

The Specter of Art in the American Business Novel: 1885-1917

By Mark Schiebe

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Abstract

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This dissertation is an examination of the interconnection between aesthetics and business practice as it is imagined in the work of American novelists during the final decade and a half of the nineteenth century and the first decade and a half of the twentieth. Through a reading of novels about businessmen composed during the years when “men of commerce” first received wide fictional representation, *The Specter of Art in the American Business Novel* explores the network of values connoted by the terms “business” and “art,” and finds a secretly shared vocabulary existing alongside the recognized antagonisms between activities commonly thought to comprise opposing poles of cultural heroism. Appropriating as a structuring allegory the fateful encounter between the expatriate artist and his ghostly “American” businessman double in Henry James’s “The Jolly Corner,” I argue that novelists such as Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Abraham Cahan perform acts of self-analysis, even exorcism, through the imaginative creation of what cultural historian Henry Nash Smith called the “capitalist hero.”

In this study, I draw on fin de siècle debates about the gold standard, the role of the immigrant in shaping capital/labor relations, and the tie between American “masculinity” and the (vanishing) western frontier; I re-assess powerful contemporary statements such as Thorstein Veblen’s theory of the businessman as a parasite of production and Andrew Carnegie’s apology for the capitalist “superman” on Darwinian grounds; and I argue for

an emerging parallel between literary and financial practices in an era when the “speculative economy,” one dominated by the manipulation of *representations* of land, natural resources, and the products of industry, eclipsed an older model based on production as an end in itself.

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Introduction

James, Howells, and the “Business Vision”

Henry James never adopted what he once termed the “business vision” for a sustained, full-length fiction, though his late story about the haunted house on “The Jolly Corner” (1909) gives us a most suggestive meditation on the existential dangers lurking in such an imaginative endeavor. The hero of the tale, Spencer Brydon, returns from Europe to his native New York after an absence of thirty three years in order to look after the real estate interests that have sustained his artistic career abroad. A latecomer in the procession of Jamesian expatriates, Brydon is one of James’s most autobiographical creations; his feelings of alienation upon returning to the city of his youth mirror the impressions the novelist had recorded in *The American Scene* (1907) during an eleven month visit to The United States a few years earlier. In the gaudy new skyline of the city, in the unceasing entrepreneurial bustle, the vulgarity of manner and taste, Brydon judges that “[t]here are no reasons here *but* of dollars,” no values but “beastly rent-values” (347, 346). The visitor nevertheless finds that he has a certain “capacity for business” after several months supervising the renovation of a lucrative family property, and a chance remark by an old friend galvanizes in Brydon an obsessive curiosity about the possibility of the American “self” he was to become had he stayed on in his country of birth.

During nightly visits to his childhood residence on the “jolly” corner, Brydon alternatively stalks, and is stalked by, a ghostly “recognition” through the airy upper stories of the mansion, a presence that by degrees takes on the proportions of a fantastic

creature, “more subtle, yet at bay perhaps more formidable than any beast of the forest” (353). At first the vision marks the vanishing point in a “diminishing perspective,” a kind of stereoscopic composite, viewed, at a safe distance, through the “aperture” of the imagination. But Brydon is shocked when one night he encounters the specter, a grotesque figure standing at the base of a staircase the artist is descending:

Every fact of him now, in the higher light, hard and acute—his planted stillness, his vivid truth, his grizzled bent head and white masking hands, his queer actuality of evening-dress, of dangling double eye-glass, of gleaming silk lappet and white linen, of pearl button and gold watch-guard and polished shoe.

Two fingers on one of the hands had been “reduced to stumps, as if accidentally shot away” (364). When the hands drop away and the figure advances, Brydon sees his own face, “too hideous as *his*,” staring back at him, and faints.

Brydon is rescued by his friend Alice Staverton, and the romantic overtones in their relationship are made explicit as she cradles his head in her arms on the floor of the house the morning after the incident. Alice’s confession that in a dream she too saw the ghost provokes a denial from the now jealous lover Brydon: “He’s none of *me*, even as I *might* have been,” (368). “Ah, I don’t say I like him *better*,” she later explains, and calls attention to Brydon’s “charming monocle,” which contrasts so sharply with the dream figure’s “great convex pince-nez.... For his poor ruined sight” (369). The contrast between Brydon and the ghost at the close of the tale, then, is figured as a difference of vision: it is the opposition of the monocle worn by the man of culture, and the pince-nez, or double eye-glass, worn by the man of commerce. “The Jolly Corner,” through a trick of optics, brings together and then pulls apart the aesthetic and the pecuniary visions. It

sets up and reinforces a binary of art and business, of the aesthetic and the economic, but also suggests the blurring, or deconstruction, of these oppositions.

One wonders precisely what James had in mind when several years later he wrote that “the most intimate idea” in the story was a subtle victory won by his hero,

turning the tables, as I think I called it, on a “ghost” or whatever, a visiting or haunting apparition otherwise qualified to appal him; and thereby winning a sort of victory by the appearance, and the evidence, that this personage or presence was more overwhelmingly affected by him than he by it. (400)

It is true that the apparition initially shields his face as Brydon approaches, though it is the artist’s eyes that fail, a seeming indication of the ghost’s victory. The abrupt ending leaves open the possibility that Brydon, strengthened by the love of Alice Staverton, will re-occupy the house on Jolly Corner and in doing so expropriate the ghost, though there is no real evidence for this. Brydon has survived the encounter, in a literal sense, though it is less than certain in what manner, if at all, he has “turned the tables” on his alter-ego. It is this quality of indeterminacy that suggests allegory, despite James’s dislike of the term. What I am proposing is that “The Jolly Corner” isn’t a business fiction, but rather, a story that imagines the genre’s condition of possibility, an allegory for the kind of sustained and (at least temporary) sympathetic identification with the figure of the businessman necessary for robust fictional representation. In this capacity, the story will serve as a guide for the project that follows. *The Specter of Art in the American Business Novel* is an examination of the interconnection between aesthetics and business practice as it is imagined in the work of Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Abraham Cahan.

In *The Art of Fiction* (1888) James had forcefully defended the novelist's imaginative license to tackle subject matter outside of his experience, though when it came to the fictional depiction of matters commercial, he always demurred. We meet James's businessmen after they have arrived in Europe ready to exchange their wad of dollars for a measure of culture. When we first glimpse Christopher Newman, *The American* (1875), he is in the Louvre, and already suffering "an aesthetic headache;" there is the famously vague "rather ridiculous object of common domestic use," the source of the Newsome family money in *The Ambassadors* (1901); and in the lesser known *The Ivory Tower* (1917), one of two novels James left unfinished, the elderly tycoon Abel Gaw, with his twenty million, is pictured briefly but memorably on his deathbed, "perch[ed]... like a ruffled hawk, motionless but for his single tremor, with his beak, which had pecked so many hearts out, visibly sharper than ever, yet only his talons nervous" (9). *The Ivory Tower* was to be another story of inheritance, and as in all of James, concerned with the social effects of money, rather than the making of money. In depicting commercial men, he once wrote that his idea "ha[d] been from the first not to show them with a business vision, but in some other way altogether" (qtd. in Hollinghurst xiv).

Nevertheless, James and many of his contemporaries believed business enterprise to be one of the great unexplored subjects of the age, a fictional frontier that called for pioneers. The final quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade and a half of the twentieth witnessed the growth of an American industrial and financial empire that spanned a continent, reached toward markets in China and India, and bankrolled a

government with imperial ambitions. The age was rife with the paradoxes engendered by the triumph of capital: unprecedented wealth matched only by deeper levels of urban squalor, the democratization of culture and the simultaneous standardization of the American mind, the celebration of masculinity precipitated by fears over its perceived disappearance. The towering figures of a Vanderbilt, a Rockefeller, a Carnegie, indicated that big business was still thought of as “a field for personal competition, of heroic endeavor,” and not yet of faceless corporate manipulation (Trachtenberg 5). In the most fiercely individualistic nation in the world, the American public lived vicariously through these men “who had only done what others would have done in their place” (Josephson 150). In short, as Larzer Ziff has observed, it had become more difficult for writers to imagine a plausible model of masculine heroism, or villainy, *outside* of business enterprise (“Afterword” 453).

The businessman’s centrality in the contemporary scene compelled the attention of Howells and the literary realists, whose aim (radical at the time) was to bring fiction closer to the world as it really was, to “narrow the gap between the fictive and the actual” (Berthoff 238). While it was the prosaic nature of business, its relation to the commonplace, that most interested Howells, it was the inhuman scale of the tycoon’s power and reach, at its heights, that made him an important figure for naturalism, and for the more sensational of the muckrakers. The American business novel, then, comes into existence as part of what Alfred Kazin called the “struggle for realism,” enters popular culture in the 1890’s when economic fictions depicting “business villainy” flood the dime paperback market to supplement the demand created by the scandals and sensations covered in the newspapers, and becomes a tour de force, almost a right of passage, for the

great naturalists Norris and Dreiser. Still “an alien intruder in the fictive world” at the time Howells published *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in 1885, by the eve of the First World War the man of commerce, both the garden-variety and the Nietzschean, had become an important part of the American fictional landscape.¹

In the span of seven years William Vanderbilt through a series of shrewd capital investments had doubled the wealth it had taken his legendary father thirty years to accumulate. When he died suddenly at his desk, in 1885, the Vanderbilt fortune of two hundred million, the largest ever amassed at the time, was entrusted with the bankers, split up and diversified into hundreds of enterprises in the names of numerous heirs. The explosive growth and swift consolidation of capital during the next two decades produced several fortunes that would dwarf even the Vanderbilt’s, and dozens more that far exceeded previous measures of what it had meant to be wealthy. As literary historians such as Alfred Kazin, Larzer Ziff and Eric Sundquist have noted, in the final decades of the nineteenth century the unprecedented scope of business enterprise and the rise of a new ruling class of “robber barons” changed the relations between American writers and the status quo. If identifying with capitalism had once meant celebrating the mythology of the self-reliant entrepreneur, whether the westbound adventurer in search of gold, the steady farmer, or the canny Yankee merchant, the nature of the economy by the end of the century had evolved into something that ominously resembled a feudal state, an economic plutocracy of tycoons lording over the land and governing the government while cynically advertising the virtues of self-reliance and democracy.

In the presence of such obscene wealth, with the corresponding social power it brought, and at a time when “culture” was more than ever associated with the woman’s sphere, writers began to feel increasingly marginalized. What was the novelist of the Gilded Age but a eunuch, a castrated entertainer of the wives and daughters of men engaged in fierce economic battle? Commercial enterprise was connected with the work of the world while literature was to serve a merely decorative function, to “spiritualize” American speech and the American landscape. Masculinity was associated primarily with the virility of the business life, the arts with the feminized realm of leisure. The mythical closing of the frontier had brought renewed calls for “the strenuous life” as an antidote to “European” overcivilization, and the captain of industry, always seeking to conquer new markets, had replaced the pioneer as the exemplary American male. In the context of such social anxieties, for the novelist to tackle the subject of business enterprise was to hunt the castrating “beast” of the economic forest. The missing fingers on the “poor right hand” of James’s apparition, so terrifying to Spencer Brydon, are the wounds of the very economic battles from which Brydon has absented himself, and so a menacing reminder of his own castration, the result of his flight from battle. Only if artistic creation could be reestablished as masculine, the act of representation imagined as itself a species of “production” on par with economic production, could a “turning of the tables” be effected. Fictional representation—to capture in the nets of aesthetic form: only then would the beast’s missing fingers come to signify a lack of his own, and a corresponding surrender in imaginative battle. The negotiation of this encounter, I will argue, runs as a powerful psychic undercurrent in the work of Twain, Norris, Dreiser, and Cahan, whose business fictions comprise the body of this study.

The distance between Howells's eponymous paint mogul Silas Lapham and the cynical oil tycoon Jacob Dryfoos, of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), anticipates the main trajectory of the business novel during the period under consideration. The plot of Lapham turns on a pair of the hero's decisions: listening to his conscience (and taking his wife's advice) he re-compensates his former business partner Rogers, whom he had "bought out" at an opportune time, then ignored; and he decides *not* to turn a lucrative profit by deceiving a group of European investors about the worth of his company. Lapham loses his fortune, but by making the morally sound choice has affirmed his humanity, his ethical connection to those with whom he shares the world. Howells's depiction of Dryfoos in *A Hazard*, just five years later, registers acutely the widening division between capital and labor, evidenced in a series of railroad strikes of unprecedented scope, the bloody retaliation of the tycoons, and the escalation of violence and chaos most famously symbolized in the murderous aftermath of the Haymarket Square bombing. Jacob Dryfoos, like Lapham, had discovered lucrative minerals under his property, but the Ohio Oil man, hardened by a series of bitter dealings with predatory investors, has turned into one himself by the novel's opening. Moving his family to New York, closer to the heart of speculative capital, he rails against the working class and their socialist mouthpieces, symbolized in the character of the German immigrant Bertold Lindau, and ends up suffering the tragedy and humiliation of the death of his son, a leftist humanitarian who is killed while attempting to quell a riotous clash between police and laborers during a street-car drivers strike. It is significant that *Every Other Week*, the "little magazine" at the center of the novel which serves to gather the talents of a

diversity of characters, a symbol of democracy in miniature, is bankrolled by the autocratic Dryfoos, who wants to fire the writer Lindau for his opinions.

Among the major business novels in the next decades, there are many Dryfooses and few Laphams. Henry Fuller's *The Cliff Dwellers* (1893), which broke new ground by taking the business offices in a Chicago skyscraper as its setting, features the banker George Ogden who is humanized when he rejects his sweetheart Abbie Brainard because of her father's "tainted millions." The dominant impression, however, is that Ogden is the only character in the building who is guided by scruples; the hero of the tale, he is essentially a foil for the bloodthirsty bankers in the offices that surround him, the last honest banker. Abraham Cahan's Talmud-reading clothing manufacturer, David Levinsky, is also a distant cousin of Lapham. His great business conquests have brought him a tortured conscience, though unlike the paint merchant he chooses to do nothing to alter the course of his life. For the rest, the battle-hardened Dryfoos is the prototype. His fictional descendants are Machiavellians like Van Harrington, the sausage tycoon at the center of Robert Herrick's *The Memoirs of an American Citizen* (1905), who applauds the Haymarket verdict and muses "The strong must rule: the world was for the strong." The historical model for Harrington may have been Chicago's conquering "monarch of meat," Philip D. Armour, who was also loath to apologize: "I like to turn bristles, blood, and the inside and outside of pigs and bullocks into revenue," he once said (qtd. in Josephson 284). Herrick was notoriously bitter about what he saw as the rampant materialism of American culture which was in the process of extinguishing all of the humanistic values. He wrote to Howells, "I am only devoting Chicago to literary manipulation.... to raise this dirt pile to some dignity... by annexing it to the principality of literature" (qtd. in

Aaron). The question remained whether literature could remain “literature” and, to risk an anachronism, safely acquire these toxic assets. For Frank Norris, though, as I will discuss in some detail, it was precisely the bristles and blood that could turn “literature” back into “life,” and reestablish the efficacy of the writer in society.

In *The Economic Novel in America* (1942), the first major study of the subject, Walter Fuller Taylor conceived of the cultural work of the business novel along similar lines as Herrick. “The economic novel,” he wrote, was a work of “cultural assimilation; precisely it was an effort to control the decisive forces of capitalistic industrialism and adopt them into the existing American scheme of humane culture” (331). Taylor saw this as a failed project, a verdict echoed in Henry Nash Smith’s “The Search for a Capitalist Hero” (1962), the next noteworthy peroration.² In a wholesale indictment of the genre, Smith concluded that “American novels about business have identified a number of moral dilemmas inherent in the capitalist system, but they have not produced a character properly described as a capitalist hero” (111). The project, however, as Taylor and Smith conceived of it, might better be thought of as abandoned, or at least profoundly altered. By the 1890’s, America’s Laphams had been forced out of entrepreneurial roles, made to sell into the giant combinations that marked the transition to a new phase of more intense capital consolidation. The names, Huntington’s “octopus,” Rockefeller’s “anaconda,” told the story. Despite the reluctance of the American public to retire the Franklinian myth of the solitary heroic capitalist who controls his own destiny, the nation’s economy was now dominated by a handful of corporate bodies of unprecedented size, scope, and influence. The survivors in this monopolistic endgame, men like Gould (though he died at the height of his power in 1892), Carnegie, Harriman, and Morgan, seemed to

represent a new species altogether. As Matthew Josephson, author of the classic study *The Robber Barons* (1934) writes, “Freed of all moral scruples, curiously informed of everything, [these men] were prompted by a sense of the world’s realities which differed strangely from the man in the street” (279). The scene of commercial enterprise during the waning years of the century, and the figure of the businessman moving in these environs, seemed to lie outside of the jurisdiction of the moral realist who sought modestly to place a human actor in a human role, and let him determine his fate. Removed from the common moral order, “the breed itself was rather unreal, unimaginable, precisely not rooted in the human life of feeling and behavior upon which the notations of fiction depend,” and was perhaps best captured by “outright fancy,” as Warner Berthoff has suggestively put it. Dreiser’s Nietzschean financier Frank Cowperwood possesses an almost supernatural ability to read the minds of his rivals, and exerts a mesmeric hold over those who orbit around his growing network of power. Twain’s Connecticut Yankee, Hank Morgan, possessed of *thirteen hundred years* of foresight and technological knowledge, is mistaken almost immediately for a terrible sorcerer by all of Camelot. Cowperwood and Morgan are fantastic creations with near omnipotent powers; they are “as one[s] who deal out marked cards in the game of buying and selling,” to adopt a remark once made of Gould, “the Mephistopheles of Wall Street” (Josephson 195).

In an 1893 piece for *Scribner’s*, suggestively titled “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” Howells struggles to define the role of the literary artist in a capitalist society. He opens with the claim that literature is business as well as art, for the writer is

a producer who sells his commodities in the market just as any other businessman. The preparations of a novelist in order to produce his novel, moreover, are in some sense analogous to the store-rent and accumulation of wares in any commercial enterprise. The work of a writer is his private property, and Howells argues for strengthened property rights for authors, on par with the legal defenses enjoyed by other types of businessmen. On the other hand, he is bothered by the idea that writers are still paid “per thousand words,” as there is no way to justly place an objective value on the work of art (12). In this sense, “[b]usiness is the opprobrium of literature” (2). The category of the aesthetic here troubles the marketplace, and so art and commerce end up where they started, which is defined *against* each other. There is the further complication resulting from Howells’s recent conversion to Christian Socialism: as producer, he says, the author’s toil binds him with all others who labor in shop and field, and whom are bound mystically to the creator. This formulation implicitly excludes the members of the capital class who live off of the labor of others, producing nothing themselves. Howells therefore concludes the essay by claiming that the artist is “by appearance.... of the classes” because they constitute his present audience, “though he knows he is not of their kind.” His true place is among the masses, the proletariat, “though they do not know it yet” (34-35). The question of whether businessmen are “producers” is answered several ways, and so not really answered at all, and the essay is therefore most illuminating as a barometer of cultural confusion.

Though ignored at the time, Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (1904) was a powerful indictment of the businessman and his “work,” an economic analysis aiming to revise the standard view that the large industrialists were the

driving force behind the creation of goods and services. For Veblen, the businessman was no hero of production, and was not the chief contributor to American material prosperity. Rather, businessmen were parasites of production, skillful manipulators of the system. At a remove from industry and from industrial innovation (the province of engineers), and from labor (the true producers), they viewed production strictly from the standpoint of “convertibility into money values, not serviceability to mankind” (51). Businessmen, in fact, were all too happy to use their strategic economic position to “disturb” the flow of production, or retard the advance of technology, if it suited their pecuniary interests. The railroad barons’ capricious slashing and spiking of freight rates, signaling alternately cutthroat competition or secret (and illegal) cooperation, profoundly destabilized commerce. A group of hardware merchants once calculated that it would cost less to ship their cargo of nails “from New York to Antwerp, across the Atlantic, discharged and reshipped on a British Vessel around Cape Horn to Redondo, California,” than to use the celebrated American transcontinental railroad system while Gould and Huntington were at truce (Josephson 227).

The appearance of new and exotic financial structures further complicated the question of production. The passage of Sherman’s anti-trust act in 1890 was a much publicized attempt to slow the trend toward capital consolidation and restore “competition.” However, in the year prior, the state of New Jersey had amended its corporate laws allowing for the birth of the holding company, a corporation that could exist solely for the purpose of owning another company’s stock. The holding company, which quickly became a deadly weapon in the hands of the powers, was not required to “produce” anything of its own, and was thus a late and decisive perversion of the original

intent of governmental charter. Other states, fearing capital flight, followed suit. The resulting “merger waves” that took place during the years of 1890-1893 and 1898-1902 further transformed the economic landscape.³ As corporate law historian Lawrence Mitchell observes, by the early twentieth century the very relation between product and profit had been inverted: large industrials were now “the raw materials of a new kind of business, a business created for finance rather than for production” (9). In an episode encapsulating the shift, when Carnegie finally sold his immense holdings into J.P. Morgan’s monolithic U.S. Steel Corporation in 1900, he remarked that “he and his partners knew little about the manufacture of stocks and bonds. They were only conversant in the manufacture of steel” (qtd. in Mitchell 10).

The “manufacture” of money, through market speculation, stock “watering” (capitalization on projected future earnings rather than current assets), the invention of baroque new financial instruments for consolidation—all of this pointed to the increasing abstraction of economic activity from its grounding in what Marx (following the classical economists) called “use value.” With the financiers emerging as the dominant type, business practice had become chiefly about the production and manipulation of *representations* of land, natural resources, the products of agriculture and industry, and, most perversely, of money itself, whose ontological status was at the center of debates around economic policy during the era.⁴ The new economy was self-perpetuating: the more speculative transactions that occurred above and beyond the direct purchase of goods at market, the more money that existed (in the form of credits and debts) for further speculation. An entire network of financial activity was being carried on with at best a tenuous relationship to real production. This historical shift toward the credit

economy, the movement toward what Georg Simmel called “the spiritualization of money,” had of course been underway for centuries, and had intensified with the explosion of commodity production during the industrial revolution, but now advanced at an exponential rate.

The increasing abstraction of commerce during this period justifies a further premise, crucial to the pages that follow, which is that the activities of the businessman and the artist had come in a certain manner to resemble each other, in spite of the powerful cultural narrative that opposed them. The work that engaged both was now essentially carried out on a symbolic plane; the techniques of finance paralleled the techniques of art; the financial imagination had come to mirror the artist’s vision. In his masterwork *The Philosophy of Money*, published the year before Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901), Simmel makes frequent allusion to the arts, and to the category of the aesthetic. Aesthetic experience for Simmel, in the wake of Kantian idealism, arose as a result of increasing distance from the initial utilitarian purpose of an object, and the historical trajectory of the aesthetic, as with the pecuniary, was an asymptotic movement toward pure form. Just as art’s value depended on “our overcoming an immediacy, which then operates as if it no longer existed,” so the de-materialization of money, its movement toward the purely quantitative, symbolized powerfully in the rapidly moving dial above the stock market floors in Chicago and New York, suggested that financial transactions were increasingly aesthetic phenomenon.

The coal magnate Henry Clay Frick’s remarkable comment that railroads were “the Rembrandts of investment” in one sense perfectly encapsulates the pecuniary conception of the artwork, an indication, as James’s Brydon might have put it, of the

businessman's "poor ruined sight" (Frick qtd. in Josephson 343). Just as the dollar value of "a Rembrandt" always increases, so with the stock of Erie Railroad. But Frick spoke more than he knew: the manipulation of railroad securities, which led directly to the creation of the modern stock market, was a practice deeply indebted to aesthetic principles. In diverse but overlapping ways, the four writers to whom I will now turn my focus all wrestle with what Marc Shell has called "the twin anxieties that.... monetary form is intrinsic to art and.... aesthetic form is intrinsic to money" (133). Accordingly, the imaginative creation of the businessman was for each a challenging attempt to domesticate, to capture in fictional form, their culture's most dynamic figure, and was simultaneously an act of self-analysis.

In Chapter One, drawing on the mass of Mark Twain's letters to his nephew and business partner Charley Webster, I read *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) in the context of the author's deep ambivalence about his career as a venture capitalist, with special attention to his activities in the 1880's, the decade during which the novel was conceived, written, and published. Twain's greatest commercial triumphs and failures came during this period, including the founding of his own publishing company and the astounding success of the publication of Ulysses S. Grant's *Memoirs*, as well as the tragedy of his obsession with James Paige's automatic typesetter, a machine he imagined would make him as rich as Vanderbilt, but which instead drove his family to the brink of bankruptcy. I argue that in the protagonist Hank Morgan's transformation from a factory superintendent from Hartford to a capitalist superman in sixth-century Camelot, Twain created a fictional analogue for his "business self," a fantasy

businessman who enjoys the decisive (and absurd) advantage of a thirteen hundred year jump on his competition. Through Morgan, who charismatically acts the role of capitalist hero, Twain allows himself to imaginatively re-invent the machinery of capitalism, grafting the commercial trends of nineteenth-century America onto medieval England. Morgan's ultimate decision to blow up his own projects, I argue, embodies the contradictory desires of America's most celebrated writer, who wanted more than all else to be considered "one of the Vanderbilt gang."

The chapter also tells the story of Twain, the man of letters, as a man of business in the Howellsian sense. I discuss his innovative attempts to retain ownership over his own literary output despite disadvantageous copyright laws, a process culminating in the creation of the Mark Twain Company and the autobiographical project that he imagined as a route to ownership "in perpetuity." I show how Twain's leveraging of his own celebrity in order to "brand" his work is mirrored in Morgan's "branding" (or "rebranding") of Arthur's Knights of the Roundtable as traveling salesmen, and more generally, of his manufacture of good bourgeois "subjects" willing to buy the goods he offers.

Chapter Two analyzes the anxieties of art and artists in *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901) and *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (1903), the two completed novels in Frank Norris's projected Trilogy of the Epic of the Wheat. The romance of business enterprise, especially when it involved the violent clash of great economic forces, giant titans of industry, transportation, and finance, was an ideal embodiment Norris's naturalist philosophy, which aimed to erase the growing gap between "literature" and "life," and to reverse the trend toward the feminization of art. For Norris, the business

novel was an existential endeavor, a re-assertion of literary art as masculine and an assertion of his own masculinity. But Norris, as I argue, is continually frustrated in his efforts to connect economic activity with “life itself,” and thus with the masculine sphere, because the structuring binaries of artists/businessmen, and art/business cannot be sustained.

My reading of *The Octopus* focuses on the career of Presley, the poet who struggles to capture the great scope of California life, and who is both a foil for Norris (in his connection to San Francisco art and literary circles) and an alter-ego (in his ultimate rejection of art). Presley for the most part remains a passive observer of the scene, and my analysis turns on the question of his superfluity, for the poet is “either a wholly superfluous character or else he the most important character in the book and the book is essentially about him,” as the critic William Vance has observed (130). However, in depictions of the exploitative, Veblenian character of business as practiced by the men who control the Pacific & Southwest Railroad, I show how Norris, in spite of his stated goals, reveals the work of businessmen in the novel to be at least as “superfluous” as the activities of the spectator poet.

The Pit follows the California wheat to Chicago, and juxtaposes the masculine commercial district centered around La Salle Street and the feminine world of opera located in an adjacent section of town, with the division encapsulated in the marriage of the commodity speculator Curtis Jadwin and his artistically-inclined wife Laura. Despite Norris’s labors to connect Jadwin’s spectacular exploits in wheat “futures” with masculine-coded images of battle and with the destructive forces of Nature, I show how analogies with art and the aesthetic sublime emerge within the stock market. Just as in

the novel's opening scene the hoarse whispers of wheat speculators destroy Laura's bliss at the opera, the specter of art interrupts Norris's vision of business untroubled by questions of "representation."

Norris, an early champion of Dreiser, recognized him immediately as his superior in the field of literary naturalism. Dreiser's *A Trilogy of Desire*, the business epic detailing the exploits of the Nietzschean financier Frank Cowperwood, is the subject of Chapter Three. Dreiser based *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (1947) on the life of the streetcar magnate Charles Yerkes, moving his hero Cowperwood through Philadelphia, Chicago, and London, respectively. Unlike Norris (and Veblen), who saw the immateriality of business as scandalous, Dreiser thrilled in the imaginative possibilities opened by the seemingly infinite suppleness of finance capital, and welcomed the analogy of financier and poet. The writer's identification with Cowperwood is less therefore less about yoking the masculine virility of business activity with the literary sphere, more attuned to the creativity and social power Dreiser associated with the masters of capital, whose penetrating vision of their surroundings, and great foresight, I suggest, linked them with the figure of the naturalist novelist, who also deals out a game of "marked cards."

