been most immediately informed by the work of Jackson Lears and Richard Slotkin. In particular, Lears' No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) and Slotkin's The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier and the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890, (New York: Anetheum, 1985).

Mass Media, Popular Culture and Hobo Culture:

Reprobate, Buffoon and Sardonic Outcast

As we utter the word 'Tramp' there arises straightaway before us the spectacle of a lazy, incorrigible, cowardly, utterly depraved savage....Insolent and aggressive when he dares, fawning and obsequious when he thinks it more prudent to conciliate, but false, treacherous, ungrateful and malignant always, [the tramp] wanders aimlessly from city to city, from town to town, from hamlet to hamlet, wherever he goes, a positive nuisance and a possible criminal.

Prof. Francis Wayland, 1877<sup>1</sup>

Wayland's admonition, issued at the Saratoga meeting of the American Social Science Association in 1877, epitomizes the hard line taken against jobless drifters by journalists, writers, academics, public figures and other late nineteenth century arbiters of the dominant culture. From the first discussion of the "tramp problem" in the 1870s right through the great depression of the 1930s, much of the mainstream discourse on tramps and tramping was saturated with derision and fear. The "tramp scare," began to filter through the popular media following the crash and subsequent depression beginning in 1873, which resulted in an explosion of roving unemployed workers. This convulsion in the much heralded process of industrial development (a process that was supposed to sustain a seamless and inevitable rise in general prosperity), generated

shockwaves that reverberated on psychic as well as material levels. Labor strife, spotlighted by the bloody Railroad strike of 1877, galvanized the fears of the propertied classes. The increasingly ubiquitous hobo seemed of a piece with a multitude of threatening omens of class-oriented unrest. Reports of gangs of tramps high-jacking freight trains added to mounting evidence of an anarchic disrespect for property and authority seemingly epidemic among the "lower sorts." The rhetoric of the "tramp menace," as such, emanated from the same anxiety that compelled the building of fortified armories in urban centers and the organization of citizen vigilante militias to protect affluent neighborhoods from rioting workers.<sup>2</sup> From the outset, the diatribe against the tramp was submerged in a broader invective directed against the "dangerous classes"—a conflation of tramps, criminals, strikers, political radicals and "foreign elements."

It is an indication of the seriousness with which the rumblings of class war were regarded by the propertied segments of society (as well a sign of the broad diffusion of popularized notions of Social Darwinism) that the language of racial derogation, heretofore reserved for the "wild Indians" of the frontier, African Americans, and other marginalized and oppressed ethnic groups, would be applied to tramps, criminals, and strikers.<sup>3</sup> Professor

Wayland's portrayal of the tramp as a depraved savage exemplifies the theme of racial recidivism running through the discourse of the "tramp menace." Tramps and other undesirables were depicted as morally and intellectually defective--as evidenced by sloping foreheads and beady eyes. Not only were such "types" dangerous and despicable in their own right, they posed a threat to the glorious ascent of civilization itself.

It was, for the most part, the popular urban press that most shrilly trumpeted the wandering tramp as threat and affliction. Newspaper commentary generally presented the hobo in as negative a light as possible. Lurid sensationalism, fear mongering, and knee-jerk prescriptions for solving the "problem" dominated the "news" of the "tramp menace." The heavy handed cant of an 1878 New York Herald article was typical: "The best meal that can be given to the regular tramp is a leaden one, and it should be supplied in sufficient quantity to satisfy the most voracious appetite."<sup>4</sup> And the grim humor of an 1877 Chicago Tribune piece does not obscure the acute hostility underneath:

The simplest plan, probably, where one is not a member of the Humane Society, is to put a little strychnine or arsenic in the meat and other supplies furnished the tramp. This produces death within a comparatively short period of time, is a warning to other tramps to keep out of the neighborhood, keeps the Coroner in good humor, and saves one's chickens and other portable property from constant destruction.<sup>5</sup>



Bourgeois and upper-class enmity toward tramps took precedence over liberal political loyalties and progressive orientations toward social problems. Genteel liberals and reformists were often the most vociferous of the hobo's enemies. Francis Wayland, the Dean of the Yale Law School, was a respected educational and social reformer. Elihu Burritt, a philanthropist, liberal reformer, peace activist, former abolitionist and U.S. consul,<sup>6</sup> saw the advent of the "tramp class" as an indication of the corruption of American exceptionalism. He advocated the adoption of the Victorian workhouse to deal with unemployed tramps:

We have with us already all the classes that vice, poverty and ignorance have made 'dangerous' in the Old World, and we must have the Old World institutions to protect society against them...We must have the English workhouse, with whatever improvements we may add to it...With such an institution, every town and village could make a clean sweep of tramps.<sup>7</sup>

In 1877, an article in the liberal Unitarian Review embraced an even older European model in response to "the sudden and fearful development of vagrancy within the last two or three years." It recommended:

stringent laws...made, as they were in England five or six centuries ago, against "sturdy beggars." Tramps who can give no satisfactory account of themselves should be summarily condemned to hard work and coarse fare.<sup>8</sup>

One of the more creative "solutions" to the vagrancy situation was proposed by a successful author, James D.

Parton. Tramps could be locked in cisterns, and water added at a rate equivalent to that which could be pumped out with continuous strenuous labor. A tramp might be saved from drowning only by learning--under the most urgent of circumstances--the value of hard work.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the zeal with which the pundits and publicists of the established order attacked the tramp, there were inconsistencies embedded in the negative "official" rendering of the tramp as menace. One crucial flaw derived from the economic formations that both generated and made indispensable a fluctuating mass of migratory workers. The feverishly expanding industrial system of the United States, while routinely uprooting and dispossessing masses of workers during the boom and bust years after the Civil War, also demanded rapidly mobilized, temporary concentrations of labor for the expansion of its infrastructure. Tramps comprised the fodder for a highly mobile labor force. Hoboes helped to lay track, blast tunnels, grade roads, cut and mill timber, work the oil fields, construct towns and factories, mine coal, and smelt steel. In addition, the opening of vast new lands to cultivation necessitated a seasonal agricultural labor force. In particular, the creation of the Middle West's wheat belt, in the years before mechanization, generated a massive demand for short-term harvest labor.<sup>10</sup>

Paradoxically, the object of propertied, employed and "respectable" society's detestation--the "tramp class"--provided, at least in part, the raw force behind its prosperity.<sup>11</sup>

The instrumentality of the itinerant worker, however, was rarely acknowledged in the discourse of the dominant culture. Lapses in the general reprobation of the hobo more frequently derived from the hesitant cognizance of the contemporary tramp's proximity to older models of adventurous or insouciant mobility. The discrepant cohabitation of apparently contrary perspectives--such as the harmless, whimsical, sightseeing tramp and the dangerous, lazy, degenerate tramp--reflected the deep seated uncertainty of settled, conventional, work-oriented society toward mobile outcasts and devil-may-care drifters. The ambivalence evident even in vituperative explications of the "tramp menace" speaks to the simultaneous suspicion and envy, fear and longing that have perpetually been invoked by roving outsiders.

Allan Pinkerton's 1878 invective, Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives amply illustrates this theme. The founder of the notorious detective agency, Pinkerton acknowledges the "pleasures of tramping," identifying the American tramp with an earlier tradition of carefree wayfarers and nature lovers. Pinkerton's cautious commendation of the wandering life, however, is engulfed in

his extensive castigation of the tramp and the "dangerous classes." Pinkerton's ambiguity is partially rationalized by the distinction he draws between "the tramp in the offensive sense" and the "better sort of tramp." His equivocation regarding tramps parallels his careful separation of workers who toe the line from those who defy management (and civilization) through activism or organization. This reflects a common tactic of the defenders of management and the status quo, and was a salient feature of Pinkerton's anti-labor career. While waging an excessively brutal underground war against trade unionism throughout the late nineteenth century, Pinkerton insistently claimed "a close sympathy with workingmen of all classes,"<sup>12</sup> a claim corroborated by his adulatory chronicler, Richard Rowan.

In his 1931 history of the Pinkerton Agency, Rowan attributes Pinkerton's, "curious blend of devotion to law and order and sympathetic understanding of the hard way of the transgressor and underdog"<sup>13</sup> to a youth of contradiction and hardship. In a standard "rags to riches" tale--spiced by the claim of Pinkerton's past militancy in the cause of social and industrial reform--Pinkerton, a young boy in Glasgow, witnesses the fatal beating of his father--a policeman--in a Chartist riot. Later, Pinkerton himself became a Chartist. In 1842, the young agitator was

compelled to leave Scotland during a crack-down on political radicalism. After a difficult passage to North America, he and his wife worked their way West with little money and few possessions. They eventually settled on the Illinois frontier, where Pinkerton worked as a cooper before he began to make his name as a detective.<sup>14</sup>

Pinkerton validates his self-proclaimed expertise on tramps through reference to his own background:

I know what it is, from personal experience, to be the tramp journeyman; to carry the stick and bundle; to seek work and not get it; and to get it, and receive but a pittance for it, or suddenly lose it altogether and be compelled to resume the weary search...In fact, I know every bitter experience that the most laborious of laboring men have been or ever will be required to undergo...<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, Pinkerton's enlarged capacity for fellow feeling does not, for the most part, translate into a sympathetic rendering of the tramp's circumstances. His depiction of an 1870s hobo jungle near an abandoned mine site conforms unmistakably to the stock image of the detestable--and racially flawed--tramp:

This grotesque company numbered thirty or forty persons, and had evidently been gathered at this particular point in anticipation of possible opportunities for raids in every direction while the locality was deserted...The moon, rising above the lonesome old breaker, fell across the camp, giving its inmates a weird, witch-like appearance as they moved about in the lights and shadows. They seemed to be a tired, dreary, wretched lot, and had the marks of travel and weary wandering upon them. Most of them had fallen upon the ground for rest, and in all sorts of sluggish positions were dozing in a stupid, sodden way that told of brutish instincts and experiences.<sup>16</sup>

Pinkerton's most extreme denunciation--in a book that decries all of the most undesirable "types"--is reserved for striking workers. In this vein, his references to tramps are particularly revealing. Pinkerton never attributes industrial unrest to the "honest workingmen" whom he eulogizes, but to various combinations of reprehensible "elements" such as, "howling communists, vicious tramps, mischievous boys and idle city riff-raff," or "confirmed tramps, disgusting drunkards, [and] miserable communistic outcasts."<sup>17</sup> Railing against a generalized "vile rabble" allows Pinkerton to depreciate the grievances of striking workers, attribute unrest to foreign "criminals" and other troublemakers, claim solidarity with the interests of "genuine" working people and exonerate his agency's heavy-handed violence against strikers. Despised tramps, like "howling communists" and "disgusting drunkards," were best dealt with using heavy boots and a stout club.

Pinkerton's adoption of a degraded image of the tramp (feeding into and drawing from the wider propagation of the tramp as menace, which, by the mid-1870s, was a formulation that had already acquired a broad cultural currency), helped in the more problematic demonization of trade unionists. However, unlike the detective's alternating portrayal of workers--who are either lauded if of the

compliant variety or reproached if inclined to protest the abuses of management--Pinkerton's contradictory portrayal of the tramp cannot be attributed to expedience. Rather, the advocacy of the positive aspects of tramping seems to be both a paean to traditional ideals of itinerant artisanship, peripatetic naturalism, and literary wayfaring, and a genuine acclamation of the possibilities of tramping (in the polite sense) for the deliberate cultivation of experience, health, and self-reliance.

Pinkerton even takes issue with some of the most outspoken expounders of the "tramp menace":

I do not agree with Professor Wayland and others as to the universal villainy and ferocity of the tramp....From personal observation, which I think in these matters is a safer guide than general assertion, I am well assured that among this army of tramps there is a large number of persons of fine mind and attainments....He may end with none but a vagabond's impulse and no sentiment at all. But, as a class, I feel that they have been somewhat misunderstood and always scorned and vilified.<sup>10</sup>

Subscribing to naturalist John Burrough's conception of the "exhilarations of the road," Pinkerton finds in tramping an "unexplainable pleasure" which he alternately attributes to "natural beauty," "freedom of care of any grave character," "adventure," and "the utter absence of responsibility":

No person can ever get a taste of the genuine pleasure of the road and not feel in some reckless way, but yet certainly feel, that he would like to become some sort of a tramp. He might rebel against any kind of a compromise with his own manhood that would make him a tramp in the offensive sense in which the word is employed; he may be

very certain in his own mind that no condition of necessity and no combination of circumstances could ever bring him to a point where he would sleep in a hay-rick, rob a hen-roost, or bully contributions from countryside folk; but there would, and there does still come an irrepressible urge to go a-tramping.<sup>19</sup>

Pinkerton cites a rich heritage for the tramp's "wandering habits and lazy mode of gaining a livelihood," identifying the "antiquity of tramps and tramping" through reference to the Bible and various traditions of itinerancy in Medieval Europe.<sup>20</sup> He highlights a number of prominent tramps; among them Jesus Christ, John Bunyan, Ben Johnson, Sir Walter Scott, Benjamin Franklin and Charles Dickens.

Moreover, Pinkerton's defense of the institution of tramping includes a recommendation of its efficacy for "men who have the advantage of wealth, of great learning, of position, and of friends, [who] quite often are utterly wanting in self-reliance and experience":

But take a man who has had to use his wits to fill his stomach, who has passed from one county or country to another in that painfully slow way that the tramp is compelled--who has had to brighten and quicken every faculty in his efforts to evade police, to keep clothed, to make roadside friends, to get work--for all tramps are not shiftless vagabonds--and often to sustain life, and he has obtained a self-reliance, a wonderful knowledge of the world, and a rare observation of men and things that gives him a peculiar advantage whenever he is in a position to use it.<sup>21</sup>

Pinkerton's winsome advocacy reveals a hint of a growing discomfort with the stultifying civility and predictability of the "privileged" life. This impulse, reflecting a



vaporous dis-ease increasingly prevalent among elements of the late and post Victorian bourgeois and elite classes, helped to prepare the ground for the evolution of an ideology of the road hero. The understanding of "experience" as something to be deliberately pursued by those who believed themselves insulated from "real life," was related to a complex range of cultural developments. These included the proliferation of a vigorous "literature of action" (including both the advent of activist realism and the resurgence of a romantic movement suffused with high chivalry and adventure), the drive for a more palpable and authentic way of living (exemplified by the Settlement movement as well as by a host of primitivist, utopian or craft communitarian schemes), and the "cult of the strenuous life" (delineated by tendencies as diverse as the surge in martial spirit accompanying increased U.S. adventurism abroad, the Alaskan Gold Rush with its iconography of the last frontier, and a new emphasis on active, "open air," liesure and amusement). These developments were closely related to the romantization of the hobo experience and the appeal of the road as a venue for masculine activism, the pursuit of simplicity and autonomy, adventure, and the quest for spiritual fulfillment.<sup>22</sup>

Pinkerton, though a steadfast and ruthless defender of

property and authority, and, in his professional capacity, a consistent enemy of the hobo (he actually set up the first railroad police force), entertains--however conditionally and tentatively--an idealization of the wandering life drawn from a traveling tradition as old as Homer, and a romantic conception of the exultation, irresponsibility, and indeterminacy of life on the road. Even in the most grim and pathetic vagabond, Pinkerton insists, there must be some "underlying principle of genuine love for the out-door world...some other motive than a mere instinct to provide against hunger."<sup>23</sup> Pinkerton's avowal of the self-enhancing gains in experience and assurance possible through taking to the road further problematizes his own reprobation of the tramp. In Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives, the pervasive representation of the despicable tramp is complicated by both residual (picaresque, medieval and romantic idealizations of wandering adventure) and nascent (the emergent heroic and rebellious category of the American hobo) cultural projections. Such ambiguity distinguishes this work from the more one dimensional invective typical of the discourse of the "tramp menace." It is also emblematic, however, of an ingrained indecision regarding tramps and vagabonds that persisted despite overwhelming official hostility to rootless wanderers. This

ambivalence is further illustrated by the development of the hobo's comic side in the burgeoning institutions of fin-de-siecle popular culture.

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In his 1877 short story, "My Friend the Tramp," Bret Harte describes the humorous encounter of a country gentleman with a crude, slothful, but basically kind-hearted hobo. The narrator stumbles on the tramp--reclined on a bed of soft moss, smoking peacefully--while on a Sunday stroll at the seaside:

He was very ragged; he was very dirty; there was a strong suggestion about him of his having too much hair; too much nail; too much perspiration; too much of those superfluous excrescences and exudations that society and civilisation [sic] strive to keep under. But it was noticeable that he had not too much of anything else. It was The Tramp.<sup>24</sup>

Harte's comical depiction of the tramp is amplified by the latter's heavy brogue, an attribute that graces the tramp's creative hard-luck tales:

...if I'd belaved that I was trispassin' on yer honour's grounds it's meself that would hev laid down on the say-shore and taken the salt waves for me blankits. But it's sivinteen miles I've walked this blessed noight, with nothin' to sustain me, and hevin' a mortal wakeness to fight wid in me bowels, by reason of starvation, and only a bit o' baccy that the Widdy Maloney giv me at the cross-

roads, to kape me up entoirly. But it was the dark day I left me home in Milwaukee to walk to Boston, and if ye'll oblige a lone man who has left a wife and six children in Milwaukee, wid the loan of twenty-five cints, furninst the time he gits wurruk, God'll be good to ye.<sup>20</sup>

As it turns out, Harte's tramp is an inveterate liar and an incurable loafer. Astounding tales of hardship and woe elicit cash donations first from the narrator, and then from his neighbors. Contracted to build a stone fence, the tramp procrastinates magnificently, at one point conniving the narrator's children and servants into taking up the work under his supervision. Harte's amusing "local color" piece turns on the tramp's innocent charm. Even the narrator, an easy touch for his ragged guest's inveigling throughout, cannot help admiring the tramp's chicanery. The story ends on a note of tragedy when the tramp is shot by an affluent landowner. But Harte adds an ironic twist. For the shotgun was supposed to have been charged only with powder—firing a blank charge being a sure method of scaring away nuisance vagrants. However, the tramp himself had loaded the weapon with buckshot earlier in the day, having conned it away from one of the landowner's servants for several hours of duck hunting. The tramp's bamboozling is ultimately his undoing.

Harte's affable rogue installed the comic picaro of venerable literary tradition on distinctively American soil. As in the picaresque modes, the butt of the joke in

"My Friend the Tramp" is less the incorrigible bum than the settled monotonies and ingrained hypocrisies of the ordinary order of convention, work and responsibility; a realm which the tramp strives to avoid.<sup>26</sup> Harte's tramp character commenced a parodic cultural undercurrent coterminous with the hostile mainstream configuration of the tramp as menace. The two formulations, however, though identifiably distinct, frequently overlapped. The tramps of the comic weeklies of the '80s and '90s were as often the objects of a decidedly cruel brand of humor as the beneficiaries of sympathetic spoof. The tragi-comic tramp anticipated by Harte did not become a recognizable cultural fixture until the twentieth century. Nevertheless, a wide variety of incipient picaros inhabited the margins of late nineteenth century culture. In his circus, vaudeville, and cartoon versions, the tramp gradually emerged as comic rogue and pitiful buffoon, and, in the process, acquired a mass audience and a broad cultural resonance.

In his 1926 reminiscence of circus clowning during the 1870s, '80s, and '90s, Robert Sherwood describes the "Pete Jenkins act," a routine that "no circus performance...was considered complete without." The gag involved an extended encounter between an intoxicated tramp dressed in rags, and a trick horse.<sup>27</sup> Simultaneously, on the early vaudeville stage, jugglers adopted the convention of donning tramp's

rags and juggling old hats and cigar boxes as a burlesque of the popular "salon jugglers," who wore tuxedos and juggled top hats and canes.<sup>26</sup> The image was refined on the vaudeville circuit by performers like Nat Wills, the "Happy Tramp" and Billy McDermot, "the last of Coxeys' Army." In her 1914 book celebrating the vaudeville scene, Caroline Caffin describes the essential attributes of the stock comic tramp, a character that had become familiar on the vaudeville circuit by the 1890s, when Wills and others introduced routines like "The Tramp and the Policeman:"

He is a happy, tattered, slovenly red-nosed rogue; glorying in his detestation of work and water and gaily oblivious of the rights of property. He lies for the pure joy of lying and his hunger and thirst are absolutely unappeasable. His costume has become traditional. A battered hat, through which his hair sticks out; the remnants of a once black coat; ragged pants, too large for him, supported by a string round the waste, from which is suspended his trusty tomato can; a gaping pair of shoes cover sockless feet--the whole effect being surmounted by a grin of inordinate proportions which seems to stretch nearly round his head. He is full of chuckling mirth and has a vocabulary of slang large enough to start a new language. He has a super-ingenuous manner, which he especially assumes when he most intends to deceive, while the excuses that he can give for avoiding anything that looks in the least like work may be contradictory without end.<sup>27</sup>

The jovial, mischievous vaudeville tramp emerged concurrently with his two-dimensional cartoon compatriot. It was in the latter form, as a character in the mass circulation magazines, however, that the comic tramp enjoyed his greatest exposure and influence.

"Weary Willie," the durable comic hobo later made famous by clown-tramp Emmett Kelly, was pioneered by cartoonist Eugene Zimmerman in the pages of Puck and Judge--the two great comic weeklies enjoying their heyday in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

"Zim" was joined by Julius Stafford Baker, and Frederick Burr Opper as frequent early lampooners of the tramp, his circumstances, and his persecutors.<sup>31</sup> However, the comic tramp prevalent in the humorous press of the '80s and '90s--though an object of fun and ridicule--had not yet acquired the element of pathos that encouraged the audience not just to laugh at, but also to identify with the hobo's plight. It was logical for "Zim" to incorporate in his tramp cartoons popular concepts that equated class difference with biological imperatives. The idiom for the racial denigration of the tramp was readily available in a popular culture suffused with bigotry. The humorous weeklies of the day--as well as more established, upscale publications--were blatantly racist in their humor and commentary. The stock tramp character molded in the comic press of the '80s and '90s developed analogously with more race-specific character types. Like the ruthlessly stereotyped ethnic minorities with whom "Weary Willy" shared the page, the comic tramp was racially defective as well as a fool and a failure (indeed, these attributes

presupposed one another).<sup>32</sup> The connection between the tramp's circumstances and ethnic inferiority was often made directly. As with Bret Harte, whose amicable hobo happened to be Irish as well as indigent, Eugene Zimmerman drew tramps named "Packed Prendergast," and "Stewed Riley" in addition to the ethnically non-specific "Tatters," "Raggedy," and "Sloppy."<sup>33</sup>

Though racial derogation tended to isolate the tramp from the sympathies of society in general, his portrayal as an innocuous buffoon--unpleasant but ultimately harmless--correspondingly softened the hard edge of hostility inherent in the image purveyed by the dominant institutions of culture. Yet even this tendency was by no means uniform. Zimmerman's tramps occasionally took on a distinctly threatening air. In his cartoon "Paralyzing Pertinence," for example, the hobo is cast as a remorseless degenerate--casually fleecing a good-hearted old woman:

MRS. HANDOUT--"And who is responsible for your impoverishment?"

TATTERS--"Easy people like you, mum, whose continuous generosity makes gettin' a job unnecessary an' de' idea irksome."<sup>34</sup>

Such representations further muddled the image of the tramp in his early comic rendition. As with the lampooning of African and Jewish Americans, an exercise that pivoted on the grotesque exaggeration and stereotyping of various alleged physical and cultural "abnormalities," cartoon



parody could elicit laughter--in the case of racial minorities and tramps, functioning as a covert justification for a structure of oppression and abuse--as well as invoke the spectre of fear and suspicion in a more overt way.

With the migration of the cartoon tramp from single frame illustrated vignettes (such as those created by "Zim") to the multi-frame comic strip format popularized in the illustrated weeklies around the turn of the century, the element of derision inherent in the nineteenth century figure of the comic tramp began to diminish. The advent of Frederick Burr Opper's "Happy Hooligan"--first appearing in Puck in 1900--advanced the genre by building on the element of pathos tentatively forwarded by Bret Harte nearly twenty-five years earlier. The Hooligan, with his wretched wardrobe, absurdly large head and tomato can hat, cut an even more ridiculous figure than the cartoon tramps who preceded him or his vaudeville contemporaries. He was the quintessential fall-guy, the endless victim of sadistic slapstick pranks and his own foolish misadventures. To be sure, the brutality with which the Hooligan was routinely visited delineates a dark side to the audience's commiseration. Behind sympathy for the Hooligan's victimization undoubtedly lurked deeper currents of superiority and sadism. Nonetheless, an essential

component of the Hooligan's appeal transcended his cruel pummeling. Opper's strip rose above sadism because of the Hooligan's perpetually thwarted good intentions--admirable attributes that, tragically, seemed to make a beating more, rather than less inevitable.

As the archetypal victim of circumstances, the Hooligan, try as he might, always wound up the loser. This was a new permutation in the evolving image of the comic tramp. Conceiving of the tramp as a victim was in itself a departure from previous formulations; conceiving of the tramp as an underdog was a direct confutation of dominant cultural forms. The "Happy Hooligan" evoked the sympathies of a broad segment of the American public because they identified with his predicament. The strip ran for thirty years--first in Puck and then in the Hearst papers, and provided the most immediate prototype for the renowned comic tramps of the twentieth century: Charlie Chaplin and Emmett Kelly. Kelly, who introduced his version of the tramp-clown in the twenties, described the character in his autobiography, Clown. Kelly's comments are likewise apposite for the less solemn, but equally unfortunate, Happy Hooligan:

...a sad and ragged little guy who is very serious about everything he attempts--no matter how futile or how foolish it appears to be. I am the hobo who found out the hard way that the dice is "frozen," the race fixed and the wheel crooked, but there is always present that one tiny, forlorn spark of

hope still glimmering in his soul which makes him keep on trying...In my tramp clown character, folks who are down on their luck, have had disappointments and maybe been pushed around by circumstances beyond their control see a caricature of themselves. By laughing at me, they really laugh at themselves, and realizing that they have done this gives them a sort of spiritual second wind for going back into the battle.<sup>38</sup>

Identification with the tramp-clown as underdog provided an element of reassurance to a mass audience confronted by colossal technological and institutional change--and its attendant everyday confusions and frustrations. These issues, of course, were faced directly by the apotheosis of the tramp-clown underdog, Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin's film characterization of the Little Tramp, beginning in 1914, struck an essential cultural chord. In contrast to the Happy Hooligan, who finished every episode in the "hoosegow" or with a bulldog hanging from the seat of his pants or an old woman's umbrella bent over his head, the Little Tramp inevitably vanquished the villain and wound up with the damsel in distress. Often triumphing over nefarious or dull-witted bosses and bureaucrats, or surmounting the inanities of a bewildering industrial landscape, Chaplin's tramp character engaged his audience in the surmounting of impossible odds.

The heroic implications of the Little Tramp were prefigured less by the Happy Hooligan, than by James Montgomery Flagg's, Nervy Nat--another icon of early twentieth century graphic humor. Nervy Nat appeared in

Judge between 1903 and 1907, was revived by other artists through 1916, and eventually featured in some early animated films.<sup>36</sup> The mischievous antithesis of the Happy Hooligan, Nat engaged in a more volitional and vigorous brand of escapade. Flagg's tramp was a no-account rogue who consistently prevailed in outrageous adventures with railroad police, rich bankers and flirting nurses. The worldly Nat was particularly distinguished by his command of the English language--he had a proclivity for upbraiding his opponents with a clever and elaborate turn of phrase. Nat was an instigator, not a victim, and in this sense he differed markedly from Chaplin's Little Tramp, whose allure derived in part from his oblivious innocence. Unlike his cartoon predecessors of the nineteenth century, however, Nat's instigation was proffered in heroic, rather than villainous terms.<sup>37</sup>

Taken as a whole, the development of the comic tramp offers an abbreviated parallel to the larger dynamic of heroic character formation occurring coextensively in fictional and documentary portrayals of the hobo. The genre reflects similar issues and ambiguities which--as with the broader emergence of the hobo as a cultural hero--coalesce in the formation of distinct character types and heroic modes. The victim role of the Happy Hooligan, Nervy Nat's aggressive roguishness, and Chaplin's accidental heroism all find their analogues in "serious"

filaments of documentary and literary expression. Of greater importance is the more difficult question of correlativity between the emerging comic tramp and other developing heroic wandering types. In this regard it is reasonable to postulate that the comic tramp was an important contributor to the erosion of the dominant cultural representation of the tramp as menace, miscreant, and racial throwback. Moreover, the comic tramp as heroic-activist--a mode suggested particularly by Nervy Nat--fed into the refiguring of the despised hobo as iconoclastic rebel-hero. In the words of Enid Welsford, "whenever the clown baffles the policeman, whenever the fool makes the sage look silly, whenever the acrobat defeats the machine, there is a sudden sense of pressure relieved, of a birth of new joy and freedom."<sup>30</sup> The relieving of pressure in pursuit of joy and freedom locates the essential intersection in the parallel trajectories of heroic magnification followed by the comic tramp of popular culture and the literary hobo-vagabond. This emancipatory impulse, however, if traced back along its roots, leads eventually to a most fundamental level of cultural-formation: that inhabited by the hoboes themselves.

...In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,  
there's a land that's fair and bright,  
Where the handouts grow on bushes  
and you sleep out every night,  
Where the boxcars all are empty  
and the sun shines every day  
On the birds and the bees and the cigarette trees,  
The lemonade springs where the bluebird sings  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,  
all the cops have wooden legs,  
And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth  
and the hens lay soft-boiled eggs.  
The farmers trees are full of fruit  
and the barns are full of hay.  
Oh, I'm bound to go where there ain't no snow,  
Where the rain don't fall, the wind don't blow,  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains...<sup>39</sup>

Subsequent verses of the "Big Rock Candy Mountain" describe streams of "alkyhol," lakes of stew and whiskey, blind railroad bulls, jails made of tin, and a life of contented ease: "I'm a-goin' to stay where you sleep all day, Where they hung the Turk that invented work..." Though there is some controversy regarding the background of the song, most folk-music historians who have taken up the question, credit it--at least in this and several closely related versions--to Harry "Haywire Mac" McClintock.<sup>40</sup> The origins, transmission and composition of McClintock's description of "hobo heaven" raise the cogent problem of indigenous hobo folk culture and its convergence with the broad currents shaping the ideology of the modern road hero.

The "folkways" of American transients have been sporadically and unevenly addressed by several generations

of scholars and commentators. Richardson Wright's impressionistic study, Hawkers and Walkers in Early America (1927), surveys the wanderings of various vocationally oriented nomadic "fraternities"--artisans, peddlers, laborers, lawyers, healers, artists, preachers, and performers--from Colonial times through the Civil War. Of greater pertinence in the present context is Nels Anderson's classic study of the customs and characteristics of "hobohemia:" The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man (1923). More recently, Kenneth Allsop has attempted the most comprehensive treatment of the tramp "subculture" thus far in Hard Travelin': The Hobo and his History (1967). Through these secondary sources, as well as through the narratives of intermittent tramps with a literary or social-scientific bent, such as Josiah Flynt and Jack London, a reasonably coherent portrait of hobo "society" emerges. It is certain that hoboes--in particular during their heyday roughly between the early 1870s and the early 1920s--comprised what Richard Phelps has termed, "a unique and discernible community" and a "genuine folk culture."<sup>41</sup> In the absence of traditional requisites of stable social structure--family units and rootedness in place, for instance--the hobo "community" substituted "surrogate institutions:" such as initiation rites, a hierarchical class system, a fluctuating network of

gathering points, a distinctive jargon, various rules of conduct and standards of prestige, a cryptographic communication system, and an established tradition of occasional celebrations and "conventions."<sup>42</sup> Of particular significance is the musical component of the oral tradition through which hoboes communicated and perpetuated their fragile "culture." Unlike other features of tramp society, hobo songs sometimes reverberated far beyond the boxcars and jungles in which they originally circulated, in many cases instigating and influencing popular impressions of life on the road.

"The Big Rock Candy Mountain," most recently rendered as a children's song by Burl Ives, was originally a rather unnerving humorous "tramp fantasy." The song referred to the custom of older, seasoned tramps ("jockers"), of enticing young boys onto the road with tall tales. The "snared" boy would become an apprentice ("preshun"), and be required to serve the older tramp by begging, stealing, and possibly providing sexual favors. In return, the older hobo offered knowledge and protection.<sup>43</sup> McClintock purportedly wrote the original version while on the road as a teenager in 1895, basing it on tales he had heard while hoboeing through the South<sup>44</sup>: (Ram 10)

One summer day in the month of May  
A jocker he came hiking.  
He came to a tree and "Ah," says he,  
"This is just to my liking."



In the very same month on the very same day  
A Hoosier boy came hiking.  
Said the bum to the son, "Oh will you come  
To the Big Rock Candy Mountains?"

I'll show you the bees in the cigarette trees,  
And the soda water fountain  
And the lemonade springs where the blue bird sings.  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

So they started away on the very same day,  
The bum and the kid together,  
To romp and to rove in the cigarette grove  
In the land of the sunny weather.  
They danced and they hiked for many a day,  
The mile posts they were counting;  
But they never arrived at the lemonade tide  
Or the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

The punk rolled up his big blue eyes  
And said to the jocker, "Sandy,  
I've hiked and hiked and wandered too,  
But I ain't seen any candy.  
I've hiked and hiked till my feet are sore  
I'll be God damned if I hike any more  
To be \* \* \* \* \*  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.<sup>45</sup>

McClintock's song, then, operated on several levels: as a suggestively humorous anecdote for "jockers" and other hoboies in the know, as a warning to naive prospective "preshuns" such as McClintock himself when he wrote the song and, most importantly, as an imaginative inversion of the actual social order (which, as hoboies were painfully aware, situated them squarely at the bottom). This latter characteristic locates the subversive significance of "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" and other hobo ballads that embraced, what Phelps calls, "the land of milk and honey theme."

Rooted in underground currents of utopian fantasy

transmitted for centuries through the folk cultures of the poor and dispossessed, the conception of "hobo heaven" juxtaposed life-as-it-is to "an extravagant, comic, imaginatively poetic affirmation of life-as-it-should-be."<sup>46</sup> Like the fabled African-American land of "Dittie Wah Dittie," and traditional folk rites such as Mardi Gras, the idea of the Big Rock Candy Mountain contained a sardonic element--an implicit critique of existing society. By imaginatively exploding the conditions and relationships of the established order, such expressions could function, in Victor Turner's words, as possible "fonts of alternative ideas, values, motivations, and designs for living."<sup>47</sup> In the hobo's case, the Big Rock Candy Mountains were accessible only from the road--the physical and emotional geography of which necessitated the formation of unique alternative "designs for living" by the rootless wanderer. These patterns found their apotheosis in the hobo "community," where ironic detachment and emancipatory exultation were institutionalized in song.

The music of the "tramp class" parodied a very real, enforced alienation. Thus, many hobo ballads, no matter how comic or sarcastic, were also permeated with tragedy. The pathos of the hobo's predicament forms the dominant theme of the "milk and honey" ballad alternately titled,

"The Dying Hobo" or "The Hobo's Last Lament." A mortally wounded tramp, having lived a life of weary roaming, finally catches the "fast train" to a "better land." What is interesting here, however, is the presence of both an element of whimsical acerbity--the counterposing of a utopian fantasy, "hobo heaven," in place of the hard reality of life on the road--and the instinctive impulse toward emancipation, which, for the hobo, meant headlong, heedless motion:

...I'm headed now for far away where prospects all are bright,  
Where cops don't hound a hobo, or pinch a man on sight,  
Tell Brooklyn Jack and Murph and Jo just what I tell you,  
I've caught a fast train on the fly and now I'm going through.

I'm going to a better land where brakies ain't so mean,  
Where weinders [sic] grow on bushes and where dogs is never seen,  
Where no one knows of rock piles and when you wants a ride,  
The Boss Con says a-smilin', "Pardner won't you get inside?"  
'O pard I hear the whistle, I must catch her on the fly,  
It's my last ride--gimme a drink of whiskey 'fore I die.'  
The hobo smiled. His head fell back, he'd sung his last refrain,  
His pardner swiped his shirt and coat and hopped the eastbound train.<sup>4</sup>  
His pardner swiped his shirt and coat and hopped the eastbound train.<sup>4</sup>

The "pardner's" spontaneous act--snagging the dead man's shirt and coat and catching a freight on the fly before his ex-companion could even begin to get cold--celebrates the tramp's impulsive restlessness. As well, it is an injection of grim comedy--in this case delightfully irreverent--into an otherwise morbid tale.

The understated humor so often a component of tramp songs, fluctuated between sardonic disdain for the circumstances faced by the tramp and a more fanciful,

indefatigably optimistic variety. One of the most enduring and adaptable of the hobo songs, "Halleluja, I'm a Bum," combined both of these comic tendencies. Sung to the tune of the Religious folk song "Revive us Again," "Halleluja I'm a Bum" suggests that the hobo's liberation necessitated an acceptance of suffering. The chorus of the song proceeds with cheery stoicism:

Halleluja, I'm a bum,  
Halleluja, bum again,  
Halleluja, give us a handout,  
To revive us again.<sup>47</sup>

The dichotomy implicit in the chorus--between the euphoria of taking to the road and the desperation of needing a handout to be revived--is made explicit in the subsequent verses. The carefree, "When springtime does come, O won't we have fun/We'll throw up our jobs and we'll go on the bum..." is juxtaposed with the bitter, "Oh, why don't you work like other men do?/How the hell can I work when there's no work to do?..." or the sarcastic, "Oh, I love my boss and my boss loves me, And that is the reason I'm so hungry..."<sup>48</sup>

Even those songs most explicitly characterized by pathos also carried an implicit social commentary. One of the oldest extant hobo ballads, published between 1875 and 1880 in the De Marsan's Singers Journal (but both predated and succeeded by an unknown number of orally circulated renditions), recounts the story of a desperate, pathetic

hobo who is thrown off a moving freight by a hostile brakeman--and killed in the fall.<sup>e1</sup> "Only a Tramp" is a woeful tale that recounts this specific incident as well as speaking to the generalized predicament faced by indigent transients. The song especially emphasizes the helplessness of those faced with the misfortune of tramping:

I'm a broken down man, without money or credit.  
My clothes are all tattered and torn;  
Not a friend have I got in this cold, dreary world--  
Oh! I wish I had never been born!  
In vain I have searched for employment,  
Sleeping out on the ground cold and damp;  
I am starved in the face by starvation--  
Oh! Pity the fate of a Tramp!...  
Oh! the rich ones at home, by their bright, cheery firesides,  
With plenty so temptingly stored,  
Have oftimes refused me, and sneered with contempt,  
When I asked for the crumbs from their board;  
And if through the cravings of hunger,  
With a loaf I should dare to decamp,  
They at once set the dogs loose upon me,  
Because I am only a tramp.<sup>e2</sup>

Here, the forlorn protagonist, beset by injustice and antipathy, can only imagine that his woes will be redressed in the world beyond, where the rich and the poor will finally find equal footing "'neath the same mother earth."

But the day will yet come when the rich man and me  
Will be laid 'neath the same mother earth;  
His joys and my sorrows will then be forgotten...

Perhaps the most resonant (though not the most numerous) of the hobo ballads--both from the perspective of the hoboes themselves and their contemporaries in "respectable" society--were those that unambiguously

celebrated the "feats and adventures" of the tramp's unique nomadic existence. George Milburn, the original collector of many tramp folk-songs in the late '20s (he wrote the only book dealing specifically with the musical lore of the hobo, The Hobo's Hornbook, 1930), writes of the frequent and enthusiastic jungle renditions of the action-packed "Gila Monster Route."<sup>33</sup> This lyric (apparently it was usually recited as a poem) recounts the story of a half-starved "bo," ditched on a "horstile" desert pike, who has to "nail" a "highballing" west-bound freight:

As she hove into sight far up the track  
She was workin' steam with her brake shoes slack,  
She hollered once at the whistle post,  
Then she flittered by like a frightened ghost.

He could hear the roar of the big six-wheel  
As the drivers pounded on polished steel,  
And the screech of the flanges on the rail  
As she beat it west o'er the desert trail.

The john got busy and took the risk,  
He climbed aboard and began to frisk.  
He reached up high and began to feel  
For an end-door pin--then he cracked the seal.

'Twas a double-deck stock car loaded with sheep.  
Old John crawled in and went to sleep.  
The con-highballed and she whistled out--  
They were off, down the Gila Monster Route.<sup>34</sup>

Two of the most widely disseminated hobo song complexes were "Waiting for a Train/Wild and Reckless Hobo," and "The Wabash Cannonball." The former recounts the rollicking adventures of a particularly roguish and philandering tramp:

...Standing on the platform, smoking a cheap cigar,  
Waiting for a freight train to catch an empty car;  
Thinking of those good old times and wishing they'd come again,  
A thousand miles away from home, bumming a railroad train...<sup>66</sup>

While "The Wabash Cannonball" (a song made famous by Roy  
Acuff but recorded scores of times in numerous versions)  
was a tramp's tribute to a mythical train:

...Now listen to her rumble,  
Now listen to her roar,  
As she whistles down the valley  
And tears along the shore.  
Now hear the engine's whistle  
And old John Hobo's call  
As he rides the rods and brakebeams  
On the Wabash Cannonball...<sup>67</sup>

The sampling of tramp songs introduced above found  
their origins in the hobo "culture" of the 1870s, '80s and  
'90s. Their diffusion into popular culture was  
widespread. In his 1930 article for The American Mercury,  
"Poesy in the Jungles," George Milburn expresses his  
annoyance with the dissemination--and consequent  
dessication--of many of the old songs. "The Dying Hobo,"  
states Milburn:

...is an example of a ballad that has been  
transformed for popular purposes. This parody is  
of indubitable hobo origin, but it has been  
memorized by high-school boys so long, and it has  
been set to such a catchy collegiate tune, that  
its flavor has been impaired.<sup>67</sup>

Milburn bemoans the popularity of some of the more  
incendiary of the tramp tunes: "Today the chorus of  
'Hallelujah, I'm a bum' and of 'Pie in the Sky' are heard  
at high-school 'hobo-day' masquerades and the luncheon club  
of Mr. Babbitt quite as often as they are at Wob [Wobbly]

meetings."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, in 1933, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" would make its debut in "Hollywood," as a popular movie starring Al Jolson.

"The Big Rock Candy Mountain"--in its "cleaned-up" version--became widely familiar during the early 1900s. It was distributed on sheet music, broadsides, printed on post cards, and officially copyrighted as early as 1906.<sup>37</sup>

"Hallejulah I'm a Bum" moved rapidly from the box cars and jungles (where it was first noted in 1897 by Carl Sandburg, who collected the song from migrant farm hands in Kansas) via the I.W.W.'s first Little Red Songbook (1910), and into the popular musical lexicon. By 1926, when Harry "Haywire Mac" McClintock first recorded the song for Victor Records, it had been printed as sheet music by sixteen different New York music publishing houses and circulated on innumerable broadsides.<sup>40</sup>

Most of the hobo ballads are genuine folk classics. They were transmitted orally among transients long before emerging in published form. Sometimes tramps or ex-tramps themselves would claim and attempt to publish a version of a tramp folk piece--as was the case with Harry McClintock. More often the song would filter from "hoboland" into broader oral circulation, at which point it would find its way into published broadsides, songsters, and sheet music.

Transmission of the hobo experience and the hobo's own



interpretation of this experience into broader channels of discourse appears to have followed two fundamental patterns. The first delineates the gradual and diffuse transfusion of hobo lore and folkways into more popular and commodious spheres of culture. Accordingly, this trend includes the vast minutiae of ordinary social intercourse--a father's stories of being "on the bum," hard luck tales heard at back gates, the vagrant's deposition to the judge, a "jocker's" adventures rendered to a crowd of slum kids, the conversations of hired migrant hands and farmers, of itinerant railroad workers and section bosses, of brakemen and tramps. Hobo songs are only the most visible and enduring traces of an impossibly complex cultural interplay. The themes of these songs, in contrast to the vapid sentimentalism that suffused fin-de-siecle popular music, focus on a vigorous and adversarial mode of living. They reveal stoic resilience, comic fatalism, sardonic haughtiness, and anarchic restlessness. Such attributes indicate the indigenous cultivation of a hobo mystique; no doubt an essential strategy for the survival of both the vulnerable scaffolding of hobo "culture," and of the mobile individual himself in a hostile landscape of hardship and estrangement.