My argument is twofold: first, through the lens of the aesthetic theory of Georg Simmel, the thematic link between art and money, I show, results in a displacement of the aesthetic sphere. Artworks in the *Trilogy* function essentially as static repositories of money, serving largely as a foil to the dynamism of financial activity, which becomes the new privileged locus of aesthetic experience. The second part of my argument addresses the aesthetic significance of the great masses of financial data that swell the novels and

that at times threaten to collapse narrative art into pure documentary description. An overabundance of economic detail lends Dreiser's work a descriptive thickness commonly associated with both a notion of historical actuality impervious to the shaping intelligence of art, and with an ideology of literary realism that suppresses the stylistic role of art in the representation of "the real." However, adopting Roland Barthes' deconstruction of the discursive mechanisms of Realism, I argue that it is precisely in its depiction of the very opacity of the financial realm that the *Trilogy* re-introduces aesthetic concerns.

In the fourth and final chapter, I consider the pervasive analogy of business and "prose" in Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), a novel that traces the career of a Russian Talmud scholar who becomes one of New York's wealthiest cloak manufacturers. Levinsky's conception of himself as a "prosaic businessman" highlights the antithesis between the poetry of the Old World, the romantic anti-capitalism that the manufacturer projects on his childhood, and the materialistic concerns of his present life. I propose that Levinsky's intimate relationship with language, however, his abiding connection with the spiritual resonance of words—of The Word—suggests that even his work in the commercial world hasn't completely severed him from his spiritual life as a reader of the Talmud. Cahan's novel therefore asserts the binary between commerce and "poetry" but also hints at a literary element in Levinsky's business activities, a "prose of trade."

In my reading, the manufacturer's "rise" comes not in spite of his Talmudic background, but rather, as a result of it. I suggest that capitalist America presents itself to Levinsky in the manner of a slowly unfolding Talmudic text, and that the cultural

paradoxes engendered by capitalism take the shape of intellectual problems capable of being resolved through the dialectical analysis in which he was trained. Levinsky's life as an immigrant businessman is one that represents not a break from his previous pursuits, but rather a metamorphosis of those pursuits. The chasm between the commercial and spiritual thus comes to be seen in a properly dialectical light. Just as America appears to David Levinsky the scholar as an endless series of Talmudic "discrepancies," it appears to David Levinsky the manufacturer as "an immense collection of commodities."⁵

Notes

¹ For a synopsis of mass market economic fictions of the 1890's, see Taylor's *The Economic Novel in America* (1942). The conception of the businessman as "alien intruder" is from Nash Smith, "The Search" (1962).

² Taylor and Smith both attempt to construct a canon of the business novel. Taylor actually ranks the top six, giving preference to the utopian economic fantasies, Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee* (1889) and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). Bellamy's fascinating work doesn't fit my narrower conception of the business novel, however, because, set in a socialist future, it lacks a business hero. Smith's views on *A Connecticut Yankee* will be discussed in some detail in Chapter One. No more recent study has surpassed this pair of early surveys as a general evaluation of the genre. The notable article-length treatments published during that period share the same preoccupations with the ethics of the businessman, and with the degree to which the novels are critiques of business culture. See Chamberlain (1948), Kavesh (1955), Lynn (1956), Howard Smith (1959), Nostrand (1959), Halsey (1959). For the most comprehensive treatment of the theme, see Watts (1982).

³ My principal sources on the topic, here and in the chapters to follow, are Josephson (1934), Cowing (1965), Chandler (1977), and Mitchell (2007).

⁴ The economic wars between the Gold Bugs, the Silverites, and the Greenback-Labor Party climaxed in presidential bid of the populist William Jennings Bryan in 1896, but also suggested a philosophical question about the relationship of money and the natural world. This last point is central to the New Historiographical readings of Norris and Dreiser performed in Walter Benn Michael's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987). Naturalists like Norris, he argued, in attempting to locate real literary 'value' in a nature beyond all artifice, were a little like the Gold Bugs who, in arguing that money's value resided in its status as a scarce natural commodity, paradoxically helped demonstrate that a universal standard of 'value' cannot exist outside of a system of (fictional) representation. In the title essay, Benn Michaels writes that "The assertion that money exists in nature is thus identical to the assertion that money doesn't exist at all."

⁵ See Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, Ch. 1 (1867): “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as ‘an immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form” (125).

Chapter One

The First Businessman:

Inventing Capitalism in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee*

Hank Morgan's is a most unlikely career: before a powerful blow to the head from a crowbar sends him back to the sixth century, he is a superintendent at the Colt Arms Factory in Hartford, a cog in the burgeoning American industrial machine; in King Arthur's England, he is a capitalist superman who pre-dates industrial capitalism by eleven centuries. Convincing the Arthurian court that he has the powers of a sorcerer and has produced a solar eclipse on the very day he was to be burned at the stake, the eponymous hero of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) simultaneously escapes certain death and metamorphoses into an ambitious and visionary businessman. After the execution is called to a halt, Morgan shrewdly negotiates with the King, pressing his advantage while the sun is still erased from the sky, a fact that terrifies the mass of spectators who thought they had merely come to see a public death, not the rise of a magician whose abilities surpassed the revered Merlin. "I have reflected, Sir King," Morgan begins,

For a lesson I will let this darkness proceed, and spread night in the world; but whether I blot out the sun for good, or restore it, shall rest with you. These are the terms, to wit: You shall remain King over all your dominions, and receive all the glories and honors that belong to the kingship; but you shall appoint me your perpetual minister and executive, and give me for my services one percent of such actual increase of revenue over and above its present amount as I may succeed in creating for the state. If I can't live on that, I shan't ask anybody to give me a lift. Is that satisfactory? (35-36)

The humor of the passage, as in so much of Twain, derives from a juxtaposition of linguistic registers; the aristocratic pretensions of kingly “dominions” is abruptly deflated by the Yankee’s talk of profit share. The exchange, though, isn’t just verbal comedy. It makes manifest Morgan’s agenda, which is about more than exposing the sham of tyrannical kings and pompous courts. The Yankee had already foreseen that the eclipse, “in a business way, [...] would be the making of me” (31).

Speculating on eclipses, as Morgan soon admits, does not represent a sustainable profit model. There would be another eclipse of the moon in two years, but the “market for it” would likely be flat by that time. The people of Camelot are already clamoring for a new miracle just days after the Yankee has bade the sun temporarily disappear. If the moon’s eclipse “had been booked for only a month away, I could have sold it short” (40). There is, alas, a limited earnings potential in sorcery. Yet Morgan possesses the monumental advantage of thirteen hundred years foresight, an edge that no businessman of any age has enjoyed, or is likely to. The England that lay before him was a capitalist visionary’s ultimate fantasy: a land of plentiful natural resources, as yet undeveloped; a robust native population of laborers, already compliant to authority; and an absolute lack of competition, (except in the sorcery “line”). “I was unique,” Morgan muses, “and glad to know that fact could not be dislodged or challenged for thirteen centuries and a half, for sure” (44).

It is in this sense that, while looking backward to sixth-century England, *A Connecticut Yankee* is very much a book about the commercial trends of nineteenth-century America, trends that Twain himself was deeply involved in over the course of his entire adult life. While the book is commonly read as a celebration of democratic values,

both cultural and political, and as an ambivalent expression of the power of technology to bring progress as well as ruin, Morgan's actions in transforming Arthurian England into a nation with a capitalist economic engine and superstructure are often marginalized in critical commentary, with a few important exceptions.

In his 1962 monograph on Twain, Henry Nash Smith emphasized Morgan's traits as an entrepreneur who "endorses laissez-faire capitalism" and argued that the Yankee certainly wouldn't have proposed any reforms to the late nineteenth-century American economic order, the clear model (151). Smith was aiming to revise an impression among many American readers (and early reviewers) that the book's critique of aristocracy was also a critique of big business, a notion aided by the fact that several American "robber barons," including the feared financier/railroad speculator Jay Gould, were depicted in the book's original illustrations in the garb of members of Arthur's court. As Smith rightly points out, despite the fact that the Connecticut Yankee tells us that he is a master technician, the imagery of the novel demonstrates convincingly that Morgan comes to perceive himself as an entrepreneur and speculator far more than an engineer (160). To Smith's observations I would add that the public works initiated by Morgan the engineer are nearly always framed in terms of "events," performed spectacles from which he will later profit; it is a pattern suggested in Morgan's initial manipulation of the eclipse. Every new technology introduced, from newspapers to toothpaste, is quickly circumscribed into the new economic system, becoming a commodity.¹ Morgan's total vision is of a capitalist utopia wherein Arthur's Knights are transformed into traveling billboards advertising the Yankee's products, and Christian monks metamorphose into pedal-pushing sewing machines churning out the raw material for his tow-linen company.

To the extent that Twain sympathized with his hero, and it is a question I will pursue, the novel is a celebration rather than a critique of big business.

Twain's own career as a businessman was as varied and ecstatic as his work as a writer: at one point or another he was invested in a steam generator, a steam pulley, a new method of marine telegraphy, a watch company, an insurance house, and a new process of engraving called the kaolotype (Cox 124). In the 1880's his publishing company sold enough of Grant's memoirs to erase the ex-president's substantial debt; by the end of the decade Twain had poured enough capital into James Paige's ill-fated automatic type-setting machine to eventually sink the publishing company. "Curse all business," he once wrote. "I can't understand even the ABC of it" (qtd. in F. Kaplan 432). Yet America's most famous writer never gave up the passion he had expressed as a young man to become "a tycoon among tycoons" (J. Kaplan 212).

Mark Twain's ambivalence about commercial enterprise, and his imaginative projection of this ambivalence in the figure of a fictional businessman, is the subject of this chapter, just as it anchors the discussions of Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Abraham Cahan that will follow. In one important way, though, Twain is unique among these writers, just as he is anomalous among canonized nineteenth-century American authors more generally: his profits as a writer subsidized his business ventures. This is true for the obvious reason that Twain was a popular writer by nature, whose comic genius appealed to the masses even while it gained audience with the elites. The fact of Twain's twin careers, however, complicates the standard cultural narrative opposing artist and businessman in *The Gilded Age*. It is a tension that produced the first great critical work on Twain, when in 1920 Van Wyck Brooks provoked a generation of scholars by

suggesting that it was Twain's inner artist, his "real self," that necessitated that he fail in business, even while his business self was sabotaging his artistic vision, demanding that he march with the status quo, conform to the commercial ethos of industrial America. "The spirit of the artist in him," Brooks wrote, "like the genie at last released from the bottle, overspread in a gloomy vapour the mind it had never quite been able to possess" (25). It is the stark contrast that Henry James portrayed in the dream encounter between Spencer Brydon and his businessman ghost-double in the house on Jolly Corner—only in Twain's case, it is difficult to decide which self is substance, and which apparition.

While the binary clarity of the artist/businessman opposition facilitated Brooks's penetrating insights into Twain's creative malaise, Twain himself frequently *linked* business venture with creativity, as several later scholars have argued.² Conceived and written from 1884-1889, a period that marked the height of Twain's business activity, and the beginning of his financial woes, *A Connecticut Yankee* bears a complex relation to Twain's own unhappy love affair with capitalism. The idea of the novel was born of a dream of confinement: Twain found himself clad in an itchy, sweaty suit of knight's armor after bringing a copy of Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur* to bed with him the previous night. The ludicrous image of the anachronistic American stuck. Such incongruity allowed Twain the satirist a wealth of targets—the divine right of Kings, the absurd (and deadly) conventions of knight-errantry, the belief in sorcerers. The dream of the Yankee roaming sixth century England, however, as I want to emphasize, provided Twain with another important opportunity: the chance to construct a fantasy analogue to his life as a businessman in the 1880's, a myth of the capitalist shaping raw, pre-capitalist material. In the figure of Hank Morgan, Twain could re-invent the machinery of capitalism,

grafting it onto Arthur's kingdom, and thus stand as the creator of the first businessman. Referring to the exaggerated profit forecasts often found in his letters to nephew and business partner Charley Webster, biographer Fred Kaplan observed that Twain often "found [...] solace in his imaginative sales projections" (436). In *A Connecticut Yankee*, I would offer, Twain found solace in an imaginative projection of the first salesman.

The Money Pit

There is no better record of Mark Twain's business activities during the 1880's than his letters to his nephew-in-law Charley. In 1881, the husband of Twain's niece, was approached by Fredonia business associates, owners of the Independent Watch Company, in an attempt to gain the famous writer as an investor. After Webster helped broker the stock purchase, Twain hired him on a full-time basis to help manage his affairs, including giving him "complete authority" over the property and employees at the Kaolatype Engraving Company, his most heavily capitalized venture to date. An old friend of Twain's, Dan Slote, had convinced him to invest in the Kaolotype. He was already in business with Slote, whose stationary company manufactured one of Twain's own inventions, a self-pasting scrapbook. Twain thought that the Kaolatype would revolutionize the printing of engravings and make him rich, and he continued to fund the company and pay a full salary to the technician and inventor of the process, Charles Sneider, despite the suspicious fact that Twain's appointments for a demonstration were twice postponed because a fire had burned down Sneider's workshop. Just months after taking over the company, Webster told Twain that the engraving process would never

make it to market and that the patent he had purchased was a fraud. In several of Twain's earliest letters to his nephew, we read that he is initiating law suits to recoup some of his losses.³

Yet Twain's enthusiasm for new investment possibilities was irrepressible. He had a particular fondness (and weakness) for new inventions in printing technology, which might in part be explained as nostalgia for his former career as a journeyman printer. As Fred Kaplan puts it, Twain's was "a deep iconic and emotional connection to the printing press" (433). By June of the same year that the Kaolatype had failed, he was writing to "Dear Charley" to find out about a new process for reproducing pictures he had heard about: "[L]ook into that Bierstadt Artotype Business (if it is stock company), & see what its business now & future prospects are, & what figure a body can buy into it at—if it be wise to buy into it at all" (186). Though the Artotype business was dropped, by October of 1881 Twain had taken a fateful interest in James W. Paige's new automatic typesetter, a machine in which he was to invest an astounding \$300,000 over the next thirteen years. But Twain didn't just invest his money; he invested his self-esteem and his faith in the power of technology to improve the material world. The failure of the Paige typesetter, as his great-nephew Samuel Webster observed, constituted "one of the major tragedies of Mark Twain's life" (171).

Paige's invention seemed the perfect marriage of technology and the written word, one machine able to do the equivalent work of six professional typesetters. Twain envisioned a revolution in the printing industry and millions in profits for the machine's investors. During the first four years of his involvement with the typesetter, he was one of a number of investors hoping to keep the development of the machine funded. The

typesetter's completion was expected within a matter of months, or perhaps a year at the outside. At that point, a successful demonstration would bring in much larger sums from investors. The problem was that Paige was a perfectionist with an idiosyncratic working style, and he insisted on taking the entire machine apart every time he wanted to make a correction or improvement, a process that in itself took several months as the typesetter was comprised of over 18,000 parts.

Still a work in progress in 1885, Paige tried to sell the rights to the typesetter to Twain's fellow investor William Hamersley for \$350,000 and a \$500 royalty for each sale in the United States. Hamersley and Twain would then, using the author's fame and connections, interest a company or group of investors who would give each man \$250,000 of the new stock along with covering the initial purchase cost. If the new company was capitalized at two million, they would own a fourth of the interest between them. The deal fell through when Twain and Hamersley had trouble finding new investors willing to put up the capital required for the new patents. Despite the lack of commitment from outside investors, the owners of Ottmar Mergenthaler's "Linotype" machine, which figured to be their chief competitor, approached Paige and his promoters and offered to hedge by exchanging a half interest in the Linotype stock for a half interest in the Paige patent. Ironically, the offer of insurance only buoyed Twain's trust in Paige's machine: he rejected the Mergenthaler people and instead began privately subsidizing his mechanical "poet," paying him seven thousand dollars yearly salary above and beyond the money needed to rent space in Pratt and Whitney's state-of-the-art Connecticut facilities. He was an investor with a gambler's all-or-nothing mentality.

Within a year, however, the Mergenthaler machine was on the market, and helping print the *New York Tribune*.

By the late 1870's, Mark Twain had become one of the two or three most recognized men in America, and his periodic lecture tours across the country were a major source of income upon which he was dependent to sustain his family's comfortable life in their Hartford mansion, and, increasingly, to cover the debts incurred by failed business ventures. When in 1884 he organized his "two-ring" circus, a national tour with the Louisiana writer George Washington Cable, Twain had grown tired of this kind of business, proclaiming the trip his last. The audiences who purchased tickets to see the man they believed to be "the living representation of American character and storytelling" also believed him to be a millionaire, a notion fueled by the newspapers, which frequently reported how much the entertainers would make. Twain felt the irony of this, knowing the epic gulf that separated him from the truly wealthy. For Twain, as Fred Kaplan writes, "there was no middle ground between being very rich and very poor" (404). Twain had always entertained a fantasy that the tycoon never stoops to financial details, leaving such matters to his underlings, and he resented haggling with Cable and his lecture agent James Pond over Cable's fees.

Meanwhile, after a decade of arguments with publishing houses over royalties and production costs, Twain had become his own publisher, creating the firm C.L. Webster & Company with his nephew as editor in chief and chief executive officer. The firm had an auspicious start, selling books based on a pre-ordered subscription based delivery service, a model Twain borrowed from The American Publishing Company, a house that had sold a half dozen of his earlier works. The initial success of Webster & Co.'s first publication,

Twain's own *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), was dwarfed by the enormous popularity of Ulysses Grant's *Personal Memoirs*, which followed soon after; by October of 1885, Twain's salesman had collected 320,000 subscriptions. Though the president and war-hero died shortly after finishing his book, the *Memoirs* earned Grant's widow an estimated \$400,000 and Twain's company another \$100,000. Twain, in fact, had shrewdly lured Grant away from the *Century* publishing house with the lucrative offer of a twenty percent royalty or seventy percent of the book's profits before expenses. The sales of Grant's *Memoirs* represented the most successful publishing event of the decade, and though Twain and Webster's book choices over the next several years were never as felicitous, there is evidence in the mass of letters to sustain his great-nephew's assertion that the author of *Huckleberry Finn* was much more savvy as a publisher than in any of his other commercial ventures. The problem was that the profits from Webster & Co., which would have gone to grow and sustain the business, were instead siphoned off into the Paige typesetter money pit.

"It is a greater machine than you imagine," Twain wrote to his nephew in the summer of 1885, "till you sit down & cipher out how much work it can really do" (331). He was at the height of his obsession:

My new idea is to get up a company in Boston to make & hire out the machines at \$2,500 a year each—not sell. This would make the [New York] Sun's composition bill \$750 or \$800 a week, instead of \$1600, as it is now. I propose to give them every chance: let them use the machine free of charge till their operators get broke in. I know all about composition; & so I know that a paper that once uses this machine in its now perfected shape, will always use it.... Three years from now I calculate to have about 1000 of those machines hired out in this country at \$2,500,000.

While Twain fantasized about projected profits, Paige endlessly tinkered with his machine, and decided to once again take the typesetter apart, postponing its planned demonstration in the spring of 1886. Seasons turned into years, and Twain's promised \$500 royalty on each sale was watered down as he found himself needing to continually bring in outside investors in order to help defray the mounting costs of the facilities, Paige's salary, and the forecasted capital needed for eventual manufacture. By early 1889, a representative from the *New York Herald* had witnessed a successful demonstration, though major papers still remained reluctant to sign purchase contracts. That summer, with around \$200,000 of his own money already in, and having consented to yet another minor improvement (the installation of an "air blast"), Twain made one final attempt to raise the needed capital. Leveraging the outer limits of his social contacts, he managed to interest the wealthy Nevada senator John P. Jones in the project. His hopes swinging like a pendulum, Twain once again waxed ebullient, figuring a commitment of \$100,000-\$200,000 from the senator, a new stock company flush with capital, and heightened interest from potential buyers based on the confident backing of a solid financier. With this news, Twain revised his estimated personal profits into the stratosphere: 20 million in the near future, 150 million over the life of the patent. But after yet another delay caused by Paige's refusal to let the still imperfect machine go to demonstration, Jones would only agree to hazard five thousand. At about this time Twain mused in a letter to his friend Joe Goodman, "I am one of the wealthiest grandees in America—one of the Vanderbilt gang, in fact-- & yet if you asked me to lend you a couple of dollars I would have to ask you to take my note instead" (qtd. in F. Kaplan 439).

In his first novel, *The Gilded Age, A Tale of To-day* (1873), jointly written with his Hartford neighbor Charles Dudley Warner, Twain had created Colonel Beriah Sellers, a gregarious and comically delusional schemer based in part on his uncle James Lampton. Twain's own business dreams, as revealed in the letters, demonstrate, however, that there was something of the author's spirit as well in Colonel Sellers, whose indefatigable will to strike it rich paradoxically represents, in Larzer Ziff's sympathetic reading, "a triumph of the spirit over the material world in an era of greed" (62-63). In a memorable episode, we find Sellers and his family dining on a meal of raw turnips and water in their shack in Hawkeye, Missouri. His guest, and youthful protégé, Washington Hawkins listens in amazement while Sellers transforms the single vegetable on his plate into a feast fit for royalty: "These are from New Jersey—I imported them myself. They cost like a sin, too; but Lord bless me, I go in for having the best of a thing, even if it does cost a little more.... These are the Early Malcolm—it's a turnip that can't be produced except in just one orchard, and the supply is never up to the demand" (83).

Sellers is the Quixote of the Gilded Age, his burning brain converting wretched vegetable into rare fruit, and, in his efforts as a land promoter, barren, uninhabited land into a bustling railroad town. Napoleon, Missouri, a frontier settlement "in the rough yet," provides the *tabula rasa* on which the colonel writes his dreams of a thriving commercial civilization, rich in profit for those who "get in" first. He eagerly shares his vision with a group of visiting speculators:

"Those buildings will all have to come down. That's the place for the public square, Court House, hotels, churches, jail—all that sort of thing. About where we stand, the deepo.... Down yonder the business streets, running to the wharves. The University up there, on rising ground, sightly place, see the river for miles.... Look at this

country, not another building within ten miles, no other navigable stream, lay of the land points right here; hemp, tobacco, corn, must come here. The railroad will do it, Napoleon won't know itself in a year." (127)

The colonel's prodigious imagination, and his ability to make others believe in his fantastic schemes, is matched only by his talent for unending self-deception. A parody of a generation of Americans who pursued fervently the holy grail of wealth in a country whose untapped reserves of natural resources and magical pace of development made the goal appear imminent, Sellers's naïveté crucially differentiates him from the scores of confidence men whose speech and manner emulate his own. America's material wealth proved an irresistible feast to the imagination of men like Sellers, and to Mark Twain as well, whose brilliance as a satirist of the Gilded Age did not inoculate him from its ideology.⁴

A persistent leitmotif in Twain's letters to his nephew is the author's resistance to commercial life, his desire to stay above the fray. In one letter he reminds Charley that "You are my businessman; & business I myself will not transact.... I won't talk business—I will perish first. I hate the very idea of business in all its forms" (qtd. in Cox 124). Yet the cumulative effect of the letters assembled by Samuel Webster demonstrates Twain's absolute immersion in the commercial world he professed to loath. Twain's business letters range from ecstatic profit calculating to more mundane number crunching, and from eager inquiries about potential investors to harried reminders about creditors. What is clear, however, is that he reveled in being at the center of a bustling financial universe of his own construction, and it didn't always matter if the bricks and mortar were real or imagined.

The House of (Hank) Morgan

Hank Morgan, without doubt, stands at the center of a financial universe of his own making, and Twain, as creator of Morgan, stands back of that burgeoning capitalist economy that the Yankee has started in motion. It is significant that Morgan, ever the showman looking to create spectacular effects, a magician who can make the sun disappear for an audience of thousands, and a master engineer who introduces modern plumbing into the sixth century, nevertheless feels his most satisfying performance is the lavish dinner he throws in order to humiliate the wealthy blacksmith Dowley. Morgan's feast is a powerful display of conspicuous consumption, a worthy predecessor of the behavior that Thorstein Veblen would memorably label in his famous descriptions of the lives of the new American tycoons in the *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

Dowley is a client of the humble charcoal dealer Marco, who is providing shelter in his lowly hovel for Morgan and King Arthur, then roaming the English countryside in disguise as farmers. The idea of the dinner comes into Morgan's head after having met the "great man" who employed several journeymen and apprentices at his shop, and "was doing a raging business" (215). The event serves the double purpose of allowing Morgan to generously thank Marco's family for their hospitality (Morgan has purchased, by Marco's standards, elaborate household furnishings to accompany the feast), while satisfying his democratic impulse to destroy the pretensions of status-seeking wealth. The Yankee relishes his chance to embarrass Dowley after the blacksmith brags of his family's rich table where "appeareth white bread every Sunday of the year," and where he hosts "a great feast of meat twice a year" (221). Morgan has in fact spent more than

fives times Dowley's annual food bill on the single meal, and he smolders with satisfaction as he perceives the blacksmith "a crushed man" upon witnessing the parade of fresh meats, poultry, beer, fish, and bread, served in new crockery and goblets, on new plates, and accompanied by the extravagant, meticulously itemized bill (225). Twain exploits the dramatic ironies inherent in the episode: a King, to save the integrity of his disguise, must feign astonishment at never having seen such a bountiful meal; and a blacksmith brags to a King (and first minister) of his power and standing in the local community. What the episode further implies is that Hank Morgan has become the wealthiest businessman in England, and is quite willing, at least while in disguise, to put that wealth on spectacular display.

Morgan has become the richest man in Christendom by inventing the economic infrastructure he then manages (from behind the scenes) in order to make money. On his first trip away from Camelot "in search of adventure" the Yankee spots a knight-errant wearing an extra piece of equipment over the chest armor, "a stiff square garment like a herald's tabard" (91). The tabard functions as a moving sign advertising "PERSIMMON'S SOAP—ALL THE PRIME-DONNE USE IT." Having introduced a series of hygienic and cosmetic products into the sixth century, Morgan has begun employing the knight-errantry of England as human billboards, and eventually as a giant travelling sales force. There is a triple benefit: soap is a civilizing advancement, the act of wearing the signs comically deflates the status of knight-errantry, and Morgan profits by enjoying free advertising for his product lines. Shortly thereafter, we meet Sir Madok de la Montaine, "a burly great fellow whose chief distinction was that he had come within an ace of sending Sir Launcelot down over his horsetail once;" he is the very specimen of

physical health, and thus the perfect man to advertise “PETERSON’S PROPHLACTIC TOOTHBRUSH” (119, 118). By the time of the feast at Marco’s, Morgan’s knights are canvassing the countryside peddling his appliances, his clothing lines, and selling his “accident insurance,” a valuable commodity in a land where riotous brawls, duels, and public hangings are the standard means of settling disputes.

In order to sell his products at a profitable rate, the Yankee needs to install a system of mass production and communication capabilities, and to educate a small army of technocratic elites who will manage the new factory and telecommunications systems. In fact, Morgan’s bold experiments in industrialization, as Henry Nash Smith has observed, mark him as an intriguing candidate in our national “search for a [fictional] capitalist hero,” a Promethean “enemy of the reactionary and tyrannical gods of tradition, [a] bringer of intellectual light and material well-being to the downtrodden masses” (“Search” 89). Yet Morgan’s ambitious projects, as Smith also notes, are at least partially satirized by Twain, who views his hero with skepticism long before the technology-driven apocalypse in the closing scenes of the novel. In Morgan’s concept of “Man Factories,” with its obvious pun on manufactories, Twain nicely captures the moral ambiguities inherent in attempting to radically re-educate an entire populace on a mass production model. In order to sell his products, the Yankee entrepreneur must engineer a revolutionary shift of consciousness, turning feudal “animals” (as he labels them at one point) into bourgeois subjects; he must mass produce the men who will buy the products he is mass producing. Moreover, the question of whether the technocratic elite emerge from the Man Factories as men or as machines is left unanswered by Twain, in spite of his protagonist’s unflagging optimism.

Morgan's transformation of a revered religious hermit into a one-man production machine is less ambiguous. He first comes across the man by joining a large audience of pilgrims gazing at the celebrated monk who perches on top of a sixty foot-high pillar, "bowing his body ceaselessly and rapidly almost to his feet" ((145). Instantly recognizing the pedal motion in the hermit's movements, Morgan hooks up a system of elastic cords to him which power a sewing machine that "turns out... ten tow-linen shirts a day," and "upwards of eighteen thousand" in the "five years' good service out of him." "I worked him Sundays and all" (145). Morgan furnishes the raw materials for the shirts for "a mere trifle," and "they sold they smoke to the pilgrims at a dollar and a half apiece, which was the price of fifty cows or a blooded racehorse in Arthurdom" (145). The shirts being produced by the hermit himself, Morgan archly observes, they were protection against sin as well as against the elements. The Yankee, of course, had been a factory superintendent in nineteenth-century Connecticut, but in his nuanced attention to the efficiencies of standardized production, he is ahead of his time in a double sense. When Morgan times the hermit with a stopwatch, recording "twelve hundred and twenty four revolutions [of the body] in twenty four minutes and forty-four seconds," he is actually anticipating the advanced techniques of the industrial capitalism of early 20th century, where Taylorite principles of scientific factory management mandated that the minutest motions of laborers were measured and economized.⁵

At the minimum, a "capitalist hero" would have to be a hero of production, a bringer of material well-being (if not intellectual light) to the masses, and a provider of work (even if at a high rate of exploitation). Nevertheless, the men who came to dominate the American economy in the final decades of the nineteenth century were not

always heroes of production, but were often financiers and bankers who were master manipulators of financial markets, whose “product” was money itself. The necessity of raising large amounts of capital during the Civil War had given a new prominence to banker/speculators like Jay Cooke, who played a major role in financing the Union army. Yet Cooke over-extended his financial empire, and when a massive fire burned Chicago’s business district to the ground, the collapse of his firm precipitated the Panic of 1873, and ensuing depression. In ten years Cooke had gone from hero to villain in the eyes of Americans, from noble patriot to “robber baron.” The notorious railroad speculator Jay Gould was depicted as a member of Arthur’s court in the original illustrations for *A Connecticut Yankee*, a gesture that pictorially realized the notion of American financiers as members of the illicit nobility alluded to in the well-known phrase. The idea of Jay Gould as a “baron” symbolically asserted the important distinction between industry and speculation, the former identified with American ingenuity and productivity, the latter with decadent (and idle) European aristocracy.

In 1889, the year Twain’s novel was published, New Jersey amended its corporate laws allowing the birth of a new financial species, the holding company. A corporation could now exist solely for the purpose of owning another company’s stock—it was no longer required to produce anything of its own, or serve the public good in any other manner.⁶ As corporate law historian Lawrence Mitchell observes, the very relation between product and profit was being perverted, with large industrials now “becom[ing] the raw materials of a new kind of business, a business created for finance rather than for production” (9). In an episode that encapsulated the shift, the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie retired from industry by selling his empire into the combination created by the

financier J.P. Morgan, wryly remarking at the time that “he and his partners knew little about the manufacture of stocks and bonds. They were only conversant in the manufacture of steel” (qtd. in Mitchell 10).

Hank Morgan, that product of Yankee common sense, draws the distinction between real and merely imaginary assets. He calls knight-errantry “a most chuckle-headed trade” and says that even though there’s “money in it” he himself would never take up the affair “because no sound and legitimate business can be established on the basis of speculation” (117).

A successful whirl in the knight-errantry line—now what is it when you blow away the nonsense and come down to the cold facts? It’s just a corner in pork, that’s all, and you can’t make anything else out of it. You’re rich—yes—suddenly rich—for about a day, maybe a week: then somebody corners the market on you, and down goes your bucket shop. (117)

The analogy emphasizes that the status of Knights, like that of publicly traded commodities, is based on communal belief systems supported by legalized fictions. Just as speculators “invest” in a stock solely to see a rise in its value, a Knight’s prestige rises precisely in the degree that the community believes in said Knight to be “worth” his reputation. As soon as investor confidence is shaken, the commodity price plummets. Knight-errantry, it turns out, is even “*worse* than pork,” for after the price of pork drops, there is still the pork, “so somebody’s benefitted, anyway.” “[B]ut when the market breaks in a knight-errantry whirl, and every knight in the pool passes in his checks, what have you got for assets? Just a rubbish pile of battered corpses and a barrel or two of busted hardware” (117). Pork, we understand, has an obvious use value apart from its

existence as a commodity on the market; knight-errantry is an abstraction, and counts for nothing outside of the ideological system that “guarantees” its existence.

Despite his initial joke about selling the moon “short,” Morgan’s preference is for a model of capitalism grounded in the material world, and this was characteristic of a majority of American businessmen of the late nineteenth century who worried (with just cause) that excessive speculation in real estate, railroads, and commodity “futures” was creating dangerous bubbles in the markets and precipitating economic crises of even greater magnitude than the standard variety brought on by drought years and production downturns. This, of course, doesn’t make all of Morgan’s business practices ethically sound. After noticing his tow-linen-producing hermit slowing down, he “stock[s] the business and unload[s],” getting out just before “the motive power” fails for good (146).⁷ Morgan’s is still a roguish brand of capitalism, a winner-take-all affair where anyone can play, though only one player has the advantage of thirteen hundred years foresight.

In the end, the snake of speculation has made its way into the capitalist Eden of the sixth century, and it is stock manipulations that disturb the economy and precipitate a catastrophic breakdown in the social order. Morgan has created a stock exchange, and it is the knights who abuse it. The stock board is taken over by Arthur’s inner circle, who have come to use the Round Table expressly “for business purposes” (281). That is, not only is knight-errantry itself characterized as a kind of speculation, but the knights have extended their gambling ways, and are depicted as the chief speculators in several of Morgan’s new “lines” (281). Returning to Camelot after a six week sojourn, Morgan discovers that Sir Launcelot, become a sixth-century Vanderbilt, is speculating in the stock of three new railroads; at first “he quietly picked up nearly all of [the shares], for a

song; then he bought about twice as much more, deliverable upon call” (290). Prices soar and he gleefully “squeezes the shorts,” but two of his victims happen to be the King’s nephews, Sir Agravaire and Sir Mordred, and they get their revenge by revealing to their uncle what everyone else in the kingdom already knows, which is that Launcelot has been carrying on with the Queen Guenever. The battles to defend the King’s honor are captured with the new photographic technology, and are written up and sold as stories of “war correspondence” by newly-trained journalists employed in Morgan’s newspapers. Clarence, the Yankee’s chief executive, gloats over a photograph, “on sale at every newsstand,” picturing Launcelot in the heat of battle, “with his sword up, and Sir Gareth gasping his last breath. You can catch the agony in the queen’s face through the curl of the smoke” (291). “The paper was booming right along,” Clarence continues, and its sources include “war correspondents with both armies” (293). Just as knights make good travelling salesmen and hermits good tow-linen producers, war makes good copy, and Morgan again profits handsomely, even while he should be engaged in defending his King.

By the final stages of the action, Morgan has evolved from burgeoning capitalist hero into a more shadowy and ominous figure. Whereas in the first two thirds of the novel we are ready to overlook the Yankee’s economic experiments as opportunism in the name of Progress, in the later episodes his cynical war profiteering and aloof stance regarding massive casualties anticipates the attitude of Joseph Heller’s Milo Minderbinder, the World War II private who bombs his own squadron “for business purposes.” As the Yankee’s industrialized sixth century society nears completion, it becomes more and more apparent that the vast majority of Morgan’s technological

innovations have been subsumed in his commercial enterprises and run for personal profit, a dark truth only suggested in the novel's opening scenes. In this sense, Morgan's sixth century has come to resemble the America of the final decades of the nineteenth century, where Thorstein Veblen could convincingly argue that the businessman had successfully hijacked the productive forces of the country and redistributed them for his own private gain.⁸

Because Morgan is a composite of Veblen's Businessman and Engineer, he is a complex figure to analyze, let alone pass judgment on. During the final stage of the wars after Arthur's death, where Morgan and his specialized squadron of fifty two remaining men pit their fledgling "Republic" against the collected force of the knights and the Catholic Church, the Yankee destroys his own factories and communications systems, lest they fall into enemy hands. Before this rash act, which will help spirit England back into the Dark Ages, it is at least plausible to view Morgan as "both a missionary of the enlightenment and justice, and a fraudulent businessman," (Smith, *Development* 159). At the novel's close, however, to judge the Yankee by his own standards is to find him wanting: just as when chivalry as a speculative "trade" collapses, there is no "benefit" for anyone (no pork, only a heap of bodies), when Morgan's industrial, capitalist Republic collapses, there is no more industry—only a rubbish heap of bodies and body parts piled around an electric wire fence. The black comedy implicit in the knights being literally electrocuted rather than "enlightened" heralds the beginning of Twain's late period skepticism about human nature, manifest in such works as *Puddn'head Wilson* (1894), "The Man who Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1899) and *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916).

The Yankee Brand

Of all of Morgan's business schemes, perhaps the most striking (and modern) is his efforts at branding. Creating a commodity-centered culture is as much about fostering consumer desire as about fulfilling basic needs, and the Yankee is quite aware of the ideological element involved. By the dawn of the twentieth century the crucial factor in business success had become the ability to generate demand, with manufacture and supply of the product having been made more economical by new efficiencies in production and distribution technologies. Here again Morgan is ahead of his time in a double sense. In fact, the problem of demand from a business standpoint presents itself to Morgan in an absolute (and absurd) sense—how to create desire for products that *don't yet exist*. His man Sir Ossaise of Surluse is charged with the formidable task of selling the public stove polish despite the inconvenient fact that there are no stoves yet for sale. The example clarifies through comic hyperbole the essential condition of the salesman, who is a man, as Arthur Miller later said about his most famous character, “way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine” (138). The knight from Surluse is “of a light and laughing disposition,” prone to jokes at the expense of his fellow knight/salesman (and by implication the public consumer), and therefore is the perfect man for the job (119).

The bonds between buyer and seller (and between sellers), however, must be solidified with something more durable than a smile and a shoeshine, must be forged by “brand,” a concept that takes on rich overtones in a story that brings together capitalist concepts with medievalisms. In an investigation of the concordance between Alfred

Tennyson's consistent preference of the word "brand" (rather than the more contemporary "sword") to describe the famous Excalibur in *Idylls of the King*, and his publisher Frederick Macmillan's attempt to turn Tennyson himself into a "brand name," Gerhard Joseph traces the etymology of the word back to the Old High German *brant*, or "the act of burning," as in the ancient practice of branding cattle to denote ownership. The "flash[ing] fire" of the Excalibur, however, endowed the instrument, itself "branded" with Arthur's mark, with the power to brand others.

For though the OED gives 1807 as the date of the first use of "brand" as a trademark denoting proprietorship of goods capable of being plugged in the commercial sense, a king's "dubbing" (from the Old High German for "to plug") of his knights is no doubt a ceremonial displacement of a more primitive branding of the skin denoting allegiance to a liegeland—or even to the Lord. [Therefore] while the word "sword" refers to a material object, the term "brand" is more suggestive of the way such an object is also a sign, precisely a blade that may have a message of ownership inscribed or branded upon it and that is itself an instrument of further inscription by its wielder. (Joseph)

In 1890, *The Poetical Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* was one of the first books sold by Macmillan under the firm's new "net" price policy, a marketing innovation whereby the prestigious publishing house offered certain books to lending libraries and booksellers only if they contracted to sell them at a specified price. (Most trade editions at the time were priced variably, and therefore "subject" to discount). That Macmillan tested the commercial waters with this edition—the first book of poetry (and second overall) to be marketed in such a way—indicates the great faith the publisher held in Tennyson the "brand," the trust of the public, in other words, that the name itself would serve as guarantor of a certain quality and therefore a ready market (Joseph). In this way, Joseph concludes, Tennyson became "a name upon which Macmillan [could] in turn inscribe

itself.” In this context, the vicissitudes of Excalibur in *Idylls* may serve as a kind of “etymological parable,” helping “uncover[...] the medieval sources of the material practices of Victorian authorial property rights.”

A similar logic (and etymological punning⁹), I would argue, is at work in *A Connecticut Yankee*, where Hank Morgan’s steel-clad sales force, as members of King Arthur’s court, have already been “branded” by the King, and if not literally (as in the case of Launcelot), at least symbolically, wield the power of Excalibur. The word “brand” is never directly employed in Twain’s novel, yet the increasing prevalence of branded goods during the author’s lifetime, combined with his attention to the latest developments in private enterprise lend plausibility to the notion of “brand” as a kind of ghosted pun linking Arthur’s instrument of initiation with the Yankee’s advertising placards.¹⁰ With the appearance of Morgan and the advent of industrial capitalism, the knights, we might say, are *rebranded* with the sign of Morgan’s consumer goods. They are then charged with the double-task of selling the product to the peasantry and rebranding any “wandering knight” they meet on their travels with the sign of the new product.¹¹ The latter transaction is exemplified in Morgan’s description of Sir Ozana le Cure Hardy, who is in “the gentleman’s furnishing line” and specializes in plug hats.

He was clothed all in steel, in the beautifulest armor of the time—up to where his helmet ought to have been; but he hadn’t any helmet, he wore a shiny stovepipe hat, and was as ridiculous a spectacle as one might want to see.... [His] saddle was hung about with leather hatboxes, and every time he overcame a wandering knight he swore him into my service and fitted him with a plug and made him wear it. (135)

The punning here is expanded to include “plug;” instead of “dubbing” the knights with his brand in order to express proprietorship, Morgan has them “fitted with a plug,” the

terms connected by the etymological origin of “dub” in its older German variant “plug.” The word play, if conscious, must have tickled a wit like Twain. The physical action of placing a hat on someone else, of course, echoes the act of a king’s dubbing. This symbolic action, I would argue, stands at the crux of the transformation of Arthur’s Kingdom into Morgan’s House.¹² The Yankee will replace swords with hats (and, eventually, kings with cats). A change in material practices, in other words, has paved the way for changes in the political superstructure. The knights and peasantry now signify their allegiance through the acts of buying and selling, which in Morgan’s system perform the cultural work of rituals maintaining the new order. Rituals have changed, but the new ones bear an oblique resemblance to their forbearers, if we follow the linguistic trace.

Sir Ozana has unloaded seventy five percent of his merchandise (twelve out of sixteen stovepipes) on his way from Camelot to the Valley of Holiness, and is applauded by Morgan. Business is booming, and the Yankee’s “brands” are wildly profitable. As Thomas Zlatick observes in a discussion of Morgan as a missionary of literacy in the sixth century, the Yankee’s ads and slogans are “plastered on every cliff and wall in England” (470). He has exploited for commercial purposes “the reverential awe that the oral culture has for spoken words, an awe most obvious in the religious belief that Logos or Word is the son of God. He transforms the motto (etymologically, the “word”) full of lofty admiration and sentiment, into the slogan or ad” (470). Persimmon’s soap is “PATRONIZED BY THE ELECT” and the ad for the hermit-produced tow-linen garment reads “Buy the Only Genuine St. Stylite.” This argument is strengthened if we recall the mysterious authority of a figure like Merlin, before Morgan’s arrival. The

sorcerer's absurd spells and prophecies send Camelot into swoons, simply through verbal magic. The faculties of skepticism, it would seem, are only possible after full literacy is attained. In a world where the very concept of falsity is inconceivable, the ad man has an easy job indeed. It is significant, moreover, that Morgan habitually refers to himself as Merlin's "peer," even as we sense his irony. "[A] magician who believed his own magic" is of course at a great disadvantage, the Yankee muses at one point, a remark that encapsulates his arrogance and cynical opportunism. It would appear that Merlin, an illiterate product of the sixth century, is no match for Morgan, though neither survives their destructive competition for market share: Merlin (disguised as an old maid) gets his revenge by fatally poisoning the Yankee during the apocalypse. The final reversal of power between the two leading "magicians" suggests in the end a basic likeness between the figures, a truth that Morgan (and perhaps Twain) could only acknowledge ironically.

In his famous analysis of the commodity form in the opening section of *Capital*, Marx speaks of the "mystical character" of commodities, to which the buyer and seller ascribe an imaginary yet entirely objective (because socially agreed upon) value status. The connection between a commodity's "value" in the marketplace and the labor that went into its manufacture is obscured, and so the values ascribed to commodities take on a fetishistic character—like religious idols, commodities now "appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own" (165). The magic of Morgan's stove polish in Camelot, in other words, is that it possesses objective value (it can be exchanged with other commodities) and only hypothetical use value (stoves haven't yet been manufactured). Commodities then, like the salesmen who sell them, appear as well to be "out in the blue," and in this context not so different from the other magical things that

one finds in Arthur's kingdom. With one fearsome sorcerer's spell, countesses are turned into hogs; with another, hogs are turned into commodities, capable of being "[bought] out... at the lump sum of sixteen pennies, which was rather above the latest quotations" (123).

Where Morgan charismatically replaces Arthur's brand and Merlin's spells with his own nineteenth-century iterations, his author was engaging in a perpetual battle with publishers, book pirates and legal authorities to maintain control of his literary identity, and to reap the maximum profits from his book sales. In time, as I will presently discuss, Twain came around to the idea of "branding" himself. Since the early 1870's, after he had accidentally discovered his international fame during a trip to London, Twain had been attempting to gain international copyright protection, which would have secured him a fortune in royalties for editions of his works sold in Europe.¹³ Recognizing that American authors had little chance of seeing foreign royalty checks if American publishers weren't required to grant the same to popular European authors like Dickens (who were facing the same problem in the U.S.), in 1875 he told Howells (then the influential editor of the *Atlantic*) that if his good friend could persuade fellow literary stars Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and Holmes to sign a petition asking Congress to begin granting protection to foreign authors, Twain himself would pay someone to find and gather the signatures of one hundred lesser known writers; nevertheless, it wasn't until 1891 that such a law was enacted (Adams 223). During this period, America's most famous writer made several well-publicized trips to England and Canada in efforts to establish his copyrights. British copyright law idiosyncratically held that an author must be physically present in British Territory on the day of publication in order to secure the

copyright. Protecting a once-secured international copyright from rampant piracy, and collecting his fair share of royalties proved a constant source of anxiety for Twain, and contributed to his split with the American Publishing Company, which he felt was not properly vigilant on behalf of its star author.

Twain had always been bothered by the legal discrepancy between literary and other types of property. Unlike private land, for example, which didn't become the property of the public after an arbitrary amount of time, but rather was passed within the family from generation to generation, the work of an author became publicly owned once the copyright expired. Having been unsuccessful in lobbying for a new type of "perpetual" copyright, in 1883, the year before he began *A Connecticut Yankee*, Twain took the unorthodox step of trying to establish his pen-name as a trademark. In *Clemens v. Belford Clark and Co.*, a U.S. Circuit Court Judge ruled against him, arguing that a literary work was a different kind of property than "vendible merchandise," and that only the latter was eligible for trademark registration, which was "perpetual" (Glass 688). In an article discussing Twain's various efforts at protecting his literary estate, Loren Glass elaborates on the distinction:

The idea of the authorial name as a trademark proposes a new relationship between author and text, a relationship appropriate to the emergent corporate order in the U.S. If copyright recognizes property in the text based on the author's labor in creating it, trademark registration recognizes property in the text as a commodity produced in the author's name. As legal scholar Bruce Bugby confirms, trademarks have generally been considered different in kind from copyrights and patents since little or no creative inspiration or effort is assumed to have gone into their design. (688)

The logic behind such reasoning was tell-tale: the “creative inspiration” that gave birth to works of art and technological inventions, presumably undertaken for reasons other than mere profit-seeking, didn’t receive the same legal protections as the trademarked commodity, a product produced specifically for sale in the market. The problem, as Twain soon realized, was that he was a person and not yet a corporation.

In 1904, Twain finally hit upon the idea of dictating his autobiography, which he hoped would allow him to circumvent the twenty-year copyright limitations. If the new material, published in the form of “notes” added to “existing books,” lengthened the original works by over fifty percent, a new copyright could be applied for (F. Kaplan 609). The genre, moreover, suited perfectly the slightly chaotic, free-associative movements of his mind, often cited as the major flaw in his novels and great strength of his public performances. The autobiographical project Twain undertook (and left unfinished) during the final six years of his life, as Glass has suggested, “can at least partly be considered an attempt to pursue the logic of the trademark by different means” (689). The genius of the project, in fact, lay in its incompleteness and open-endedness; the autobiography “was never intended to be a single, marketable text,” but rather a means to re-assert ownership of the author’s literary property, even after his death (682). By adding previously unpublished sections of autobiographical material held in reserve, the copyrights for the works Twain published in his lifetime could be held by his family for something close to “perpetuity.”¹⁴

The idea depended, in part, on the willingness of his future editors to execute his directions from beyond the grave. Twain imagined, for instance, that new editions of the autobiography would be necessitated after the deaths of each of those characters in his

book about whom his editors “ha[d] judgment enough and charity enough to suppress all such chapters” that might do damage to their (or their family’s) reputations (qtd. in Glass 684). In this case, it would seem, the author’s notorious temper and paranoia in his business affairs would provide an unlikely boon in the afterlife: each successive edition would include previously unpublished material deemed too scandalous at the time. The success of endless editions of the autobiography, nevertheless, would depend on more than willing literary executors—it would depend on the continued interest (and trust) of the public, a public that revered Twain the stage performer at least as much as Twain the literary genius. The problem was that while a dead Twain could keep being published, he could no longer entertain in person.

Two years before his death, in 1908, a final legal maneuver was attempted. By establishing the Mark Twain Company and naming his daughters Clara and Jean as officers, Twain had successfully managed to incorporate his pen name, an event that spawned a satirical article in the *North American Review* entitled “Is Mark Twain Dead?” by a writer named Eugene Angert.¹⁵ Angert speculated that Twain had actually died in 1906 and anything written under his name since that time was the work of “imposters” hired by the Mark Twain Company who had attached his signature in order to trade on the author’s fame. Angert wryly remarked that “[I]f his death, when it occurred, could be kept secret, books written by publishers’ hacks might be given to a gullible public year after year as the latest offering of Mark Twain” (qtd. in Glass 683). By first “branding” himself, in other words, the Twain brand was then able to proliferate as his signature was passed among other writers carrying on the name incorporated.

Significantly, the strategy of incorporation that Twain arrived at near the end of his life had by that time become theoretically (or at least rhetorically) linked with notions of “brand value” during the great merger wave in the final decade of the nineteenth century. Testifying before the Industrial Commission in Washington in June of 1899, Henry O. Havemeyer, then considered the second-most powerful trust-organizer in America (after Rockefeller), addressed the key question of how he went about setting a “par value” for the stock offered during the capitalization of his American Sugar Refining Company. When pressed specifically about his understanding of “value,” he argued that the future profit forecasts based on the strength of the newly incorporated brand were worth a sum far above the total combined assets of the buildings, refineries and other real-estate acquired, and that the total stock value of the new combination was estimated according to these profit forecasts, rather than the combined tangible asset value, the standard at the time for setting a stock “par” (Mitchell 62-63). Despite what Lawrence Mitchell calls Havemeyer’s “holistic approach to valuation,” where expected future earnings and tangible asset value were lumped together, it is clear that Havemeyer’s testimony unabashedly emphasized what he labeled the “real value.... the value of the trade-mark, the name Havemeyer as identified with sugar.” Asked what it would cost to build all of the refineries now in the company’s possession, the sugar tycoon agreed that the sum was roughly between thirty and thirty-five million, but added that he thought “the brand of Havemeyer & Elder would bring thirty-five millions alone” (64).

By 1899 Havemeyer’s method of corporate valuation based on projected profits was commonly held among economists, financiers and “promoters,” though still viewed with skepticism by the government and the public at large. However, what I want to

emphasize is his implicit understanding of the formidable power of brand loyalty. Consumers didn't just want sugar—they wanted Havemeyer Sugar. The historical record of the dawning century, where a handful of brands rose to unprecedented dominance in American consumer markets, more than bore out Havemeyer's reasoning, even if his testimony at the time was manifestly self-serving. On the one hand, branding addressed the quite sober and pragmatic desire of the consumer who expected a consistent product in exchange for his dollar. Yet the rise of "brand" proves as well the great explanatory power of Marx's analysis of the essentially fetishistic character of the commodity, which proudly displays itself at market as if it had carried itself there. From this perspective, branding was an attempt by the seller to highlight the "mystical" qualities already present in the commodity form—to have his trademarked goods assume autonomous identities above and beyond mere "use."

In the end, the branding of a literary work, as we expect, is more problematic than the branding of a sack of sugar. After all, as Joseph points out, a work of serious literature (as opposed to mass market pulp) is likely to resist total commodification.

"Contemporaries of Tennyson," he writes, "surely thought of him only in passing as a Macmillan author, as readers of, say, Hemingway and Fitzgerald think of such later figures only in passing as Scribner authors." Beyond any number of branded editions, lies, in the case of such writers, the imaginative work itself, which exists in the mind of the author and readers, even if such an idealized "book" is a "romantic mystification" triggered by commodity culture (Joseph). Perhaps, back in 1883, the U.S. Circuit Court Judge had something like this in mind when he denied Twain's attempt to trademark his name and by implication his literary output. While individual copies of the books might

be “vendible merchandise,” the authorial labor which entitles one to a copyright but not a trademark was by this logic unsaleable. Works of the imagination, as Terry Eagleton has put it, give us an image of non-alienated labor. How mythological this image is depends to a large extent on how much we believe capitalism colors our views of the means of production that preceded it. In any case, as is suggested by the 1883 judicial decision against Twain, the romantic notion of authorial genius was alive and well, and thus a quite rigid binary could exist between the type of labor judged to warrant copyright protection, and the type of labor judged to warrant the protection of the trademark. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, America’s commodity-centered culture, fortified by legal precedent, reified notions of the artistic and the commercial as opposing poles, and was therefore incapable of imagining the production of a saleable commodity as a “creative” act. The ironic result was that its most popular writer spent the second half of his life trying to gain the legal (and pecuniary) advantages granted nearly every other producer of popular commodities. In such a climate, a figure like Twain sits grotesquely astride the binary.

The Man in the White Flannel Suit

One may argue that by taking on a pen name at the beginning of his career, Twain, in another sense, had already “branded” himself long before the more official later attempts. Perhaps, like a Hawthornian symbol, the original brand deepened with the passing of time. In a 2004 monograph, Larzer Ziff wrote that when Twain began signing his articles with the new pen name, he was essentially “the same man as the Sam

Clemens who wrote the news articles” (9). Yet as Clemens’s career gained momentum, both as stage performer and popular travel writer, and as his elaborate retellings of his own experience in those lectures and books began to blur biography and fiction, the relationship between Clemens and “Twain” evolved.

In life Mark Twain, the author, lecturer, and public figure, led Sam Clemens to increasingly public displays of singularity—his famous adoption of white suits in winter as well as other seasons is but one example—and by the close of the century the Sam Clemens who in 1863 had created Mark Twain had turned into him. (9)

To say Clemens had become Twain isn’t necessarily to say that a writer is alienated from an original or more genuine self, and it isn’t the line Ziff pursues in his recent reappraisal. Yet Ziff frequently returns to a contradiction between Twain the serious writer and Twain the “funny man,” as Matthew Arnold notoriously labeled him. Pen names were in fact most common in Twain’s era among the western comic writers, and rarely taken on by those with “higher” ambition. Arnold’s comment touched a nerve, perhaps, because Twain had always on some level felt his work “sub-literary” (Ziff 23). By 1874, the New England establishment, through the agency of Howells, had admitted Twain into *The Atlantic*, but always kept him, as Ziff remarks, in “the vestibule of the temple.... at a safe distance from the literary altar, and Twain felt it” (16). His books, meanwhile, weren’t picked up by the trade houses, who published the nation’s “literature:” Emerson’s essays, Longfellow’s poems, James’s novels. Sold instead through subscription publishers employing agents who solicited patrons door-to-door, Twain’s work always had the stamp, or stigma, of the popular, the taint of the sales pitch.¹⁶

In Ziff’s assessment, therefore, despite the book’s generally celebratory tone, we still hear echoes of the Brooksonian thesis that Mark Twain was the great victim of his age,

an era where the pursuit of wealth was “sacred duty,” and where the nation’s overriding acquisitive ethos crushed the artistic spirit seeking more subtle channels of expression. If Twain, as Ziff observes, was continually frustrated in his efforts to be perceived by the public as more than a backwoods humorist, his persistence in the comic vein, for Brooks, signaled an arrested development, a flight from the more rigorous demands of the creative instinct.¹⁷ Brooks’s Twain is a stubborn neurotic, a slave to public opinion who squanders his satirical genius because he is incapable, after *The Gilded Age*, of criticizing his contemporaries, and cannot therefore listen to the voice of the submerged “artist” inside.¹⁸ This Mark Twain only attacks what it is popular and safe to attack—outmoded ideologies like Monarchy. In the grips of his own thesis, Brooks forgets that satire frequently works through displacement, and therefore when he finds *A Connecticut Yankee* a pathetic flight from social and political reality in America, a cowardly decision to flatter his nation’s ingenuity and pluck rather than criticize its greed, corruption and budding arrogance, he misses the mark. Such a reading manifestly ignores the tragic ending of the novel, where it is difficult not to see in Morgan’s ultimate failure to modernize Arthurdom an authorial comment on the sustainability of the naïve American faith in a technology and free-market driven Utopia. Twain, it should be remembered, was in fact not afraid to take unpopular positions when something mattered deeply to him. His consistent stance against American imperialism in the final two decades of his life testifies to this.

One repeated gesture helps sustain Brooks in his powerful attack on Twain, and it is especially relevant in the context of this discussion: he systematically conflates Twain’s alleged conformism, his herd mentality, his longing for popularity, with the

business cast of mind. On the final page of *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, Brooks is still lamenting the repression of “the born artist, the starved artist who for forty years had to pretend that he was a business man, the born artist who had always wanted to be original in his dress and has had to submit to a feverish censorship even over his neckties” (256). The oppositions here are unmistakable: the businessman’s pursuit of material gain is inherently devoid of imaginative qualities—in fact an overheated imagination can only hurt him in his commercial ventures, as it did Twain. “Originality” is the province of the arts, though in pursuing this goal the artist sacrifices his American birthright, a chance at great wealth.