The second pattern involves the interpretation of the reality of the tramp's life on the road by educated

"participant-observers." These individuals, through their extended forays into the hobo "subculture," produced documentary and fictional written narratives describing the world of the hobo, and especially their own adventures and experiences as temporary members of the "tramp class." The impact of this small contingent of commentators on popular conceptions of the tramp was more substantial than the random dissemination of tramp lore occurring on a wider and more fluid front; largely because of these writers' access to the established media of the mass culture. The potency of sympathetic portrayal or heroic enlargement of the hobo's experience was amplified enormously through its representation in the same class of mainstream publication that propagated the idea of the tramp as menace. The dispersion of an image of the hobo discordant with dominant cultural formations in established media, could not be rivaled by the discursive musical productions of a scattered, marginalized and powerless "subculture." Nevertheless, it is imperative to realize the correlativity between these two modes of transmission of the hobo's nascent ideology. Fiction and sociology--often romanticizing (however ambivalently) the tramp's disconnected wanderings--fed back into the cultural self-awareness and subsequent cultural productions of the hoboes themselves. The resulting dialectic generated a

sort of myth-making snowball effect that helped to activate and vitalize the ascent of the hobo as hero.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in John D. Seelye, "The American Tramp: A Version of the Picaresque," American Quarterly XV (Winter 1963), 541.

<sup>2</sup>Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace, 31.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment, 480-481.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Kenneth Allsop, Hard Travellin': The Hobo and his History, (New York: The American Library, 1967): 117.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Allsop, 110.

<sup>6</sup>Allsop, 114.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Allsop, 114.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Frederick Feied, No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac, (New York: The Citadel Press, 1964), 9.

<sup>9</sup>Allsop, 116.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 128.

<sup>11</sup>Recognition of this seems to have been confined mostly to localized--often rural--discourse, and even here the availability and utility of migrant labor was considered a mixed blessing at best. See the comments of Mrs. E.T. Curtiss quoted in Allsop, 129.

<sup>12</sup>Allan Pinkerton, Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives, (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969, 1877 repr), 15.

<sup>13</sup>Richard Wilmer Rowan, The Pinkertons: A Detective Dynasty, (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1931), 5.

<sup>14</sup>Rowan, 4-6.

<sup>15</sup>Pinkerton, xi.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 59-60.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Allsop, 151.

<sup>18</sup>Pinkerton, 32.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 26.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 33-34.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 36.

<sup>22</sup>To fill out this sketchy overview of the cults of experience and the strenuous life see Jackson Lears' No Place of Grace. While it is difficult to establish direct lines of causation between the diffuse and amorphous "dislocations" and "weightlessness" examined by Lears and more palpable historical phenomena and events, these "structures of feeling" nevertheless appear to explain a great deal about fin-de-siecle American society.

<sup>23</sup>Pinkerton, 16.

<sup>24</sup>Bret Harte, "My Friend the Tramp," Complete Works: Collected and Revised by the Author, Vol. 3, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1901), 433.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 433.

<sup>26</sup>Kingsley Widmer, The Literary Rebel, (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 86-87. This motif is forcefully echoed in Twain's, Huckleberry Finn, where chafing against the strictures and pieties of "civilization" and convention drive the flight of Huck, and motivate his eventual decision to, "light out to the territories."

<sup>27</sup>Robert Edmund Sherwood, Here We Are Again: Recollections of an Old Circus Clown, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1926), 74-75.

<sup>28</sup>John Culhane, The American Circus: An Illustrated History, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1990), 112.

<sup>29</sup>Caroline Caffin, Vaudeville: The Book, (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 205-206.

<sup>30</sup>Allsop, 146. Also see Walter M. Brasch, Zim: The Autobiography of Eugene Zimmerman, (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 1988) and David E. Sloane ed., American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals, (New York, Greenwood Press, 1990).

<sup>31</sup>Maurice Horn ed., The World Encyclopedia of Cartoons, (New York: Chelsea House, 1980): 96. And see Richard Marschall, America's Great Comic Strip Artists, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 61-67.

<sup>32</sup>Brasch, 28-30.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 45, 65, 130.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 130.

<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Wilton Eckley, The American Circus (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984.)

<sup>36</sup>Horn, 413.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, 413.

<sup>38</sup>Enid Welsford, The Fool: His Social and Literary History (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), 318-319.

<sup>39</sup>Quoted in Hal Rammel, Nowhere in America: The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Other Comic Utopias (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1990), frontispiece.

<sup>40</sup>Richard Phelps, "Songs of the American Hobo" Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 16 No. 4 (Fall, 1983), 10.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 1.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid, 1-2. The most detailed discussion of hobo social structure remains Nels Anderson's, Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923). Much of the information Anderson presents is also contained in the documentary and fictional accounts forwarded by Josiah Flynt and Jack London--which will be discussed in detail in the next section. Some hobo jargon (much of which will crop up in this study) includes:

- jocker or profesh: Seasoned, experienced hobos, at the top of the hobo social ladder. London called the profesh the "blonde beasts" of the hobo world.
- gay cat, bindle or blanket stiff: A tramp who will work.
- preshun: Novice hobo.
- brakie or shack: Railroad brakeman.
- ditched: To be thrown off a train.
- rods and brakebeams: Parts of the undercarriage of railroad cars suitable for riding.
- jungle: Hobo campsite, usually near a freight yard or water tower.

"Hobo," "tramp" and "bum" undoubtedly connoted different shades of meaning for the indigent migratory individual and society in general during the period in question. One interpretation defines the hobo as one who rides and works, the tramp as one who rides and dreams, and the bum as one who rides and drinks. These particular distinctions, however, were not necessarily germane for general society or even for the majority of those on the road. I have used

"hobo" and "tramp" interchangeably, while shying away from "bum" because of its current pejorative and stationary implications.

<sup>43</sup>George Milburn, "Poesy in the Jungles" American Mercury XX (May, 1930), 83. See also John Greenway, American Folksongs of Protest (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 103.

<sup>44</sup>Rammel, 10.

<sup>45</sup>Greenway, 203-204. McClintock unfortunately expurgated the "offensive" line in the last verse of the song when he originally wrote it out. It has not been recovered, but can be surmised nonetheless.

<sup>46</sup>Rammel, 2-3. Rammel traces the "comic utopia" theme back to the British, "Land of Cockaigne" and the German "Oleana."

<sup>47</sup>Quoted in Rammel, 3.

<sup>48</sup>Quoted in Phelps, 12-13.

<sup>49</sup>Quoted in Phelps, 14.

<sup>50</sup>Quoted in Phelps, 13-14.

<sup>51</sup>Quoted in Norm Cohen, Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 347-348.

<sup>52</sup>Quoted in Cohen, 348.

<sup>53</sup>Milburn, 82-83.

<sup>54</sup>Quoted in Milburn, 82-83.

<sup>55</sup>Quoted in Cohen, 355.

<sup>56</sup>Quoted in Milburn, 84.

<sup>57</sup>Milburn, 84.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid, 85. "Wobbly" refers to a member of the International Workers of the World (I.W.W.).

<sup>59</sup>Rammel, 104-105.

<sup>60</sup>Greenwood, 198.

### The Hobo as Hero

The hobo as a heroic figure was framed and filled out, in fits and starts, by a number of writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The flip side of the loathesome, lazy and degenerate tramp, the hobo hero alternately followed a stubborn, independent road in an age of conformity, and stoicly endured the buffeting of an unpredictable and hostile "system." Without doubt, the heroic hobo found first developed expression--and greatest exposure--in the writing and persona of Jack London. London's achievement, however, must be understood in the context of the documentary and autobiographical tramp narratives that preceded it. The wandering worker accounts of Walter Augustus Wyckoff and the tramp studies of Josiah Flynt<sup>1</sup>--works which directly influenced London--embodied a developing conception of the heroic dimensions of the modern hobo. This conception eclipsed the profoundly ambivalent representations current in both the dominant culture--with its nearly unanimous reprobation of the tramp--and in emergent mediums of popular culture; where even the tramp's image as an innocuous buffoon was problematized by underlying elements of hostility.

Both Wyckoff and Flynt endured, to varying degrees, the



alienation at the root of the hobo's flight. In both cases, this experience resulted in an unusual degree of sympathy for the hobo. Yet the true heroism in the work of Wyckoff and Flynt was that of the authors themselves. Both commentators romanticize their own "scientific" or "sociological" tramping. In so doing, they begin the reconstitution of the hobo's road as a route toward new landscapes of adventure and experience. It would be left to Jack London to extend the romanticization from the respectable "participant-observer," the educated visitor to the the tramp world, to those less volitional wanderers of this realm: the tramps themselves.

Wyckoff's stint on the road appears, on the surface, a rudimentary exercise in participant-observation. At twenty-six, Wyckoff set out from Connecticut, penniless, in the coarse dress of an unskilled worker, to tramp across the country and plumb the depths of the "labor problem." For a year and a half Wyckoff lived the life of a wandering laborer, working in factories, mines, lumber camps, road crews, and as a farm hand, railroad section worker, dishwasher, and hotel bus-boy. The son of a Presbyterian missionary, Wyckoff had spent his youth in exclusive Eastern boarding schools and was awarded his B.A. from the College of New Jersey (later Princeton). In 1888 Wyckoff entered the Princeton Theological Seminary but proved a

restless student. He dropped out after a year to study and travel in Europe and, on his return, again delayed his pursuit of the ministry for his trek westward. It was Wyckoff's intense interest in social issues, coupled with the conviction that, without direct experience, his understanding of such issues would remain "bookish and inadequate," that propelled his 1891-1893 trans-continental tramp.<sup>2</sup> Wyckoff's observations from the journey appeared initially as a serial in Scribner's Magazine and were later published in two volumes entitled The Workers: An Experiment in Reality--The East (1897) and The West (1898).

At bottom, Wyckoff's journey was a quest for experience and understanding--two amorphous endowments limited for Wyckoff by a constraining matrix of class and circumstance. Echoing Pinkerton's advocacy of tramping for the cultivation of self-reliance, the appeal of the privations of the road and of life at the bottom of the social heap was, for Wyckoff, grounded in the certitude that the "strippings" and "wastings" of the voyage would result in positive gains in character, knowledge and experience.<sup>3</sup>

One week ago I shared the frictionless life of a country-seat. Frictionless, I mean, in the movement of an elaborate system which ministers luxuriously to the physical needs of life. Frictionless, perhaps, only to those to whom it ministers. Now I am out of all that, and am sharing instead the life of the humblest form of labor upon which that superstructure rests. This is not a frictionless life in its adjustment to daily

needs--very much the reverse. And whatever may be its compensations, they are not of the nature of easy physical existence. The actual step from the one manner of life to the other was sure of its own interest. It was painful to say good-by on the last evening, and there was enough of uncertainty in the prospect to account for a shrinking from the first encounter with a strange life; but there was promise of adventure, and almost a certainty of solid gain in experience.<sup>4</sup>

Though remaining largely undefined ("experience" and "adventure" are concepts with which Wyckoff only nebulously comes to terms), the "compensations" of this new "manner of life," are implicit in Wyckoff's narrative. Foremost is the psychic and physical benefit of mastering the unfamiliar demands of a foreign environment and meeting the various challenges of difficult and swiftly changing circumstances. Throughout The Workers we are reminded of Wyckoff's painful encounter with the "real world": the slow development of callouses over soft hands, the hardening of formerly flacid muscles, the agonizing achievement of competence in various jobs and the gradual winning of the grudging respect of foremen and fellow workers. Wyckoff gradually becomes a master at self-reliance.

Also evident in Wyckoff's account is a sense of the immediacy, the profound experiencing of the full range of human emotion, that comes of surviving on the far margins of society. The most difficult stretch of Wyckoff's journey, the winter of 1891-92 spent bitterly homeless and unemployed in the Chicago cold, spawned a strange exhilaration in its very arduousness and indeterminacy:

When life is lived in its simplest terms, one is brought to marvellous intimacy with vital processes...It is as though you were a little child once more, and your moods obedient to little things. When living is a daily struggle with the problems of what you shall eat and what you shall drink, and wherewithal you shall be clothed, you take no anxious thought for the morrow...Your heart will leap with hope at any brightening of your lot, and will sink in deep despair when the way grows dark...A world all bright with hope can be had on the terms of heat and food, and the sense of these can be induced for a nickel in a "barrel-house."<sup>8</sup>

Wyckoff alternately revels and languishes in a life that has devolved to its most basic level—stripped of the trappings of civilization. There seems an innocence, a purity, a simplicity on the edge of survival. Even despair itself tastes pristine, elemental. Here also are the outlines of what would become, in Jack London's work, the essence of the hobo's heroism: dogged triumph in the primal struggle for existence. Wyckoff frames the issue directly in describing the brutal reality of the fight for work and sustenance:

...baffled and weakened, you are thrust back upon yourself and held down remorselessly to the cold, naked fact that you, who in all the universe are of supremest importance to yourself, are yet of no importance to the universe. You are a superfluous human being...There remains for you simply this alternative: Have you the physical and moral qualities which fit you to survive, and which will place you at last within the working of the large scheme of things, or, lacking these qualities, does there await you inevitable wreck under the onward rush of the world's great moving life?<sup>9</sup>

Wyckoff, however, while recognizing the power and enormity of the naturalistic struggle, does not develop a

heroic mode--either for himself or for the tramps he describes--within its apocalyptic limits. Neither are Wyckoff's tramps, locked in the dregs of this struggle, portrayed with the tragedy or pathos that their situation might warrant. For the most part, Wyckoff's tramps seem to deserve their misery and degradation. Consider Wyckoff's description of the pathetic mass of humanity who congregate nightly in the hard shelter of the Chicago jail:

And in the men themselves, how widely severed from all things human is the prevailing type!--Their bloated, unwashed flesh and unkempt hair; their hideous ugliness of face, unreclaimed by marks of inner strength and force, but revealing rather, in the relaxation of sleep, a deepening of the lines of weakness, until you read in plainest characters the paralysis of the will.<sup>7</sup>

Wyckoff draws a sharp distinction, however, between the "bleary-eyed, bedraggled, cowering type" and honest workingmen unable to find employment. These hobos--though, according to Wyckoff a "marked exception"--receive his unmitigated sympathy. Significantly, it is not some weakness of will, deficit of character, or criminal predisposition that displace and exile these workers, but the incomprehensible fluctuations of industrial capitalism.

In Wyckoff's description of the predicament of a workless companion astray in the blighted Chicago labor market, one may detect a certain indignation, a disaffection with a system that can spasmodically muzzle the prospect of decent work and dignity:

He had been out of work before, but he had had a home, and in its shelter he could tide over the depression which had cost him his job. Now his home was gone, and he was adrift without support. But he was young and strong and accustomed to work, and all that he sought was a chance to win his way. And yet his very struggles for a footing seemed to sink him into deeper difficulty. The conditions which he was forced to face seemed to conspire against the possibility of his success.<sup>9</sup>

Wyckoff is keenly aware of his own dehumanization in the face of the naked determinisms of the market. He conceives of himself—a "hungry human body" with physical energies for hire—as a mere unit in a "like multitude of unemployed."<sup>10</sup> The bitter irony of harrowing want in the midst of the "splendid power" of "ceaseless productivity" staggers Wyckoff:

Everywhere about you there is work, stupendous, appalling, cumulative in its volume and intensity...Men everywhere are staggering under burdens too grievous to be borne. And here are you idle, yet counting it the greatest boon if you might but add your strength to the mighty struggle.<sup>10</sup>

Added to the frustration of economic expendability, is the harsh realization of social estrangement. Wyckoff marked this phenomenon on the very first day of his journey: "My good-morning was not infrequently met by a vacant stare, and if I stopped to ask the way, the conviction was forced upon me that, as a pack-pedler, I was a suspicious character, with no claim upon common consideration."<sup>11</sup> Wyckoff tasted himself, and saw in others, the bitterness of alienation.

Here again are the preconditions for positive agency on

the part of Wyckoff himself, or the hoboes who share his predicament--this time in a political sense. Wyckoff's documentary, "scientific" treatment of the subject, however, does not bend toward the heroic. Though posing two themes eminently suitable for heroic development--the hobo as actor on an evolutionary battleground, and the hobo engaged in the revolutionary struggle against misery and degradation--Wyckoff only implies the possibilities of these themes. Ultimately Wyckoff remains faithful both to the letter of his empirical endeavor and to his original social and economic milieu. There are, however, plenty of reservations. Wyckoff castigates bourgeois "money grubbers," he vilifies the "self-indulgence," artificiality, and purposelessness of the rich,<sup>12</sup> he scorns the "social cleavage" in the "house of God"--the very atmosphere of which seemed to "preclude the presence of the poor."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Wyckoff offers a sympathetic account of the ideas of various Socialist activists and revolutionaries whom he took pains to seek out and observe. Inevitably, however, Wyckoff rejects concepts that must to him have smacked of immoderation: "When we draw too near to the hand of Fate, and begin to feel as though there were a wrong in the nature of things, it is best, perhaps, to change our point of view."<sup>14</sup> This, it seems, Wyckoff accomplished assiduously.

Though Wyckoff did not create a hobo hero, several

important strands shine clearly through his commentary nonetheless. Wyckoff exalts in passage itself. Both the physical exhilaration of the tramp, and the visual feast along the way are repeatedly celebrated. There is, occasionally, an ebullience in Wyckoff's tramping reminiscent of Whitman at his most buoyant:

The mere writing down the bare fact of the journey stirs in one's blood again the joy of that free life. The boundlessness of the world and your boundless enjoyment of it, the multiplicity of abundant life and your blood-kinship with it all, some goal on the distant horizon and your "spirit leaping within you to be gone before you then!" There is scarcely a recollection of all the tramp through Illinois and Minnesota and Iowa and eastern Nebraska which is without the charm of a free, wandering life through a rich, beautiful country.<sup>10</sup>

Further, notwithstanding the hell-hole of Chicago and Wyckoff's own dancing on the brink of the social abyss, The Workers is permeated with an effusive optimism about the perfectability, the unavoidable legitimacy, of the American experiment. Wyckoff finds the bedrock of American righteousness in the sturdy religiosity, confident self-assuredness, moral fiber and sober thrift of the rural population. The contrast is repeatedly made between the industrial cauldrons of dissipation and frenzied activity and the simple, placid, uprightness of rural living; between the crowded and monotonous East and the boundless, wide open West. Wyckoff's work manifests a tradition of American anti-urban travel narrative defined by an amalgam



of regional and historic idealisms. "Getting to know the country" comes to be an exercise in the acquaintance of out of the way places that seem to preserve an idealized past. In Wyckoff's account we catch an early sense of this kind of patriotic nostalgia--here, pivotally, garnered on the hard road of experience. Such reassuring excursions--whether undertaken oneself or lived vicariously--became increasingly important as American industrial society carried its frantic transformation into the twentieth century.

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Jack London dedicated The Road to Josiah Flynt, describing him as "the real thing, blowed in the glass." Like Wyckoff, however, Flynt was of a different breed than the hoboes he wrote about and from a background decidedly more privileged than that of London himself. Born in 1869, Flynt was brought up in a conservative Methodist village on the shore of Lake Michigan. His father, an editor of a Chicago daily newspaper, died when the boy was eight years old, and from then on Flynt's upbringing was dominated by women; his mother, grandmother, sisters, various nurses,

governesses and a famous aunt--the celebrated temperance leader, Frances Willard. Flynt's childhood was punctuated by frequent escapes from the narrow convention, bourgeois pettiness, and religious "prudery" of small town life:

I learned more about fibbing and falsely "explanationing" how I had disposed of my time at this period of my life than at any later period, and I boldly put the blame now on the unmercifully strict set of rules which the culture and religion in the place deemed essential. My mother, and later on, my father, were steeped in the narrow view of things just as badly as were my grandparents. The Sunday of those days I look back upon with horror. Compulsory church and Sunday school attendance, stiff "go-to-meeting" clothes, and a running order to be seen and not heard until Monday morning is what I recall of my childhood Sundays. Church-going, religion and Sunday school lessons became a miserable bore...<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the account that Flynt presents of his childhood in his autobiography, My Life, reveals a flagrant Huck Finnish desire to flee starched collars, tedious lessons, and strict table manners. And, like Huck Finn, Flynt was a dreamer. Steeped in dime novel adventure, "living much solely with my own thoughts, bashful and timid to a painful degree at times, and possessed of an imagination which literally ran riot with itself every few months or so," Flynt becomes a "helpless victim of the whims of the 'wanderlust.'"<sup>17</sup>

Compounding the compulsion to break out of a limiting Victorian conformity was Flynt's embrace of the self-made man ideology as espoused by Horatio Alger<sup>18</sup> and others.

Flynt glories in the idea of disappearing and returning triumphantly:

The mere reading of some biography of a self-made man, who had struggled independently in the world from about my age on to the Presidency perhaps, would fire me with a desire to do likewise in some far-off community...the appeal to go elsewhere carried with it a picture of independence, midnight oil and self-supporting work, which fascinated me, and at an age when most boys have got over their gusto for wandering, I would start off in secret, to return famous, some day, I hoped.<sup>19</sup>

The impulse that combined separation from familiar circumstances with independent worldly success dovetailed also with Flynt's misgivings about religion. This was precipitated by Flynt's discovery of the efficacy of "willpower" as a "moral dynamic." Flynt's adolescent idolization of a self-made lawyer who had plumbed the depths of experience as a young man, rejected "theology," but nevertheless attained eminence and stature, provided a prototype of the "moral life" (which Flynt seems principally to equate with "amounting to something in the world") achieved without conventional religiosity:

I had been taught to believe, or, at any rate, had partially come to believe, that all such moral victories, indeed, that all conquests over one's rebellious self, had to come through prayer and Divine assistance, or not at all...But the lawyer--ah ha! here was at last a living, breathing witness to the fact that prayer and Divine help were not indispensable in gathering oneself together, putting evil habits aside, and amounting to something in the world...will-power and not "conversion" had made him one of the most noted citizens of his community and one of the prominent lawyers of his State.<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, however, Flynt's adoption of "willpower" was as dismal a failure as his half-hearted youthful attempts to accede to his family's exhortations to "get religion." Certainly, it was Flynt's "rebellious self" that, throughout his life, seemed to maintain the upper hand. In the forward to Flynt's autobiography, he testifies to the turning in his life that the writing of the book was supposed to have marked:

The game is over and the dealer retires. My dead Self I herewith put aside, and begin afresh in a new world. The old Self died hard. I can hear its bones rattling yet. But there came a time when it had to go, and now that I know that it is really and truly gone, that tomorrow morning, for instance, to find peace and contentment for the day it will not be necessary for me to take up my staff and go nervously through the same antics and searching as of old, a sweet satisfaction steals over me and I am glad to be alive.<sup>21</sup>

But Flynt's "new world" consisted largely of a hotel room in Chicago in which he proceeded to drink himself to an early grave. Flynt was dead at thirty eight. My Life was published posthumously.

Though in Flynt's autobiography we see something of youthful rebellion and grown-up alienation, these features are largely absent—in any heroic or redeeming sense—in the tramps that Flynt travels with and writes about. Flynt lives a curiously attenuated life. Uncomfortable with settled bourgeois existence, he also rejects the "underworld" of trampdom. Flynt's most celebrated book,

Tramping With Tramps (1893)<sup>22</sup> is a grim portrayal of hobo life. Flynt castigates the tramp as a "discouraged criminal" who "laughs at law, sneers at morality and gives free rein to appetite,"<sup>23</sup> and he expounds on the predictable themes of depravity, laziness, and malefaction. Nevertheless, Flynt--through his awkward, earnest sociology--confronts the lure of the road more directly than Wyckoff, and certainly exceeds Pinkerton in this regard.

Accordingly, Flynt's discussion of the "children of the road" includes analysis of the motivations of young vagabonds. The "worshippers of the tough," for example, "have somehow got the idea that cow-boy swagger and criminal's lingo are the main features of a manly man, and having an abnormal desire to realize their ideal as quickly as possible, they go forth..."<sup>24</sup> Yet despite the sermonizing tone, Flynt can't help reinforcing a version of the muscular unruliness of the wandering life, ergo: "the Western tramp is rough, often kind-hearted, wild and reckless; he always has his razor with him, and will 'cut' whenever there is provocation."<sup>25</sup> And, in railing against the cruel affliction of "wanderlust" or "railroad fever," one can't help but read a certain attraction, a subtle validation, between the lines:

For a romantic and adventuresome boy...possessed of wanderlust generally wanders for a while...but the chance he now has to jump on a freight-train

and "get into the world quick," as I have heard young lads of this temperament remark, has a great deal to do in tempting him to run away from home. Once started "railroading" they go on and on, and its attractions seem to increase as the years go by...The railroad...makes it possible for them to keep shifting the scenes they enjoy, and, in time, change and variety becomes so essential that they are unable to settle down anywhere.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately, however, Flynt's contribution to the incipient mystique of the American road hero lies less in the familiar ambiguity of his depiction of tramp life, than in Flynt himself--the shape changing vagabond/sleuth par excellence.<sup>27</sup> Flynt portrays the "real road" as a sort of parallel universe, an underworld largely invisible to the naive inhabitants of respectable society but existing nonetheless--just beneath the surface, menacing and seductive:

The "real" road is variously named and variously described. By the "ambulanter" it is called Gipsyland, by the tramp Hoboland; the fallen woman thinks it is the street, the thief, that it means stealing and the penitentiary; even the little boy who reads dime novels and fights hitching posts for desperados believes momentarily that he too is on the real road. All these are indeed branches of the main line. The road proper, or "the turf," as the people who toil along its stretches sometimes prefer to call it, is low life in general. It winds its way through dark alleys and courts to dives and slums, and wherever criminals, hoboes, outcast women, stray and truant children congregate; but it never leads to the smiling windows and doorways of the happy home, except for plunder and crime. There is not a town in the land that it does not touch, and there are but few hamlets that have not sent out at least one adventurer to explore its twists and turnings.<sup>28</sup>

Flynt's creation of this shadowy road--the home of outlaws and drifters but also suitable venue for the daring forays

of hardy middle-classed explorers—was rooted in the dessication of more traditional avenues of "authentic" adventure. For Flynt's and several subsequent generations, the most salient and immanent paradigmatic adventurous and masculine forms were derived from the American West.

By the 1880s the American frontier had already well receded in actuality and begun its ascent as mythology. The pursuit of the dime novel West by imaginative young adolescents is repeatedly cited by Flynt as an insidious producer of new tramps (even though the propensity for dime novel inspired adventure was a propellant of Flynt's own early excursions on the road). Even Walter Wyckoff grumbles of the imminent dissolution of the "real West:"

... "the West" recedes even farther from my sight, until impatient desire sometimes spurs me to a quicker journey, in fear that the real West may have faded from our map before I reach it, and I may miss the delight of vital contact with the untamed frontier.<sup>27</sup>

Flynt's depiction, in his novel The Little Brother: A Story of Tramp Life, of a conversation between a wide-eyed road-kid on his first freight ride, and a veteran roadster hoping to lure him into hobo apprenticeship illustrates the coherence for Flynt, and many others, between the myth of the West and the lure of the road:

"An' can I learn how to ride bareback with the Indians?" Benny questioned...  
"Cert. And you'll learn how to shoot too," Blackie replied reassuringly. "Why, I've been on trains out West when you could sit on a box-car and pick off Indians with your rifle as easy as birds on

the telegraph-wire."

"Say, but that 'u'd be fun. The Indians can't shoot at you, can they?"

"Oh, they try to, but the train's going so fast that they only hit you once in a while, and you get so tough that the bullets don't hurt anyhow."<sup>30</sup>

The yearning for the rigors of the frontier<sup>31</sup>

suggested here—and even more pronounced in the passage by Wyckoff—exemplifies the coalescing of a heroic Western ethos with an emerging road hero ideology. For Flynt, however, this is ancillary to a broader conception of the rapid mapping and appropriation, by "civilization," of terrain previously unknown, inviolate, and wild. Flynt pores over maps, tracing the relentless encroachment of the "known"—a European endeavor completed in his lifetime. Flynt idolizes an earlier generation of explorers and vagabonds. Livingstone, Burton, Speke, and Stanley comprise Flynt's pantheon of men among men. He has dreams of becoming an explorer himself.<sup>31</sup> So it is no surprise that it is in this capacity that Flynt guides us on his pseudo-sociological tours of the hobo "underworld." In all of his writing, whether it be as covert hobo or, later, as undercover criminal, Flynt wears the mantle of intrepid explorer, expert guide and adventurer, shape-changing his way from "Civilization" to "Hoboland" and back again:

Such is the geographical nearness of Hoboland to Civilization, and yet when you start out to explore it a journey to Africa seems more easily accomplished. To those who know its highroads and byways, however, it can be entered and left by the very thoroughfares which traverse our towns and villages, where its inhabitants knock at the doors



for alms, and a few minutes later have returned to their mysterious country."<sup>33</sup>

It is Flynt then, who creates the first unambiguous portrayal of the American road as an arena for heroic action in the rugged, individuating sense. The fact that Flynt's hoboes rarely shine as heroes only accentuates Flynt's own heroism. It is a role that Flynt apparently relished throughout his career. In a postscript to My Life, Alfred Hodder, one of Flynt's New York compatriots, describes him in his element:

He invited me the night I met him to go with him on one of his wanderings. A Haroun-al-Rashed adventure it seemed to me. I closed with the offer at once and asked how I should dress. I had an idea that I must wear a false beard and at least provide myself with a stiletto and revolver, and be ready to use them. "Why, you will do just as you are," he said. "I shall go just as I am." He did not know it, but he did not tell the truth. He did not change his clothes, but at the first turn into side streets he changed his bearing, the music of his voice, his vocabulary. I could scarcely understand one word in five. He was a finished actor; Sir Richard Burton, of course, was his ideal; always in the underworld he passed unsuspected...<sup>34</sup>

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In a 1901 letter to Cloudesley Johns, an aspiring writer who had hit the road for a time, Jack London compared Josiah Flynt and Walter Wyckoff:

Wyckoff is not a tramp authority. He doesn't

understand the real tramp. Josiah Flynt is the tramp authority. Wyckoff only knows the workingman, the stake-man and the bindle-stiff. The profesh are unknown to him. Wyckoff is a gay cat. That was his rating when he wandered over the States.<sup>38</sup>

As he continues, London indicates something of the disposition which undergirded this assessment:

Wish I were with you [on the road]. I am rotting here in town. Really, I can feel the bourgeois fear crawling up and up and twining round me. If I don't get out soon I shall be emasculated. The city folk are a poor folk anyway. To hell with them.<sup>39</sup>

London's comments here hint at the tempestuous temperament of the man; a temperament that by 1901, at the bare beginnings of a spectacular literary career, had already led its young proprietor on a lifetime's worth of exploits and adventures. It was, furthermore, a temperament that entailed a favorable disposition toward Josiah Flynt and a corresponding disdain for Walter Wyckoff. Exploration of this situation dictates an inquiry into London's attitudes toward his society and his art, and the impact of these attitudes on the evolving textual representation of the hobo.

London's reservations (both stated and implicit) concerning Wyckoff's documentary or sociological tramp writing derived partially from differences in moral, religious and political convictions. In The Workers, for instance, Wyckoff compulsively apologizes for the irreverent vocabulary of the tramps and laborers with whom he associated on the road. His sense of propriety did not even allow him

to enter a public house. London, a hard drinker from the time he was old enough to reach a bar rail, could only have been contemptuous of Wyckoff's sanctimonious refusal--despite the pleas of a hungry hobo companion--to enter a drinking establishment that served free food with a glass of beer.<sup>37</sup> Of greater consequence for London, however, was Wyckoff's rejection of socialism in favor of a religious solution to societal difficulties. Religious idealism, coalescing around a revival of "Christian brotherhood," was the centerpoint for Wyckoff's solution to the "labor problem."<sup>38</sup> This kind of lofty moralism and religiosity flew in the face of London's fervent socialism and agnosticism. Wyckoff's sentiments, for London, no doubt seemed hopelessly naive and regressive.

To be sure, these differences may be attributed to the disparate social constellations from which each writer emerged: the one privileged and traditional, the other poor and unstable. More salient, however, is the divergence between the two writer's literary ideals. London's reticence regarding Wyckoff's "scientific" realism and its capacity to depict tramp life, is revealed in a June 16, 1900 letter to Cloudesley Johns:

The "Philosophy of the Road"....is a fascinating subject. It has itched me for long, and it is often all I can do to keep away from writing on it...some day, saturating myself with the life again, I will go ahead. But as you say, it is infinite. But Cloudesley, do you think you are

handling it just right?...You are treating it in much the same manner Wyckoff treated The Workers East and West. But he treated it scientifically, and empirically scientifically, if I may use the phrase. And for that matter, he dealt more with the workers than with the tramps; but the method of treatment still applies...You are not, from your choice of subjects or topics, treating it as he treated it. Therefore your style should be different. You are handling stirring life, romance, things of human life and death, humor and pathos, etc. But God, man, handle them as they should be. Don't you tell the reader the philosophy of the road (except where you are actually there as participant in the first person). Don't you tell the reader. Don't. Don't. Don't. But HAVE YOUR CHARACTERS TELL IT BY THEIR DEEDS, ACTIONS, TALK, ETC. Then, and not until then, are you writing fiction and not a sociological paper upon a certain sub-stratum of society.<sup>39</sup>

In calling for a fictional style capable of conveying the drama of life on the road, London was struggling to transcend the dominant literary categories of his day. Emerging from the stifling conventions of a realism that sought the scientific replication of life in literature, London's artistic orientation--still very much in formation at the time he wrote the words above--has recently been designated "activist realism" or "popular naturalism."<sup>40</sup> London's literary "project" involved the depiction of the "reality of a world of struggle,"<sup>41</sup> the nature of this reality necessitated coming to terms with the passion and emotion inherent in both it's human and "natural" constituents. London himself called his approach "passionate realism" or "emotional materialism."<sup>42</sup> Analysis was fine with London--even sociological analysis--but it had to approach those attributes central

to London's conception of reality itself: "stirring life, romance, things of human life and death, humor and pathos, etc."

Such an agenda, of course, worked best when the subjects and situations depicted were inherently emotive and dramatic. Accordingly, London ceaselessly tracked suitable subject matter. When his reservoir of adventurous experience began to seem depleted, he would seek new exploits in exotic locales, draw from journalistic sources, and even buy plots from other writers. London's appreciation of Josiah Flynt must be attributed, in part, to the latter's creation of the hobo's testing wilderness—a development that facilitated London's literary exploitation of his own tramping experience. In contrast, Wyckoff's work—in London's eyes—had done nothing to further the suitability of the hobo as a dramatic agent fit for fictional development.

In any case, at the time that the "philosophy of the road" letter was written to Johns, London himself was still far from creating the kind of fictional hobo that he commended to his correspondent. To date he had placed two stories about road kids in his High School newspaper and one essay—actually an expose of the tramp world in the Flynt vein—had been accepted for magazine publication but was later turned down; apparently deemed offensive "under

amended policy of new owners." A sparse piece entitled "Jack London in Boston," which was a tramps-eye reminiscence of the author's swing through the port-city in 1894, had been published in the Boston Evening Transcript just three weeks before London wrote the letter to Johns.<sup>43</sup> Surprisingly, however, the foundation for London's heroic conception of the hobo seems to have long predated the correspondence with Cloudesley Johns and the literary theorizing that their exchange often reflected. It was certainly a component of London's thought while on his 1894 tramp with Kelly's industrial army of the unemployed.<sup>44</sup> In his diary of this road-trip, London's remarks concerning the early desertion of a homesick tramping companion are particularly revealing:

This afternoon Frank & I had an understanding. The road has no more charms for him. The romance & adventure is gone & nothing remains but the stern reality of the hardships to be endured. Though he has dicided [sic] to turn West again I am sure the expearience [sic] has done him good, broadened his thoughts, given a better understanding of the low strata of society & surely will have made him more charitable to the tramps he will meet hereafter when he is in better circumstances.<sup>45</sup>

Already juxtaposing "romance and adventure" and "stern reality," London at eighteen seems to have been equally enamoured with both attributes of the road.<sup>46</sup> The "hardships to be endured" were obviously outweighed by the obscure but profound broadening benefits that London expected to accrue through his perseverance. Frank's

abandonment of the journey increased its significance for London. It was, undoubtedly, with a heightened sense of stature and mission that London continued his way East.

London's early romanticization of the road suggests something of his internalization of the conviction at the heart of the Western tradition of masculine self-expression: that is the correlativity between the difficulty and danger of an endeavor and its ultimate value as adventure, experience and as evidence of manhood itself. This diffuse conception had acquired a particular currency in Jack London's time, underlying the sanctioned violence of colonialism as well as providing the idiom for various reactions to a perception of "softness" or "feminization" rooted in "over-refined" Victorian norms (in literature and otherwise). In America, the "cult of the strenuous," it bears reiterating, describes an impulse toward intense living that permeated all levels of culture. London's recognition of the gains in character and stature made possible by the tramp's suffering and alienation—benefits that Allan Pinkerton had hinted at and that were implicit in the writing of Wyckoff and especially Flynt—were pivotal to the vitalization of the passive and despised hobo.

Like Josiah Flynt, the combination of voracious youthful reading and an energetic and impressionable

imagination provided the basis for London's obsession with ultra-masculine models of adventure and romance. In a 1900 reply to the Houghton Mifflin Company's request for biographical information (to support London's first major publication, the collection of short stories entitled Son of the Wolf), London comments specifically on his boyhood reading:

Was an omniverous reader, principally because reading matter was scarce and I had to be grateful for whatever fell into my hands. Remember reading some of Trowbridge's works for boys at six years of age. At seven I was reading Paul du Chaillu's Travels, Captain Cook's Voyages, and Life of Garfield. And all through this Period I devoured what Seaside Library novels I could borrow from the womenfolk and dime novels from the farm hands. At eight I was deep in Quida and Washington Irving. Also during this period read a great deal of American history. Also life on a Californian ranch is not very nourishing to the imagination.<sup>47</sup>

Nonetheless, the incessant diet of adventure, romance, and tales of poor boys making it big provided ample grist for London's boyhood dreaming, despite the indifferent collection of dirt farms and dilapidated rented bungalows in which he spent his youth.

Indeed, the mundane reality of impoverishment--always hard on the heels of the London family--and the stifling "petty routine" of working from an early age to supplement his stepfather's meager income, certainly contributed to young Jack's restlessness. In the semi-autobiographical Valley of the Moon, the young protagonist, echoing London's



own youthful sentiments, expresses a desire to move, to explore, to escape the constraints of home and experience the world:

Don't you sometimes feel you'd die if you didn't know what's beyond them hills an' what's beyond the other hills behind them hills? An' the Golden Gate! There's the Pacific Ocean beyond, and China, an' Japan, an' India, an'...all the Coral Islands. You can go anywhere out through the Golden Gate—to Australia, to Africa, to the seal islands, to the North Pole, to Cape Horn. Why, all them places are just waitin' for me to come an' see 'em. I've lived in Oakland all my life, but I'm not going to live in Oakland the rest of my life, not by a long shot. I'm goin' to get away...away....<sup>48</sup>

And, in a particularly cogent section of the autobiographical letter to Houghton Mifflin, London explicitly links his youth of poverty and work to interlocking strategies of escape: the first through the imaginative world of reading, the second through adventurous mobility—sailing, tramping, and gold-seeking. Further, besides spotlighting the centrality of literary myths in the feeding of London's quest for experience, this selection also reveals London engaged in the early construction of his own myth:

...from my ninth year, with the exception of the hours spent at school (and I earned them by hard labor), my life has been one of toil. It is worthless to give the long sordid list of occupations, none of them trades, all heavy manual labor. Of course I continued to read. Was never without a book. My education was popular, graduating from the grammar school at about fourteen. Took a taste for the water. At fifteen left home and went upon a Bay life. San Francisco Bay is no mill pond by the way. I was a salmon fisher, an oyster pirate,

a schooner sailer, a fish patrolman, a longshoreman, and a general sort of bay-faring adventurer-- a boy in years and a man amongst men. Always a book, and always reading when the rest were asleep; when they were awake I was one with them, for I was always a good comrade.

Within a week of my seventeenth birthday I shipped before the mast as sailor on a three top-mast sealing schooner. We went to Japan and hunted along the coast north to the Russian side of Bering Sea. This was my longest voyage; I could not again endure one of such length; not because it was tedious or long, but because life was so short. However, I have made short voyages, too brief to mention, and to-day am at home in any fore-castle or stokehole--good comradeship, you know. I believe this comprises my travels; for I spoke at length in previous letter concerning my tramping and Klondiking. Have been all over Canada Northwest Ty., Alaska, etc. etc., at different times, besides mining, prospecting and wandering through the Sierra Nevadas.<sup>49</sup>

As might be surmised from this passage--with its one eye in a book, and another on the horizon roster of adventurous exploits and hardships overcome (like stickers on a battered valise), London had a singular penchant for the creation of his own larger-than-life image. London's fiction, and much else that he wrote, seemed, on some level, calculated to feed back into the personal myth.<sup>50</sup> London's self-promotion followed precedents set by Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling--two literary personalities who had courted celebrity through the conflation of their art and their highly public lives. The account of himself that London gives above suggests the cultivation of the career-making image--that of the indomitable literary adventurer--even at the most formative stages of his writing life.<sup>51</sup>

However, notwithstanding London's self-promotional acumen and its efficacy in his perpetual attempt to "engage the mass market-place directly,"<sup>82</sup> further evidence suggests that London's personal myth-making also expressed desires deeper than the craving for professional success. Myth-making, for London, involved the affirmation, reification and idealization of his own remembered past. It is not far fetched to posit an underlying therapeutic element to London's literary struggles--a reconstitution of the past through the exercise of writing, and its validation through publication and popular acceptance. London's autobiographical novels, such as John Barleycorn, Martin Eden and The Valley of the Moon, certainly played the largest role in this exercise. However, the fictional re-creations of London's adventurous exploits--at sea, "klondiking," and on the road--were instrumental as well. It is precisely this space of self-validation or self-constitution in which we may best read the significance of London's youthful immersion in illusive worlds of literary romance and adventure. In a sense, London's epic life was scripted by the imaginary realms delineated by the texts of his youth; only to be re-narrated, and re-mythologized, in London's own texts. Moreover, for London this was a necessary--perhaps even a cathartic--process.