“In one pathetic excess alone the artist blossomed,” Brooks writes, “that costume of white flannels” (255). The remark simplifies the affair, reducing originality to the mere outward symbol of it. Nevertheless, Twain’s singularity, if not his artistry, have long been widely associated with his favorite “costume of flannels,” a conjunction that gains in richness and irony if we trace the wardrobe forward to its 1950’s iteration, the ubiquitous uniform worn at the office by Sloan Wilson’s protagonist Tom Rath in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955). The qualities represented by the flannel suit have by this time fully reversed: whereas Twain’s white “costume” signifies the carefree bucking of convention, Tom Rath’s gray uniform is one of the decade’s most conspicuous symbols, standing for the submergence of individuality in the social fabric, and, for Tom and his co-workers, the surrender to the will of the corporation, a place where men wear suits that look just like his. “Maybe that’s why I’m on edge all the time,” Rath muses to himself at one point, “I have to keep pretending” (241). Mark Twain dons the suit, as Brooks has it, in an outward gesture of defiance, a defiance that

signifies the inward struggle of the artist to overcome the voice of society which warns of the terrible consequences of nonconformity. The white flannels amount to the final “acting out” of the child who knows he is up against superior opposition. In this sense, Brooks’s Twain is a unlikely forerunner of Sloan Wilson’s era-defining protagonist—both are dominated by the compulsion to conform by becoming “businessmen;” both smolder with resentment under the uniform. The different colors of suit signal merely differing stages of rebellion.

Twain’s relationship with the commercial world, and his sense of himself as a businessman, as demonstrated through both his letters and his imaginative writings, is more complex than the Brooksonian opposition can allow, though Brooks’s analysis of Twain’s “ordeal” is foundational. It is true that when Twain writes to his nephew that he is “terribly tired of business” and “by nature unfit for it,” he is railing against the prosaic aspects of commercial activity—the account keeping, the dull routine of sales and promotion—though even these aspects he seems to relish at times (Webster 356). But when Twain identifies himself as “one of the Vanderbilt gang,” it is apparent that he has a quite different and far more heroic picture of the businessman’s calling in mind, a conception of the man of affairs as a visionary possessed of great imaginative powers. The Vanderbilt gang is no rule-abiding set, but rather, a loose group of mavericks who dominate by standing *apart* from the herd. The tycoons of Twain’s era succeeded precisely because they were ruthless innovators and individualists, and often held contempt for the conformist masses that unreflectively lived by the rule of laws which suppressed them in favor of those already possessed of power and property.

If we understand Twain's ambivalence about business enterprise as derived not from the rebellious anti-business artist inside, but rather from a fear of failure in his own commercial projects, we can understand why he might create a capitalist superman like Hank Morgan at the time that he did. To the extent that Morgan represents Twain's ideal self, it should be clear that the plot of *A Connecticut Yankee* is no mere flight from the commercial realities of the 1880's, and certainly not a flight into the mythical garden of art, but a fantasy wherein late nineteenth-century commercial enterprise is "invented" through the artist's surrogate, who possesses the audacity of a Vanderbilt, the brains of a Gould, the patience of a Rockefeller, and the technical skill of a corps of any of their best engineers. The omnipotence of Morgan, who towers over his new contemporaries, is suggestive of the omnipotence of the author over his fictional world.

Twain's business life and his literary pursuits, though they had never really been far apart, mirror each other most intensely during the decade of the 1880's, when *A Connecticut Yankee* was conceived, written, and published; when he was most engrossed in the fortunes of his own publishing company; and when he fell in love with Paige's automatic typesetter, which nearly drove him into irreparable debt. The psychic conjunction of all three projects is symbolized by his curious desire to finish writing the novel on the same day the Paige machine was finished, and Twain went as far as singling out the calendar date of October 22, 1888. His mental health, as his biographers point out and his letters attest, was tied up with the perfecting of the Paige machine more than any of his previous investments, before or after.¹⁹ In the most explicit formulation of this connection, James Cox wrote in 1960 that "Hank Morgan is to a large extent the concrete embodiment of Twain's obsession with Paige's invention," and that the Yankee,

in a parallel of the machine itself, was made to perform a series of increasingly difficult “acts” before he finally breaks down in exhaustion (125-126). In the death of Morgan and the destruction of Camelot at novel’s end, Cox suggests, Twain was enacting a symbolic “self-preservation” through a proleptic strike against the machine, in which he did continue his investment for three more frustrating years (126). This is a forceful view, as it helps explain why Twain chose finally to distance himself from the Yankee. The writing of the novel, in other words, provided an outlet for unloading the burden of his investment, in both the psychic and monetary sense.

Why does Twain blow up his fantasy? In closing I would offer another psychological possibility that doesn’t explicitly contradict the previous explanation: perhaps the author was in the end revolted by the manner of Morgan’s success, a victory essentially pre-determined at the outset, and a victory which paved the way for a state-sponsored capitalism run by a technocratic elite. Hank Morgan wins his profits in a rigged game—a game where competition is illusory. In this darker sense, the world of Camelot at Morgan’s peak powers is suggestive of the emerging world of incorporated America, where a handful of secretly cooperating financial giants, aided by their army of engineers, were cementing control of the wealth of the land, while preaching competition and decentralization to their capitalist underlings and the toiling masses below them.

The triumphant rise, and sudden defeat, of Hank Morgan’s capitalist utopia reflect the complexities of his creator’s attitude about business practices in America, and his alternating euphoria and wretchedness regarding his own commercial fortunes during the decade in which the book was written, for Morgan’s story is a fictional embodiment of Twain’s ambivalence, and a testament to the intertwining of his venture capitalism and

his literary pursuits. More generally, and with greater hindsight, *A Connecticut Yankee* reflects the wider tensions of an age where the American businessman was both national hero and national villain, developer of a continent and guilty of theft on a continental scale, paragon of individual achievement and herald of a new corporate order that by the dawn of the new century had rendered the romance of the solitary capitalist all but medieval.

Notes

¹ I have in mind Marx's classic definition, as formulated in *Capital*, Vol. 1, Chapter 1. Commodities for Marx are defined by their dual character: they are external objects that satisfy human needs, while at the same time they carry a purely symbolic value by participating in an order of exchange that exists independently of their individual "use value." The capitalist, like Hank Morgan, is primarily interested in their "exchange value," purchasing or producing them for the purposes of sale. He is in the Money-Commodity-Money circuit, rather than the reverse. The relevance of the commodity form to my argument will become more apparent in a later section of this chapter.

² See especially James Cox (117-129) and Justin Kaplan (211-228) who both make the connection in discussions of *A Connecticut Yankee*. Also see Fred Kaplan's biography *The Singular Mark Twain*, especially chapters 13 and 14.

³ My principal biographical sources in this discussion of Twain's business life during the 1880's are his letters to Webster, collected in *Mark Twain, Businessman*, ed. Samuel Webster; and Fred Kaplan's biography. On a side note, Twain's commercial exploits were the subject of a relatively recent book by Peter Krass, who manages to extrapolate an odd kind of business self-help book out of these and related sources. A couple of Krass's chapter titles convey the flavor of the book: Chapter Two: "How to Quit a Good Job and Then Lose A Million Dollars." Sub-title: "Quirky Habits and Brazen Philosophy: Even a Crank Knows to Dress for Success." Chapter Nine: "Enduring Financial Crisis and Adversity: A Rockefeller Crony Comes to the Rescue." Sub-title: "Quirky Habits and Brazen Philosophy: Are Ethics for Fools?" See *Ignorance, Confidence, and Filthy Rich Friends: The Business Adventures of Mark Twain, Chronic Speculator and Entrepreneur* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2007).

⁴ Webster writes, "When it came to figuring profits Uncle Sam could make his cousin [sic] James Lampton look like a pessimist" (309).

⁵ Martha Banta explores this connection in a sustained fashion in "The Boys and the Bosses: Twain's Double Take on Work, Play, and the Democratic Ideal." *American Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 1991).

⁶ For an authoritative account of the origins of the Holding Company, the battles over revisions to corporate law over the ensuing two decades, and the historical significance of the new financial instrument, see Lawrence Mitchell's *The Speculation Economy: How Finance Triumphed Over Industry*.

⁷ Morgan's decision to sell a failing business to misled investors is exactly opposed to the famous choice of Howells's Silas Lapham to back out of the sale of his paint company to a group of Europeans (a move that would have all but guaranteed lifelong wealth), and instead to personally bear the burdens of the financial losses, moving his family back upstate to more humble surroundings. Nevertheless, Howells, with characteristic generosity, had unreserved praise for his good friend's novel, which he called "a glorious gospel of equality," and for Hank Morgan who had brought enlightenment to the dark ages. See pgs. 44, 148 in *My Mark Twain* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997).

⁸ See *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (1904), esp. section one. Businessmen, for Veblen, are not the main reason for nineteenth century America's exponential jump in productive capacity, though they are the chief beneficiaries. The businessman is almost always at a remove from industry and thus from industrial innovation, and often as not works decisively against new modes of efficiency when it suits him—in other words, when he can collect greater profit from slowing down or blocking technological innovation, or altering the paths from commodity production to distribution. It is the engineers who are the true heroes of industry, as they "create the mechanical possibility of new and more efficient methods and correlations" (44). I treat Veblen's arguments in greater detail in subsequent chapters on Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser.

⁹ Joseph quotes Jonathan Culler's insight that "Etymologies give us respectable puns, endowing pun-like effects with the authority of science and even of truth."

¹⁰ Earl Briden has tracked down the historical source for *Noyoudont*, the Yankee's brand of toothwash, which was surely a parody of the popular *Sozodont*, advertised regularly in Twain's hometown newspaper, the *Hartford Daily Courant*. The strangely negative warning implied in the Yankee's product name, Briden surmises, is the author's comic response to an ad that ran in the *Courant* in September of 1888. It reads: "When a dealer who happens to out of SOZODONT tries to make you believe that something he has in stock is better or as good, quietly say No, seek the next establishment where that standard tooth beautifier can be obtained." See "Advertising in *A Connecticut Yankee*." *American Notes & Queries* Vol. 21, Issue 5/6 (Jan/Feb 1983).

¹¹ Henry Nash Smith brings our attention to the fact that we are nowhere told how the peasants actually *make* their money. It would be difficult to buy anything without any cash, and therefore Morgan's sixth century more closely resembles Soviet Russia's state-sponsored industrialism than nineteenth century American free enterprise. In any case, in the haphazard construction of his plot Twain wasn't overly interested in plausibility, and this is just one of the elements he glosses over in his fantasy. See *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress*, pgs. 102-104.

¹² My emphasis on the Yankee's creation of a culture of advertisement (and, by implication, consumption) suggests an alternative to the views of Bernard DeVoto and Larzer Ziff, who feel that the advertising sections in *CY* are simply examples of Twain's "frontier humor" transposed to the sixth century landscape, and at best marginal to the meaning of story. See Ziff, p. 77.

¹³ My principal source here is F. Kaplan's biography; see esp. 281-282, 315-316, 358.

¹⁴ In 1906-1907, twenty five installments of "Chapters from My Autobiography" appeared in the *North American Review*. Selected fragments of the Autobiography have been published in several editions in the years since Twain's death, the most widely cited being *Mark Twain in Eruption* (1940) a thematic collection of ruminations edited by Bernard DeVoto, who had recently taken over for Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain's first biographer, as literary executor of the estate. In 2010, and in accordance with Twain's desire that parts of the Autobiography remain unpublished until one hundred years after his death, The Mark Twain Project, in conjunction with California University Press, brought out the first of what will be a three volume scholarly edition of the "complete" Autobiography, in all its rambling glory, just as Twain dictated it.

¹⁵ Angert was playfully echoing the title of Twain's own 1906 book, "Is Shakespeare Dead?," the first publication of the newly incorporated Mark Twain Company.

¹⁶ Twain sold half a dozen books through The American Publishing House, a subscription seller, before starting C.L. Webster & Company, and employing his own agents to canvass his work. After *The Gilded Age* went to print, Twain called it "rather a rubbishy looking book," with "wretched paper and vile engravings." His co-author, whose literary reputation surpassed Twain's at the time, summed up the dilemma of the subscription route in a letter to another writer: "I think if you were to see your dainty literature in such ill conditioned volumes, you would just die. There is no doubt about it, however, that 'by subscription' is the only way for the author to make any money" (qtd. in Budd xxix, xvi).

¹⁷ The classic counter-interpretation is found in *Mark Twain's America* (1932), Bernard DeVoto's response to Brooks's thesis. DeVoto argues that Brooks willfully ignored Twain's frontier roots, the true source of his power. Far from a symptom of arrested development, the comic mode was Twain's natural idiom, as he was essentially a humorist in the backwoods tradition, and it was his genius to distill its language, apply it in a diversity of settings, and elevate it through his artistry.

¹⁸ The antinomy is explicitly emphasized in the following passage, which is a typical one: "Almost incredible, in fact, to anyone familiar with the normal processes of the literary mind, was Mark Twain's fear of public opinion, that fear which was the complement of his prevailing desire for success and prestige. In later life it was his habit to write two letters, one of which he suppressed, when he was addressing anyone who was not an intimate friend upon any subject about which his intuitive feelings clashed with the popular view" (228). In the growing mass of unsent letters we have in miniature an allegory of the frustrated writer inside, bound and censored.

¹⁹ See especially Justin Kaplan's "The Yankee and the Machine," where he makes the case that the failure of the typesetter permanently altered Twain's mindset. It was the chief cause of his darkening vision of human nature, manifest in the greater part of his late writings, and for his frequent comparison of man's mind to "a mere automatic machine" (228). In a dramatic reversal, the typesetter, as Kaplan has it, becomes the very embodiment of the imperfection of man.

Chapter Two

The Theater of Business:

Art, Commerce and Masculinity in Frank Norris's Wheat Novels

Nearly six hundred pages into *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901), a meeting takes place between Presley, the poet, and Shelgrim, president of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. The poet has come to the San Joaquin Valley in South Central California to observe the farmers cultivate the vast wheat fields that stretch across the horizon, and to write his epic "Song of the West." The past several months, though, have wrought a series of disasters for the ranchers: the railroad has reneged on a contract to sell them the land at the previously advertised rates, the courts have sided with the railroad, an attempt through bribery to reverse the court decision has been botched, and a bloody gun battle between the ranchers and the railroad operatives has left six of the ranks dead. Magnus Derrick, head of the newly formed League of Ranchers, has seen one son die at the hands of the railroad, and the other, ambitious and cynical, become their stool pigeon. Still mourning the death of his faithful son, the proud rancher is publicly humiliated when the bribery case is discovered by the League. Meanwhile, Presley has shelved the epic, sensing that perhaps the romantic vision is anachronistic in an age of machines and contract labor. Instead he has written "The Toilers," a realistic poem depicting the struggles of the downtrodden western farm laborer.

Shelgrim receives Presley's card and immediately identifies him as the young man who has written the poem currently making a stir in San Francisco literary circles.

In the preceding month, the poet had become a minor celebrity. Nevertheless, the railroad man is unimpressed:

‘I’ve seen the picture called ‘The Toilers,’ continued Shelgrim, ‘and of the two, I like the picture better than the poem.’

‘The picture is by a master,’ Presley hastened to interpose.

‘And for that reason,’ said Shelgrim, ‘it leaves nothing more to be said. You might just as well have kept quiet. There’s only one best way to say anything. And what has made the picture of ‘The Toilers’ great is that the artist said in it the best that could be said on the subject.’

‘I had never looked at it in just that light,’ observed Presley....

‘If I am to listen to that kind of talk, Shelgrim continued, ‘I prefer to listen to it firsthand. ‘I would rather listen to what the great French painter has to say than to what *you* have to say about what he has already said.’ (574-575)

Presley had arrived at the offices of the P. and S.W. full of righteous anger, looking to trace his sense of economic injustice to its source. He discovers to his surprise upon encountering the railroad president not a soulless brute but an “art critic” (574). Shelgrim has seen the painting by Jean Francois Millet upon which Presley based his poem. It is a sprawling work of oil on canvass and hangs in the library of his brother-in-law Cedarquist, the manufacturing tycoon. The poet is now forced to defend his work against charges that it is derivative, superfluous, the work of a mere apprentice.

Commentators on *The Octopus* have rarely paused at this rather strange moment, hastening instead to address the railroad man’s speech which directly follows (“Blame conditions, not men”), among the most frequently quoted in all of Norris’s work.

Shelgrim, silencing Presley with a preemptive strike on artistic terrain, goes on to lecture the *poete paysan* about the nature of the economy and the world market, about railroads

“building themselves,” and wheat growing itself, about the elemental forces of supply and demand, and the great powers of nature and industry dwarfing the agency of the individual. Indeed, the speech long ago attained the status of naturalist manifesto in the critical literature on the genre, and has been the locus of a sustained dialogue in Norris scholarship about the degree to which the author himself espoused his character’s notions of economic determinism.¹ My aim in calling attention to Shelgrim’s prior comments on Presley’s poem is not to diminish the importance of his remarks on economic determinism, but rather to bring into focus the network of issues I want to pursue in this chapter: namely, the role of art in novels whose principal subject is business, the divided allegiances of a writer in a culture dominated by commerce, and the hidden relations between the aesthetic and the economic in a culture that tended to view them as antithetical.

As readers of Norris’s literary criticism know, the author was a far more passionate theorist of art than of capitalism, despite his deep reservations about aesthetic “refinement,” and in the context Norris’s critical pronouncements, it is Shelgrim’s apology for *laissez-faire* in the realm of art, not business, that marks him as a mouthpiece for his author. As Presley himself seems to realize, there are in fact the seeds of a cogent theory contained within the tycoon’s critique of his poem. The work of a “master” is a work that exhausts its subject—a work that completes the work to be done, “leaves nothing more to be said.” It is a Darwinian theory: a work emerges victorious, its competitors bound for extinction. Most tellingly, it is Shelgrim’s debasement of all that is secondary experience (“I’d rather listen to it firsthand”) that links him with Norris.

Frank Norris was an artist whose dogged pursuit of “the real,” of naked experience, is most directly reflected in his pronouncement “We don’t want literature, we want life.”² He was a writer in revolt against Literature, against style, and against all forms of culture he deemed decadent, effeminate, and derivative of Art. In these views, Norris was far from iconoclastic; he was a representative man of this time, a kindred spirit with Teddy Roosevelt’s band of “rough riders,” eager to prove his manhood in battle. Norris has become touchstone for recent scholars of the period, not because of the exceptional quality of his work, but because he is useful as a kind of “cultural seismograph” registering the anxieties and compulsions of his generation, a generation that was the first to fully absorb the Darwinian worldview, to witness “the closing of the frontier,” and to push beyond that frontier in self-conscious gestures of American empire.³

Influenced by the French school of Hugo and Zola, with its emphasis on painting a broad canvas of society, and Kipling in England, with his celebration of muscular Anglo-Saxonism, Norris was the most self-aware American practitioner of literary naturalism, that most masculine of genres. In fact, Norris became a leading theorist of naturalism as his career blossomed and he won his short-lived fame, a fact lamented by some of his readers. Werner Berthoff and Larzer Ziff, for instance, complain that Norris’s theories seduced him into philosophical abstraction and away from concrete narrative, causing him to substitute “hyostatizations” like “force” and “Truth” in the place of disciplined empirical observation.⁴ More recently, Michael Davitt Bell has argued that Norris’s distaste for Literature and “fine writing” caused him to develop a

crude style full of hyperbole and devoid of irony as he strove to be a “representative naturalist” (116).

In early works like *McTeague* (1899) and *Vandover and the Brute* (1914), capturing “life” directly meant probing the depths of his character’s desires and revealing the sexual obsession and greed, jealousy and alcoholism, the Zolean *bête humaine*, that lay close beneath the veneer of civilization. Whereas realists like William Dean Howells were satisfied with scrupulously recording surface detail and action, the naturalist would pierce the surface to explore the “vast and terrible drama” underneath.⁵ In a potboiler like *Moran and the Lady Letty* (1898) “the real” was associated with manly adventure and conquest on the high seas. However, by the time Norris set to writing what would be his final novels, his *Trilogy of the Epic of the Wheat*, “life” meant emphasizing that other element in Zola he was to inherit, the clash of great forces, both in nature and in human society, that rendered individual striving into its properly miniscule perspective. Norris imagined the trilogy as capturing the thundering roll of California wheat advancing from the American West, where it was produced, to the great commercial center of Chicago, where it was traded on the market, and finally on to Europe where it was devoured by the hungry peasantry. The grain, which symbolized the vast creative powers of nature herself, would be pitted against other titanic powers: the California railroad trust and the great financiers and banking houses of Chicago all would attempt to annex nature’s power to their own.

Norris’s primary interest in the economic, therefore, was not as a reformer, nor as an apologist for capitalism. Rather, he was interested in economic struggle as a subject for an authentic American romance, with the capitalist assuming his rightful place as both

hero and villain. With the spectacular triumph of industry in the final decades of the nineteenth century, no one could deny that the industrialist and the financier, the representatives of capital, were now the central protagonists in the American story. They were the great forces changing the landscape, harnessing steam and electricity and labor power; imagining, setting into motion, and altering to maximize profit the direction and flow of money and goods across the continent and oceans. The subject of business, then, during the final decades of century, had become the ideal embodiment of Norris's own unique brand of naturalism, with its fusion of romance and realism.⁶

With the wheat novels, wrote Walter Fuller Taylor in his pioneering study on *The Economic Novel in America*, Norris "lifted the romance of economic conflict from a sub-literary to a literary level." Doubtless, Taylor meant this as praise. The literary here is that loosely defined quality that separates Norris from the hundreds of forgotten novelists who worked from the same set of cultural materials.⁷ Yet for Norris, who was excessively sensitive about issues of gender and art, the literary was connected with all that was feeble and effeminate, and was a symptom of the loss of virility that Roosevelt's generation feared. As Donald Pizer has suggested, whereas earlier American novelists had seen the nature-machine conflict as the central cultural struggle in nineteenth-century America, Norris "substitute[d] for the machine the contemporary aesthetic movement," which he viewed as an enemy of a healthy civilization connected with the life of the instincts (*The Lit. Crit of Frank Norris* 20). The way to combat the decadent nineties was through a revitalized, manly prose that echoed the exploits of American frontiersman, the cannons of American soldiers, and the hum of American commercial enterprise.

As Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century began to draw a sharp opposition between art and commerce, the place of the artist in society had shifted. The “wholesale commercialization of life,” in the words of Larzer Ziff, precipitated a separation of the spheres, with businessmen pursuing profit and leaving artists to the “business of beauty” (14). In a commercial society, the notion of the artist as truth-teller gave way to the faith in the businessman as prophet. Commercial enterprise was connected with the real work of the world, while Literature was to serve a merely decorative function, to “spiritualize” American speech and the American landscape. It was associated with the feminine sphere. Norris, perhaps more than any writer of his generation wrote while experiencing this cultural divide as a kind of psychic fracture. His father was a self-made man who enjoyed great success in the jewelry business in Chicago and San Francisco. His mother Gertrude, by contrast, was given to an artistic temperament. She had been an actress before marriage and remained devoted to art and literature throughout Frank’s childhood, reading the classics to her children. As a boy, he had showed considerable talent from an early age as an artist and storyteller. But if Norris’s eventual success as a writer argues for the triumph of his mother’s sensibility, he also inherited his father’s distaste for the “literary.”⁸ It is in his grappling with these issues that Norris’s wheat novels gain their psychological depth.

The Superfluous Character

The Octopus, the first book in the Wheat Trilogy, is the story of the triumph of the railroad trust over the emerging forces of agribusiness on the California frontier. The

winner would gain the lion's share of the profits from the sale of millions of bushels of wheat across the world market. As in the Gold Rush during the middle of the century, there was a collective feeling that California's vast resources were anyone's for the taking. The ranchers (and their hired labor) were the producers, planting the seed and harvesting the grain, though, as Norris acknowledges, they were no lovers of the land. They were shrewd capitalists themselves, exploiting the soil as a lucrative natural resource in a manner paralleling the previous generation of forty-niners. By the 1870's, with the appearance of new technologies like the gigantic steam-propelled plow, ranchers were able to work the land on a new and massive scale, but without the railroad there would be no possibility of reaching the distant markets necessary to unload the great quantities of wheat that they could produce. The newly built Southern Pacific (which served as the historical model for Norris's P. and S.W.) was flush with Federal subsidies and massive government land grants.⁹ Despite this advantage, the railroad men knew that without a steady traffic of freight cars full of the California grain, there would be little profit in the venture. But these men also knew that if they could control river traffic, and therefore possess a monopoly on the means of grain transportation, they held the decided advantage. If they could dominate state politics through covert subsidies of party officials, politicians, and judges, in short, could "buy" the California Railroad Commission, they could set their own rail rates.

Based loosely on the events leading up to a violent gun battle between ranchers and The Southern Pacific in 1880, *The Octopus* records the decisive historical victory of the railroad in its economic struggle with the California wheat producers.¹⁰ By novel's end, the four largest ranches in the valley, the territories owned by Derrick, Annixter,

Broderson, and Osterman, have been repossessed by the P. & S.W. Norris suggests this dominance, and finds his central symbol, in his detailed description of the commissioner's official railway map that Lyman Derrick pores over in his office. The map plots the trajectories of the different railways of the state in blue, yellow, and green. These, however, are "brief tracteries, very short, isolated, unimportant." More ominously,

The whole map was gridironed by a vast, complicated network of red lines marked P. and S.W.R.R. These centralized at San Francisco and thence ramified to every corner of the State. (288)

The map was white, and it seemed as if all the colour which should have gone to vivify counties, towns, and cities marked upon it had been absorbed by that huge, sprawling organism, with its ruddy arteries converging toward a central point. It was as though the State had been sucked white and colourless, and against this pallid background the red arteries of the monster stood out, swollen with life-blood.... A gigantic parasite fattening on the life-blood of an entire commonwealth. (289)

The octopus is a potent symbol, but so is the map itself. As an aesthetic artifact within the novel, it is a representation of the pulsing, ever-expanding force that is the railroad trust. It depicts the economic conquest of California in a decisive manner that seems to exhaust the matter at hand. Contemplation of the map leaves one with the feeling, as Shelgrim had said about the Millet painting, that there is indeed "nothing more to be said."

Could Norris have written *The Octopus* without the character of Presley? As William L. Vance wrote, "Presley is either a wholly superfluous character or else he is the most important character and the book is essentially about him. If the book is primarily about the growing of wheat and the rancher-railroad war, then Presley is useless" (130). A mere observer, he affects none of the actions of the book, nor does his

conversation or his art change anyone's opinions about anything. His passionate speech to a crowd of ranchers has not inspired them to rise up against the railroad, his hasty attempt to bomb the offices of the local P.& S.W. representative has been botched, and he is unable to save from starvation and prostitution the family members of his murdered friend, the German émigré farmhand Hooven. In the novel's penultimate chapter, his protest poem "The Toilers" is mere fodder for a dinner party conversation among the wives of the rich. Wholly superfluous, Presley is nonetheless the key to the book in at least one central respect: he allows for an authorial meta-commentary on the act of writing the business novel.¹¹ *The Octopus* is an attempt at the business fiction writ large, an attempt to aesthetically capture the commercial conquest of the great West, and it is simultaneously a commentary on that attempt. Thus, despite Norris's admonitions to "let your style go to the devil" and just to tell a good straight-forward yarn, he wrote a novel of considerable stylistic complexity, one that includes an important reflexive element. As Larzer Ziff once observed, "Frank Norris was not so uncomplicated as he pretended to be" (251).

Presley's relation to Norris has been a pervasive subject in commentary on *The Octopus*. Early interpreters, including Jack London, saw Presley as Norris's primary spokesperson and were puzzled by the novel's conclusion. The poet has come to accept Shelgrim's economic determinism, yet softened its implications by adding a patina of Utilitarian sentiment about the wheat ultimately reaching "the people" despite the malicious greed of the railroad:

What was the larger view, what contributed the greatest good to the greatest numbers?... Yes, good issued from this crisis, untouched, unassailable, undefiled.... Men—motes in the sunshine—perished,

were shot down in the very noon of life, hearts were broken.... But the Wheat remained.... That mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, indifferent to human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed grooves (651).

He has also been affected by his friend Vanamee's Christian mysticism, which grows out of an exotic subplot in which the wandering shepherd has witnessed the resurrection of his dead lover Angele in the body of her daughter. In their final meeting, the shepherd had urged the distraught poet to expand his vision, to see life as a whole, whereby evil ultimately proves an illusion. In the novel's concluding passage, as Presley prepares to sail for India along with the wheat that is destined to feed the famine-stricken nation, his thoughts echo Vanamee:

The larger view always and through all shams, all wickedness, discovers the truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good (652).