It was a process, however, that was repeatedly frustrated in the case of London's hoboing experience. London's tramp pieces were his hardest to sell. For, in contrast to more mainstream accounts of adventure in the Arctic or at sea, London's hobo writing faced a decidedly hostile cultural climate. As Richard Etulain has observed, few mainstream magazines of London's time were willing to publish tramp material, and tramp fiction casting the hobo in a heroic light was practically unthinkable.<sup>83</sup>

Publisher resistance to The Road—the collection of sketches and essays in which London came closest to fitting the hobo into a heroic mode—was both a professional setback, and a profoundly personal affront. London's tramp writing represented a critical stretch of the author's past, one that—by all accounts—had pivotally shaped the subsequent course of London's life; impacting both on his political ideology and on his decision to write.<sup>84</sup> In a letter to George Sterling, who had had reservations about the publication of The Road on the grounds that glorifying the hobo would adversely effect the sales of London's other books, London clearly expresses the overriding ontological importance of the project: "I cannot get a line on why you wish I hadn't written The Road. It is all true. It is what I am, what I have done, and it is part of the process by which I have become."<sup>85</sup>

Far less frustration attended the writing and publication of London's stories of the Alaskan gold rush--his most successful body of work, and still that with which he is most identified. Moreover, London's Klondike experience, both in actuality and in its textual depiction, colored the writer's aesthetic interpretation of life on the road. Undeniably, the mythologies that have issued from both the mass migrations of gold-seekers, and the inveterate circulations of hoboes, were rooted in similar social, economic and cultural impulses and anxieties. The gold rush may certainly be considered a defining event of the "anxious nineties"--the last great spasm of a frontier society that had filled up, fenced-in and begun to urbanize and industrialize feverishly.<sup>26</sup> For London, and for many others, the understanding of the Alaskan mineral strikes was dictated by the mythology of previous gold rushes as articulated within a broader mythology of American Westward expansion. The prospector, like the archetypal lone Western scout, was a semi-primitive hero, at once a point man of, and a fugitive from, an expanding civilization. Both were wanderers in an unyielding wilderness. In contrast to the scout, however, whose sojourn in the hinterlands presupposed a certain harmony with the natural world, the prospector sought to wrest profit, a fortune perhaps, from the very maw of nature.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, the unstated rapaciousness implicit in the figure of the hardy prospector is emblematic of the rabid acquisitiveness behind the misty image of America's expansion in total. And, true to form, the creation of this image had itself, by the end of the nineteenth century, become a most profitable industry. However, the reality of an industrializing society, rocked by successive waves of depression, and ever consolidating into more permanent industrial and bureaucratic arrangements, larger aggregations of capital, and increasingly stratified divisions of labor and management, denied the pursuit of the western ideal even as it created the conditions that reinforced its urgency.<sup>52</sup> In the industrializing topography of fin-de-siecle American society, as the prospects for a generation raised on the myths of previous mobilities became both economically and geographically static, the Klondike appeared a last glorious chance. The epic self-consciousness of the Klondike rush may be construed from the word used to describe the avid fortune-hunters of '97 and '98: "argonauts." The frontier novelist, Hamlin Garland, who, like London, was drawn to the Northern "gold fields," sums up the impetus for the journey:

I believed that I was about to see and take part in a most picturesque and impressive movement across the wilderness. I believed it to be the last march of the kind which could ever come in America, so rapidly were the wild places being settled up....I wished to return to the wilderness

also, to forget books and theories of art and social problems, and come again face to face with the great free spaces of woods and skies and streams."<sup>9</sup>

Jack London is more succinct: "I had let career go hang, and was on the adventure path again in quest of fortune."<sup>10</sup>

For his Klondike stories, London drew on the idiom of an established body of heroic frontier writing, as well as from an equally popular canon of adventure works emerging from Imperial Britain.<sup>11</sup> London built on the conventional motifs of this fare through the injection of a heady dose of Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionism. London's northern heroes operate in a naturalistic world of elemental extremes. Here they act out the primal evolutionary struggle for survival. In this context, a recurring theme is the perpetual conflict between civilization and savagery. It is here that London's Klondike writing articulates problems particularly relevant to the larger culture, and most applicable to the germination of the road hero. Like Conrad's Heart of Darkness, The Call of the Wild chronicles an inexorable descent from civilization to savagery. This descent may be mapped both geographically, in the journeying of Buck, a country judge's domesticated pet, toward the unsettled spaces to the North, and chronologically, in the parallel movement from the civilized present to the more essential topos of the evolutionary past. Buck's answering of the "call of the wild" is finally, an entering into the antithesis of the civilized—a

life of instinct, freedom, and movement. Franklin Walker explains the significance of the dog's journey:

The part of Buck that was Jack London was escaping from the confining elements of society. For the contemporary reader, the 'call' represents the tug on all civilized men to get away from routine tasks, to simplify their lives in somewhat the same way Thoreau wanted them simplified, to find adventure in nature far from cities and family responsibilities.<sup>42</sup>

London's atavism was preconditioned by the rationalizing structures of his society, structures that seemed to foreclose the possibility of the savage, the elemental, or any authentic semblance thereof. London's quarrel, in this sense, was with the march of civilization itself. His fictional returns to the purity of the savage expressed an increasingly prevalent fear of "over-civilization" and suspicion of material progress. However, London, like many others, was not overly rigorous in his denunciation of progress or civilization per se. The discomfort with the dynamics of modernization so clearly expressed in his fictional work is clearly contradicted in his political ideology. London, as a committed socialist, was as bound to the concept of material progress and the march of civilization as his capitalist counterparts.

Pivotaly, London's hoboos seem to wander past this contradiction. Unlike any of London's other protagonists, they articulate a critique of modernity in the context of



radical socialism. On the one hand they are the regurgitate of a sick society, cast into the social pit by the deterministic convulsions of industrial capitalism; on the other they are self-conscious cultural outcasts, chasing a slippery ideal that involves freedom, self-determination, the joy of conflict, and masculine adventure. Their heroism lies not in their victimization, but in their activism--which, for London, is animated by both the revolutionary and the combative implications of the hobo's flight.

In the 1903 essay, "How I became a Socialist," London describes the genesis of his social consciousness--an awakening that occurs, appropriately, on the road. More importantly, the passage exemplifies the two theoretical influences that crucially shaped London's emerging hobo hero:

On rods and blind baggages I fought my way from the open West, where men bucked big and the job hunted the man, to the congested labor centers of the East, where men were small potatoes and hunted the job for all they were worth. And on this new 'blond-beast' adventure I found myself looking upon life from a new and totally different angle. I had dropped down from the proletariat into what sociologists love to call the "submerged tenth" and I was startled to discover the way in which that submerged tenth was recruited.

I found there all sorts of men, many of whom had once been as good as myself and just as blond-beastly; sailormen, soldier-men, labor-men, all wrenched and distorted and twisted out of shape by toil and hardship and accident, and cast adrift by their masters like so many old horses. I battered on the drag and slammed back gates with them, or shivered with them in box cars and city parks, listening the while to life histories which began

under auspices as fair as mine, with digestions and bodies equal to and better than mine, and which ended there before my eyes in the shambles at the bottom of the Social Pit.<sup>43</sup>

London claims here to move away from a combative Nietzschean conception of society toward a Marxist sensibility emphasizing "the submerged tenth's" victimization at the hands of a vicious and unjust social and economic system. However, throughout London's hobo writing, the Nietzschean "blond-beastly" motif continues to appear to rescue his hoboes from the passivity and hopelessness inherent in the predicament of the powerless oppressed. Indeed, it is the aggregation of the Nietzschean road-warrior figure with the abject, economically expendable "waste of the social organism" image that invigorates London's hoboes and leads them to rebellious expression.<sup>44</sup>

In The Road, London revels in the two-fisted contention of hobo existence. Far from passive, London's hoboes are, in truth, aggressive individualists--anarchic, jocund, swaggering. "Holding Her Down" is a triumphant account of "beating" a passenger "drag" on the Canadian Pacific. London is the last of fifteen less competent hoboes who have been "ditched" by the train crew. And in the battle of wits and strength that follows, London manages to "hold her down" and win the respect of his opposition: "And why not? Was I not blessed with strength, agility, and youth? (I was eighteen, and in perfect condition.) And didn't I

have my 'nerve' with me? And furthermore, was I not a tramp-royal? Were not these other tramps mere dubs and 'gay-cats' and amateurs alongside of me?":

By the time our number had been reduced to four, the whole train crew had become interested. From then on it was a contest of skill and wits, with the odds in favour of the crew. One by one the three other survivors turned up missing, until I alone remained. My, but I was proud of myself!...I was holding her down in spite of two brakemen, a conductor, a fireman, and an engineer....As I wait in the darkness I am conscious of a big thrill of pride. The overland has stopped twice for me--for me, a poor hobo on the bum. I alone have twice stopped the overland with its many passengers and coaches, its government mail, and its two thousand steam horses straining in the engine. And I weigh only one hundred and sixty pounds, and haven't a five-cent piece in my pocket!....It is five to one, including the engineer and fireman, and the majesty of the law and the might of a great corporation behind them, and I am beating them out. 68

On the road then, with skill and mettle, it is still possible to hold one's own--as an individual--against the monolithic controlling forces of an increasingly mechanized society. Moreover, here is a venue where one might realize raw human potential, and live a "real" life of strength and wit, rather than a factory life of dull toil and repetition. In another piece, "Rods and Gunnels" (1902), we see again the possibility for mastery, for triumphant autonomy, through a life lived in the open; a possibility foreclosed for many in the world of work. Here, London superimposes a hierarchy that blends Nietzschean and Spencerian influences on a tramp underworld reminiscent of

that of Josiah Flynt. At the top of the heap is the "profesh":

Thousands of men on the "road" are unfit to be the "profesh"; it is impossible for them to be "profesh." The "profesh" are the aristocracy of their underworld. They are the lords and masters, the aggressive men, the blond beasts of Neitzsche, lustfully roving and conquering through sheer superiority and strength. Unwritten is the law they impose. They are the Law, the Law incarnate. And the Underworld looks up to them and obeys.\*6

In "The Tramp" (1904) London outlines the progression—for those workers already predisposed toward blond-beastliness—from economic expendability to hobo activism. Discouraged workers choose the road in preference to the social pit. Alienation breeds rebellion:

He may come down and be a beast in the social pit, for instance; but if he be of a certain calibre, the effect of the social pit will be to discourage him from work. In his blood a rebellion will quicken, and he will elect to become either a felon or a tramp.

If he has fought the hard fight, he is not unacquainted with the lure of the "road." When out of work he has been forced to "hit the road" between large cities in his quest for a job. He has loafed, seen the country and green things, laughed in joy, laid on his back and listened to the birds singing overhead, unannoyed by factory whistles and bosses' harsh commands; and, most significant of all, he has lived. That is the point! Not only has he been care-free and happy, but he has lived! And from the knowledge that he has idled and is still alive, he achieves a new outlook on life; and the more he experiences the unenviable lot of the poor worker the more the blandishments of the "road" take hold of him. And finally he flings his challenge in the face of society, imposes a valorous boycott on all work, and joins the far-wanderers of Hobo-land, the gypsy-folk of this latter day.\*7

London's "hobo-land," then, though a turbulent, agonistic place, also contains the promise of liberation, and the "blandishments of the road" beckon to all those engaged in meaningless toil. In the final analysis, the purity of nature, the tranquility of a world without schedules, and the variety of ever-changing people and places awaits the hobo-traveler whether triumphing in the primal struggles of the tramp world or not.

Like the Klondike, London's road offers an arena for manly self-creation and adventure as well as an escape from the stifling conformity and lockstep drudgery of "civilization." Though occasionally described in Josiah Flynt's terms (the menacing underworld), London's road is, for the most part, wide open, a broad "wilderness of rails" in the midst of organized society, with danger and hardship to spare. In "Pictures," one of the vignettes in The Road, London recounts the attraction of his exploits for two elderly, and eminently civilized, spinsters:

Those two maiden ladies, with their pink-and-white complexions and grey curls, had never looked upon the bright face of adventure. As the 'Tramp-Royal' would have it, they had worked all their lives 'on the same shift.' Into the sweet scents and narrow confines of their uneventful existence I brought the large airs of the world, freighted with the lusty smells of sweat and strife, and with the tangs and odours of strange lands and soils....My coming to sit at their table was their adventure, and adventure is beyond price anyway.<sup>40</sup>

In the same tale London revels, much as Wyckoff and even

Pinkerton before him, in the indeterminacy and subsequent immediacy of life on the road:

Perhaps the greatest charm of tramp-life is the absence of monotony. In Hobo Land the face of life is protean--an ever-changing phantasmagoria, where the impossible happens and the unexpected jumps out of the bushes at every turn of the road. The hobo never knows what is going to happen the next moment; hence, he lives only in the present moment. He has learned the futility of telic endeavour, and knows the delight of drifting along with the whimsicalities of Chance.<sup>69</sup>

And, anticipating the young bohemian vagabonds that he would one day influence, London celebrates the timeless euphoria of youth:

That was a page read and turned over; I was busy now with this new page, and when the engine whistled on the grade, this page would be finished and another begun; and so the book of life goes on, page after page and pages without end--when one is young.<sup>70</sup>

Ultimately, the siren call of the road for London was the call of life itself. In a 1900 letter he comments, "the rut--the well greased groove--bah! Have breadth and thickness as well as length to one's life."<sup>71</sup> Density of life, for London, was borne of experience and adventure. The message of all of his tramp writing, whether explicating the social necessity of the "submerged tenth" or sketching an amusing tale of a hung-over hobo, is that civilization as presently configured--and work especially--hobbles experience and denies life. That which fosters life--adventure, strenuous experience, health, intensities

of feeling, manly contention, closeness to the earth and  
air--might be found on the road:

I became a tramp--well, because of the life that  
was in me, of the wander-lust in my blood that  
would not let me rest...I went on 'The Road'  
because I couldn't keep away from it; because I  
hadn't the price of the railroad fare in my jeans;  
because I was so made that I couldn't work all my  
life on 'one same shift'; because--well, just  
because it was easier to than not to.<sup>72</sup>

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Flynt avoided the use of his surname, Willard, in order to escape association with his famous aunt, the temperance leader Frances Willard. It did not appear on the earliest editions of Tramping With Tramps and is also absent from the comments of Flynt's contemporaries. Except for inclusion here and in the bibliography, I have dropped it also.

<sup>2</sup>Dictionary of American Biography, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 574-575.

<sup>3</sup>See Eric J. Leed, The Mind of the Traveller: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism (Basic Books, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>Walter Augustus Wyckoff, The Workers: An Experiment in Reality, The East (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1903), 3.

<sup>5</sup>Walter Augustus Wyckoff, The Workers: An Experiment in Reality, The West (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1904), 41.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 38.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 60-61.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 47.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid

<sup>11</sup>Wyckoff, East, 5.

<sup>12</sup>Wyckoff, West, 81.

<sup>13</sup>Wyckoff, East, 32.

<sup>14</sup>Wyckoff, West,

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 331.

<sup>16</sup>Josiah Flynt Willard, My Life (New York: The Outing Publishing Company, 1908), 20-21.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 17.

<sup>18</sup>In an 1880 story, Tony the Tramp, Alger introduces a rootless young reprobate to the familiar bootstrap-pulling formula.

<sup>19</sup>Flynt, My Life, 13. The biography that Flynt alludes to was undoubtedly William L. Thayer's popular volume, From Log Cabin to White House: The Story of President Garfield's Life (1881).



<sup>20</sup>Flynt, My Life,

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, xxiv. Flynt's multiplicity of selves ("rebellious self," "gathering oneself together," "dead self," "old self," etc.), speaks to the experience of identity fragmentation that seems to have accompanied the transition from a pre-modern ("inner-directed," grounded in "character") to a modern ("other-directed," grounded in "personality," "therapeutic") sensibility. Flynt's rejection of a traditional moral framework and his grasping--unsuccessfully--at "willpower," further situates him within the categories forwarded by contemporary psycho-historical discourse on this subject (by Lears, Warren Susman, David Riesman, and others). Flynt's "lifestyle," involving frenetic mobility and frequent changes of identity, almost caricatures the modern situation.

<sup>22</sup>John Seeyle, in his 1963 article "The American Tramp: A Version of the Picaresque," groups Tramping With Tramps--a bit impulsively to my mind--with Leaves of Grass as the "bible of the future tramp writers."

<sup>23</sup>Josiah Flynt Willard, Tramping with Tramps: Studies and Sketches of the Vagabond Life (New York: Century Co., 1907), 108.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 47. One might reasonably speculate that Flynt's obsession with masculine toughness--especially his own--might have been related to his diminutive stature. He was a slender 5'3" and was able to pass as a teenager for most of his life.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 69.

<sup>26</sup>Flynt, Tramping With Tramps, 54.

<sup>27</sup>Flynt's expertise on tramps eventually landed him a job as a railroad detective. He worked undercover, reporting on the vulnerability of various rail lines to the deprivations of the hoboes.

<sup>28</sup>Flynt, Tramping With Tramps, 28. This passage exemplifies one of the important characteristics of Flynt's brand of documentary or sociological realism: the presentation of somewhat titillating, risqué, or at least indecorous subject matter. Such exposes--often, as in Flynt's case, examining some aspect of the "low life"--were immensely popular with a polite reading public still subject to the strictures and conventions of strait-laced Victorianism.

<sup>29</sup>Wyckoff, West, 6.

<sup>30</sup>Josiah Flynt Willard, The Little Brother: A Story of Tramp Life (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Gregg Press, 1968, repr. of 1902 edition), 47. This slim book was Flynt's only published

attempt to use the tramp as a fictional character. Though sympathetically portraying the one major hobo character, the purpose of the book is to warn against the insidious enticements of the road.

<sup>31</sup>In particular, the unspoiled terrain of a pristine frontier, which in the American Western and European Colonialist mythos was the ideal arena for masculine renewal and the playing out of heroic energies. See Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier and the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890 (New York: Anetheum, 1985) and David Wrobel, "The Closing Gates of Democracy: Frontier Anxiety Before the Official Closing of the Frontier" American Studies Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1991)

<sup>32</sup>Flynt, My Life, 163.

<sup>33</sup>Flynt, The Little Brother, 44.

<sup>34</sup>Flynt, My Life, 342.

<sup>35</sup>Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz III, and Milo Shepard eds., The Letters of Jack London, Vol I: 1896-1905, Vol. II, 1906-1912, Vol. III: 1913-1916 (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 259-260. London's "profesh" are the "aristocracy of the road." These are the tramps that have sworn off work and live by their wits.

<sup>36</sup>Letters, 260.

<sup>37</sup>Wyckoff, West, 54-55.

<sup>38</sup>Though somewhat sympathetic, Wyckoff viewed the socialist agenda as misguided and futile. Harmony might only be renewed through a community oriented Christianity, and a return to traditional rural values of citizenship and family.

<sup>39</sup>Letters, 191.

<sup>40</sup>"Activist Realism" is the term used by Lears in No Place of Grace. It is framed by Lears as a boisterous, virile departure from "domestic realism." Christopher Wilson, in The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), locates London's literary orientation under the rubric, "popular naturalism." This designation appropriately emphasizes the influence of the mass literary market--particularly through an increasingly rationalized publishing industry--on the formation and output of this "school."

<sup>41</sup>See Lears, No Place of Grace,

<sup>42</sup>Wilson, 101-102.

<sup>43</sup>Richard W. Etulain ed. Jack London on the Road: The Tramp Diary and Other Hobo Writings (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1979), 61, 69, 81.

<sup>44</sup>The industrial army movement, of which "General" Kelly's was the Western contingent, was a response to the panic of 1893. Unemployed workers, most of them hoboes, heeded the call of General Jacob Coxey and organized in a number of locations to march on Washington to demand employment (specifically, Coxey sought the passage of a "good roads bill," a piece of social legislation designed to ease unemployment through government created road work). Most of the "armies" disintegrated before they reached Washington. Coxey's army, 3000 strong, camped on the outskirts of Washington for several months, during which time it was assiduously ignored by the Congress and the President (Grover Cleveland). The industrial army movement contributed to the halting politicization of the "tramp class," a task that would be taken up in earnest by the I.W.W. after 1905.

<sup>45</sup>Etulain ed., 34.

<sup>46</sup>It is notable that in 1894, London was not yet acquainted with the work of Flynt or Wyckoff. The Workers did not appear until 1897, and, though Tramping With Tramps was available, London apparently did not read it until 1901. See David Mike Hamilton, "The Tools of my Trade": The Annotated Books in Jack London's Library (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 16.

<sup>47</sup>Letters, 148. John Townsend Trowbridge (1827-1916) was a popular writer, mostly of boys adventure tales. He was a frequent contributor to the Atlantic and the Youth's Companion (two periodicals to which London later contributed). Stand-outs from his over forty books include: Father Brightropes (1853), Neighbor Jackwood (1857), and The Jolly Roger (1882). Paul de Chailly, the world famous explorer, wrote Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa. Ouida (actually Louise de la Ramee, 1839-1908) was a British novelist of adventure and self reliance who wrote, Under Two Flags (1867), A Dog of Flanders (1872), and Signa (1875). "The Life of Garfield" refers to William Thayer's adulatory treatment of the President's life as has already been noted.

<sup>48</sup>Quoted in Andrew Sinclair, Jack: A Biography of Jack London (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978), 11.

<sup>49</sup>Letters, 148.

<sup>50</sup>See Franklin Walker, Jack London and the Klondike: the Genesis of an American Writer (San Marino, Ca.: The Huntington Library, 1966), James Lundquist, Jack London: Adventures, Ideas and Fiction (New York: The Ungar Publishing Co., 1987), and John

Perry, Jack London: An American Myth (Chicago: Nelson Hall Inc., 1981). All of these books variously address London's myth of himself.

<sup>81</sup>See Wilson, 92-112.

<sup>82</sup>Wilson, 95.

<sup>83</sup>Etulain, 21-22.

<sup>84</sup>Etulain, 23.

<sup>85</sup>Letters, 737. These sentiments were echoed in a letter to London's publisher, George Brett. Once again referring to The Road, London writes: "I am still firm in my belief that my strength lies in being candid, in being true to myself as I am to-day, and also in being true to myself as I was at six, sixteen, and twenty-six. Who am I, to be ashamed of what I have experienced? I have become what I am because of my past; and if I am ashamed of my past, logically I must be ashamed of what that past made me become." (Letters, 693)

<sup>86</sup>Regardless of the historical accuracy of Turner's frontier thesis, the broad perception of both common Americans and intellectuals in the late nineteenth century tied the American ideal of limitless opportunity to an accessible reservoir of usable land. Dire forebodings accompanied the closing of the frontier, and these were manifest not just in palpable social and political currents (which included a boisterous surge of nationalism, expansionism and nativism), but also in a more diffuse and intangible cultural sense. See Wrobel, "The Closing Gates of Democracy: Frontier Anxiety Before the Official Closing of the Frontier."

<sup>87</sup>Richard Slotkin details the many variations within the mythology of the Frontier. This brief consideration of the scout and the prospector draws from Slotkin's comprehensive treatment.

<sup>88</sup>The deification of the cowboy, scout, prospector and pioneer, and the inaccessibility of these heroic options for ordinary Americans, were mutually reinforcing trends. Even in the 1880s, when the industry of Western myth-making was just beginning to crank up, would-be pioneers were streaming back from the frontier with "In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted" chalked on their wagons (see Wrobel, 61).

<sup>89</sup>Walker, 14.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Stevenson and Kipling were the dominant figures here.

<sup>92</sup>Walker, 227-228.

63 London, "How I Became a Socialist" (1903) in, Etulain, 99.

64 See Frederick Feied, No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac (New York: The Citadel Press, 1964).

65 Jack London (I.O. Evans ed.), The Road (London: Arco Publications, 1967), 64,65,69.

66 London, "Rods and Gunnels" (1902) in Etulain, 94-95.

67 London, "The Tramp" (1904) in Etulain, 134.

68 London, The Road, 78-79.

69 Ibid, 77.

70 Ibid, 88.

71 Letters, 184.

72 London, The Road, 13.

## INTELLECTUAL VAGABONDAGE

Nels Anderson, in his notable 1923 sociological study of the hobo, describes a peculiar area of Chicago's "hobohemia" inhabited by young intellectuals:

On the north side of the river, Clark Street below Chicago Avenue is the "stem." Here a class of transients have drifted together, forming a group unlike any in either of the other areas of Hobohemia. This is the region of the hobo intellectuals. This area may be described as the rendezvous of the thinker, the dreamer, and the chronic agitator...They alone come here who have time to think, patience to listen, or courage to talk. Washington Square is the center of the northern area. To the "bos" it is "Bughouse Square"... "Bughouse Square" is, in fact, quite as much the stronghold of the more or less vagabond poets, artists, writers, revolutionists, of various types as of the go-about. Among themselves this region is known as the "village."<sup>1</sup>

The contrary epithets for Chicago's bohemia--the "village" for its idealistic inhabitants, the "bughouse" for the hardcore hoboes on its outskirts--exemplifies something of the social and cultural cleavage between the average workless stiff and the impoverished educated radical. Yet there is an essential ligature here as well. It is in the sharing of certain aspects of lifestyle and vision--a common disdain for convention, a common antipathy for authority, a common recourse to the road.

To be sure, the mythology that has risen from the experience of the American hobo has depended on those

educated elements of the hobo mass who actually put pen to paper. Invariably, these types were often not strictly of the hobo mass at all, their forays into "hoboland" being temporary exercises in sociological study, youthful defiance, literary alienation or some combination thereof. Many of these literate hoboes would have felt at home in "Bughouse Square." Hobo/bohemian Harry Kemp, for instance, whose Tramping on Life appeared in 1922 and was an overnight sensation, writes: "With a second-hand Shakespeare, in one volume, of wretched print, with a much-abused school-copy of Caesar, in the Latin (of whose idiomatic Latin I never tired), an extra suit of khaki, a razor, tooth brush, and tooth-powder--and a cake of soap--all wrapped up in my army blankets, I set forth on my peregrinations as blanket-stiff or 'bindle-bum'."<sup>2</sup> Kemp's description represents the penetration of the hobo's milieu by the intellectual vagabond.

Of course, it might be argued that this was exactly what Wyckoff, Flynt, and London had done. These individuals, however, though traversing the hobo's realm with notebooks or journals in hand, subscribed to a markedly different aesthetic than the dilettantish intellectual vagabond. Wyckoff and Flynt--to different degrees--were guided by a scientific or sociological agenda on their tramping excursions.<sup>3</sup> Science, in turn, with

its obsession for accurate reporting, and reasoned analysis, had dictated the form of their narratives and shaped their textual representations of the hobo. Similarly, London, though cultivating the mystique of the literary voyager, was also interested chiefly in the interpretation of the hobo's reality. London's hoboes roam a gritty, contentious, and disturbingly palpable sphere, more "real" than the "un-naturalized," care-free, pastoral realms travelled by the literary set. However permeated with romance, the texts of Wyckoff, Flynt and London remain exemplifications of the broad realistic current that dominated fin-de-siecle intellectual and literary culture. In contrast, the intellectual vagabond of the 1890s originated in the literary counter-current of the day: the neo-romantic revival. Vagabondage—in this mode—involved the pursuit of beauty, not reality.

The intellectual vagabond emerged in purest form in the Songs from Vagabondia of Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman. However, though these poetic lyrics practically defined the genre, the post-1890 spate of self-conscious literary wandering that they represent was purposefully derivative of an older tradition. The idea of a vagabond strand in literary history—as has been suggested by its prominence in Allan Pinkerton's tramp material—was one of some currency among literate Americans of these years. In fact,



a full-length treatise on the subject appeared in 1906. Arthur Rickett's, The Vagabond in Literature concentrated on seven writers who were claimed to epitomize the "vagabond temperament": William Hazlitt, Thomas De Quincey, George Borrow, Henry David Thoreau, Robert Louis Stevenson, Richard Jefferies, and Walt Whitman.<sup>4</sup> These poets and novelists, it is safe to assume, exercised considerable influence on their literary-minded descendants of the late nineteenth century. Moreover, the vagabond clique offered by Rickett might be widely extended. As Kingsley Widmer aptly observes:

A considerable part of the subject matter of literary rebels, past and present, is linked with the road. This does not just derive from the aesthetic aptness of the outsider to mirror life on the highways and in the low-ways of society, but comes also from the glorification of the outcast as hero, the kaleidoscopic picaresque modes, the rich amorality of pariahdom, the radical perspective on the established order, the almost mystic negative freedom and terror of the wanderer--indeed, a whole complex of related ways of showing man not at home in the universe.... Some of the greatest types in literature, such as Odysseus and Don Quixote, largely define themselves by their wanderings. Many of our most profound probings in art appear through the eyes of restless Ishmaels.<sup>5</sup>

While skirting the massive literary and cultural pool suggested by Widmer,<sup>4</sup> it is necessary, nonetheless, to come to terms with the archetypal "literary rebel" of American letters, a figure whom Rickett calls, "the supreme example of the Vagabond in literature": Walt Whitman.

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In a 1908 letter to George Bernard Shaw, Floyd Dell (with Harry Kemp, the most renowned of the Greenwich Village intellectual vagabonds) identifies Walt Whitman as a bohemian prototype. Dell credits Whitman particularly with a "new and purer attitude toward sex." Whitman, according to Dell, was "a man who had loafed,...steeped his youth in the glory of the metropolis, chummed with roughs and cab drivers, and begotten children of love." Dell's praise, inadequate as it may be, underlines those elements of the Whitman mystique that most attracted the urban intellectuals of subsequent generations. Anticipating a century of restless, unorthodox disciples, Whitman did in fact, hover on the peripheries of the original New York bohemian "scene"--centered on Pfaff's saloon--in the late 1850s and early '60s.<sup>6</sup> But Whitman's cultural radicalism far outstripped that of the ostentatious collection of urban free-thinkers at Pfaff's. In the preface to the first edition of Leaves of Grass (1855), Whitman articulates his message of liberation. "Here is what you shall do," he tells the reader:

Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and

labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.<sup>9</sup>

Whitman's call for an ethic of spontaneous generosity, democratic inclusiveness, robust outdoor living, critical reappraisal of received knowledge, strident instinctiveness, and the merging of life and art was a thorough assault on the materialism, class-consciousness, and religious and artistic conservatism of his day--an assault which continues to resonate. Long before Walter Wyckoff masqueraded as a wandering worker to interpret the experience of "low" society for respectable Americans, Walt Whitman donned laborer's garb for the portrait that forms the frontispiece of Leaves of Grass--a visual repudiation of literary convention and the genteel tradition on which it rested.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Wyckoff, Whitman, throughout his career, genuinely strove to be "of the people"--their voice and mentor. It was a quest that Whitman pursued on the open road<sup>11</sup>:

Away, from curtain, carpet, sofa, book--from "society"--from city house, street, and modern improvements and luxuries--away to the primitive winding, aforementioned wooded creek, with its untrimm'd bushes and turfy banks--away from ligatures, tight boots, buttons and the whole

cast-iron civilizee life--from entourage of artificial store, machine, studio, office, parlor--from tailordom and fashion's clothes--from any clothes, perhaps...<sup>12</sup>

However, Whitman's revolt was not strictly against the apparatus of domestication, civilization, and progress. Elsewhere, Whitman celebrates the creations of civilization with as much zeal as those of the natural world. Rather, Whitman stood against the constrictions and conventions of society and culture that denied wholeness and independence.

On the open road, Whitman shucked off constraint and convention, and pursued a holistic freedom and individuality. But the road allowed Whitman more than the transcendence of limiting circumstance, it was a path toward a more encompassing and revelatory transcendence. In "Song of the Open Road," Whitman celebrates the exhilarations of passage but hints at the road's deeper import:

O public road, I say back I am not afraid to leave you,  
yet I love you,  
You express me better than I can express myself,  
You shall be more to me than my poem.  
("Song of the Open Road"<sup>13</sup>)

To Whitman the road is the channel through which the poet joyfully devours the world around him. As such, journeying becomes a profound act of self-creation. The road not only expresses Whitman, it facilitates the making of him. Whitman feasts sensually on panoramas--past, present, future, real, imaginative--that open to him in his roving. In consuming the world, and "cataloging" it, Whitman merges

with a reality that transcends time and space. Whitman's journey, then, is ultimately a spiritual one. A selection from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" illustrates Whitman's perpetual disintegration and re-creation--merged with a transcendent whole:

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,  
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,  
The similitudes of the past and those of the future,  
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over the river,  
The current rushing so swiftly, and swimming with me far away,  
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,  
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

....  
It avails not, time or place--distance avails not,  
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence...<sup>14</sup>

Inherent in Whitman's encompassing vision is a kind of camaraderie of connectedness. Whitman's expansive community is ever widening as new vistas open before the poet. His special comrade is the reader--or, more accurately, a universal or generalized reader--who is invited to join in intimate solidarity with the poet, to partake of the feast with Whitman, ever the genial comrade and guide:<sup>15</sup>

I lead no man to a dinner-table or library or exchange,  
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
My left hand hooking you round the waist,  
My right hand points to landscapes of continents, and a plain public road.

It is not far, it is within reach,  
Perhaps you have been on it since you were born,  
and did not know,  
Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land.<sup>16</sup>

The camaraderie of the road also becomes a metaphor for Whitman's idealized democracy. The figures whom Whitman eulogizes in his impressionistic reveries--from the fleeing slave to the sturdy workmen and mechanics--are actors in what Whitman conceives as a unique democratic experiment. Whitman strives to express their collective consciousness. As Paul Zweig notes, the road in 1855 (when the first edition of Leaves of Grass was published) still symbolized opportunity, progress, personal betterment, and fulfillment.<sup>17</sup> Whitman's taking to the road launched him into the main current of American aspirations--the direction of which was optimistically upward and outward. From the road Whitman could partake of his nation's rushing dynamism:

...a calm man of deep vision will find, in this tremendous modern spectacle of America, at least as great sights as anything the foreign world, or the antique, or the relics of the antique, can afford him. Why shall I travel to Rome to see the old pillars of the Forum, only important for those who lived there ages ago? Shall I journey four thousand miles to weigh the ashes of some corpses? Shall I not vivify myself with life here, rushing, tumultuous, scornful, masterful, oceanic--greater than ever before known?<sup>18</sup>

Well within Whitman's lifetime (he died in 1892), however, his optimistic vision of America had become problematic. Beyond the new physical limitations of the road (the road west no longer led to the boundless spaces of Whitman's youth), Whitman's democratic heroes--the artisan, craftsman

and mechanic--were being shouldered into the margins of society by forces of specialization, mechanization, and rationalization. Culturally, instead of dynamic, American art, Whitman in 1871 found only "numerous congeries of conventional, over-corpulent societies, already become stifled and rotten with flatulent, infidelistic literature, and polite conformity..."<sup>19</sup> By the final decades of the nineteenth century, Whitman's road poetry--as a celebration of an American reality--was already quaint nostalgia. Nevertheless, the idealized Democracy to which Whitman gives voice (like the agrarian midwestern utopias venerated by Wyckoff), invokes a fleeting, mythic America that has continued to beckon restless searchers.

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Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman, by contrast, had no inclination to flood themselves with the "immediate age" or plunge into the raw matter of the American experience the way Whitman had. Their reticence is partly explained by both poets' advocacy of the high function of art. "Art for life's sake", for Hovey and Carman, was art elevated from the "trivial particularities of time and place."<sup>20</sup>

Hovey, in his 1895 essay "The Passing of Realism," disdainfully accounts for the movement that was a dominant force in the literary establishment for all of his productive life. He explains that: "Art having forgotten the earth too long, needed to sprawl upon it for awhile for refreshment. It is a good thing as a phase, tho in itself something unpleasant. It is an attitude of fatigue and fatigue is usually unbeautiful."<sup>21</sup> Hovey's opinion of realism presumably extended to Whitman's earthy exaltation of the most common "instincts and appetites."<sup>22</sup> Hovey and Carman strove to keep alive a poetic tradition of highest romance. This agenda did not mesh with Whitman's democratic idiom of "the commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest..."<sup>23</sup> The poetic mission was ultimately the pursuit of beauty--a quest that Hovey and Carman felt unfulfillable, but of supreme worthiness nonetheless.<sup>24</sup>

Hovey and Carman were highly educated sons of the upper bourgeoisie. They met in Boston in the summer of 1887, at the tail-end of somewhat frustrating academic careers. Both young men had a habit of neglecting their studies (Hovey at Dartmouth and an Episcopal Seminary in New York; Carman at Edinburgh, the University of New Brunswick, and Harvard) in favor of various literary endeavors. It was literature--and particularly poetry--as well as a mutual aversion to the materialistic temper of the day, that



brought the two together. Oscar Wilde's aestheticism had influenced both young poets. As an undergraduate, Hovey had preached Wilde's "gospel of the beautiful" at conservative Dartmouth--affecting flamboyant dress and spontaneous behavior in the Wildean tradition.<sup>25</sup> Bliss Carman had actually met Wilde during one of the artist's renowned North American tours. The "apostle of art for art's sake" stayed briefly at the home of Carman's artistically inclined aunt and uncle.<sup>26</sup>

Wilde's foppish aestheticism was one of a complex of factors that fed into the new romantic sensibility which, during the '80s and '90s, was rapidly gaining currency in American literary and artistic circles. This movement seems also to have been inspired by Verlaine and the French symbolists, a Whitmanesque vogue for spontaneity and the natural life (though stopping well short of communing with the lower sorts), and the resurrection of the medieval romance signalled by Alfred Lord Tennyson's refashioning of Malory's Arthurian Saga.<sup>27</sup> Hovey's essay, "The Passing of Realism," was only one volley in the so-called "realism war," a confrontation between realists and romantics that raged in the literary magazines of the '90s.<sup>28</sup> Yet despite the ideological posturing of these ostensibly hostile literary camps, they shared--as Jackson Lears has pointed out--a common role in contributing to a renewed

"literature of action." The depiction of a contentious reality by "progressive" or "activist" realists like Jack London, Hamlin Garland, and Frank Norris dovetailed with the neo-romantic obsession with heroism, violence and questing adventure.<sup>29</sup> Both schools--though advocating divergent approaches to their art--embraced an ideology of masculine renewal through action.

It is ironic that Hovey and Carman, two poets with decidedly grandiose literary aspirations, would be remembered chiefly for their Songs From Vagabondia series. These slim collections of poetry (Songs from Vagabondia, More Songs From Vagabondia, Last Songs From Vagabondia and Echoes From Vagabondia) appeared--and were enthusiastically received--between 1894 and 1912. Their appeal to the general public derived less from poetic merit, however, than from their celebration of spontaneous revelry, manly camaraderie, and lusty adventure. The opening poem of the initial booklet sets the tone for what follows:

Off with the fetters  
That chafe and restrain  
Off with the chain!  
Here Art and Letters,  
And Myrtle and Wanda,  
And winsome witches,  
Blithely combine.  
Here are true riches,  
Here is Galconda,  
Here are the Indies,  
Here we are free--  
Free as the wind is,  
Free as the sea,  
Free!

Houp-la!<sup>30</sup>

Ducking a suffocating Victorian propriety, and slipping out of the immobilizing straitjacket of materialism, the wanderers of Vagabondia set out in pursuit of the true wealth of freedom and beauty.

Through the Vagabondia lyrics Hovey and Carman strove to create a new persona for the literary man, vitalizing an image that they felt had become intolerably "feminized." Like London, the two young poets emulated "masculine world wanderers" such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling in an effort to break out of the stifling mold that they blamed on the polite literary conventions of domestic realism and the genteel tradition. Carman complained in 1894: "We had become so over-nice in our feelings, so restrained and formal, so bound by habit and use in our devotion to the effeminate realists, that one side of our nature was starved...We must have a revolt at any cost."<sup>31</sup> The agent of Carman's "revolt" was the literary vagabond, a man who combined "Arts and Letters" with the lustiest of proclivities: wine, women, song, stout comradeship, and the carefree joys of the road:

Then up and away  
Till the break of day,  
With a heart that's merry  
And a Tom-and-Jerry,  
And a derry-down-derry -  
What's that you say,  
You highly respectable  
Buyers and sellers?  
We should be decenter?  
Not as we please inter  
Custom, frugality,

Use and morality  
In the delectable  
Depths of wine-cellars?

Midnights of revel  
And noondays of song!  
Is it so wrong?  
Go to the Devil!<sup>32</sup>

In addition to carefree carousal propounded as a deliberate affront to custom and respectability, Hovey and Carman counterposed the healthy, open air vigor of life on the road to the flabby, pallid, closed spaces that they associated with a stale literary culture and with bourgeois respectability in general. Echoing Whitman, Hovey declares:

...we like the outdoor note in poetry. We go in for greater freedom of treatment, but more especially for freedom of atmosphere and spirit-- the sort of poetry that represents free and natural and buoyant life, whether indoors or out. We don't care so much for the refinements of the scholar as for something genuine and healthy and modern and alive....We prefer the sort of work that a man does who lives outdoors a great deal and has a healthy mind in a healthy body, and is free from morbidness.<sup>33</sup>

As with Whitman's open road, camaraderie is one of the principal virtues found in Vagabondia. However, the sexual undertones of Whitman's camaraderie, as well as the effeminate ambiguity of Wilde, seem to have been consciously expunged from Hovey and Carman's fellowship of the road.<sup>34</sup> It is hearty, masculine companionship through and through:

COMRADES, pour the wine to-night  
For the parting is with dawn!  
Oh, the clink of cups together,  
With daylight coming on!

Greet the morn with a double horn,  
When strong men drink together!<sup>35</sup>

Good fellowship is enhanced, however, by the constant presence of violent death around the next corner. The certain prospect of "death for the brave" permits the unfettered enjoyment of the intensities of "real" life:

Comrades, give a cheer to-night  
For the dying is with dawn!  
Oh, to meet the stars together,  
With the silence coming on!  
Greet the end,  
As a friend a friend,  
When strong men die together!<sup>36</sup>

The theme of sudden death looms unexpectedly even in relatively placid, atmospheric poems. The mood of the sedate, pastoral "Three of a Kind," for example, is altered abruptly by graphic violent imagery:

Three of us in love with life,  
Roaming like wild cattle,  
With the stinging air a-reel  
As a warrior might feel  
The swift orgasm of the knife  
Slay him in mid-battle.<sup>37</sup>

Hovey and Carman romanticize the warrior's death--here seen as orgasmic in its intensity. It is not enough to face death bravely; one must court it, seek it, and laugh in its face. This audaciousness in the face of death becomes more significant when considered in the context of the consumptive sentimentalism that accompanied the pervasive images of death and sickness in the popular literature of the day. Reckless impetuosity could free one from the morbid preoccupation with mortality that Hovey and Carman

saw as a symptom of Victorian dissipation:

Oh, not for us the easy mirth  
Of men that never roam!  
The crackling of the narrow hearth,  
The cabined joys of home!  
Keep your tame, regulated glee,  
O pale protected State!  
Our dwelling place is on the sea,  
Our joy the joy of Fate!<sup>38</sup>

In an age when knighthood was no longer in flower, and buccaneers long driven from the seas, and even outlaws seeming to have lost any of the redeeming romance that they may have claimed in simpler times, Hovey and Carman turned to the road to exercise their verve and vigor. They cluttered their Vagabondia, however, with relics from more heroic ages. In particular, much of the Songs either deal explicitly--or are infused with--popular medieval motifs of knighthood and chivalry. This is more than decorative bunting--medieval imagery imbues Hovey and Carman's road with much of its romantic vitality. Moreover, it is through the diaphanous lens of a romanticized medievalism that the two poets--and especially Hovey--conceived the heroic implications of the nomadic aesthete.

Hovey was early attracted to the medieval trappings of the Episcopal High Church which, in the late nineteenth century, had acquired a certain subversive popularity amongst aristocratic intellectuals rebelling against a dull, middle-classed Protestant tradition that they associated with boorish rapacity.<sup>39</sup> As he matured, Hovey

colored his poetic mission with the same gothic-hued anti-materialism. He invested his calling with a quest-like importance. A pivotal episode in the young poet's life was the consecration of his literary quest by the wife of the late exalted poet, Sydney Lanier—who presented Hovey with her husband's laurel wreath after a reading. For Hovey, this was the equivalent of a sacred charge.<sup>40</sup> Hovey's striving to be worthy of Lanier's legacy meant taking up the struggle for beauty in a world choked by commercialism and industrialization. Hovey's most sustained effort in this regard was an interlocking series of Arthurian plays and masques through which he hoped to dramatize the plight of the individual in modern society (Hovey's early death in 1900 left the majority of this grand scheme uncompleted). These dramas afforded Hovey, in the words of Carman, "a modern instance stripped of modern dress."<sup>41</sup> In the last completed of these, the masque Taliesan, Hovey anoints the poet-wanderer as sacred priest of God, with a noble objective of vanquishing worldly evils and uniting "body, mind and soul."<sup>42</sup> This, we may surmise, was a challenge that Hovey himself strove to confront; but more importantly, by defining the quest of the artist/hero/vagabond, Hovey advanced the mythic possibilities of the romantic literary wanderer.

If Hovey and Carman's medieval fixation helped to

vitalize their poetry, it also draws attention to its fraudulence. For the two poets--in actuality--were not overly comfortable with the contrivance of danger for danger's sake, and while roving was fine for a few days, they were days that invariably would end with a cold draught, a warm hearth, and a soft bed. On their actual walking tours of New England and New Brunswick, Hovey and Carman pretended to be English Romantic poets, jongleurs, wandering minstrels and even "knights errant in search of adventure,"<sup>43</sup> but pretense was apparently undisturbed by the reality of actual danger or hardship. The poet's permanent "vagabondian camp" in Canada was actually a well stocked tent village--for which a cook was customarily engaged.<sup>44</sup> Hovey and Carman's vagabonding was principally an opportunity to commune with nature, thus cultivating poetic inspiration and renewing themselves for various literary and theatrical projects in New York or Boston. Such excursions--and the popular acceptance of their heroic representations in verse--were reflective of both the growing importance of leisure for an increasingly desk-bound middle class, and the corresponding demand on literature to provide vicarious adventurous experience.