The trouble, as many have observed, is that it is difficult to reconcile the morally centered worldviews of Utilitarianism and Christianity with the amoral, Darwinian world implied by Shelgrim's speech (and conventionally understood as a cornerstone of naturalism). It is not that naturalist writers didn't propose moralistic solutions to social problems, but that their fictions were thought to convincingly depict the workings of amoral nature. Endowing nature with a moral purpose, as Presley seems here to do, would belie the naturalistic premise.¹²

Warren French and Donald Pizer were two of the first to treat Presley in any detail as an autonomous character, and thus defend Norris against charges of ideological confusion. French emphasized that *The Octopus* is "an exercise in point of view," that of a poet who spends a summer in the San Joaquin Valley "trying to discover a purpose and

direction for his work” (92). Pizer, writing in the wake of the New Criticism, was determined to demonstrate the literary validity of Norris’s work by highlighting his sense of paradox and resolution, and the overall coherence of his philosophy. He argued for the influence of Norris’s professor at Berkeley, Joseph Le Conte, the evolutionary theist. *The Octopus* was a Le Contean work whose purpose was to synthesize Christianity and Darwinism, supernatural and natural laws, and Presley is the protagonist of the novel’s bildungsroman plot: It wasn’t Norris who was inconsistent, but Presley, who progressed through stages to reach his final synthetic perspective. “Each succeeding perception of the wheat... had meant an increase in knowledge” (138).

Norris’s biographers Joseph McElrath and Jesse Crisler are right when they point out that Presley, despite his Norrisean desire to write the great epic of the contemporary age, ends up embodying everything that Norris himself loathed about the artistic persona. He shows himself to be the kind of effeminate, passive, and diletantish artist Norris disparaged in his critical writings. Yet McElrath and Crisler probably go too far in emphasizing their differences—Presley is not just a foil for Norris, but rather a refracted version of the author, an ambivalent portrait of the would-be epic poet.¹³

As the novel opens, the thirty year old Presley has arrived at Magnus Derrick’s ranch, Los Muertos, and his imagination is immediately fired by the setting. He dreams of weaving a great mosaic depicting the “new race” forged through contact with the frontier:

each group in its proper environment; the valley, the plain, and the mountain, the ranch, the range, and the mine—all this, all the traits and types of every community from the Dakotas to the Mexicos, from Winnipeg to Guadalupe, gathered together, swept together, welded and riven together in one single and mighty song, the Song of the West

(9-10).

But Presley quickly becomes frustrated by the banality of the railroad-rancher conflict, which does not seem to fit into his idealized picture of the West. “All the noble poetry of the ranch—the valley—seemed in his mind to be marred and disfigured by the presence of certain immovable facts” (12). Searching for his subject, he is “again and again brought up against the railroad, the stubborn iron barrier against which his romance shattered itself and disintegrated” (13). That Presley is unable to incorporate “grain rates” and “unjust freight tariffs” into a vision of epic romance is precisely the point. Initially flinching at such a challenge, he wanders instead around the old Spanish mission, taking symbolic refuge in California’s past and feeling he lives in an age where romance is dead.

The dominant impression of Presley, based on his thought and behavior in the opening chapters, is that he is a weak version of Norris, a would-be novelist with a set of outmoded sensibilities. In certain moments though, Presley seems to voice Norris’s views quite directly, as when he admits to Vanamee that “The life is here; my West is here.... It is the man who is lacking, the poet; we have been educated away from it all. We are out of touch” (41). Over-education is directly connected with the kind of over-refined intellectuality that Norris identified with all of the degenerative elements in his culture, the decaying of the Anglo-Saxon life-force. Here it is what prevents the writing of the epic. Many of Norris’s biographers and critics have emphasized his aversion to formal academic training despite his access to first-rate institutions (he attended Berkeley, The Academy des Arts in Paris, and Harvard), emphasizing his stated preference for “doing” over “thinking.” No doubt Presley is here voicing doubts Norris himself had about his own ability to discard the dead weight of his intellectual inheritance

in order to write the great contemporary novel. At another early moment, Presley's musings take him to the brink of the Norrisian naturalist formula: "Reality was what he longed for, things that he had seen. Yet how to make this compatible with romance" (23). By mid-novel, however, he has long given up attempting such a synthesis.

As Vance points out, there is a general similarity between the diction of Presley and that of the novel's omniscient narrator, and phrases that ostensibly come from Presley's interior consciousness are duplicated in scenes where the poet is not present. Some of this ambiguity is probably due to Norris's rather imperfect mastery of free indirect discourse. Nevertheless, there is a case to be made that during the writing of the novel Norris was less than sure how much he identified with the poet, which would account for the shifting narratorial distance. At one point he tells us that Presley had disappointed Anne, the wife of Magnus Derrick who had welcomed the arrival of a "congenial spirit" with literary pretensions (61). She is shocked that he cares little for literature, "outside of a few chosen deities," that he is "indifferent to 'style,' to elegant English," and prefers "barbaric" Homer to "the neatly phrased rondeaux and sestinas and chansonettes of the little magazines" (61). When she tells Presley that his imagined "Song of the West," is not literature, he replies, "no, thank God, it is not."

Yet when measured against Vanamee and Annixter, two of the novel's other principal figures, Presley is characterized as effeminate and overcivilized. In a characteristic passage depicting a group of field hands resting and eating after an exhausting day's labor, Norris shows Vanamee sitting among the men and taking part in their "crude and primitive feasting." While he sees nothing repulsive in the scene, "Presley would have abhorred it—this feeding of the People, this gorging of the human

animal, eager for its meat.... They were strong, these men, with the strength of the soil they worked, in touch with the essential things” (132). As Norris’s prose approaches his naturalist paradigm of “life, not literature,” Presley is alienated by the healthy, honest labor of men living off of the land. Likewise, the poet’s sterile bachelorhood is unfavorably compared to the healthy change that has occurred in his friend Annixter. His love for Hilma Tree has transformed him from a foul-tempered cynic into a humble, caring, more fully humanized being. Annixter has begun to live for others instead of himself. “Pres.... she’s made a man out of me” (467). Conjugal union, for Norris, far from placing limits on the exercise of masculinity, allows it to blossom. And it is no coincidence that in the presence of the “new” Annixter, Presley, with his “vague schemes, glittering systems of reconstruction.... with all his refinement.... stood a bungler at the world’s workbench” (468).

The Curse of the “Literary”

In Book Two of *The Octopus*, the depiction of the artist as effeminate and degenerate is extended beyond Presley. In the opening chapter, Norris shifts the scene to San Francisco, where, as will be the case with the Chicago milieu of *The Pit*, the center of business is also the center of the art scene. The poet attends an event at a local club and is introduced to a gallery of male aesthetes and society women. As we might expect, it is an occasion for Norris to satirize a local art scene that he was once a reluctant part of. While writing for the San Francisco *Wave* from 1896-1899, Norris was in contact with the members of literary circles such as Los Jeunes, and with the poets and artists

associated with *The Lark*, one of a number of “little magazines” sprouting up as part of the so-called artistic Renaissance centered in the city.¹⁴ The main attraction at the club is the painting of a middle-aged artist named Hartrath, which is being raffled off in order to begin fundraising for the city’s upcoming “Million–Dollar Fair and Flower Festival.” The artist is “flamboyantly dressed” in a velvet coat and wears his hair long. The picture, as Donald Graham notes, is “a conventional pastoral scene of the kind much in vogue in California in the 1890’s” (83). When Presley is introduced to Hartrath by Mrs. Cedarquist, he pathetically admits that “I am too sensitive.... beauty unmans me” (316). For all that Hartrath is a cardboard artist figure, he is also a refraction of the more complicated Presley, just as Presley is a refraction of Norris himself. When Graham observes that “Hartrath is an apparition of Presley’s former self,” we might apply the same formula to the relationship of Presley and Norris (87).¹⁵

The central figures of the scene, however, are the Cedarquists themselves, the quintessential representation in the novel of the man of affairs and his socialite wife. Mrs. Cedarquist, acting mistress of ceremonies for the occasion, is the subject of ridicule. She is “a fashionable woman, the president and chairman of a score of clubs, forever running after fads,” concerned primarily about being the first to discover and bring to society’s attention some new triviality:

a Russian countess.... an aesthete possessing a collection of wonderful topaz gems.... a decayed musician who had been ejected from a young ladies’ musical conservatory.... A Japanese youth who wore spectacles and a grey flannel shirt, and who, at intervals delivered himself of the most astonishing poems.... Now a Christian Scientist, a lean, grey woman, whose creed was neither Christian nor Scientific.... Now a University Professor, with the bristling beard of an anarchist chief-of-section. (312)

Mrs. Cedarquist and her procession of fakes are set off against the impressive Mr. Cedarquist. The manufacturer has recently pulled the remainder of his capital out of The Atlas Iron Works, and lectures Hartrath on his naiveté about the real relationship between culture and industry. He wryly recommends blowing up the abandoned Iron Works before the arrival of “Eastern Capitalists” for the “Million Dollar Fair,” otherwise “we should have to answer that our business men preferred to invest their money in corner lots and government bonds, rather than to back up legitimate, industrial enterprise. We don’t want fairs. We want active furnaces” (303).

But Cedarquist is more than just a manufacturer; he is an entrepreneur, and while he is clearly bothered by the business community’s retreat from industry, and is rather ashamed of the public’s seeming indifference to their own economic well-being (“Do you suppose Shelgrim could convert the whole San Joaquin Valley into his backyard otherwise?”), his real interest lies in staying ahead of the game. As such, Cedarquist may rival and even surpass Shelgrim as the novel’s most visionary businessman. It is obvious that the epic scope of Cedarquist’s thought inspires Norris. In front of Presley, Harran, and Lyman Derrick, he holds forth on the problem of over-production and the future of commercial enterprise: “The great word of the twentieth century will be.... Markets” (305). By novel’s end, Cedarquist has ploughed all of his capital into his great new adventure, the building of ships to carry wheat and other goods to China and India, massive new markets for American products that will dwarf those of Europe: “We must march with the course of empire, not against it” (306). In a certain light, then, Cedarquist is indeed the heroic capitalist. He is not just distributor of food to the hungry masses, but is an American visionary. He has found a way to extend the frontier beyond

the limits of California, into the Pacific and beyond. He has fused the vanishing pioneer spirit and old dreams of Manifest Destiny with the modern twentieth century entrepreneurial imagination, projecting American empire into the Far East, well beyond the borders of the continent.

Meanwhile, Presley struggles to suppress the inner artist. As the novel progresses, he forms deeper ties with individual ranchers and begins writing his protest poem "The Toilers," taking the idea from a painting he sees during a visit to the Cedarquist mansion. The poem is completed during a night of inspired anger at the railroad and sympathy with "the people" after he overhears a conversation about the devastating effect the railroad freight hikes have on his friend Dyke, a hop grower. He pours his thoughts into his journal, and "as his prose grew more exalted, it passed easily into the domain of poetry" (371). The spontaneous outpouring of emotion leaves Presley immensely satisfied, and he feels like he finally produced something significant. Yet soon after, "the artist in him reasserted itself" (372).

He became more interested in his poem, as such, than in the cause that had inspired it. He went over it again, retouching it carefully, changing a word here and there, and improving its rhythm. For the moment he forgot the people, forgot his rage.... remembered only that he had written a great poem. Then doubt intruded. After all, was it so great? Did not its sublimity overpass a little into the bounds of the ridiculous.... Had he failed again? (372-373)

Despite the poet's own doubts, "The Toilers" is a great success, published initially with fanfare in a San Francisco paper and then reprinted widely across the country. Presley wonders if he is actually "the greatest American poet since Bryant," as one newspaper has it (394).

His literary sensibilities again get in the way during an impassioned, populist-themed lecture at a crucial meeting of the League of Ranchers, after they have lost their legal battle with the P. & S.W. The improvised speech is powerfully structured by tempered cadences and is peppered with historical references to Lexington and Waterloo. Despite the roar of applause, Presley chides himself as he walks away from the scene: “[h]e had talked as he would have written” (532). Feeling once again alienated from the “Life of the People,” Presley eventually abandons words altogether, opting for direct action and plotting with the socialist saloon-keeper Caraher to throw a pipe bomb through the window of S. Behrman, the local P. & S.W. representative. This, too, is botched.

The final insult comes in the ironic form of praise. While the wife and child of his dead friend Hooven beg and starve on the streets of San Francisco, Presley reluctantly attends a luxurious dinner party hosted by a Mr. Gerard, the vice-president of the P. & S.W. Presley is the guest of honor, as his poem has “made a convert” of Mrs. Gerard. While supping on Londonberry Pheasant, she tells him she has “started a movement” to send a shipload of wheat to help the starving people of India (605). “The Toilers,” conceived out of sympathy with the People, but suffering from the fatal flaw of excessive artistry, is ultimately appropriated by the capitalist class, serving to assuage the consciences of the wives of the rich. By the end of *The Octopus*, the novel’s resident artist has essentially given up his calling, ceding the role of visionary to the capitalists, to the manufacturer and the railroad man. In the novel’s final scene, Presley is neither creator nor creative destroyer, but merely spectator, a passenger on the first of Cedarquist’s steamships headed for India.

Two Sides of a Coin

What then of Norris's two victorious capitalists? While Shelgrim is generally considered the more important figure, a careful reading of the novel's conclusion reinforces the notion that Cedarquist is at least as significant, especially if we extend the perspective beyond the scope of the novel. As a manufacturer who has withdrawn his investment in the Iron Works in order to capitalize new markets abroad, Cedarquist embodies the great economic shift that forms the backdrop of the novel, the transition from a production-based economy to a speculation-driven and consumption-driven economy. In his entrepreneurial focus on opening new markets, his re-orientation toward the consumption side of capitalism, Cedarquist is a businessman of the twentieth century. Yet, while Norris depicts Shelgrim's railroad as an entirely exploitative rather than a productive force, Cedarquist, despite abandoning the Iron Works, still maintains ties to manufacturing; as the novel concludes, he has embarked on a career as a shipbuilder. As the scene moves to Chicago in the second book of the trilogy, the sphere of production, as we will see, drops out entirely.

With *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (1903), the scene has shifted to the urban milieu of America's newest and fastest growing metropolitan center, "the only great city in the world to which all of its citizens have come for the avowed purpose of making money," the novelist Henry Fuller once observed. Loosely based on Joseph Leiter's famous attempt to corner the wheat market in 1897, Norris tells the story of the rise and downfall of Curtis Jadwin, a Michigan farm boy who has come to Chicago and made his fortune in real estate.¹⁶ Jadwin, nearing forty and bored with his success, is increasingly drawn into

the commodity speculation game, despite initial reluctance and the warnings of his good friend, the wealthy businessman Charlie Cressler. Taking a “short” position on a thousand bushels of wheat based on a tip about new European import duties, he makes an easy hundred thousand and is “blooded to the game.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, Jadwin pursues the beautiful and spirited Laura Dearborn, an aspiring actress who has come with her sister to Chicago to escape the provincial attitude of her native New England town. Laura, an independent-minded and somewhat temperamental young woman, entertains three suitors, among them the artist Sheldon Corthell, before eventually submitting to Jadwin, seduced by dreams of becoming one of the city’s glamorous nouveau-riche.

The marriage starts disintegrating after Laura, feeling shunned by her increasingly distracted husband, takes up with the artist Corthell and, Madame Bovary-like, loses herself in the romantic fantasies of the heroines she reads about. As husband and wife become estranged, Norris’s plot breaks into two. Early success selling wheat short has earned Jadwin a reputation, and, feeling an air of invincibility, he decides to pull off a dramatic coup. Covertly taking a “long” position on May wheat futures, he becomes the “unknown bull” and masterfully corners the market. But Jadwin is unwilling to relinquish his god-like grip on the wheat market, and is ruined in an attempt buy all of the July wheat, a crop he has helped make impossibly large, as farmers across the country had begun to plant exclusively wheat in order to take advantage of the high prices caused by the earlier corner. Added to this is a tragic complication: his friend Cressler had taken a short position on the wheat and been caught in the rush of the bull. He is bankrupted and commits suicide. The night before the final showdown at the board of trade, Laura in a last ditch effort to capture her husband appears before him in a series of gaudy

costumes, masquerading as Emperor Justinian's consort Theodora and reciting a dramatic scene from Racine's *Athalie*, before transforming into Bizet's *Carmen* and dancing the bolero. In an unlikely ending, the collapse of the corner (and the speculator's nervous breakdown) allows Laura to slip into the role of caretaker, and the couple, renouncing speculation and art, decide to move west and begin anew.

As even such a short sketch demonstrates, with the second novel in the wheat trilogy, Norris has moved definitively into the sphere of what his contemporary Thorstein Veblen calls "Pecuniary Culture," an environment characterized by the unprecedented degree to which money is the ultimate arbiter in a wide range of value distinctions. The businessman is the central and dominant cultural figure in such a society. Nonetheless, in *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (1904), Veblen attacks the popular notion that the businessman is the figure largely responsible for moving industry and culture in a progressive direction. The type of businessman that dominates the turn-of-the-century economic scene, he argues, is neither a producer nor a strictly commercial man (by this he means someone who is primarily involved in selling). Rather, he is the large businessman who operates in the middle, at the interstices of production and consumption. He is primarily interested in "a redistribution of investments for more profitable ventures, and coalitions with other businessmen" (24). At a remove from industry and from industrial innovation (the province of the engineers), he views production from the standpoint of "convertibility into money values," not the benefit to mankind of these new products and services (51). Despite the fact that his culture often views him as a leading figure, the businessman's strategy often as not is to slow the advance of technological progress, when it suits him:

This work of keeping and disturbing the interstitial adjustments does

not look immediately to the output of goods as its source of gain, but to the alterations of values involved in the disturbances of the balance, and to the achievement of a more favorable business situation for some of the enterprises engaged. (49)

Writing in the wake of a decade and a half of the most intense industrial consolidation in American's history, Veblen was registering the rise of the era of finance capital, symbolized in the figure of J.P. Morgan and his masterful manipulation of the new financial instrument called the holding company. The post-civil war era in business had been dominated by men like Rockefeller and Carnegie, shrewd industrialists who, like Norris's Cedarquist, were capitalists still tied to the manufacturing sector. But when Morgan purchased Carnegie's consolidated steel empire in 1903, it was purely for the purpose of acquiring the corporate stock, not the manufacture of steel.¹⁸

Born out of revisions to New Jersey's corporation laws in 1889, the holding company allowed for the creation of a joint-stock company whose sole purpose was to hold stock in other companies; the original idea of the corporate charter had undergone a final perversion. Intended to serve the public by facilitating the creation of goods or services deemed of general interest, this new species of corporation no longer needed a governmental charter, nor was it required to "produce" anything—its sole tie to industry was an interest in buying and selling industrial stocks at a profit.¹⁹ With this financial weapon, J.P. Morgan grew a paper empire so large that during the Panic of 1893 he was called on to bail out the U.S. government. As Morgan and his new breed moved to the center of the American economy, they embodied the growing split between finance and industry, a split between what Veblen called "the businessmen," and his "Pecuniary Culture," and "the engineer," and his "Industrial Culture."

The distinction is illustrative in any consideration of the relationship of business and art in Norris's wheat novels, precisely because it suggests that both lie on the same side of the binary. This has two important ramifications. The first is the implicit argument that businessmen themselves are the superfluous men, and are at least as responsible as artists for contributing to the perceived cultural degeneration. Unlike the engineers or farmers, businessmen are parasitical power brokers who take their cut of the profits without actually producing anything. They operate entirely in the symbolic realm of exchange values. Veblen himself warned that the "excess growth" of this class "will eventually bring a decline in the vitality of the community" (64). To take this insight seriously would be to rewrite the standard cultural historical narrative of the "decadent nineties," replacing Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater with J.P. Morgan and Charles Flint. If values are ultimately rooted in the soil and in the technical skill necessary to cull its fruits, with this new breed of businessmen as the leading figures in the culture we have indeed moved a great distance from Jefferson's dream of a farmer's republic, each citizen a producer and each with an equal voice in the political process.

In *The Octopus*, the triumph of the parasitic railroad over not just the ranchers but the skilled class of engineers is evident in the tragedy of Dyke, one of the novel's many martyred at the hands of the P. & S.W. In an early scene, we find out that the engineer has been fired by the railroad after refusing to take a pay cut, despite faithful and brave service for over ten years. Deciding to become a hop grower, he has a boom crop during his first harvest season, only to see the profits it would bring expropriated by the railroad in the form of an outrageous freight rate hike. Infuriated enough to take direct action, Dyke executes a daring one-man train robbery and steals the money in the train's lock-

box, shooting and killing a conductor in the process. On the run for weeks, he hijacks a detached locomotive, only to be hunted down and killed by P. & S.W. agents.

Throughout this subplot, it is noteworthy that Norris not only depicts Dyke's rebellion against the railroad with sympathy, but also writes with profound respect for the engineer's technical skill in operating the car he hijacks. In his mastery over the "great brute" of a freight car, "once more [Dyke] was the engineer," and he operates it on an instinctual level associated by Norris with masculine health and power. It takes a small army of lesser men to finally capture him.

Like Marx in Europe, and Bellamy in America, Veblen dreamed that the reign of the parasitic business class was bound to be a "transitory dominion." The rise of the machine age, he felt, inevitably led to "the socialistic disaffection" (400). Veblen's utopia was one where The Engineers threw off their shackles and took command of the progress of a healthier technology-centered civilization. During a solitary moment of reflection in the library of Cedarquist, Magnus Derrick envisions a future "stranding the middleman, the *entrepreneur*.... the farmer suddenly emancipated, the world's food no longer at the mercy of the speculator" (319). But Magnus isn't a farmer at heart; like Shelgrim and Cedarquist, he too is ultimately a capitalist whose visions center on personal gain, a fact made plain by his fantasy of sailing the Pacific to conquer Chinese markets with his son Harran leading the flagship. It is not surprising, however, that Norris never seriously entertained the notion of the business class as superfluous. As we have seen, he was far too enthralled with the romance of commerce and its cultural relation to fantasies of masculine power.

If Veblen's distinction between pecuniary and industrial culture helps us demythologize the productivity of the businessman, it also helps us to recognize that the worlds of Curtis Jadwin the speculator and Laura Dearborn the actress are, as it were, two sides of the same coin. With *The Pit*, the scene has moved entirely out of the sphere of production-- of land cultivation, farming technology, railroads and ship building. The wheat itself makes no appearance in the novel, with the fleeting exceptions of a spilled sample sack on the floor of the Chicago board of trade, and a handful of seeds fed to pigeons on the window ledge of a commodity broker's office. This is as it should be, for the novel's principal businessmen, buying and selling commodity futures, have no intention of even owning (let alone distributing) the wheat when it is actually harvested. They concern themselves instead with market forecasts, international tariffs, and fluctuations in stock quotes, relying on their superior intelligence and "sixth sense" rather than any physical attributes associated with farm or factory production.

Critics who have seen *The Pit* as part of the genre of the business novel generally take the business/art divide as axiomatic, and in doing so they capitulate in the standard narrative that the sphere of business is to be associated with production, with "doing" and "work," while art is associated with the spiritual refinements. Thus, the public life of Chicago, burgeoning metropolis of the Midwest, appears split between spheres of production and consumption, associated in the novel with the business district and the theatre district. However, as Veblen demonstrates in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), in such an environment, all aesthetic valuations are inevitably linked with economic valuations. The pursuit of refinements during leisure time becomes an occasion for the conspicuous display of fiscal strength. The "pecuniary canons of

beauty” are established by America’s new capitalist leisure class in such matters as styles of dress and furniture, types of domestic servants and pets, and artistic and scholarly pursuits, all of which are coded demonstrations of wealth and power. The aesthetic qualities of each work in the gallery or library of the businessman are trans-valued as they come to be seen in the light of pecuniary culture. “Any valuable object in order to appeal to our sense of beauty must conform to the requirements of beauty and of expensiveness both.... The marks of expensiveness come to be accepted as beautiful features of the expensive articles” (87-88). Such a view, obviously enough, directly contradicts any notion of an autonomous aesthetic realm.

Business in the Garden of Art

The crux of interpretation in the critical history of *The Pit* has centered on the relationship between the “love plot” and the “business plot.” Such a reading is encouraged by Norris, who more or less structures the novel in a sequence of chapters alternating between Laura’s domestic life and Curtis’s activities on La Salle Street, the center of the business district. In an early review, Howells complains that the novel is weighed down by the “unimportant” love plot. “It should have toppled, if at all, to the side of the wheat gambler—not the wheat gambler’s wife” (242).²⁰ While this sentiment is a bit odd, given Howells’ own emphasis on the domestic, it is unsurprising that the comments are echoed in many of the notable interpretations of the novel. After all, Norris’s work was from the first generally associated with a masculine, naturalist aesthetic, as he himself vigorously encouraged. In the first book-length study of Norris,

Earnest Marchand feels Norris “missed his chance to equal to his earlier performance when he allowed the love story to gain the upper hand” (86). Charles Child Walcutt finds the focus on Jadwin’s home life a bothersome “intrusion” as Laura’s character is never really convincing; “she is merely there as a foil to set off the great struggle of the Pit,” but ends up causing the story to break into halves (153-154). Donald Pizer finds both the business and the love plots “unsuccessful,” yet observes that they are somewhat more effective when considered independently of one another, as the dualistic structure suffers from “no common theme” (174).

Warren French, moving Laura’s story to the center of the novel, finds *The Pit* more satisfying. He argues that the reconciliation of the Jadwins in the novel’s conclusion demonstrates the author’s maturing vision. French discovers a thematic link in the twin plots: both Laura and Curtis struggle to overcome the abyss of “the cult of self,” that fin de siècle danger symbolized in the novel’s title. Such an interpretation is supported by Norris’s own happy marriage during the year he began the trilogy, and his subsequent views on the healthy abatement of ego in such a union.²¹ Seeing Laura as the novel’s principal character, French was really just following a hint from Norris himself, who wrote the following to his friend Isaac Marcossou while composing the novel in November of 1901: “The story is told through Laura Dearborn. She occupies the center stage all of the time, and I shall try to interest the reader more in the problems of her character than in any other human element of the book” (qtd. in McElrath and Crisler 397). However, as McElrath and Crisler argue in their recent biography, Norris probably changed his mind after he started writing and realized that it would be impossible to carry

through on his wheat theme writing principally about a heroine who has no interest in the business world.

New Historiographical readings of the novel have continued to focus on the “plot problem.” In his article on *The Pit* in an influential collection entitled *American Realism: New Essays* (1982), Howard Horwitz argues that the problem with the novel lies precisely in its attempt to harmonize marriage and speculation. Keyed in to Norris’s generation’s anxieties over the shift from a “money economy” to a “credit economy,” he finds a parallel in Laura’s flirting and Curtis’s grain speculating. Thus, just as the difference between love affairs and real love is blurred during flirtation, the difference between gambling and legitimate investment is blurred in the act of speculating. But Norris, unlike his successor Theodore Dreiser, ultimately abandons the task of romanticizing the actions of the speculator, sensing how a speculative economy in both business and human relationships “melts solid property and identity (229).” For Horwitz, Curtis’s retreat from grain speculation back to real estate and the couple’s renewed commitment to marriage signify Norris’s imaginative retreat to “an Eden with no exchange values,” and thus a repression of the recognition that in the America of J.P. Morgan, “all business activity becomes speculative” (217).²²

The idea that the market itself might be a locus of “the sentimental” is considered in David S. Zimmerman’s article “Frank Norris, Market Panic, and the Mesmeric Sublime.” Zimmerman argues that turn-of-the-century economists, struggling to make sense of a series of devastating financial panics, appropriated the language and findings of contemporary crowd psychologists, coming to consider the market a sublime mechanism capable of inducing mass hypnotism in investors. In panics, a hysterical

atmosphere produced behavior characterized by “extraordinary emulativeness.”

Spiritualism and economics came to be seen as “not opposites but partners, changeling twins in the heart of the marketplace.” Thus, Zimmerman argues, “[b]oth Laura’s hysteria and the market’s panic are the effects of hypnotization.” In Zimmerman’s work particularly, the separation of spheres has effectively collapsed. It is also interesting to note that the binary structuring the novel has gradually shifted from business/love to business/art. My reading of *The Pit* develops this critical narrative, as I demonstrate how Norris depicts business and art in a dialectical rather than dualistic framework.

The novel’s opening chapter is largely told through the perspective of Laura, who has recently arrived in town and has been invited by the Cresslers to a performance of Gounod’s *Faust* at the Chicago Auditorium. Along with her sister Page and her Aunt Wess, she impatiently awaits the arrival of the rest of the party. Laura is in a state of nervous excitement, feeling her destiny has finally arrived and she is entering the *haute monde*. The aura of anticipation is shot through, however, with another tension. On the other side of town, commodity markets at the board of trade have gone haywire following the great “Helmick failure.” Laura, fretting about missing the overture, catches fragments of the conversations in the inner vestibule of the opera house:

‘—and I guess he’ll do well if he settles for thirty cents on the dollar!’
‘-- Never saw such a call for margins in my life. Some of the houses
called eight cents.’ (11)

During the second act, as Laura sits in the opera box entranced by a duet between the tenor and soprano, “a discordant element developed:”

“The shortage is a million bushels at the very least. Two hundred carloads were to arrive from Milwaukee last night” (23).