Throughout the Vagabondia volumes, however, in addition to the strenuous rewards of the road, Hovey and Carman acclaim the simple pastoral pleasures of tramping. These,



we sense, were the true essence of the vagabonding  
experience for the poets:

Now the joys of the road are chiefly these:  
A crimson touch on the hard-wood trees;

A vagrant's morning wide and blue,  
In early fall, when the wind walks, too;

A shadowy highway cool and brown,  
Alluring up and enticing down

From rippled water to the dappled swamp,  
From purple glory to scarlet pomp;

The outward eye, the quiet will,  
The striding heart from hill to hill;...<sup>45</sup>

It was, furthermore, a serious mistake to equate Hovey  
and Carman's festive roving--or the more rugged lyric  
versions of their adventures--with more authentic hoboing  
or tramping. Responding to a British review that described  
the authors of Songs From Vagabondia, as "two American  
hoboes," Hovey's wife Henrietta fumed:

I am still raging about the criticisms. To think  
their taking Richard for a vagabond! Why, he is  
without exception the most aristocratic nature I  
ever knew or heard of! Only an aristocrat would  
write nonsense and play at vagabond...Anyone would  
know [that the poems are the work of] intelligent  
men in holiday mood...Think of dubbing their  
'plein air' school mere hoboism with its Saxon  
lustiness, its gypsy freedom [and] the virility of  
Carlyle, Henley, Stevenson, Kipling in it!<sup>46</sup>

Mrs. Hovey's displeasure was no doubt aggravated by the  
proximity of the review to the recent extended media  
coverage of the "tramp problem" generated by Coxey's march  
on Washington (Mrs. Hovey wrote the letter in July of 1894

while the remnants of the hobo army were still encamped on the outskirts of the Capitol). The association of her husband with such a depraved mob must have been an unpleasant prospect indeed.

While it is true that Hovey and Carman's limited cultural rebellion was mostly disengaged from the larger social and political struggles of the day (socialism, trade unionism etc.), their revolt against literary realism, disdain for convention, and anti-materialism nevertheless played a central role in the generation of a diffuse urban bohemianism that would eventually incorporate and vivify the image of the road hero as rebel. Both poets were fixtures of the New York artistic scene. They stalked the garrets, salons, studios, cafes, publishing offices, and ethnic restaurants of lower Manhattan. As well, though each regularly submitted work to the major periodicals, they also participated—to varying degrees—in experimental and avant-garde projects like The Knight Errant and The Chap Book.<sup>47</sup> In addition, both Hovey and Carman affected a studied unconventionalism. Hovey especially, was notorious for his long flowing hair, beard, and rakish dress.<sup>48</sup>

Though non-conformists from youth, the self-conscious bohemianism of the two poets—like that of many others—was galvanized by the publication in 1894 of George DuMaurier's Tilby. This novel, exploring themes of art and

materialism in the artistic community of the Parisian Latin Quarter, achieved an immense popularity in the '90s.<sup>47</sup> Songs From Vagabondia profitted from the Trilby hype. Its anti-middle class sentiment echoed the linking of greed and corruption, materialism and degeneration enunciated in Trilby. Genteel respectability, over-security, analytic reason, pointless custom, frugality, utility, morality, and money-grubbing were challenged by the bohemian ethic of youth, spontaneity, vitality and unrestricted experimentation. While helping to articulate these sentiments, the Songs From Vagabondia extended the site for youthful defiance from urban drawing rooms, salons and smoky cafes to the unbounded road. The Songs tapped into a strenuous impulse beginning to encroach widely on the "flabby" sedentariness of bourgeois and genteel culture. Like the road of Josiah Flynt and Jack London, Vagabondia promised of adventure, strenuous actuation, and virile independence.

Crucially, however, Hovey and Carman's road accomodated a mystic and mythic element. Whitman's encompassing communion with the road, its wayfarers, inhabitants and environs (and imaginative fusion with much else besides), was reconstituted, in the Songs, as a more heroic--but no less spiritual--questing sensibility. Hovey and Carman's road heroes, most certainly, sought romance for its own

sake. But they also journeyed in search of an illusive transcendence: beauty, truth, inspiration, self understanding, the meaning of life, etc. The new asceticism implied in the work of Hovey and Carman, gradually gained cultural currency as the processes of modernization hazily decried by the two poets became more entrenched, and the muddled intellectual dissonance of 1890s bohemia gave way to a more profound alienation.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Nels Anderson, The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 8-9.

<sup>2</sup>Harry Kemp, Tramping on Life: An Autobiographical Narrative (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1922), .

<sup>3</sup>However, it's worth noting Josiah Flynt's somewhat bizarre literary pretensions. Flynt seems to have had a sycophantic obsession with literary celebrities. His travelling in Europe was largely comprised of pilgrimages to the homes of renowned literatii. These included an extended visit to Count Tolstoy. Arthur Symons, the noted English poet, dramatist and critic, and another of Flynt's celebrity acquaintances, counted Flynt as perhaps his most peculiar friend. Symons would accompany Flynt on tramps into the English countryside as well as forays into the London "underworld."

<sup>4</sup>Arthur Rickett, The Vagabond in Literature (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1905). Also see William Brevda, Harry Kemp: The Last Bohemian (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1986), 115.

<sup>5</sup>Kingsley Widmer, The Literary Rebel (Carbondale Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 78.

<sup>6</sup>Even approaching the task of interpreting and analyzing the complex influence of centuries of human travel and the multitude of discursive traditions that have emerged from this on the individuals and culture in question is well beyond the scope of this effort. A beginning of an accounting of mobility and its literary and mythological correlate in human history is offered by Eric Leed's, The Mind of the Traveler (see Introduction, note 4). Kingsley Widmer also addresses this issue.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Robert E. Humphrey, Children of Fantasy: The First Rebels of Greenwich Village (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1978), 211.

<sup>8</sup>Albert Parry, Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1933), 38-42.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Paul Zweig, Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1984), 12.

<sup>10</sup>Betsy Erkillla, Whitman the Political Poet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-4.

<sup>11</sup>Whitman's wandering, it must be said, was largely imaginative and metaphorical. There is no evidence that he took extended walking trips or engaged in any manner of protracted tramping.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Erkill, 121-122.

<sup>13</sup>Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Readers Edition, Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley eds. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1965), 151.

<sup>14</sup>Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," from Leaves of Grass, 160.

<sup>15</sup>Ezra Greenspan, Walt Whitman and the American Reader (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 167-168.

<sup>16</sup>Whitman, "Song of Myself" from Leaves of Grass, 83.

<sup>17</sup>Zweig, 242-243.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Walter H. Eitner, Walt Whitman's Western Jaunt (Lawrence, Kansas: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1981), 1.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace, 27.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Allan Houston MacDonald, Richard Hovey: Man and Craftsman (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1957), 134-135. Originally from Richard Hovey's "On the Threshold" in the Independent (Nov., 1892).

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in MacDonald, 138.

<sup>22</sup>James Cappon, Bliss Carman and the Literary Currents and Influences of his Time (New York: Louis Carrier and Allen Isles, Inc., 1930), 270.

<sup>23</sup>Whitman, "Song of Myself," Leaves of Grass, 41.

<sup>24</sup>William R. Linneman, Richard Hovey (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 22. The impossibility of fulfilling the quest for beauty heightened the tragedy and romance of the endeavor.

<sup>25</sup>MacDonald, 29.

<sup>26</sup>Cappon, 7, 192.

<sup>27</sup>James Doyle, "Bliss Carman and the American Literary Milieu of the 1890s" in Gerald Lynch, ed. Bliss Carman: A Reappraisal (Ottawa: The University of Ottawa Press, 1990), 46.

<sup>28</sup>Linneman, 25.

<sup>29</sup>Lears, 103.

<sup>30</sup>Bliss Carman and Richard Hovey, Songs From Vagabondia (Boston: Copeland and Day, 1894), 1.

<sup>31</sup>Quoted in Lears, 106.

<sup>32</sup>Carman and Hovey, Songs, 4.

<sup>33</sup>Quoted in MacDonald, 146. From an Interview with the Boston Sunday Herald (Oct., 1898).

<sup>34</sup>The disparity between the obsessive masculinity of Hovey and Carman's work and the sexual ambiguity of two of their most immediate literary influences--Whitman and Wilde--cannot be entirely explained by their revolt against domestic realism and a "feminized" Victorianism. The 1890s saw the apex of the imperial project on both sides of the Atlantic and the unprecedented enlistment of mass culture in the cause of nationalism and imperial expansion. The cultural celebration of violence and imperialism, in addition to the military requirements of the State, dictated a rigid sexual orthodoxy. In the late 1890s Hovey was rabid in his advocacy for war against Spain, and throughout the Vagabondia lyrics there are numerous references to the glories of empire and conquest. Making heroic and masculine virtues out of aggression, domination and death in battle served the political exigencies of the time (as has always been the case) and reflected the jingoistic hysteria of much of American culture. Moreover, in the charged climate of the '90s, the championing of such a questionable attribute as "beauty" required vigorous efforts at counterbalancing. Nevertheless, Hovey and Carman's portrayal of virile good fellowship can be read--in its near homophobic masculinity--as a camouflage for an underlying element of homoeroticism. As much was adumbrated by Floyd Dell in his Intellectual Vagabondage (1926). Dell decries Hovey and Carman's "erotic good fellowship" as one "in which woman, and the love of woman, as serious realities, are eliminated from the scheme of living." (Intellectual Vagabondage, 187-189)

<sup>35</sup>Carman and Hovey, Songs, 54.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, 55.

<sup>37</sup>Bliss Carman and Richard Hovey, More Songs From Vagabondia, (Boston: Copeland and Day, 1894), 41.

<sup>38</sup>Carman and Hovey, Songs, 36.

<sup>39</sup>Linneman, 17-18.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid, 21-24.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 25.

<sup>42</sup>MacDonald, 95.

<sup>43</sup>Linneman, 18.

<sup>44</sup>Muriel Miller, Bliss Carman: Quest and Revolt (St. John's, Nfld.: Jespersion Press, 1985), 107-108.

<sup>45</sup>Carman and Hovey, Songs, 5-6.

<sup>46</sup>Quoted in Macdonald, 145-146, and in Miller, 127-128.

<sup>47</sup>Doyle, 45.

<sup>48</sup>Linneman, 13.

<sup>49</sup>Linneman, 31, and see Albert Parry, Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1933), 102.



## The Consolidation of Images: The Emergence of the Road Hero

Richard Hovey, Bliss Carman and the Vagabondia series exemplify the unvarnished literary/bohemian vagabond: pure-hearted, courageous, impassioned, erudite, virile, and spontaneous. Jack London and his tramp writing denote the grittier figure of the heroic hobo: rugged, hard-bitten, fierce, resolute, and stoical. These two configurations constitute the essential projections on the broad spectrum of images that eventually converged in the formation of the road hero. Reflecting the different circumstances of their creators and the wide social gulf separating their real-life counterparts, the heroic hobo and the intellectual vagabond as cultural icons were initially oriented toward disparate social and cultural spheres. After all, Jack London sprang from the marginalized fringes of the petty bourgeois. His sympathies and allegiances were formed as a tramp and a laborer, and, for most of his life, London dedicated considerable talent and energy to the struggles of the working classes. Hovey and Carman, by contrast, were products of a privileged elite, and though they sought a limited liberation from Victorian morality and bourgeois materialism, they were largely unaware of the issues faced by those genuinely outcast and dispossessed.

Furthermore, as Christopher Wilson has shown, London's working-class sensibility fundamentally shaped his literary ideology. Transposing "the terms of physical labor to [his] 'brain work'," London sought to master the writing profession through honest toil, studied imitation, rigid application and dogged persistence.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, London barraged periodicals of all kinds with his literary "product," at first selling his work to whoever would take it, and later to the highest bidder. London's tramp pieces appeared in magazines ranging from Wilshires, and the Woman's Home Companion, to the socialist publication, The Comrade.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, Hovey and Carman--in keeping with their own more cultivated backgrounds--sought to maintain a principled detachment from the literary mass-marketplace. They subscribed to a romantic conception of the independent man of letters--a role revived in the bohemian credo of the '90s as the last guardian of beauty, truth and inspiration in a world choked by commercialism. American "decadence," insisted Carman in 1896, was art and literature subjected to the debasing influence of the market:

Anything that is commonplace is decadent...All popular, commercial art which is merely pretty and is supplied to fill a demand is decadent.... Magazine poetry, for instance,...is thoroughly decadent. It is admittedly ephemeral; it is intended for the average man, and is intended to last until the next number of the magazine can come to press--about thirty days.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, both poets published work in large

circulation periodicals like the Atlantic Monthly, the Century, Scribner's, and Current Literature.<sup>4</sup> And, though the popularity of Songs From Vagabondia may have been unpalatable from an idealistic standpoint, Hovey and Carman nonetheless managed to defer their literary scruples long enough to capitalize on their success and produce three additional installments of Vagabondia poetry. In short, despite their disdain, Hovey and Carman--like London--were forced to operate within an expanding literary marketplace that increasingly sought the patronage of the very "average man" whom Carman spurned. It was here, in the leveling crucible of a mushrooming mass culture, that the distinctions between the hobo hero and the intellectual vagabond first began to blur.<sup>5</sup>

Corresponding to the diffuse blending of images occurring on this broadest of cultural levels, a more precise and salient rapprochement ensued against the highly charged ideological terrain of Progressive era political culture. Specifically, the first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the ascent of the International Workers of the World and the radicalization of resurgent bohemian enclaves in Chicago and especially New York City. These distinct phenomena overlapped in their idealization of the hobo as the archetypal disaffiliated proletarian: a symbol of the bankruptcy of the system and a model of

defiance and resilience.

The I.W.W. was formed largely in response to the American Federation of Labor's craft unionism, conservatism, and failure to situate the grievances of workers within the context of the class struggle (the A.F.L. was labelled the "American Separation of Labor" by its class conscious detractors). From the beginning, the I.W.W. sought to draw its support from the great mass of disaffiliated unskilled workers: "I do not care a snap of my fingers whether or not the skilled workers join the industrial movement at this time...We are going down into the gutter to get at the mass of workers and bring them up to a decent plane of living,"<sup>4</sup> promised Big Bill Haywood at the first convention of the I.W.W. in January of 1905. The I.W.W.'s organizers reasoned that the mechanization of American industry would eventually eliminate the demand for craftsmanship. Workers should organize with an eye to the mounting proletarianization of the skilled trades in the face of advancing technology. What was needed was an integrated union to challenge organized capital effectively. The goal was complete transformation. As Haywood proclaimed: "We are here to confederate the workers of this country into a working-class movement in possession of the economic powers, the means of life, in control of the machinery of production and distribution without regard

to capitalist masters."7

The apostles of "one big union" proselytized and organized in hobo jungles and crowded boxcars from the beginning. In the West, unskilled laborers were often left with no option but itinerancy. Lumberjacks, ice cutters, miners, agricultural workers and railroad section hands were frequently forced to the road by the seasonal or boom and bust nature of their employment. These roving workers provided an ideal pool for I.W.W. recruitment. But the I.W.W.'s courting of the wandering worker was far from a one-sided transaction. The rough cohesiveness of hobo "culture" impressed itself on the I.W.W. even as the "industrial movement" gave voice and meaning to the plight of the hobo wanderer. Ralph Chaplin, a hobo artist who later rose to "Wobbly" prominence as an organizer and lyricist, remarked on the cross-fertilization of I.W.W. militancy and hobo solidarity. Describing his hobo indoctrination as a migrant field hand in the midwest--during which time he learned to appreciate, "the magnitude and beauty of the American continent" as well as "how the underdog was forced to live"--Chaplin notes the self-abnegating comradeship at the heart of hobo group consciousness:

...yet there were brave and devoted friendships among us [hobo harvest hands]. We would stand together, fight for one another, steal for one another, and share our last crust with one another. It was to these seeds of solidarity that

I have always attributed the phenomenal growth of the I.W.W. once it developed momentum about 1915. In that year resistance to these conditions swept the harvest fields from one end of the country to the other. But not until the rebel songs of the I.W.W. resounded from every threshing rig, every freight train, and not a few "hoosegows" did the situation change...It was the bitter medicine of job organization that brought John Farmer to his senses and straightened out the crooked judge, the grasping brakeman, and the high-handed policeman and railroad detective...<sup>o</sup>

The "seeds of solidarity" described by Chaplin--though certainly planted long before the I.W.W.'s forays into "Hoboland," (however idealized in accounts like this one)--were subsequently nurtured in the industrial movement's vociferous ideological dialogue.

Retaining and augmenting the support of hoboes required that their way of life be thoroughly romanticized. This task proceeded with evangelical fervor--through the "hymnody" of the Little Red Song Book, the street corner "preaching" of I.W.W. activists, the I.W.W. meeting halls and reading rooms strategically located on urban skid rows, the hagiolatry of a retinue of martyred Wobblies, and a profusion of pamphlets, newspapers and other publications. The figure conceived as the "backbone" of the industrial union movement--the wandering worker--was cloaked in the raiments of myth, much as central elements of I.W.W. dogma (the general strike for instance) took on a mythical or even sacred air.<sup>o</sup> An article in a 1914 issue of Solidarity conveys something of the ideal of the militant

Wobbly hobo:

The nomadic worker of the West embodies the very spirit of the I.W.W. His cheerful cynicism, his frank and outspoken contempt for most of the conventions of bourgeois society, including the more stringent conventions which masquerade under the name of morality, make him an admirable exemplar of the iconoclastic doctrine of revolutionary unionism....His anomalous position, half industrial slave, half vagabond adventurer, leaves him infinitely less servile than his fellow worker in the East. Unlike the factory slave of the Atlantic Seaboard and the Central States, he is most emphatically not "afraid of his job."

His mobility is amazing. Buoyantly confident of his ability to "get by" somehow, he promptly shakes the dust of a locality from his feet whenever the board is bad, or the boss is too exacting, or the work unduly tiresome, departing for the next job even if it be 500 miles away. Cost of transportation does not daunt him. "Freight trains run everyday" and his ingenuity is a match for the vigilance of trainmen and special police. No wife or family encumber him....Nowhere else can a section of the working class be found so admirably fitted to serve as the scouts and advance guards of the labor army. Rather they may become the guerillas of the revolution--the francs-tireurs of the class struggle.\*

At the 1908 I.W.W. convention in Chicago, it was a contingent of hoboes--the "overalls brigade"--that wrested control of the I.W.W. from the Socialist Labor Party headed by Daniel DeLeon.<sup>10</sup> DeLeon complained bitterly of the "slummists" and "bummery" who "slept on benches at the Lake Front" and disrupted convention sessions by singing "Hallelujah I'm a Bum."<sup>11</sup> This musical incursion precisely represents the most distinct point of fusion between indigenous hobo culture and the fledgling revolutionary idealism of the I.W.W. The amalgamation of

hobo lore and radical politics in the Little Red Songbook evokes the heroic hobo at his most sturdy, epic and defiant. At bottom of course, the song book was an instrument of propaganda--its function to politicize and unify. Commenting on the popularity of "Hallelujah I'm a Bum"--the "theme song" of the Western militants--J.H. Walsh, the founder of the "overalls brigade," explained that, "although this may not be as scientifically revolutionary as some would like...it certainly has its psychological effect."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Joe Hill, who became the most celebrated of the Wobbly martyrs after his execution in 1915, expounded on the benefits of the musical packaging of the I.W.W.'s radical message:

A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over; and I maintain that if a person can put a few cold, common sense facts into a song, and dress them...up in a cloak of humor to take the dryness off of them, he will succeed in reaching a great number of workers who are too unintelligent or too indifferent to read a pamphlet or an editorial in economic science.<sup>13</sup>

The Little Red Songbook, however, did more than appeal to the latent radicalism of the transient laborer and tramp. It encapsulated and vivified the hobo's own indigenous lore. Classic hobo ballads such as "Hallelujah I'm a Bum," and "The Wabash Cannonball"<sup>14</sup> were juxtaposed to revered revolutionary standards such as "The Internationale." Moreover, the songbook introduced a



number of new pieces contributed by a growing contingent of I.W.W. tramp-composers like Joe Hill, Ralph Chaplin and T-bone Slim. Hill's most popular song, "The Preacher and the Slave"--as with a host of other trenchant I.W.W. compositions--rapidly established itself in the repertoire of the hobo jungles, from which it gradually filtered into wider circulation.<sup>15</sup> Sung to the tune of the Salvation Army's, "In the Sweet Bye and Bye"--a song with which most tramps were all too familiar--Hill's "hymn" begins:

Long-haired preachers come out every night,  
Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right,  
But when asked about something to eat,  
They will answer with voices so sweet:

You will eat (you will eat), bye and bye (bye and bye)  
In that glorious land in the sky (way up high).  
Work and pray (work and pray), live on hay (live on hay),  
You'll get pie in the sky when you die (when you die).<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, a significant component of I.W.W./hobo poesy celebrated the revolutionary purity of the solitary wandering hobo. "The Migratory I.W.W.," for example, romanticizes the radical lone wolf whose only consolation is the "cause":

He's one of the fellows who doesn't fit in,  
You have met him without a doubt,  
He's lost to his friends, his kith and his kin,  
As he tramps the world about.

At night he wanders beneath the stars  
With the mien of an ancient seer,  
And often he's humming a few sweet bars,  
Of a rebel song soft and clear.  
Yes he's one of the breed that never fits,  
And never a dollar can glean,  
He's one that a scornful world requites,  
As simply as might-have-been.

But deep in the heart of his hungry soul,  
Tho' the smug world casts him out,  
There burns the flames of a glowing coal,  
The fires of love devout.

Of a world in which all may live,  
And prosperity be for all,  
Where no slave shall bow to parasite's greed,  
Or answer a master's call.<sup>17</sup>

The image of the lone radical was a central element of the I.W.W.'s iconography. In preference to the cultish cohesiveness of revolutionary fraternity, the I.W.W. fostered solidarity through the idealization of alienation. The celebration of the isolation of the wandering life, while emphasizing its dissociation from accepted modes of bourgeois existence, also enhanced the mystique of those alienated wanderers from whom the I.W.W. drew its support.

The I.W.W.'s strident militancy--epitomized by the call for a general strike and the adoption of a revolutionary policy of "direct action"--augmented London's casting of the hobo as an agonistic hero (in this case embroiled in an explicitly revolutionary struggle culminating with the destruction of the capitalist state and the creation of a worker controlled cooperative commonwealth). Furthermore, the organization's imagery of revolution emphasized the desperate, apocalyptic, epic connotations of the struggle. The cultivation of "last stand" romanticism fed into and drew from the hobo's consciousness of isolation. More importantly, however, the war of annihilation foreseen in I.W.W. propaganda enhanced the mythic stature of the hobo-activist:

Scorn to take the crumbs they drop us,  
All is ours by right!  
Onward, men! All hell can't stop us!  
Crush the parasite.<sup>16</sup>

Like Hovey and Carman's questing vagabond at his most heroic, the archetypal revolutionary hobo is fired with moral purpose--the fulfillment of which demands self-effacing trial, sacrifice, and finally the application of overwhelming violence.