In the *grande scene* of the fourth act, the soprano must again compete with the “hoarse whispers” in the darkness: “—Clearing House balance of three thousand dollars” (27). Laura’s night at the opera is blighted, but the scene is magnificently realized, as Norris establishes his leitmotif: the intrusion of business into the garden of art.²³

The gendered nature of the business/art binary is manifest in the vast opposition between Laura’s principal suitors, Jadwin the real estate man and Corthell the stained glass painter.²⁴ She is enthralled by Corthell’s manner and eloquence in all matters concerning art—he represents the world that seduces her. Yet she is intrigued with the powerful Jadwin as well:

“He was a heavy-built man, would have made two of Corthell, and his hands were large and broad, the hands of a man of affairs.... Those broad hands and keen, calm eyes would enfold and envelop a Purpose with tremendous strength, and they would persist....” (32).

On the surface level, the stereotype is fully exploited. Just as the Jadwin is largely seen in and around the offices in the business district on La Salle Street, Corthell appears primarily in the drawing rooms with the ladies, discussing Racine or Rochefoucauld. As in *The Octopus*, Norris is once again preoccupied with the effeminacy of the art world.

Autobiographical elements in *The Pit*, as numerous critics have discussed, may be even more prominent than in the earlier novel.²⁵ According to Norris’ brother Charles, Jadwin and Laura were clearly modeled on their parents, and the growing alienation between B.F. and Gertrude Norris wasn’t lost on the precocious boy. Frank’s mother, seeing a precocious talent for drawing in the boy, sent him to the prestigious *Academy Julian* in Paris while he was an adolescent, but his father called him home when he found out Norris was spending his time writing romances. In *The Octopus*, as I have argued, Norris expresses his ambivalence towards his calling as a literary artist in the figure of

Presley. In *The Pit*, on the plot level, the author's ambivalence is expressed through Laura's choice of suitors. Even after her decision to marry Jadwin, the artist Corthell continues to press his claims on Laura's attention throughout the novel until the final pages when the couple reconcile and decide to leave Chicago.²⁶

By mid-novel, the Jadwins have moved into their spectacular new mansion on Lincoln Park. As we might expect, Corthell is more comfortable in navigating its vast interior than the owner himself, who, like Howells's Silas Lapham, has let a team of decorators take care of the internal furnishings. Giving his broker Gretry a tour of the house one evening, he confesses ignorance to the question of the total number of rooms, adding that he "discovered a new one yesterday" (175). Jadwin brings Gretry to the magnificent art gallery, which is full of European treasures: "ivory statuettes, old snuff boxes, fans from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries... a multitude of pictures, oils, water colors..." (175). It is not lost on Gretry that all of this represents "a big pot of money" (176). The centerpiece though, is the gigantic pipe organ. In a rather buffoonish series of gestures, Jadwin draws a perforated roll from a case and attaches it to the organ, pumping the pedals of his prized machine. As the overture of *Carmen* booms through the gallery, Gretry catches snippets of the real estate man's impromptu lecture:

"Toreador...horse power...Madame Calve...electric motor...fine song...storage battery" (178).²⁷

In a parallel scene in the following chapter, Corthell visits and detaches the self-playing mechanism from the organ. He plays Mendelssohn's "Consolation," the second movement of Beethoven's *Appassionata*, and Lizst's "Mephisto Waltz." Corthell has dimmed the lights and Laura melts into the languorous mood "of those prolonged chords

of Lizst's, heavy and clogged and cloyed with passion" (221). But as Corthell finishes the piece and begins to reflect on music as the most intimate of the arts, "the electric lights all over the gallery flashed out in a sudden blaze, and Curtis Jadwin entered the room, crying out: 'Are you here, Laura? By George, my girl, we pulled it off, and I've cleaned up five—hundred—thousand—dollars'" (223). As in the novel's opening scene, Laura's attempt to escape into the sanctuary of the aesthetic realm has again been tainted by the sudden intrusion of the commercial world, symbolized here by the bright electric lights and the Bergsonian comedy of the self-playing organ attachment, Jadwin's contribution to the gallery.²⁸ In the ensuing conversation between speculator and artist, the stereotyping verges on parody, as Jadwin, flush with his newest triumph, offers Corthell some advice:

"Buy May wheat. It'll beat art all hollow."

"Oh, dear no," returned the artist. "I should lose my senses if I won, and my money if I didn't."

"That's so. Keep out of it. It's a rich man's game.... Well, let's not talk shop. You're an artist, Mr. Corthell. What do you think of our house?" (225)

In such a scenario, Corthell appears so emasculated that Jadwin is seemingly oblivious to the fact that his wife is being seduced before his very eyes. Rather than recognize a competing model of masculinity, another male capable of arousing a woman sexually, Jadwin sees the figure of the eunuch entertaining his wife while she waits for her husband to arrive. Corthell, perhaps knowingly, plays into Jadwin's fantasy by reinforcing the disjunction between the realm of artistic judgment and money-making. By speculating, he claims, his aesthetic sensibilities would atrophy. Meanwhile, maintaining the separation of spheres in both Laura and Jadwin's minds, he is free to pursue his interests

of stealing her away from the speculator. And while Laura ultimately does not elope with the artist, there is more than a suggestion that the affair is sexually consummated in a later scene when Laura invites the artist into her private rooms. Jadwin comes home one night later in the week complaining of “a queer sensation.... A sort of numbness” between the forehead and the eyes; it would appear he has acquired the cuckold’s horns.²⁹

In the context of the gender theme, it is interesting to consider the subplot involving Laura’s sister Page Dearborn and her suitor Landry Court, the stock broker. Norris clearly meant the couple to provide a foil for the Laura/Curtis pairing, as both are naturally conservative characters, less given to flights of the ego. When Page tells her sister that Landry is serious about her, she praises her new lover as an ideal model of temperance. “He wants to be more than a money-getting machine, he says, and he wants to cultivate his mind and understand art and literature and that. And he wants me to help him” (198). While Landry is more than competent in his role on La Salle Street, he proves a faithful and attentive companion to Page in the evening hours. In fact, Norris’s tacit approval of the Page/Landry union suggests a third model of masculinity, a kind of synthesis of the commercial man and the man of refined sensibility. Larzer Ziff claimed that *The Pit* is “the first profound business novel because it rightly examines the psychic consequences of the commercialization of American life.... [it] addresses itself to the question of what, indeed, happens to masculinity in America when the male’s successful pursuit of his role in accordance with the business ethic drains him of his virility” (273). Such a perspective suggests both that masculinity is performative rather than essential, and that it is performed differently in public and private. In a recent study of the novel, Karsten Piep emphasizes the Page/Landry courtship, arguing that Landry “embodies the

successful reconciliation of the ‘strenuous’ with domestic life.” By novel’s end Jadwin is “a dinosaur” and Landry has come to “personify the new middle-class model” of manhood.

It is undoubtedly true that Jadwin is, in Ziff’s phrase, “less than his virile self in his marital relations,” and that this contributes significantly to Laura’s increasing infatuation with Corthell (272). It is also true that Landry is drawn sympathetically by Norris. Nonetheless, the young stock broker remains a minor character, and it is clear that Jadwin’s manly conquests on La Salle Street preoccupy Norris’s imagination. If *The Pit* is a reformist text helping to inaugurate new gender relations in the Progressive Era, as Piep argues, this is at the very least neutralized by the conservative thrust of the central love plot, where Jadwin and Laura, after indulging their parallel fantasies, return to more traditional gender roles by novel’s end.

The “Representation” of Commerce

What is more certain is that Norris’s anxieties about masculinity are manifest in the novel’s figuration of business activity.³⁰ In the central symbol of the wheat pit, and more generally in the depiction of the events on La Salle Street, Norris labors to connect business with images of battle and with the creative and destructive energies of the natural world. We begin to see this in the final passages of the opening chapter, where Norris forges his central opposition. Wheat speculators have invaded the Auditorium and destroyed Laura’s aesthetic bliss. As the carriage carrying the Dearborns leaves the theatre district and rolls through the “commission district,” Laura all of a sudden

recognizes “that other drama, that other tragedy, working on there furiously, fiercely through the night, while she and all those others had sat there in that atmosphere of flowers and perfume, listening to music” (38). Bringing the two spheres together in Laura’s mind, encapsulated in the word “drama,” Norris emphasizes their essential opposition through hyperbolic adjectives—La Salle Street is “furious” and “fierce” while the Auditorium is floral and perfumed. The scene of commercial transaction then fully takes shape in the language of martial conquest:

Ah, this drama of the “Provision Pits,” where the rush of millions of bushels of grain, and the clatter of millions of dollars, and the tramping and the wild shouting of thousands of men filled the air with the noise of battle!.... It had all the significance of field hospitals after the battle—hospitals and the tents of commanding generals. The wounds of the day were being bound up, the dead were being counted, while, shut in their headquarters, the captains and the commanders drew the plans for the grapple of armies that was to recommence with daylight. (38)

When Norris takes us inside the wheat pit in the subsequent chapter, he paints a scene of violence and fragmentation, calling to mind Picasso’s *Guernica*:

Arms were flung upward in strenuous gestures, and from above the crowding heads in the Wheat Pit a multitude of hands, eager, the fingers extended, leaped into the air. All articulate expression was lost in a single explosion of sound as the traders surged downwards to the center of the Pit, grabbing each other, struggling towards each other, tramping, stamping, charging through with might and main. (88)

If the floor of the board of trade is a great battleground where soldiers act out the commands of their field generals, the pit is also described as a kind of powerful whirlpool, a great centripetal force sucking in wheat, money, and men. In this respect, it functions rather like the railroad, that profit-sucking network dominating the earlier

novel. The powerful pit is the heart of city, and the “entire locality reeked with the fatness of a hundred thousand furrows. A land of plenty, the inordinate abundance of the earth itself emptied itself upon the asphalt and cobbles of the quarter” (56-57). Before Jadwin attempts to dominate the flow of wheat in and out of the city, he is in awe of the power of the pit, conceiving of it as a great “resistless force.” “Endlessly, ceaselessly the Pit, enormous, thundering, sucked in and spewed out, sending the swirl of its mighty eddy far out through the city’s channels. Terrible at the center, it was, at the circumference, gentle, insidious and persuasive” (72).³¹

Such a conceit, like the symbol of the octopus, works to establish the proximity of business enterprise to the workings of the natural world, a connection Walter Benn Michaels makes in a provocative discussion of Theodore Dreiser’s *The Financier* (1912). Michaels argues that in equating the volatility of the Philadelphia stock exchange with the unpredictability of weather patterns, Dreiser naturalizes capitalism and thus undermines the force of any political critique of the existing economic structures (83). In Dreiser, whom I will discuss in a subsequent chapter, a contradiction arises between the reformist impulse and the author’s own private fantasies of power.³² *The Financier* and its sequel, *The Titan* (1914) are troubled by the fact that the author seems to identify with capitalist superman Frank Cowperwood, whose very machinations the novels are meant to critique. Making this suggestion about the ideological work of Norris’s wheat novels is less scandalous. Bourgeois through and through, Norris had much less interest than his successor in changing the economic status quo.³³ Rather, Norris’s motivation in his use of nature metaphor seems to parallel Theodore Roosevelt’s motivation in urging a “strenuous life” of outdoor activity: in heading each morning to La Salle Street, Norris’s

businessmen are traveling back to nature, where they have an invigorating encounter with the real—with “life, not literature.” The contradiction in Norris, then, is that in attempting to depict the economic sphere as overtly masculine, he resorts again and again to the aesthetic. His rhetorical strategy, as we have seen, is to play the economic off against the aesthetic in the scenes where commercial language intrudes on the aesthetic realm; and he dramatizes the opposition in Laura’s choice of diametrically opposed suitors, Jadwin and Corthell. Yet the commercial activity of the businessmen on La Salle Street, with their focus entirely on exchange value, on *representations* of wheat, suggests that, in the new speculative economy, metaphors culled from the arts might be more apt than those drawn from battle or nature.

Indeed, the businessmen in *The Pit* encounter “nature” at a high degree of abstraction, generally through the medium of figures on paper as they nervously scan stock quotes and crop yield forecasts. We can see this ambiguity when Norris endows Jadwin with “that blessed sixth sense,” the quality that makes him such a successful speculator (168). On the one hand, “the sixth sense” seems to imply a deep instinctual connection with nature, a masculine quality if ever there was one in Norris. Jadwin’s ability to “feel” subtle shifts in the financial weather give him a special advantage. It is during one of these moments in the winter of his third year in the market that the speculator decides to “cover his May shorts” and start buying September wheat, commencing to build his “long line” that eventually results in a corner during the following Spring. Yet, the term “sixth sense” simultaneously suggests that Jadwin is in touch with something beyond the natural—something in the realm of the spiritual. And

from the moment Jadwin covertly reenters the market as “the Unknown bull,” there is indeed something spectral about him.

The bears watch September wheat prices slowly climb, prodded by this mysterious force. The following year, aided by weak crop forecasts in Europe, Jadwin has pushed the May option up to a dollar a bushel, despite telling his friend Cressler that “there isn’t any big bull” (244). In the ensuing months, Jadwin and his broker Gretry string together a brilliant series of maneuvers to obtain the corner. For the past half year, Jadwin had been playing a secret game with his arch nemesis, the great bear Calvin Crookes. Once Crookes has discovered that Jadwin is the “unknown bull,” he gathers his gang of bears for an assault. With wheat over a dollar a bushel, and Jadwin forty million long for May, Crookes’s gang begins selling fiercely; Jadwin surprisingly follows suit, selling bushel for bushel with Crookes. Willingly depreciating the value of forty million dollars in order to draw in the bear’s capital, he begins buying again the end of the week. “With the buoyancy of a feather,” the wheat shoots back up over a dollar the following week, breaking the bears. While the immoral Crookes covertly covers his shorts at a substantial loss, many in his gang, Cressler included, are forced into bankruptcy.

Both Jadwin and Crookes, vying for market control, operate behind the scenes. By the time his identity is revealed, the “Napoleon of La Salle Street,” has a corner on the May option; “[h]is hand was upon the indicator of the wheat dial of the Board of Trade, and he moved it through as many or as few of the degrees of the circle as he chose” (291). The newspapers have turned Jadwin into a celebrity, and, exhausted from his triumph, he reads of the still rippling effects of his agitating of the whirlpool. Farmers from Kansas to the Dakotas sing his praises as sky high prices allow them to pay off

crushing mortgages. Meanwhile, Italian peasants can no longer afford bread, and subsist on lentils and cress. The great speculator, though, is already too fascinated by the possibility of a July corner to care about the hungry masses.

The shift to the European scene was to take place in *The Wolf*, the unwritten third book of the trilogy, and we might surmise that Norris would have dealt in depth more with the great humanitarian issue of hunger. What we know is that such matters are given remarkably little attention in *The Pit*. Not only is Norris “astonishingly uncritical of the very financial framework [he] had sought to expose in *The Octopus*,” as Alfred Kazin remarked (101), but his infatuation with speculation for speculation’s sake causes him to lose the thread of the wider theme of his projected trilogy, the movement and eventual consumption of the wheat itself. Nevertheless, my point is not to question Norris’s ethics, but rather to stress that, as a novelist, he was faithful to his muse in creating a work that depicts a modern American “pecuniary culture” removed from the processes of production. It should also be noted that Norris regularly defended himself against charges that the philosophy of his work upheld an inhumane economic order, pointing out that he was a novelist, not a political economist, and that it was unreasonable to expect him to be able to imagine a solution that none of his characters could.

But after the 1890’s, a decade of economic trauma that registered the birth pangs of a new era of corporate capitalism, it is fair to say that political economists themselves were puzzling over how to properly understand the place of speculation in a new economy that seemed to invert the common sense relation between industry and finance. The triumph of money, the extraordinary power of the exchange medium over the goods themselves, seemed to suggest an evolution in the ontological status of the very medium.

The great monetary debate in The United States that had begun after the Civil War reached a climax in William Jennings Bryan's unsuccessful 1896 bid for the presidency, which assured the continuance of the gold standard. However, president McKinley's conservative monetary policies at the turn of the century only temporarily slowed a process that the contemporary sociologist George Simmel referred to as "the spiritualization of money." In *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), Simmel argued that the historical development of the money medium tended toward increasing abstraction in a gradual movement from a qualitative to a quantitative standard of value (150). Paradoxically, in order to become more useful as a means of exchange, money came to divest itself of its materiality, its original bartering value, whether as food, tool, or ornament. The more dematerialized money became, the more powerful was its function in society, until it finally came to stand for the concept of "value" itself (128, 169). It is noteworthy that Simmel continually reaches for analogies with art in his analysis of the increasing abstraction of the money form. For Simmel, the meaning of art is derived from its distance from the sensory: "The value of art depends on our overcoming an immediacy, which then operates as if it no longer existed" (153). Like art, money is born in the material world and seeks its destiny in a realm of pure abstraction. Thus, taking a different route, Simmel draws a parallel conclusion to Veblen: namely, that in an economy dominated by businessmen who "manufacture" fluctuations in value, the spheres of the economic and the aesthetic interpenetrate. In the words of a recent commentator on the subject, with the shift "from substance to inscription," economic activity is "grounded in aesthetic experience."³⁴

With this in mind, it is possible to defend Norris against charges that his prose “substituted hypostatizations” for life itself.³⁵ As we have seen, the strategic positions taken in the wheat futures market by traders in *The Pit* are premised upon the contingency of a crop failure, the possibility that the actual wheat may never materialize. In fact, this is exactly what Jadwin the bull is wagering. If the wheat never grows, the price of a bushel rises, and the speculator’s net worth increases. Nature’s non-productivity “produces” profit for the bull.³⁶ Norris’s businessmen, operating solely on the level of exchange value, are trafficking in representations; the material itself is only incidental. In such an economic environment, substituting the concept “The Wheat” for the wheat itself seems relevant indeed. Norris’s fascination with abstraction parallels his protagonist’s, and by extension, his culture’s. By the end of the nineteenth century, not only had the businessman usurped the role of cultural hero, he had done so by appropriating the aesthetic realm from the artists themselves. Like Simmel’s artists, these men had begun to “overcome[e] an immediacy, which then operates as if it no longer existed.”

Just as Presley’s presence in *The Octopus* functions to comment on the status of the artist in the business novel, the theatre/board of trade dialectic in *The Pit* indicates Norris wasn’t just writing another “stock market novel,” but was working through the problem of how to represent commerce. On the climactic day when Jadwin’s July corner is busted, the board of trade is transformed into a great theatre where the traders perform a strange spectacle for the eager crowd who assemble in the gallery. As the novel’s opening chapter is seen largely through the eyes of Laura, during the final chapter Norris

filters the events through the perspective of Page Dearborn, who nervously enters the visitor's gallery to watch Landry help execute Jadwin's orders.

The crowd was packed solidly upon the stairs, between the wall and the balustrades. There were men in top hats, and women in silks; rough fellows of the poorer streets, and gaudily dressed queens of obscure neighborhoods, while mixed with these one saw the faded and shabby wrecks that perennially drifted about the Board of Trade. (312)

Despite its motley appearance, what is apparent is that a crowd has gathered to watch a monumental performance. The chaotic scene of trading that follows is an occasion for some of Norris's characteristically overwrought prose. Yet the efforts to romanticize commerce-- the grimaces, shouts and cries of the men on the floor, and the dramatic swinging of the wheat indicator, seen through the eyes of the uncomprehending Page, appear in all their theatricality.

All around roared the vague thunder that since early morning had shaken the building. In the pit the bids leaped to and fro.... The very planks under foot seemed spinning about in the first huge swirl of the Pit's centripetal convulsion. There was dizziness in the air.... Something deafened the ears, blinded the eyes, dulled and numbed the mind, with its roar, with the chaff and dust of its whirlwind passage.... All at once [Landry] was fighting; all at once he was caught, as it were, from off the stable earth, and flung headlong into the heart and centre of the Pit. What he did, he could not say; what went on about him he could not distinguish.... On the wall overhead, the indicator on the dial was rocking back and forth, like the mast of a ship caught in a monsoon.... The fluctuations were no longer by fractions of a cent, but by ten cents, fifteen cents, twenty five cents at a time. (339)

In the climactic toppling of the wheat corner, Norris's prose aims to evoke a kind of business sublime, as he posits a mysterious force that short-circuits the sensory, dazing actor and spectator alike. More specifically, what this scene emphasizes is that Landry

and the other traders are indeed actors, carrying out the detailed instructions of the master text, as written by the Jadwin's and Crookes's who stay off stage. And the fact that the scene is refracted through Page's perspective allows us to perceive a quality of illusion suffusing the enterprise as a whole, the great wheat dial on the wall coming to seem like nothing so much as a melodramatic stage prop.

Unwilling to stay behind the scenes while the price of wheat finally collapses, Jadwin, in a fit of madness, enters the stage. Norris, unable to resist reaching for nature imagery, turns the speculator into a beast who has broken free. Jadwin fights past Gretry and a group of brokers who attempt to hold him back: “[Flinging] off the restraining clasps, [he] thrust the men to one side, and rushed from the room” (342). To the consternation of traders and gallery both, the great bull himself wades into the center of the pit, fighting off “the undiked Ocean of the Wheat,” which “leaping to the lash of a hurricane, struck him fairly in the face” (343). Then, in a final “gesture of defiance,” “the great bony hand that had once held the Pit in its grip, flung high in the air:”

‘Give a dollar for July—give a dollar for July!’

With one accord [the bears] leaped on him. (344)

In such a moment, we might ask, are we witnessing Jadwin throw off his shackles in a final heroic battle against the elements? Or have we witnessed the speculator assume his rightful role as lead baritone in the final act of “The Smash of the Great Wheat Corner,” as the Chicago newspapers would come to label it the following morning?

Perhaps it is in this tension that we can understand an important aspect of Norris's contribution to the genre of the business novel. Determined to shed all traces of the aesthetic, laboring to identify his prose with the masculine battle, aligning business with the remorseless creative and destructive energies of the natural world, his wheat novels

nonetheless help us to perceive the deeply aesthetic elements ingrained in American commercial enterprise at the turn of the century.

Notes

¹ For a summary of early interpretations conflating Norris and Shelgrim, see French (1962), pp. 89-95 and McElrath and Crisler (2006) pp. 398-402. However, the majority of recent Norris readers view the author as taking a critical stance toward the railroad baron, and thus avoid the problem of explaining how Norris can be both a social Darwinian/economic determinist and retain an ethical conception based on personal responsibility. For a survey of influential views on the question, see Walcutt (1956) pp. 148-151; Pizer (1966) pp. 137-147; Davison (1980) pp. 107-111 and McElrath (1992) pp. 98-100.

² *The Letters of Frank Norris*. Ed. Franklin Walker, pp. 30-31. Such statements run thematically through Norris's book reviews as well. Cf. "It's the Life we want, the vigorous real thing, not the curious weaving of words and the polish of literary finish. Damn the 'style' of a story, so long as we get the swing and rush and trample of the things that live." *Wave*, XVI (22 May 1897).

³ The "seismograph" analogy is made by Michael Davitt Bell (1993), p. 115. Frederick Jackson Turner's famous "frontier thesis" has since been challenged by numerous historians, including Richard Hofstadter in *The Age of Reform* (1955); see esp. Ch.1 "The Agrarian Myth and Commercial Realities."

⁴ See Berthoff pp. 224-225; Ziff p. 270.

⁵ See "Zola as a Romantic Writer." *Wave*, XV (27 June 1896).

⁶ For one his most notable discussions of the subject, see "Zola as a Romantic Writer." *Wave*, XV (27 June 1896). In this and other articles, Norris uses Zola's prose as a model in order to argue that naturalism is not an "inner circle of realism," but rather a form of romanticism that appropriates the realism's fidelity to fact surface detail.

⁷ For a survey of forgotten economic novels from the 1880's and 1890's see Taylor, pp. 59-65.

⁸ For a detailed treatment of Norris's relations with his parents, see McElrath and Crisler, chapters 2-4.

⁹ For every mile of track completed, the Southern Pacific was granted up to twenty miles of land in alternating sections, making it the biggest landholder in the state. See Kevin Starr, "Introduction," *The Octopus*, xv.

¹⁰ The Mussel-Slough Massacre, which took place in 1880, was named for the irrigation ditch where the gunfight occurred. Norris was not the first to base the events in a novel around the massacre. There were at least two predecessors, Josiah Royce's *The Feud of Oakfield Creek* (1887), and W.C. Morrow's *Blood Money* (1882). In order to integrate the gunfight with data he used from the 1890's, Norris anachronistically pushed the event forward about twenty years. See McElrath and Crisler, pp. 347-348.

¹¹ Vance says "By making him a literary person and letting him mull over some of Norris's own problems, inadvertently placing him in the center of the book and made his problems its theme" (130). Also cf. Barbara Hochman: "Much of [Norris's] fiction, while apparently grounded in objective 'reality,' is nonetheless engaged in a vital exploration of the relationship between the reality being explored and the medium of exploration: words memory, and the storytelling impulse" (97).

¹² Charles Child Walcutt makes the influential argument that the majority of naturalist novels are fraught with contradiction as result of the attempt to synthesize transcendental, ethical, and deterministic ideas.

¹³ This perspective had been more or less suggested by Vance and also by Donald Graham (1977) and Barbara Hochman (*The Art of Frank Norris: Storyteller*. Columbia: Missouri UP, 1988) in their monographs on Norris, with Hochman highlighting Presley's infatuation with storytelling and Graham documenting biographical evidence demonstrating that Presley is neither Norris nor "anti-Norris," but rather a "composite figure" of the artist of the nineties, "an amalgam of aesthetic images: Mallarmean faun, San Francisco aesthete, socialist poet in the Markham tradition, and would-be natural poet" (68-69).

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the correspondences between members of the San Francisco literary circles and their fictional counterparts in the novel, see Graham, pp. 66-122

¹⁵ It is striking to note the reversal from Norris's earlier work *Vandover the Brute*, where art has the potential to save us from the beast within. In *The Octopus*, art is what unmans us.

¹⁶ For a summary of Leiter's life and attempted wheat corner, see McElrath and Crisler, pp. 388-390.

¹⁷ In a moment decided by "chance," Jadwin's decision to speculate is left to a coin toss. The scene is suggestive a far more famous one in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, where the banker Hurstwood lets the "accidental" closing of a safe deposit box determine his decision whether or not to steal enough money to elope to New York with Carrie.

¹⁸ For an excellent discussion of the shift in emphasis from industry to finance, see Lawrence Mitchell, *The Speculation Economy* (San Francisco: Barrett-Kohler, 2007), esp. Ch. 1.

¹⁹ The final and most radical form of the law passed in 1899. For a detailed discussion, see Mitchell, Ch. 2.

²⁰ In a later article on Veblen entitled "An Opportunity for American Fiction," Howells talks about the new American leisure class as *the* great subject novelists should exploit. Howells hadn't yet read Veblen when he published his review of *The Pit*.

²¹ After a four year courtship, Norris was married to Jeannette Black on February 12, 1900.

²² Cf. Henry Nash Smith, who argues that Norris, is guilty of dilettantism, playing with concepts that he in the end retreats from. "The Search for a Capitalist Hero" in *The Business Establishment* ed. Earl F. Cheit. (New York: John Wiley & Sons).

²³ In *The Machine in the Garden* (London: Oxford UP 1964), Leo Marx makes an analogous point, though on a much grander scale, arguing that American writers have attempted through fiction to harmonize (disruptive) technological progress with the myth of American as a pastoral Eden.

²⁴ For an interesting counter-suggestion, see Larzer Ziff, who argues that Jadwin and Corthell comprise two different models of masculinity, p. 272.

²⁵ See McElrath and Crisler pp.33-64; p. 397.

²⁶ It is worth noting that McElrath and Crisler make the case that Norris, the sole provider with a wife and baby on the way, tacked on the "conclusion" in an effort to increase the popularity of the novel and the likelihood of more stories and articles being published in the coming months, p.395. For a dissenting perspective, see Warren French, who feels that Norris was voicing his own perspective on marriage at the ending of *The Pit*.

²⁷ Walter Fuller Taylor, perhaps overemphasizing Jadwin's awkwardness in this and related scenes, compares the speculator to Lewis's Babbitt. One salient parallel, however is worth mentioning: both attempt to run Sunday schools on business models!

²⁸ Jadwin's infatuation with the organ is discussed extensively by David Zimmerman, who argues for a parallel between the instrument's and the stock market's qualities of automation.

²⁹ In "Eroticism in The Pit" (*Critical Essays on Frank Norris*) Joseph Katz provides a reading of the scene analyzing the covert sexual imagery and concluding the lovers have had intercourse. Despite the alleged graphic nature of McTeague, Norris largely held to Victorian proprieties restricting the graphic depiction of sexual content. I owe the cuckold's horns insight to Katz as well.