Conjointly, this point of intersection might be further extended to include the variations of masculine community dictated by the mythology of the intellectual vagabond and the I.W.W. hobo. Though there are important differences here (ie: the radical hobo's is a solidarity borne of alienation and struggle while the vagabond's camaraderie is often of a jovial, boisterous variety), there is also an element of coherence: the final sublimation of solidarity/camaraderie to the high romance of the revolution/quest. The chorus of a Wobbly favorite proclaims:

Hold the fort for we are coming--  
Union men, be strong.  
Side by side we battle onward,  
Victory will come.<sup>17</sup>

Carman and Hovey's "Comrades" similarly celebrates the camaraderie of "strong men" faced with the prospect of glorious battle:

Comrades, give a cheer tonight,  
For the dying is with dawn!<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the masculine community of I.W.W. insurrectionism --like that of literary vagabondage--was the exclusive domain of ardent youth. Ralph Chaplin writes:

Youth has a logic all its own, and the I.W.W. was an organization of young men. Sometimes it pays to be out of step with the world as I was at that time; sometimes it doesn't. In step or out of step, in jail or out of jail, we had the satisfaction of feeling that we were on the side of right and justice and that it was the other fellow who was beyond the pale. We weren't willing and uncomplaining victims of exploitation--"work oxen," "wage plugs," "scissorbills." We were rebels--and proud of it.<sup>21</sup>

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Harry Kemp, the resident tramp poet of the "new" Bohemia in pre-war Greenwich Village, helped to reinstate a cult of youth that had somewhat subsided since its brief heyday during the Trilby-crazed '90s. In The Cry of Youth (1914), Kemp writes: "Let youth dance forth to meet the delicate dawn, rose-crowned and smiting lyres of ecstasy. Live in your youth, and the everlasting spirit of youth will never permit you to grow old."<sup>22</sup> According to Floyd Dell, the restless temperament of the "young intellectuals" (to use Henry May's appellation) was derived directly from the "immediate and profound" influence of Hovey and

Carman's Vagabondia lyrics: "These books of song, with their hearty gusto for accidental and irrelevant experience, touched all youth to the quick."<sup>23</sup> Yet, by the turn of the century, a number of young literary-minded individuals had already chosen a more vigorous road than that marked out by Hovey and Carman. What was "accidental and irrelevant" in Vagabondia, it seemed, did not commend itself to those youth seeking authentic, intense experience and a taste of "real life."

Carl Sandburg went hoboing in the summer of 1897 at nineteen years of age. Harry Kemp was eighteen when he began his first tramp in 1900. Other intellectually inclined youth "hitting the hobo trail" during these years included W.H. Davies, Robert Service, Vachel Lindsay, and Jim Tully. Van Wyck Brooks commented later that, "one might have imagined, that the roads of the West were thronged with literary wanderers."<sup>24</sup> Of course, most of the "throng" actually paid for their train fare, and traveled toward a fixed goal—from small towns and villages to the bright lights and burgeoning Bohemias of Chicago and New York City. Dell's Felix Fay, the hero of the autobiographical novel Moon Calf, for instance, was propelled to the big city in part through his dreamy obsession with a map posted in his home-town railway station, "the map with a picture of iron roads from all

over the Middle West centering in a dark blotch in the corner... 'Chicago!' "25 Escape from a seemingly limiting and predictable home terrain was the motivation for many who hit the road, and the urban "experience"--promising excitement, culture and liberation--was the principal attraction.

Notably, however, those who followed a more circuitous route--exploring the hinterlands from a box-car and keeping the rough company of hoboes--while desiring escape and experience to be sure, seemed also to embrace a more self-consciously introspective quest. Sandburg writes:

What came over me in those years 1896 and 1897 wouldn't be easy to tell. I hated my home town and yet I loved it. And I hated and loved myself about the same as I did the town and the people...I came to see that my trouble was inside of myself more than it was in the town and the people...I decided in June of 1897 to head West and work in the Kansas wheat harvest. I would beat my way on the railroads and see what happened. I would be a hobo and a "gaycat"...I would take my chances on breaking away from my home town where I knew every street and people in every block and farmers on every edge of town.... Now I would take to The Road, see rivers and mountains, every day meeting strangers to whom I was one more young stranger.<sup>26</sup>

For the scattering of earnest young vagabonds of Sandburg's stripe, the hobo's road promised more than the studied bohemianism of the urban centers. It represented the cleanest of breaks--both from external circumstances of home and habit, and from diffuse internal conditions: confusion, self-doubt, anxiety, lethargy, enervation. A

selection from Vachel Lindsay's diaries--in which the young poet reflects on his 1906 tramp through the South, exchanging his verse for food and shelter--denotes the revival of the spiritually bracing, transforming, transcendent possibilities of the road, notions largely quiescent (with the exception of Hovey and Carman's half-formed questing ideality) since Whitman:

I have taken back and forth in the world, yet feel as though I always stayed at home till I started South. That was living for the first time. It seems the beginning of wisdom to me, the first time I have really revered and followed the divine.... It is worth while to be alone. It is worth while to mix with one's fellows. It is worth while to be one's self on the road, and to study to be that.... the dust of the road shall make clay on my sweating face, and the eternal road shall lead me on, till I have travelled every foot of my ancient dwelling places, and gathered such wisdom as is there distilled from a thousand memories.<sup>27</sup>

On a more mundane level, these aspiring writers sought, in the robust life of experience that they attributed to the hobo, the impetus--either aesthetic or utilitarian--to pursue their literary aspirations. Carl Sandburg's hoboeing afforded an effective preparation for his craft:

I was meeting fellow travelers and fellow Americans. What they were doing to my heart and mind, my personality, I couldn't say then nor later and be certain. I was getting a deeper self-respect than I had had...I was getting to be a better storyteller. You can be loose and easy when from day to day you meet strangers you will know only an hour or a day or two.<sup>28</sup>

Harry Kemp's approbation of tramping, moving beyond

Sandburg's estimation of its efficacy for training in story telling, centered on the artistic and spiritual liberation afforded by the wandering life. Kemp represented himself as a "tramp for the sake of my art."<sup>29</sup> And while Kemp's hoboing provided extensive material for future literary exploitation, it was the intangible benefits of tramping as a mode of life and angle of vision that Kemp most extolled. "The rambling haphazard course of life," wrote Kemp, "was less comfortable but better for the freedom of mind and spirit that poets must preserve."<sup>30</sup>

The tentative cultural currency of a heroic--or at least rebellious--ideology of the road that presupposed the spate of intentional hobo wanderings by educated searchers around the turn of the century, was in turn compounded by these very migrations. One may discern a certain impetus here. Building on the limited challenge to cultural norms posed by Wyckoff, Flynt, Hovey and Carman in the '90s, and reinforced by the naturalistic hobo tales of London and Gorky beginning to appear during the first years of the new century, an explosion of writing by erstwhile mobile intellectuals began to blend itself into the cultural stew starting around 1910 and continuing for the next two decades.

Kemp's poems--actually preceded by his self-generated



reputation as the "tramp poet" (a notoriety gained through fortuitous national media attention)--first surfaced in The Independent in 1906. Claiming to have created a poetry of "genuine vagabond moods--without diletantism" (a reference to Hovey and Carman's work), Kemp sought to combine elements of Vagabondia type romanticism with the realism of London's writing.<sup>31</sup> The Cry of Youth (1914), containing a number of hobo pieces, juxtaposed the reality of the road with a bohemian celebration of youth and rebelliousness. Tramping on Life (1922), Kemp's prose account of his travels, further extends these themes--describing the adventures of an idealistic aesthete wandering the hobo's rugged realm.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, Vachel Lindsay's mystic, romantic travelogues, collected as A Handy Guide for Beggars: Especially Those of the Poetic Fraternity (1916) and Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty (1914), were initially published in periodicals such as Outlook Magazine and Twentieth Century with titles like "The Man Under the Yoke: An Episode in the Life of a Literary Tramp" (1907) and "A Religious Mendicant" (1912).<sup>33</sup> Lindsay's poetic treatment of the wandering life included, The Tramp's Excuse and Other Poems (1909) and Rhymes to be Traded for Bread (1912). The Autobiography of a Super Tramp, W.H. Davie's realistic chronicle of his adventures as a British nomad in America

(which were abruptly put to an end when his foot was amputated by a train wheel), was published in 1908.

Beggars of Life, by Jim Tully appeared in 1924. And Henry Herbert Knibb's, Songs of the Outlands--a collection of Kiplingesque tramping poetry which imbued the hobo with both the heroism of the Wild West and that of the age of chivalry--came out in 1914.

This rash of tramp narratives and road verse held a particular resonance for the evanescent bohemian enclaves in Chicago and New York City. To begin with, the poetic collaborations of Hovey and Carman had previously cemented the link between Bohemia and Vagabondia--an integral feature of a now glamorized '90s "rebellion" to which the "new" bohemians looked for inspiration.<sup>34</sup> Of more immediate importance, a number of the literary hoboes publishing in these years were themselves intimately connected to bohemian communities. Sandburg and Lindsay, for instance, were mainstays of the "Chicago Renaissance," and Harry Kemp was an undisputed Greenwich Village celebrity. John Reed's lionization of Kemp in The Day in Bohemia (1913) reveals the power of Kemp's mystique, but it also signifies the advancement of a new permutation in the image of the intellectual vagabond:

The unkempt Harry Kemp now thumps our door;  
He who has girdled all the world and more.  
Free as a bird, no trammels can bind,  
He rides a boxcar as a hawk the wind;  
A rough, thin face, a rugged flow of words,--

Fresh from a fiery ordeal that has paved  
The Pit anew--from terrors trebly braved  
He rises, burning to avenge the wrong  
By flooding all the stupid earth with song.  
Here's to you HARRY, in whatever spot!  
True poet, whether writing it or not.<sup>35</sup>

The acceptance of the hobo's mode of life as an option--an ideal--for restless, bookish, young rebels, depended also on the more general ennoblement of the proletariat itself. The tentative "humanization" of the "lower sorts" for the "respectable" American public was induced by diverse cultural and social developments including the Settlement movement, the teachings of the Social Gospel, reformist, "muckraking" journalism and socially conscious realistic literature.<sup>36</sup> It was precisely the disfavor with which conventional society viewed the working classes, however, that shaped the attraction of the earnestly non-conventional artists and intellectuals of Bohemia. A certain harmlessly rebellious sentimentalizing of the working classes had long been in vogue among urban free-thinkers--who, by the 1890s, were affecting flannel shirts, frequenting ethnic restaurants and renting cheap garrets next to tenement slums. The close-knit working class and immigrant neighborhoods of the cities were seen in romantic counterpoint to modernizing, mercenary, Anglo Saxon, bourgeois society. They seemed to embody two qualities high on the list of bohemian virtues: buoyant poverty and exotic difference. As John Reed put

it, "within a block of my house, was all the adventure in the world; within a mile was every foreign country."<sup>37</sup>

The gradual diffusion of socialist and anarchist thought in bohemian circles, however, provided the most powerful impetus for the energized glamorization of the proletariat. Bohemian political radicalization was both a logical extension of an oppositional cultural dynamic that sought to challenge conventional society on an ever widening front, and the result of the influx of specific political ideas. Of the latter, Anarchist ideology as propounded by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman was the earliest and most enduring influence; while Syndicalism, incarnated in America by the increasingly notorious I.W.W., sparked a brief and intense bohemian enthusiasm.<sup>38</sup> Both of these developments further invigorated an idealization of the politically active proletarian--a configuration promoted most conspicuously by leftist journalist and arch-bohemian Hutchins Hapgood. In his, The Spirit of Labor (1907), and Types From City Streets (1910), Hapgood articulated a new proletarian persona--the sturdy, virtuous, wise, simple, honest worker modestly engaged in political action and labor organization; a committed activist in the cause of revolutionary transformation.

The proletarian mystique apotheosized in Greenwich Village bohemian circles was compounded by the brief

incursion of the I.W.W.'s radical hoboes for the strikes at the Paterson silk mills in 1913. The "American intelligentsia's" profound "sentimental attachment to barbarism and savagery, preferably of a nomadic sort," as Floyd Dell so aptly put it, was suddenly vivified through face to face contact with the I.W.W.'s two-fisted, free-wheeling Western radicals. The Wobblies, indeed, seemed to represent the consummation of both the proletarian and vagabond fantasies of city-bound non-conformist youth. The spread of the "class war" to New Jersey (an event enthusiastically heralded by the Village's radical organ, The Masses), and the location of the I.W.W.'s headquarters in New York City, provided an opportunity for an extended intercourse between bohemians and Wobblies--the latter including the principal custodians of the industrial movement's hobo mythology: Ralph Chaplin, Arturo Giovannitti and Big Bill Haywood himself. For the Villagers, this contact afforded an unprecedented opportunity for engaging in the "real life" social and political struggles of the working classes. But the bohemian's romancing of the I.W.W. also reflected the profound feelings of deficiency and doubt underneath the Greenwich Village "perfect dream." The Wobblies seemed to possess, in Harry Kemp's words, a "surety of goal" conspicuously lacking in the salons and cafes of the

Village.

Big Bill Haywood swiftly became a salon celebrity. In an article for the New York Globe, Hutchins Hapgood describes the I.W.W. leader as a "simple, strong, big man, with one piercing eye...a person as straight as a die." Hapgood writes, "I was struck again with the real marriage there was between Haywood's feeling and his active life. His was not a complex or split up personality....His nature was that of a straight line."<sup>37</sup> Hapgood saw in the Wobbly chief the antithesis of the privileged self-absorption of the Village scene, and in his reporting of Haywood's immersion in the social life of the Village, he emphasized the Wobbly's dominance and force--a marked contrast to the vacillation and dissipation of Village poets and artists. Hapgood refers bitingly to the wistful fawning of one coterie of Haywood admirers, "Henri and his friends want a new life...They want Haywood's life."<sup>40</sup>

The cult of celebrity surrounding Haywood and his group of I.W.W. organizers reached its apex with the Paterson strike pageant--a dramatization of the strike conceived by Mabel Dodge, the celebrated impresario of Village salon culture. Madison Square Garden was engaged, and a huge cast of strikers were enlisted to act out their suffering on stage. In its transformation of "radical politics into entertainment" (John Reed actually led the strikers in an

original song called "The Haywood Thrill"),<sup>41</sup> the Pageant epitomized the strain of sycophantism running through the bohemian-Wobbly encounter. A salient footnote to this event--and the collaboration that it culminated--is provided by Floyd Dell's 1925 piece for Century Magazine, "Hallelujah I'm a Bum." Dell describes an I.W.W. hobo's encounter with the Village scene:

...he had discovered in Greenwich Village a kind of tramp he had never known before--the artist kind. These painters, poets, story writers, were old friends in a new guise. He and they understood one another perfectly...We had him at all our parties, and he taught us to sing the "Wobbly" songs. It came natural enough to us...<sup>42</sup>

Here, the rapprochement of hobo and vagabond--as was the case in actuality--coincides with the reduction of the hobo's militancy to attraction (a trend in which Dell's Wobbly, like Haywood and his troupe, is all too complicit).

It is in this context that the symbolic significance of the convergence of radical bohemia's literary vagabonds and radical labor's defiant hoboes might be best interpreted. Their meeting represents the zenith of both the heroic hobo and the intellectual vagabond as independent cultural formations, and the emergence of the more generalized configuration of the road hero. It would be a mistake, however, to read this intersection of cultural archetypes as more than merely representative of an underlying and ongoing cultural process. The strands of this process,

again, included the proliferation of images produced in a clamoring popular culture--from dirty bums to comic hoboes and valiant vagabonds; the halting fabrication of a heroic and rebellious category for the wandering hobo within sociological, fictional, and autobiographical discourse; the renewal of the figure of the intellectual/bohemian vagabond, drawn from a timeless tradition of literary wandering; and the increasing and cumulative commingling of these trends.

The road hero, however, though constituted from all of these strands, was ultimately activated by forces outside the framework of hobo and vagabond idealism that has been considered here. The automobile, first and foremost, redefined the physicality of the American road, and transformed the very experience of motion and passage. Conjointly, the expansion of a culture of consumption (with the automobile its most triumphant commodity) created the mechanisms for the re-integration and appropriation of oppositional modes of culture. As such, the image of the road's rebellious possibilities--freedom, adventure, masculine self-creation--have become irrevocably tied to the market world of technology and products. In one sense, then, all that remains of the road experience is "diluted, contrived, and prefabricated"--"pseudo-adventure," as decried by Daniel Boorstin thirty years ago.<sup>43</sup>



Nevertheless, we are reminded--every time a pack of leather clad Harley riders thunders past on the interstate--of the legacy of hoboes and vagabonds. For the road still provides refuge to iconoclastic rebels, and its image--despite its contemporary dessication--still attracts literary minded dreamers.

Rail-squatters ranged in nomad raiillery,  
The ancient men--wifeless or runaway  
Hobo-trekkers that forever search  
An empire wilderness of freight and rails.  
Each seemed a child, like me, on a loose perch,  
Holding to childhood like some termless play.  
John, Jake or Charley, hopping the slow freight  
--Memphis to Tallahassee--riding the rods,  
Blind fists of nothing, humpty dumpty clods.

Yet they touch something like a key perhaps...

Hart Crane, The Bridge, 1930

Take a second-hand car, put on a flannel shirt,  
drive out to the Coast by the northern route and  
come back the southern route....Don't talk to your  
banking friends or your chamber of commerce  
friends, but specialize on the gasoline station  
men, the small restaurant keeper, and the farmers  
you meet by the wayside, and your fellow  
autobmobile travelers.

FDR: advice to young man seek-  
ing to learn about the country,  
1939

...I was an oldtime bhikku in modern clothes  
wandering the world (usually the immense triang-  
ular arc of New York to Mexico City to San

Francisco) in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener) and as a future Hero in Paradise... I was a perfect Dharma Bum myself and considered myself a religious wanderer.

Jack Kerouac, The Dharma Bums, 1958

To be a vagabond is simply (to be free) to be yourself. Thus to vagabond is to be fully alive. Think about it.

Ed Buryn, Vagabonding in the USA, 1980

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Wilson, 98.

<sup>2</sup>See Etulain.

<sup>3</sup>Doyle, 48. London would no doubt have reacted to Hovey and Carman's high-minded literary idealism in much the same way as the impractical and "anachronistic" "literary posture" of his friend Cloudesley Johns. As Wilson relates, London characterized Johns as the type that "scorns...[hack] work... writes for posterity, for a small circle of admirers...doesn't want money, scoffs at the idea of it, calls it filthy, damns all who work for it, etc. etc" (quoted in Wilson, 99). As for artistic "inspiration" and literary "genius," London writes: "There is no such thing as inspiration, and very little of genius. Dig, blooming under opportunity, results in what appears to be the former, and certainly makes possible the development of what original modicum of the latter which one may possess" (quoted in Wilson, 98).

<sup>4</sup>Doyle, 43-47.

<sup>5</sup>This process seems to have begun--in the case of the Vagabondia poems--at the moment of publication. The review in the British literary press which described Hovey and Carman as "hoboes" was merely one instance in a more general confusion regarding vagabondage. A review of Songs From Vagabondia in the Springfield Republican, for instance, called it, "an elaborate effort to combine the love of nature with the morals of the tramp" (Macdonald, 144).

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Joyce Kornbluh, Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 2.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Kornbluh, 1.

<sup>8</sup>Ralph Chaplin, Wobbly: The Rough and Tumble Story of an American Radical, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 89.

<sup>9</sup>See Donald E. Winters Jr., The Soul of the Wobblies: The I.W.W., Religion, and American Culture in the Progressive Era, 1905-1917, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985).

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Kornbluh, 66-67.

<sup>11</sup>Kornbluh, 6.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Winters, 40.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Winters, 41.

<sup>14</sup>Milburn, "Poesy in the Jungle," 85.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 85.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Phelps, 7.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Kornbluh, 84. This poem originally appeared in the Industrial Worker, November, 1916, signed by "J.H.B. 'The Rambler'."

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Winters, 47.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Winters, 47.

<sup>20</sup>Carman and Hovey, Songs, 54.

<sup>21</sup>Chaplin, 89.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in William Brevda, Harry Kemp: The Last Bohemian, (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1986).

<sup>23</sup>Floyd Dell, Intellectual Vagabondage: An Apology for the Intelligentsia, (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1926), 181.

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Brevda, 73.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Henry F. May, The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Time, 1912-1917, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 252.

<sup>26</sup>Carl Sandburg, Always the Young Strangers. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), 377, 381.

<sup>27</sup>Quoted in Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, A Poet in America, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), 169, 172.

<sup>28</sup>Sandburg, 391.

<sup>29</sup>Quoted in Brevda, 117.

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Seelye, 549.

<sup>31</sup>Brevda, 117.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>See Dennis Camp ed., The Prose of Vachel Lindsay, Vol. 2, (Peoria, Ill.: Spoon River Poetry Press, 1988).

<sup>34</sup>May, 199.

<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Brevda, 77.

<sup>36</sup>Examples of the latter include Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, Frank Norris's The Octopus, Jacob Riis's How the Other Half Lives, Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie, Jack London's The People of the Abyss, and Upton Sinclair's The Jungle.

<sup>37</sup>Quoted in Roger Bruns, The Damndest Radical: The Life and World of Ben Reitman, (Urbana Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 107

<sup>38</sup>May, 303-307.

<sup>39</sup>Quoted in Peter Carlson, Roughneck: The Life and Times of Big Bill Haywood, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1983), 210.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid, 211.

<sup>41</sup>Christopher Lasch, The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991), 338. Also see, Martin Green, New York 1913: The Armory Show and the Paterson Strike Pageant, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988).

<sup>42</sup>Floyd Dell, "Hallelujah I'm a Bum!" The Century Illustrated Magazine, (Vol CX. June 1925), 142.

<sup>43</sup>Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream, (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 77-79.

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