³⁰ At least one commentator, William Dillingham (*Frank Norris: Instinct and Art*. Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1969), has been bothered by the novel's eponymous central symbol, which he feels merges with the symbol of the wheat by novel's end, thus obscuring the function of the latter.

³¹ The gentle, persuasive qualities of the pit also lend force to critical interpretations, like Alred Kazin's, that argue that Norris was essentially writing a temperance novel where speculation is equated with other addictive behaviors like gambling and alcoholism. "The hold of the pit over Curtis Jadwin was exactly like the hold of drink over the good but erring father in a temperance novel" (101).

³² Dreiser, though, was not bothered by his culture's equation of art with effeminacy. His financier Frank Cowperwood is far more knowledgeable about art than Jadwin, as art (for himself and his author) is just another form of power. Indeed, the activities of Dreiser's financier are openly likened to the activities of the artist. For Norris, however, as I have emphasized throughout this chapter, such insights had to be repressed even as the texts of *The Octopus* and *The Pit* demonstrate that the author intuited the connection.

³³ Taylor makes the convincing case for Norris as basically an economic conservative pp.282-83.

³⁴ The quote is from Marc Shell's *Art & Money*, p.74. In a later passage, Shell argues that "dematerialization" is "the hallmark of 20th century visual aesthetics and economics" (107).

³⁵ See Berthoff, Ziff, and Bell.

³⁶ In "Dreiser's Financier" (*The Gold Standard*), Michaels points out that Jadwin is ultimately punished, however, by "nature's uncontrollable bounty" (72).

Chapter Three

Clouds of Ink:

Aesthetic Experience in Theodore Dreiser's *A Trilogy of Desire*

The early incident that “cleared things up considerably intellectually” for ten-year-old Frank Cowperwood, Dreiser contends, is the slow devouring of a squid which had been placed in a tank with a lobster, and conspicuously displayed at a local fish-market the boy passes on his way to and from school. The lobster was not being fed, and so the squid was “considered his rightful prey” (*The Financier* 7). Despite the best efforts of the doomed fish, which darts about the limits of the tank, “shooting out at the same time a cloud of ink behind which it would disappear,” portions of its body are steadily snapped off, until, sapped of energy, with its ink-bag near empty, it finally succumbs to the inevitable. This Darwinian parable, as we suspect, allows the precocious boy to interpret the human world as at bottom a brutal power struggle where the fittest thrive by pitilessly exploiting the mediocre and weak—“men lived on men” (9). Needless to say, young Cowperwood, already sensing his nascent powers, identifies with the victorious lobster, that “greenish-copper engine of destruction” (8). As is generally recognized, Cowperwood’s story, as it plays out in the course of the three novels comprising Dreiser’s *A Trilogy of Desire*, is indeed a Nietzschean/Social Darwinian narrative detailing the exploits of a ruthless, preternaturally talented financier for whom monetary and sexual conquests are primarily symbols of greater and greater power.

Yet to limit ourselves to this perception is to ignore the plain fact that for much of *The Financier* (1912, 1927), the novel which traces his initial rise, Cowperwood finds

himself in the unenviable position of the squid—chased from corner to corner by private detectives, scores of creditors, and a district attorney, among others. After the great Chicago fire of 1871 and the ensuing panic and credit crunch, the thirty-four year-old financier finds himself perilously overextended and in danger of having his illegal agreement with the Philadelphia city treasurer exposed. Hired as a broker charged with bringing city loans “up to par” by investing them in private markets, Cowperwood has at the same time been borrowing the city money to privately gain a foothold in several of the burgeoning street-railway lines, a potentially lucrative project that has gained the attention of all of the major investors in the city. Short five hundred thousand dollars to the treasury when his accounts are called, with Cowperwood & Co. banking house facing imminent suspension, the financier discusses the situation with his lawyer Harper Steger. The thing to do is to assign his liquid holdings to the largest creditors—Jay Cooke & Co., Edward Clark & Co, Drexel & Co.—who will later help him resume business when the storm blows over. Designating them as preferred, he intentionally dissatisfies the smaller stakeholders in his company, who are certain to sue. “Suits in plenty,” however, are exactly what is needed to “tid[e] over a crisis of this kind until stocks and common sense are restored.” “You’ll have a network of suits spread here shortly,” Steger observes, “which no one can break through. They’ll all be suing each other” (220-221). Ink and more ink, it turns out, is just the thing to protect the financier’s vulnerable assets.

The ink clouds unleashed by Cowperwood and Steger do end up saving the financier; he suffers considerable financial damage (his banking house closes) and serves a thirteen month prison term, yet emerges essentially in tact in time to regain his fortune with astonishing rapidity, making a million in the course of a week by speculating on the

New York Stock Exchange during the financial Panic of 1873. If copious amounts of ink serve as a kind of protective covering for the financier, allowing him the necessary camouflage while he rearranges banking and stock records in his favor, ink is also metonymically suggestive of the writing process itself, and thus returns us to the author. In writing the *Trilogy*, a business epic of larger scope and detail than yet attempted by any American writer, did Dreiser identify with the lobster or the squid?

As scholars of the period such as Larzer Ziff and Eric Sundquist have noted, the unprecedented scope of American business enterprise during the second half of the nineteenth century changed the relations between writers and the status quo. If identifying with capitalism had once meant celebrating the mythology of the self-reliant entrepreneur, whether farmer businessman or Yankee merchant, the nature of the economy by late century had evolved into something ominously resembling feudalism, an economic plutocracy of tycoons lording over the land and governing the government while cynically advertising the virtues of self-reliance and democracy. The place of the writer in such a society, if he wasn't to be reduced to the role of eunuch, a mere entertainer of the wives of the rich (or of the masses), therefore necessitated a critical engagement with the tycoon, by all accounts the dominant figure of the era. The realist agenda set forth by Howells and James during this period demanded an increased fidelity to the actual, to lives as they are really lived, and robust fictional representation seemed to demand (at least temporary) sympathetic identification with one's characters. This act of imagination distinguished novelistic realism from muckraking journalism, an offshoot, yet it suggests a new relation of writer and subject, as I have shown in the case Frank Norris, whose ambivalent identifications with his fictional businessmen enriched the

complexity of his narratives even as it complicated the political message of the texts themselves.

Despite his commitment to the left, Theodore Dreiser's private fantasies of power and wealth (not to mention his prodigious sexual appetite) have been well documented by critics and biographers.¹ It is probable, moreover, that his commercial triumphs as a commanding editor of a group of popular women's magazines influenced his choice of subject.² Flush with a taste of worldly success, Dreiser embarked on the Cowperwood novels which he patterned on the life of the street-railway magnate Charles T. Yerkes, whose extraordinary career he had been following with interest since his boyhood in the Midwest.³ That he identified with the Nietzschean outlook of a man like Yerkes, if not the Machiavellian tactics, is widely acknowledged. Dreiser borrowed Cowperwood's motto, "I satisfy myself," directly from the figure he is modeled after, and the phrase is certainly appropriate for the author himself, whose uncompromising novels made him a touchstone of rancorous literary and cultural debate for well over half a century.

Nevertheless, whether the tycoon was a figure even susceptible of capture within a realist framework was a doubt sounded by critics of the genre like Warner Berthoff and Sundquist, and by the writers themselves, including Dreiser, who in an essay on "The American Financier," described the breed as "more force than human." Meanwhile, several of Dreiser's contemporaries, cultural critics like Van Wyck Brooks, wondered if the virulent capitalist ethos of the Gilded Age hadn't permanently degraded the status of the artist in America to mere servant of the bourgeoisie, or worse. In a country where business values reigned unchallenged, they argued, the acquisitive instinct inevitably led to creative desiccation. The man of letters wasn't just the squid trapped in the lobster

tank; he was the squid whose ink pouch was ineffectual. The naturalism of Dreiser and his most talented contemporaries, Crane, Norris, and London, can be seen in part as an attempt re-assert the masculine potency of the word, to capture in writing a new collective sense of naked force, the surge of inhuman energies unleashed by capitalist production which Henry Adams associated with the Dynamo, a machine to replace the Virgin, that more human-scaled idol of our pre-industrial past. Were such status doubts nagging Dreiser, the writer Alfred Kazin called “stronger than all the others,” as he wrestled the story of Charles Yerkes into that of Frank Cowperwood, *his* financier? Like the squid, would he slowly be swallowed by his subject?

The question of the business novelists’ relation to the businessman, as I have argued in previous chapters, is more nuanced than a simple power relation, a species of idol worship, political criticism, or other, just as the perceived opposition between business and art oversimplifies the more complex cultural reality. Perhaps the parable of the lobster and the squid, then, with its attractive dualism, is itself a kind of deception, a mere outer layer disguising an intimate network of connections between the economic and the aesthetic. In the interpretation of Dreiser’s *Trilogy* to follow, I argue that as the economic sphere becomes more abstracted from both agricultural and industrial production, the activities of the businessman (especially the financier-type) and the artist mirror each other rather than serving as opposing cultural poles. Both are essentially concerned with the creation and manipulation of representations.

The analogy wouldn’t trouble Dreiser. Unlike Norris, he readily embraced the link between finance and the arts, making the connection himself several times in the *Trilogy*. Through the lens of the aesthetic theory of Georg Simmel, the thematic link

between art and money, I will show, results in the displacement of the aesthetic sphere: despite Dreiser's strong emphasis on Cowperwood's love of art, artworks in the *Trilogy* function essentially as static repositories of money, serving largely as a foil to the dynamism of financial activity, which becomes the new privileged locus of aesthetic experience. This chapter will also address the aesthetic significance of the voluminous masses of financial detail in the *Trilogy*, which threaten to collapse narrative art into pure documentary description. An overabundance of economic data lends the novels a descriptive thickness commonly associated with both a notion of historical actuality impervious to the shaping intelligence of art, and with an ideology of literary realism that would suppress the stylistic role of art in the representation of the "the real." However, I will argue that it precisely in their depiction of the very opacity of the financial realm that the novels re-introduce aesthetic concerns.

"The Financial Imagination"

When in 1904 Thorstein Veblen wrote that "[n]o single factor in the cultural situation has an importance equal to that of the businessman and his work," he wasn't offering praise, but rather was embarking on a provocative sociological indictment of business enterprise, aiming to reverse the standard view held by academic economists that the formation of large industrial and financial consolidations were the driving force of the economy (3). For Veblen, the businessman was no hero of production, and was not the chief contributor to an ever-rising American standard of material living. Rather, the businessmen who rose to power during the second half of the nineteenth century were

parasites of production, skillful manipulators of the system, and successful enough as a class to have permanently altered the relations between producer, consumer, and profiteer. Taking advantage of the exploding scale and speed of manufacturing that followed technological revolutions in energy, transportation, and communications, as well as the increasingly complex and decentralized systems of industrial control, the modern, Veblenian businessman views production from the standpoint of “convertibility into money values, not serviceability to mankind” (51). His use value to society is incidental, not, as Adam Smith had it, crucial.

Rather than accepting the standard cultural opposition between business and art, Veblen instead drew a basic distinction between the Engineer and the Businessman, the former creating new mechanical possibilities and more efficient industrial methods, the latter retarding production if advantageous for personal profit. “The captain of industry, when it is to his advantage,” writes Veblen, “works decisively against new modes of efficiency (39). The excess growth of these “parasitic” modes of business “will eventually bring a decline in the vitality of the community” (64). This paradigm shift implied that businessmen, not artists, were the truly decadent and superfluous members of the culture. The insight is present in the depiction of business in Norris’s *Trilogy of the Epic of the Wheat*, as I argued in an earlier chapter, despite the fact that Norris’s intention was to connect business enterprise with the masculine-coded sphere of production rather than the decadent, feminized realm of art.

The financier, a privileged subgenus, “an elite within the moneyed elite,” to quote the historian Robert Wiebe, is perhaps the Veblenian businessman *par exemplar*. Not only need he never set foot on the farm or in the factory, in the mine or the shop; he is at

a remove even from the garden-variety businessman who is often forced to maintain at least some ties to the world of production. However, while Veblen disdained a class he saw as parasites on the socio/economic body, Dreiser was hypnotized, seeing in the figure of the financier the embodiment of the creative will, the American *Übermensch*. As Claire Eby develops in some detail in her book pairing the two writers, where Veblen saw the very *immateriality* of business as scandalous, Dreiser saw imaginative possibility, an ideal field for the striving genius (66-72). When Cowperwood reflects on the exploding expansion of the nation's borders during the first half of the nineteenth century, the annexing of Texas and the southwest, the far Northwest, the purchasing of Florida from the Spanish—"To a man with great social and financial imagination these facts could not help but be significant; and if they did nothing more, they gave him a sense of the boundless commercial possibilities which existed potentially in so vast a realm" (77). These spatial possibilities represent not just new areas for potential profit, but something more like sites for the exercise of the creative will.

At nineteen, while working as a broker for the investors Tighe & Company, Cowperwood is attracted by the speed and subtlety of the world of securities trading. At the Philadelphia produce exchange, "[t]here were rumors, rumors, rumors—of great railway and street-car undertakings, land developments, government revision of the tariff, war between France and Turkey, famine in Russia or Ireland, and so on.... There was an air of great secrecy and wisdom" (40). At first, the young broker is enthralled with the physicality of the scene—"sometimes the whole company would attempt to take advantage of the given rise of a given stock by either selling or offering to buy, in which case the activity would become deafening.... Distorted faces were shoved over shoulders

or under arms. The most ridiculous grimaces were purposely or unconsciously indulged in” (41). Before long, however, physical proximity to the activities on the exchange (themselves mere shadows of the activities of the producers of the commodities) becomes less interesting to Cowperwood. It is solely as mental representations that stocks, bonds (and other financial instruments) engage him. “A clearer sense of the intricacies of the problem came before him. Buying and selling stocks, as he soon learned, was an art, a subtlety, a psychic emotion” (42). The stock-brokers, in any case, were themselves merely well-paid pawns in the greater games played out by men whose “immense means” the stocks represented, “the men who schemed out and built the railroads, opened the mines, organized trading enterprises, and built up immense manufactories.” These men weren’t mere “small-minded” agents, gamblers, or tools; they possessed the imaginative vision to employ the agents, gamblers, and tools, both human and financial (42). Cowperwood, even at nineteen, recognizes himself as one of the elect.

Dreiser’s rising financier gets rich, but is far from being “materialistic and mundane,” as one commentator has remarked (Lehan 107). He takes as his models the “scheming” men who have developed the country, not out of admiration for the railroads and manufactories themselves, nor for the great amounts of human labor that went into their creation, but for the *schemes* that gave rise to these monumental projects. As John Berryman has put it, “One never thinks of [Cowperwood] as running a business—providing gas or transportation—but only as operating out of businesses” (504). The financier desires not material wealth but something more like power itself: that more elusive elixir that the Carnegies and Rockefellers possess; the ability to control the men and materials around him; to use rather than to be used. He is drawn to the street-railway

business, initially in Philadelphia and subsequently in Chicago and then London, for this reason. He isn't interested in the way this new mode of locomotion is going to transform urban travel, but rather in the looming strategic chess match over who will possess the controlling stock holdings of existing and future lines.⁴ Fifty one percent, as Cowperwood well knows, is the number that matters.

After starting his own note brokerage business, Cowperwood forms an alliance with the new Philadelphia treasurer-elect, George Stener, whom he immediately recognizes as a man he can manipulate. The characterization of the new treasurer is a classic Dreiserian description, and worth quoting at length:

[He] was a puppet in the hands of other men, but who, also in spite of this fact, became a personage of considerable importance, for the simple reason that he was weak. Stener had been engaged in the real estate and insurance business in a small way before he was made city treasurer. He was one of those men, of whom there are so many thousands in every large community, with no breadth of vision, no real subtlety, no craft, no great skill in anything. . . . On the other hand, he was not a bad fellow. He had a stodgy, dusty, commonplace, look to him which was more a matter of mind than of body. . . . [Y]ou could dole him out a few platitudes and he would repeat them. (84)

Stener is a tool of the Republican Party, dominated in Philadelphia by the financial triumvirate comprised of the city contractor Edward Butler, state Senator Mark Simpson, and coal dealer and investor Henry Mollenhauer. His initial task after being "placed" in the treasury department by the money-kings is to bring certain city loan certificates back to par value, an important move that would allow Mollenhauer and others who are "long" on city warrants to draw out their capital in order to invest in certain "bonanza offers" out West (88). Cowperwood learns that the "big three" of Mollenhauer, Simpson, and Butler routinely "borrow" public funds from the Treasury for private capital ventures,

paying scandalously low interest and returning the money when convenient, just as they are given preference over other investors when financing city debt is a more attractive prospect during turbulent times in the private sector. The treasury and treasurer “were like a honey-laden hive and a queen bee around which the drones—the politicians—swarmed in the hope of profit” (134).

Having gained a reputation as a skillful broker, Cowperwood is hired by Stener and trusted with a large block of money to “manufacture fluctuations” in the market that will raise the price of city loan certificates (94). He quickly dominates the treasurer and illegally secures a private treasury loan with which to purchase shares in several street-railway lines, gaining an initial foothold in the game. The value of certain depressed shares will substantially increase in worth if license for a future extension of said lines is granted, and especially if their city franchises are extended, possibilities Cowperwood secretly pursues by using some of the money to bribe the right city officials. After the franchises and line extensions are secured, “the plan was then, ... by issuing a great block of stock and hypothecating it with a favored bank, [to] be able to return the principal to the city treasury and pocket [the] profits from the line as earned” (133). The strategy is part of what Cowperwood calls “the endless chain:”

[B]uy a certain property on a long-time payment and issu[e] stocks or bonds sufficient not only to pay your seller, but to reimburse you for your trouble, to say nothing of giving you a margin wherewith to invest in other things—allied properties, for instance, against which more bonds could be issued, and so on, *ad infinitum*. (102)

What is noteworthy about this strategy, which serves as Cowperwood’s basic philosophy in all subsequent capital ventures, is its lack of interest in any final or definite outcome. It is a pure striving for power through control of men, property, and technology; yet it is a

striving seemingly unfettered from the material world it exploits, and therefore not quite subject to its limitations.

Cowperwood's rise, like that of Yerkes, is a symptom of the rise of the credit economy, and the tactics he helps pioneer only became more baroque in the hands of the next generation of uber-financiers exemplified by J.P. Morgan.⁵ While it is possible to argue that all forms of money are in some sense "credit," part of an exchange of a useful good for the promise of one in the future, it is widely acknowledged that a qualitative shift occurred during the nineteenth century. The amount of paper money in circulation relative to metal grew dramatically, stock markets received more and more economic traffic and as a result grew in importance, and new financial instruments such as the futures contract, originating as a kind of insurance for the agricultural community in case of crop failures, subsequently became the means for more exotic types of speculation in commodity markets. The new economy was self-perpetuating: the more speculative transactions that occurred above and beyond the direct purchase of goods at market, the more money that existed (in the form of credits and loans) for further speculation. An entire network of financial activity was being carried on with at best a tenuous relationship to real production. Perversely, Veblenian financiers seemed to have succeeded in inverting the very relationship between product and profit. As corporate law historian Lawrence Mitchell observes, "the modern stock market left behind its business origins and became the very reason for the creating of business itself" (2).

By the final decade of the century, despite a rising tide of populism climaxing in William Jennings Bryan's passionate call for an end of the tyrannical reign of banks and speculators over the American heartland, powerful new forms of corporate re-

organization, subtly evading state and federal anti-trust laws, were even more radically altering the economic landscape. In 1889, New Jersey became the first state to allow for a corporation solely created to hold stock in other companies, and New York and other states quickly followed suit with their own legal revisions, fearing a mass capital exodus to the states with more liberal laws. The problem, as Mitchell explains, was that these new Holding Companies that bought industrials could set the par for their own stock, and so “overcapitalization” became the dominant concern (58). Financiers induced industrialists to sell their businesses into these giant combinations by offering the carrot of lucrative immediate profits (combined with the stick: avoid gaining a menacing corporate enemy and willing saboteur). The new corporation was then capitalized for an amount higher than the cash value of the assets on the balance sheet by issuing “watered” stock based on expected future earnings. Between 1896 and 1900, nearly a billion dollars of capitalization by combination was added to the account books. With capital outgrowing and eventually superseding industry, “valuation was very much in the eye of the promoter” (73). It is precisely his intelligent grasp of these new socio-economic realities that makes Dreiser’s financier a powerful “force.” Cowperwood masters the use of credit and the concept of the Holding Trust; they are his two most effective financial tools. “He knew instinctively what could be done with a given sum of money—how as cash it could be deposited in one place, and yet as credit and the basis of moving checks, used in not one but many other places at the same time.” This gives him the “purchasing power of ten and a dozen times as much as his original sum might have represented” (*The Financier* 99).

Cowperwood's mastery of buying "on margin" derives from his superior ability to perceive a change occurring in the ontological status of money itself, what Marc Shell calls "the shift from substance to inscription" (74). In a credit economy, the material characteristics of money recede and its representative qualities are emphasized. The historical slide of money away from the material world and toward a realm of "pure exchange" was the subject of the German sociologist Georg Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*, published in 1900. The evolution of money, he argued, paralleled the evolution of human cognition in its move from substance-based to purely numerical forms of valuation, a growth of what he called "imaginative rationality." "The ideal of knowledge," Simmel said, "is seen as the dissolution of all qualitative categories of reality into purely quantitative ones" (150). In more advanced economies, the functionality of money, its capacity to represent the concept of exchange itself, becomes far more important than its resemblance to items of use or ornamental value. There is still a trace of the material residing in the dried ink of an account book, but barely so. Cowperwood knows that money has essentially become dematerialized, its representational and numerical character making an almost infinitely supple medium for manipulation.

In the summer of 1871, at the age of thirty three, he has a banking business carrying nearly a million dollars, personal holdings of around nearly half a million, "a small army of politicians and political hangers-on were on his books for various sums." He is speculating in commodities with the contractor Edward Butler's money, and "his own loans at the banks, varying from day to day on variously hypothecated securities, were as high as seven and eight hundred thousand dollars" (140). Reaching again for an

analogy from the animal world, Dreiser compares Cowperwood to “a spider in a spangled net, every thread of which he knew.... [H]e had surrounded and entangled himself in a splendid, glittering network of connections, and he was watching all the details” (140). However, during the financial panic brought on when Chicago’s commercial district burns down the following October, the financier is trapped in his own web. He has stretched the threads of capital too far and wide, and when his loans are called in concert and he fails for over a million dollars, his illicit borrowing from the city treasury is discovered. Yet the ensuing trial and brief incarceration, along with the re-arranging of bank accounts, is felt by the financier as nothing more than “an unholy and unsatisfactory disrupting and delaying spectacle” (291). That is, just as the suppleness of the money medium tempted Cowperwood to create a far-reaching and unstable network of capital flows that ultimately and costs him his business, the Panic of 1873 brought on by the failure of Jay Cooke allows the financier to gain it all back in a turn of events that seems less fortuitous than merely inevitable.

Having only been out of jail for six months, now working as a broker for the traders Wingate & Co., with no investments of his own to cover, during the panic Cowperwood goes short “of everything,” “selling as high as he could and buying as low as he could on a constantly sinking scale,” clearing a hundred thousand on the first day alone, a millionaire again by the end of the week (440, 443-444). In an economy where the relationship between production and speculation is inverted, where the quantity of bushels and bales traded on the exchanges equal more than seven times the annual crop yield,⁶ it is not only possible to turn an immense profit buying and selling products you don’t have (and never intend to), it is a likely scenario when talent and circumstance

meet. Cowperwood, playing “bear” and preying on the “ignorance and insophistication” of investors, is able to artificially depress the market, creating a commodity surplus by selling goods that don’t yet exist, then buying them back when the market is at low ebb (441). The speculators’ near-instantaneous “production” of profit by “manufacturing” price fluctuations is not only an affront to the labor, time commitment, and real risk undertaken in the production of wheat or steel, but by betting on overproduction, as Walter Benn Michaels has put it, “he succeeds in turning their labor against them, in converting it into the agent of their misfortune” (287).

When Cowperwood and Aileen officially settle in Chicago in 1876, he sets up a partnership with the grain and commission merchant Peter Laughlin, speculating in various commodities on the Chicago Board of Trade. The business is profitable and promises twenty thousand a year to each partner, but Dreiser tells us that Cowperwood is in it solely to collect inside information about the real networks of power out West. Who are his new competitors, and which enterprises, public and private, possess the most economic potential? While commodity speculating plays a role in *The Titan* (1914),⁷ the second novel of the *Trilogy*, corporate combination is Cowperwood’s chief strategy. The financier’s “endless chain” of railway combinations, public stock offerings, and franchise licenses remained largely a theoretical dream in the first novel, but not so in the second.

His initial project is to purchase a majority share stake in three struggling city gas companies, offering four times the current market share price, then combining and capitalizing the three companies in one, with himself as managing “trustee” (44-45). The failure of this initial foray convinces Cowperwood that because he is a newcomer to the

city, he will have to organize in the suburban areas first, creating, in Dreiser's martial metaphor, "an entering wedge of attack on the city proper" (45). Gas companies are preferred by Cowperwood for the same reasons he is interested in street-railways: in growing urban areas there is tremendous potential for expansion, and as businesses that are privately funded but intimately connected with public life, he can build and then exploit a self-created network of private capital and political influence.

Gathering a motley assortment of players—three lawyers of diverse temperament and expertise, a collection of investors, and an engineer named Sippens who had once attempted and failed at this very project—Cowperwood orchestrates an impressive coup. After bribing several village councilman, he secures franchises for a trio of new gas companies that will compete directly with the existing ones. Recognizing that the new lines will possess the distinct competitive advantage of pooled resources, the old companies reluctantly agree to sell out; Cowperwood keeps "one half of the surplus stock of the new general issue, and two for one of every share of stock for which his new companies had been organized" (94). Then he turns around and sells out completely. By organizing a set of dummy companies, securing a "blanket franchise," and threatening ruinous competition, the financier, never having needed to "lay a pipe or build a plant," has made away with enough money to enter the real game in Chicago (82).

The financier's exploits in the city proper follow the same divide, conquer, combine, capitalize, and expand formula as he sets his sights on Chicago's street-railway system. In depicting Cowperwood's courting of city officials, and his strategic battles with the financial of "quadrumvirate" of Schryhart, Hand, Arneel and Merrill, *The Titan* resembles its predecessor; but as Dreiser details the financier's incorporation of new

railway technology (cable cars, elevated lines), his contentious relationship with the newspapers and the public, and his brilliant use of powerful party henchman behind the scenes, the second novel is an even richer canvas. In an effectively drawn episode mid-novel, Dreiser shows us how Cowperwood neutralizes the power of the new Republican mayor. Dreiser's satirical portrait of "The Honorable" Chaffee Thayer Sluss is worth quoting at length:

He was a tall, shapely, grandiloquent person who took himself and his social and commercial opportunities and doings in the most serious and, as it were, elevated light. You know, perhaps, the type of man or woman who, raised in an atmosphere of comparative comfort and social pretension, and being short of those gray convolutions in the human brainpan which permit an individual to see life in all its fortuitousness and uncertainty, proceed because of an absence of necessity and the consequent lack of human experience to take themselves and all that they do in the most reverential and Providence-protected spirit.... The Honorable Chaffee Thayer Sluss reasoned that because of the splendid ancestry on which he prided himself, he was an essentially honest man. (295)

Like the treasurer George Stener, Sluss proves no match for Cowperwood. The mayor is a philanderer, and in his weakness for "plump blonde women with corn-colored hair," the financier sees an opening. Sluss, unless undermined, is likely to provide crucial political backing for the quadrumvirate in matters of further railway expansion. Cowperwood assigns the task of collecting incriminating evidence to one of his lawyers, Burton Stimson, who then further delegates to one of his assistants, Oliver Marchbanks. Marchbanks is the man who finds just the right call-girl, Claudia Carlstadt, to pose as a "Mrs. Brandon" and offer herself for hire as a secretary in the mayor's office. "It was an amazing situation in some respects, but those who know anything concerning the intricacies of politics, finance, and corporate control, as they were practiced in those

palmy days, would never marvel at the wells of subtlety, sinks of misery, and morasses of disaster which they represent” (298). Sluss takes the bait and documents of the affair are carefully collected and saved for the moment when blackmail will be most effective.

The episode is characteristically Dreiserian in several respects: the satirical venom is saved for the pretentious, the hypocritical, for the materially and morally complacent; on the other hand there is a deep respect for the underground element, the men and women on the street who must struggle for their power, those for whom the law is more weapon than duty; finally, there is the sheer awe at the complexity of the urban world, what Dreiser called “the mystery and wonder and terror of life” and at the same time a refusal to be paralyzed by the wonder and terror, a determination to puncture the veils, to grasp the mysterious inner workings of the city.

By the novel’s close in 1898, twenty two years after first settling in Chicago Cowperwood faces a final standoff with his enemies: financial, legal, and personal (the latter most often caused by indiscriminate philandering). He claims to employ over twenty thousand men and is beholden to eighteen thousand stockholders, having capitalized at least half a dozen new street-railway lines across the city. He awaits a vote by city aldermen that will determine whether his newly formed Consolidated Traction Company of Chicago will be given an unprecedented fifty year franchise extension, an order that if approved would all but vanquish his competitors. Each of the city alderman have been promised thirty thousand dollars for their vote. The new governor is already in his pocket. In a fateful turn of events, even Hosmer Hand, Cowperwood’s bitter rival, has been induced to sell out his traction stock holdings and discontinue his war against the financier. In funding a damaging public campaign against Cowperwood, the

quadrumvirate have stirred up that “great, fiery-eyed” cat, the public. Hand and the others recognize that protecting their class interests is even more vital than dealing Cowperwood a weakening blow; they might have an all-out class war on their hands if municipal ownership becomes a valid political idea.

Nevertheless, it is an angry public that in the end denies Cowperwood his fifty-year franchise, succeeding where the powerful plutocracy had failed. On the day of the crucial vote at City Hall, hordes of protesters surround and infiltrate the building, threatening physical violence to any of the bought and paid-for councilmen who vote down a proposed city ordinance to block the franchise grant. One by one the aldermen renege on their contract with Cowperwood. It is not so much public opinion as it is the *presence* of the public, *en masse*, that denies the street-railway millionaire. The physical presence of the public at the close of *The Titan* is in itself a significant counterpoint to the flurry of stock market manipulation (a purely insider’s game) with which the first novel ended. The specter of a socialist city is raised not through the customary political channels, but through bodies and voices on the streets. In a capitalist order dominated by the dematerialized activities of the financial imagination, the possibility of socialism implies a return to the materiality of the body.

Art & Money

In 1914, the year *The Titan* was published, Dreiser complained to reporters that tycoons were now only interested in getting rich (Elias 201). By comparison, Cowperwood and his historical model, Charles Yerkes, were men graced by an artistic

sensitivity and a passion for pictures. During his final year in Chicago, Yerkes was building a mansion on Fifth Avenue and 68th Street in New York in order to house his world-class art collection, which included “three Rembrandts, a Franz Hals, a Van Dyck, a Hobbema, a Tyron, a Jan Van Beers, several Turners as well as pieces by Corot, Claude Lorrain, Bouguereau, Delacroix, and Millet, among others” (Lehan 103). Unlike other tycoons, he didn’t purchase his collection “wholesale,” but carefully crafted it according to his own taste. Dreiser had always been drawn to Yerkes’s life narrative, having read about him in the papers throughout his teenage years and occasionally written about him during his early days as a journalist. The street-railway man wasn’t puritanical or pious, “had none of the ‘bookkeeper’s soul’ that was attributed to Rockefeller,” nor was he a “roisterer” like Jim Fisk (Matthiessen 131). He was a lover of beauty, drawn to fine art and beautiful women, as well as wealth and power.

Dreiser’s fictional financier inherits this passion for beauty; it is a trait given a good deal of emphasis in the *Trilogy*. After completing the gas company deal, his first major success out West, Cowperwood decides to invest some thirty thousand dollars “in pictures, if he could find the right ones” (57). Since early on, Dreiser repeatedly tells us (as if trying to convince himself!) that the financier had been a lover of art. His earlier collection, stored in the Philadelphia apartment he privately kept while he and Aileen were still secret lovers, had been a casualty of his conviction and imprisonment, lost with the rest of his holdings. With a firm financial footing in a new city, however, “[t]his matter of art was once again beginning to interest him immensely” (57). Several of Chicago’s wealthy residents, Cowperwood notes, have acquired some notable works, and he will begin collecting again now that he has a secure financial footing. On an

excursion to Europe with Aileen, he makes acquaintance with art dealers from London, Paris, and Brussels, developing a nuanced taste for certain of the great masters and schools, and as a wealthy potential patron he is casually introduced to a handful of contemporary artists. In London he buys “a portrait by Raeburn; in Paris a plowing scene by Millet, a small Jan Steen, a battle piece by Meissonier, and a romantic courtyard scene by Isabey” (60). Cowperwood also has Aileen’s portrait painted and hangs it among several masterpieces in his gallery, a move that alienates the conservative high society with whom the young couple are trying to gain acceptance.

Artists and artist-types of several stripes serve minor roles in Dreiser’s narrative. There is the architect Ellsworth, who designs Cowperwood’s Philadelphia house; the Danish violinist Harold Sohlberg, who is cuckolded by Cowperwood and bribed to keep his mouth shut; the poet and playwright Forbes Gurney, who steals a lover from the financier. Perhaps more significantly, the women Cowperwood takes as lovers seem to exhibit greater artistic talent and aesthetic sensibility with each new affair. His first major tryst in Chicago is with Rita Sohlberg, who had attended the Chicago Fine Arts School and dreamt of becoming a great artist. “Mentally she was much more aware than Aileen, more precise in her knowledge of art, music, literature” (109). Stephanie Platow, his next serious infatuation, is an aspiring actress and for Cowperwood “a kind of artistic godsend in this dull western atmosphere.... She had refused to go to school like her sister, and was idling about, developing, as she phrased, her artistic possibilities” (197, 207). Moreover, she sees Cowperwood himself in an artistic light: “She conceived of him as a very great artist in his realm rather than as a businessman” (199), a point to which I will return in a moment. Finally, in the precocious Berenice Fleming, who is just

seventeen when they meet, Cowperwood feels he has found an aesthetic soul-mate, someone who understands that his just-finished New York mansion where he houses his art collection is “the color of his soul” (447). But Berenice isn’t just the ideal companion he dreams about; she is also the embodiment of beauty, a living equivalent of the masterpieces that furnish his mansion.

At last he saw clearly, as within a chalice-like nimbus, that the ultimate end of fame, power, vigor was beauty, and that beauty was a compound of the taste, the emotion, the innate culture, passion, and dreams of a woman like Berenice Fleming. (426-427)

Cowperwood’s capture of Berenice is the culmination of a process in the *Trilogy* whereby women and art merge in a hypostatized image of “beauty.” It is a result foreshadowed in the financier’s earlier remark that “[h]e had little faith in women aside from their value as objects of art” (112).

Given Dreiser’s obvious efforts, why, then, do the depictions of women and artworks feel lifeless? Clearly, Dreiser, vicariously identifying with his hero, luxuriates in the physical and sensual attributes of the women Cowperwood engages. Yet, of all of them (including Cowperwood’s first wife, Lillian) only Aileen achieves some slight roundness of character. The impression is rather that Cowperwood’s catalogue of women, as the list grows, comes to resemble his growing collection of artworks. Taken together, they function as static repositories of beauty, not meant to grow or develop, but providing a key foil against which the dynamism of finance is juxtaposed. The basic emotional truth that the *Trilogy* is largely unconvincing when dealing with art has generally been read by critics as one more piece of evidence that Dreiser was an untutored barbarian who lacked a subtle aesthetic sensibility. He didn’t possess adequate finesse, the argument goes, to engage with the nuanced realm of art on its own terms, just

as he was unable to depict feminine psychology outside of his own sexual desire for his female characters. I'd like to posit an alternative answer, which is that artworks in the *Trilogy* suffer not because Dreiser was incapable of writing about art, but rather because they ultimately come to represent an outmoded model of capital accumulation, while business dealings take place in the kind of rarefied aesthetic space normally reserved for art.

In theorizing the evolution of the money form, Georg Simmel repeatedly made allusion to the arts and the category of the aesthetic. For Simmel, aesthetic experience arises as a result of increasing distance from the initial utilitarian purpose of an object, with a new sense of "objectivity" being gained through detachment. "The more remote for the species is the utility of the object that first created an interest and a value and is now forgotten, the purer is the aesthetic satisfaction derived from the mere form and appearance of the object" (75). Thus, just as "the value of art depends on our overcoming an immediacy, which then operates as if it no longer existed," (153) so the development of the money form towards a less and less substantive medium renders it more capable of producing aesthetic effects. According to this logic, the more abstracted Cowperwood's financial machinations are from the "immediacy" of production, both agricultural and industrial, the more he operates without regard for the physical products of which his stock holdings were originally representations, the greater is the aesthetic refinement and "satisfaction" therein. In such a scenario, the financier's vocation would seem more aligned with the artist than the businessman, as Cowperwood's mistress Stephanie Platow realizes. Dreiser himself makes the connection explicit several times, on one such occasion telling us that his financier "forever busied himself with various aspects of the

scene quite as a poet might have concerned himself with rocks and rills” (*The Titan* 156).⁸ Yet even this analogy, implicitly bringing art and business closer together, doesn’t quite capture the significance of Cowperwood’s activities. If the poet is a realist, he almost certainly desires a closer connection to the material world than the financier, who works to mystify the connection.

Mencken, in an early review of *The Financier*, saw Cowperwood as a special kind of artist figure, obsessed with power as “a means to beauty.” “For the actual dollar, indeed, he has no liking at all, but only the toleration of an artist for his brushes and paint-pots” (102). Mencken is right in his perception that the financier prefers to dwell on the abstract and immaterial. However, his linking of the dollar with the de-privileged material medium of the painter misses the point that for the speculating capitalist commodities, not dollars, are the raw materials, and so correspond with Mencken’s brushes and paint-pots. (It is useful to remember here that in Marx’s terms, the very definition of a capitalist lies in his use of the commodity form as the means of producing more money, not the reverse. He’s in the M-C-M’ circuit; not the C-M-C). What the depictions of the financial sphere in the *Trilogy* suggest is not that the power of the dollar is “a means to beauty,” but rather that the dollar itself is moving (asymptotically) closer to the *concept* of beauty, closer than the artworks that line the walls of the bankers’ homes.⁹ The locus of the aesthetic has shifted from artistic to financial activity.

Artworks, generally speaking, are a less lucrative investment than streetcars, and certainly a more conservative one. When the financier purchases Renaissance tapestries and oil paintings (which have existed centuries longer than streetcars) it is their concrete materiality that attracts him, not their potential for quick resale. Artworks serve as safe,

even final, resting places for capital, suggesting a kind of ultimate personal reserve fund. In this way, they are like the gold bars in the Federal Reserve which stabilized (through “guarantee”) the less material forms of exchange. Thus, despite the fact that Dreiser labors to make Cowperwood’s “love of art” the proof of his aesthetic daring, his longing to transcend the material world, the financier’s investments in art represent a retreat from the aesthetic, as defined by Simmel. They tether him, in fact, concretely to the material world. It is, for example, much more difficult to move two dozen masterpieces from Chicago to New York (Cowperwood’s mansion housing the art gallery is over a year in construction) than it is to “move” a million dollars worth of Consolidated Traction stock issue (accomplished in the time it takes a telegraph to be written, sent, and read). It would seem, then, that “the spirit of art that occupied the center of Cowperwood’s personality” (*The Titan* 399), if we trust the novels rather than the novelist, is the force that spurs him to conquer the commercial scenes of Philadelphia, Chicago and London, not to build the New York art mansion.

While Dreiser compares finance to poetry on at least two occasions (*The Financier* 11; *The Titan* 199), Cowperwood’s artistry seems more closely connected with that of the novelist, and so with Dreiser himself. Dreiser drew freely from his own life for materials for his financial superman, especially in the matter of women, adding significant detail to the general pattern of Yerkes’s career, and in the process “becom[ing] identified in his own imagination with his conquering hero” as F.O. Matthiessen observes (145). Dreiser’s financier is a mixture of fictionalized biography and autobiography, a kind of fantasy composite.

Cowperwood, in some respects, might have been “the embodiment of so much that he himself longed for and missed,” (133) as Matthiessen argues, though the author’s rapid and improbable rise to editorial prominence in the magazine industry, along with his successful promotion of a second edition of *Sister Carrie*,¹⁰ demonstrate that the success fantasy was one of degree, not kind. In the span of a half-dozen years, 1904-1909, Dreiser had increased his salary from thirty-five dollars a week as an assistant feature editor for Munsey’s *Daily News* to ten thousand dollars a year as editor of Butterick publication’s popular “trio,” *The Designer*, *The New Idea Women’s Magazine*, and *The Delineator*. As his first biographer Dorothy Dudley put it: “He was on the inside now among the money makers” (qtd. in Matthiessen 104). But like Cowperwood, Dreiser’s habit of seducing young women gained him several professional enemies. He was forced to leave his lucrative position at Butterick after it was publicly revealed he was having an affair with the daughter of a woman in the organization.

More generally, Dreiser and Cowperwood share a Nietzschean disdain for the petty hypocrisy and slavish weakness of men dominated by conventional morality.¹¹ Cowperwood frequently pits his worldview—the world is for the strong, “force was the answer”—against the views of “the little guardians of so-called public law and morality” and finds their views wanting (121).

The newspapers, the preachers, the police, and the public moralists generally, so loud in their denunciation of evil in humble places, were cowards all when it came to corruption in high ones. They did not dare to utter a feeble squeak until some giant had accidentally fallen and they could do so without danger to themselves. (121)

All men secretly desire power, wealth, sexual freedom. The intellectually and socially elect act on these desires while the common lot content themselves with the perverse

pleasures of resenting those who do. Cowperwood's opposition to the conventional mores of his day is paralleled in Dreiser's recurrent battles against censorship. For Dreiser (and his defenders such as H.L. Mencken and Sherwood Anderson) the suppression of *Sister Carrie* in 1900 and *The "Genius"* a decade and a half later highlighted the basic hypocrisy of a critical establishment that praised the efforts of the realists to tell stories of life as it is really lived, yet refused to allow the public to read about sex dealt with more honestly, or poverty un-sentimentalized. "What is it I have lost?," Carrie famously asks after yielding her virginity to the traveling salesman Drouet in exchange for middle-class material comforts and respite from her soul-destroying job in a shoe factory sweatshop. In the end, both men won their wars against the petty moralists. Cowperwood well into middle age continues to ignore the preachers and bribe the lawmakers, while Dreiser was ultimately accorded respect by the critical status quo, due in part to his persistence and unflinching belief in the veil-piercing cultural mission of the novelist. Both business and art, in their upper reaches, are beyond good and evil.

Apart from biographical parallels and philosophical affinities, we can see that Cowperwood's manipulations are the projection of the novelistic art into the commercial sphere. Specifically, Dreiser endows Cowperwood with a novelist's gifts: a penetrating vision of character and a talent for plot construction. Even as an eighteen-year-old broker for Waterman & Company, the two men he works for "were already nothing more than characters in his eyes.... He could see their weaknesses and shortcomings as a much older man might view a boy's" (*The Financier* 29). Men like the treasurer Stener, the banker George Addison (his first business contact in Chicago), and the broker Laughlin are but minor characters, pawns in Cowperwood's larger schemes. Dreiser seems to

accord the most respect to those in the *Trilogy* who possess the ability to shrewdly evaluate character (even if for selfish ends)—financial stalwarts like Mollenhauer and Simpson, Schryhart and Arneel, influential power brokers in the trenches like the Chicago Irishmen Gilgan and McKenty, even the occasional “liberated” woman like Hatti Starr, Berenice’s mother who pulls herself out of poverty by running a prostitution house. Yet it is Cowperwood alone who possesses eyes that “indicate much and reveal nothing,” who manipulates even the manipulators (*The Financier* 15). With a superior breadth of imagination, the financier, like the novelist, rises above material reality in order to reconstruct it according to his own will.

If Cowperwood’s ultimate success is linked to his novelistic eye, his penetration of character and his capacity to construct webs of (financial) intrigue, perhaps the fantasy at work is the fictional transformation of the tycoon into the artist-type. Such a fantasy re-opens the question of the power relation between the artist and the businessman. On the one hand, business in its “highest” forms would now appear to be subject to the laws that govern art. Yet this seems to come only upon condition that the artist abnegate his own privileged place in the aesthetic order. Is the uber-capitalist in America really the rightful heir of the artist’s visionary gifts?

History, Realism, Aesthetic Experience

The volume and density of financial detail in the *Trilogy* is astonishing. Early reviewers of *The Financier*, even those defending the novel, frequently alluded to the author’s “slow plodding through jungles of detail,” his “sentences imposed upon one

another like bricklaying.” Often in connection, they called attention to his “insatiable lust for facts” and his copious borrowing and rehashing of thousands of newspaper clippings covering Yerkes’s activities, a technique one reviewer found taxing, though in the end powerful in effect (*The Critical Reception* 102-109, 182). “Facts,” Dreiser seemed to have forgotten, “are only significant when they portend an inward meaning” (Cary, qtd. in Lingemen 98). Randolph Bourne complained that “those stenographic conversations, webs of financial intrigue, bare bones of enterprise insult our artistic sense,” a comment echoed by Donald Pizer, who felt that “the weight of mundane detail and its pervasive emotions of greed, fear, and hate was incongruous in relation to.... [Cowperwood’s] refined interests” (84, 169). (The hero would be offended by his portrait, Pizer implies). Biographers like Philip Gerber and Jerome Loving, seeing the excessive detail as a Dreiserian weakness, voice the majority opinion. For Gerber, “the books tell us far more of the financial jungle than we ever wanted to know or could possibly absorb; and even if everything that happens in Cowperwood’s life is relevant, there is still too much relevant” (62). For Loving, the details are overdrawn and heavily repetitious (226).¹²

The issue always seems to resurface as new critical paradigms wax and wane in influence, suggesting that there is something significant about the sheer weight of words.¹³ In his praise of what he calls “the glacial power of [Dreiser’s] style” in the *Trilogy*, Larzer Ziff’s (1967) essay defends this practice. Ziff sees the heavy repetition of financial detail as essential to establishing the credence of the reality Dreiser aims to depict. Between chapters twenty three and twenty five, he observes, the reader hears a detailed account of the same narrative five times. When Cowperwood is caught “long” after the Chicago fire, we listen to his interior monologue as he considers his options,

then follow him as he decides to meet with Edward Butler to ask the wealthy contractor to help support the market, Cowperwood recounting, carefully and selectively, his secret dealings with the treasurer Stener. Cowperwood's story is then repeated by Butler to his son Owen, who then drives his father to the house of Mollenhauer where the story is retold. When the senator Simpson arrives, Cowperwood's predicament is once again rehearsed, this time shaded by the perspective of Mollenhauer. Each man interprets the situation according to his own financial interests, a fact that is readily understood and accepted by the others. "His five tellings," Ziff observes, "share a considerable objective content, and their all-but-repetitive juxtaposition contributes to the reader's belief in the absolute existence of Frank Cowperwood and the kind of world he inhabits" (458).

If one of literary realism's central tenets is to "narrow the gap between the fictive and the actual" (Berthoff 238), Ziff's remarks about the *Trilogy* implicitly argue for a quantitative as well as qualitative element in the realist mode. Descriptive accuracy isn't always enough to render one's object sufficiently "life-like." Fidelity to the object must be supplemented with a certain weight, a fullness of description. To establish the objectivity of the account, to render things "as they are," descriptive volume is required, and Dreiser's subtly-shaded repetitions are what in the end make the world of the *Trilogy* credible.

A certain weight of circumstantial detail had always been a strength of the novel form, early masters like Richardson and Fielding bringing their characters and scenes "to life" through the voluminous richness of their fictional worlds. In the nineteenth century, though, as the permanent effects of the industrial revolution were being more acutely registered, first in Europe and then America, the stature of the novel rose just as it was

made to carry a larger cultural burden of explication. This was especially true regarding city life, where mass urbanization brought dense city crowds as well as increasingly complex divisions of public and private space, and while ceaseless technological innovation pushed the city ever into the future. Urban men and women, newcomers and natives alike, found themselves in a world made mysterious by new forms of production and transportation, by a seemingly infinite horizon of new commodities, and by waves of immigrants whose cultural practices portended upheavals in the balance of the social and political order.¹⁴ The accompanying sense of a loss of control, the inability to discern reality in the form of a cultural whole, pervaded the collective consciousness of Americans living during the final decades of the nineteenth century. The historian Robert Wiebe, locating the very definition of the period in an entropic breakdown of meaning, wrote that the “failure to comprehend a society that they were helping to make contained the essence of the nation’s society” (12).

Could the novelistic gaze penetrate and illuminate a world in kaleidoscopic flux, where all that was solid seemed to melt into air? Could it provide the reader a privileged vantage point, or failing that, a mirrored reflection of this newfound sense of complexity? As Amy Kaplan has argued, “[Realists] often assume a world which lacks solidity, and the weightiness of descriptive detail—one of the most common characteristics of the realist text—often appears in inverse proportion to the sense of insubstantiality, as though description could pin down the objects of an unfamiliar world to make it real” (9). Dreiser seems to employ just such a strategy as he labors to establish the reality of an increasingly immaterial economic sphere dominated by the “dizzy phantasmagoria of financial operations” (*The Titan* 205).

Nowhere is the cumulative force of detail more powerful than during Cowperwood's trial for larceny and embezzlement and the events leading up to it, which dominate the second half of *The Financier*. Even before the trial proper, official investigation into Cowperwood's "failure" is being undertaken by The Citizens' Municipal Reform Association, which is on a quixotic mission to rid Philadelphia public life of dishonesty and corruption. Aiming to "bring to light all the facts in the case," a committee is organized and produces a lengthy statement, parts of which I have here excerpted:

It appears.... that it has been the custom of city treasurers for years, when loans have been authorized by councils, to place them in the hands of some favorite broker for sale, the broker accounting to the treasurer for the moneys received by such sales at short periods, generally the first of each month.... But from the manner in which Mr. Cowperwood has had possession of bonds (city loan) for hypothecation, etc., it would appear that he has been held to no responsibility in these matters and that there have always been under his control several hundred thousand dollars of cash or securities belonging to the city, which he has manipulated for various purposes.... Some of the operations consisted of hypothecation of large amounts of these loans before the certificates were issued, the lender seeing that the order for the hypothecated securities was duly made to him on the books of the treasurer.... Furthermore, at the very time these hypothecations were being made, and the city paying interest upon such loans, the money representing them was in the hands of the treasurer's broker and bearing no interest to the city. The payment of municipal warrants was postponed, and they were being purchased at a discount in large amounts by Mr. Cowperwood with the very money that should have been in the city treasury. (235-236)

In the subsequent scenes, we hear these facts turned about several more times: Aileen reads about Cowperwood activities in the *Philadelphia Ledger*, the prosecution's opening

courtroom argument is made, the treasurer Stener is called to testify, the jury deliberates about the details of the case; the defense attorney Steger then presents a counter-narrative, rehashing much of the same territory, before giving way to the prosecutor Shannon once again. By the time the jury is in final deliberations, the repetition of fact no longer seems to move us closer to actuality, but has started to suggest the reverse: an entropic breakdown of the connection between information and truth. Dreiser alludes to this while commenting on the arguments being made in the jury-room: “facts are capable of such curious inversion and interpretation” (324). In this way, the courtroom drama, which Dreiser was to return to in *An American Tragedy*, with its panoramic repetition of fact and circumstance, paradoxically comes to serve as synecdoche for the realist text *par exemplar*, while simultaneously undermining its governing strategy—the attempt to establish objectivity through quantity, through “weightiness of descriptive detail.”

Despite the conviction of Cowperwood, the larger social issue involving the drive for reform, represented here by The Citizens’ Municipal Reform Association, is ultimately ineffective. We can sense a discomfort in the very statement issued by the Association, quoted above. On the one hand, there is a difficulty in deciding the nature of the offense. Have past city treasurers been guilty of misappropriation of funds under cover of “custom”? Is Cowperwood’s crime one of degree, or of kind? On the other hand, there is a failure to condemn such actions on properly moral terrain, a failure to translate financial misdeeds into the moral vocabulary of good and evil.

Part of the reason might lie in tectonic shifts in the collective perceptual grid. At bottom an attempt to re-inscribe the complexity of the urban world within a moral framework, traditional reform movements had become outpaced by the protean qualities

of modern city life and began to be replaced by muckraking investigative journalism, which was more equipped to deal with complexity, yet lacked the same moral authority when passing judgment. An analogous evolution had been taking place in contemporary fiction, where morality had for so long served as perceptual anchor and organizational bulwark. Howellsian realism broke from the overly sentimentalized (and thus false-to-life) morality of traditional fictional heroism, yet his narratives were still firmly tethered to the ethical vision of the good life. This view had given way by the turn of the century to a literary realism closely aligned with journalism, a genre it had pre-dated and helped birth. As in journalism, “the historicity of what was described” now served as the authoritative organizational principle (Ziff 454).

Dreiser’s *Trilogy* belongs to this second generation realism not just because all of his major figures (and a good deal of minor ones) have historical analogues, but because historical referents are strategically inserted into the text in such a way that their past-“ness” lends a solidity to everything around them. *The Financier* begins in 1847 when Cowperwood is ten; *The Titan* closes as he prepares to leave Chicago in 1897 after his fifty-year franchise bid is defeated. Positioning his narrative in the half century directly preceding the time in which the first two books of the *Trilogy* were published,¹⁵ Dreiser establishes the “historicity” of the text by periodically referring to future events that subsequently came to be known as historical markers. When Cowperwood first becomes a broker, “[t]he first Atlantic cable car had not been laid as yet” (40). Likewise, when Dreiser tells us that Cowperwood’s investment strategy of buying on margin, incorporating assets, and then capitalizing through large stock issue “became an old story later,” he isn’t referring to Cowperwood’s future actions, but to those of Morgan and the

early twentieth century financiers, as fictional depiction slides seamlessly into a reference to (future) historical narrative. In a third strategy, historical vignettes are inserted directly into the *Trilogy*, without a formal textual marker separating them from the rest of the narrative. On the day Cowperwood is released from prison, we read the following paragraph:

On September 18, 1873, at twelve-fifteen of a brilliant autumn day, in the city of Philadelphia, one of the most startling financial tragedies that the world has even seen had its commencement. The banking house of Jay Cooke & Co., the foremost financial organization of America, doing business at Number 114 South Third Street in Philadelphia, and with branches in New York, Washington, and London, closed its doors. Those who know anything about the financial crises of the United States know well the significance of the panic which followed. It was spoken of in all the histories as the panic of 1873, and the widespread ruin and disaster which followed was practically unprecedented in American history. (434)

Dreiser's technique is here is more radical than the modernist experiments of his follower Dos Passos, who incorporates historico-biographical vignettes and "Newsreel" clippings into his sprawling *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1930, 1932, 1936), but cloisters them off from the narrative flow. By weaving historical fragments directly into the novelistic pattern, when Dreiser resumes in the next paragraph with Cowperwood's actions at the Wingate brokerage firm, he has simultaneously achieved the reverse effect: his financier has been woven into History.

In a sense, literary realism's two chief rhetorical strategies, descriptive heft and historical anchoring, provide one another with an alibi. Such is the argument developed by Roland Barthes in an essay from 1968 entitled "The Reality Effect." On the one hand, from the perspective of literary form, the "superfluous" detail is scandalous as it disrupts an intelligible relation between the particular and the universal. Excessive description,

“insignificant notation” Barthes calls it at one point, resists incorporation into the larger structural economy of the text because it can’t be converted into “narrative information” (141). His example is a sentence from Flaubert’s story “A Simple Heart,” (from *Three Tales*) where the author tells us that “an old piano supported, under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons.” “If it is just possible to see in the notation of the piano an indication of its owner’s bourgeois standing” Barthes writes, “and in that of the cartons a sign of disorder and a kind of lapse in status likely to connote the atmosphere of the Aubain household, no purpose seems to justify reference to the barometer, an object neither incongruous nor significant, and therefore not participating, at first glance, in the order of the *notable*” (141-142). In fiction (as opposed to history) the reader comes to expect aesthetic choice to play a vital role in limiting what Barthes calls “the vertigo of notation,” by balancing fact and meaning (145). The shaping intelligence of art is our weapon against the arbitrary. The barometer is there because it completes the picture.

From this perspective, for readers who feel that Dreiser’s excessive and repetitious use of financial details, his “stenographic conversations” and barrage of facts “insult [the] artistic sense,” therefore, it is precisely *because* these facts don’t adequately signify, don’t “portend inward meaning.” Yet, as Barthes argues, by taking historiography as its model, literary realism eliminates the need to justify the particular because the historical record itself serves as an adequate referent, substituting for aesthetic (or moral) “truth.” Realist details, we might say, now portend outward, not inward meaning. If the descriptive weight of the realist text is anchored in historical reality, excess facts can never obscure meaning.

The authenticity of history, meanwhile, its claim to an unmediated connection with “the real,” is justified, according to Barthes, precisely by the appearance of the superfluous detail. No longer associated (as in antiquity) with public knowledge, with the realm of the intelligible, in the modern conception History is akin to the natural world in its chaotic plenitude, its capacity to flood our circuits of meaning-production. Therefore the “naked relation” of History must now appear as a “resistance to meaning.” “[I]t suffices to recall that, in the ideology of our time, obsessive reference to the ‘concrete’ (in what is rhetorically demanded of the human sciences, of literature, of behavior) is always brandished like a weapon against meaning, as if, by some statutory exclusion, what is alive cannot signify—and vice-versa” (146). The non-signifying detail thus comes to stand as the very proof of (historical) reality.

Barthes’s argument helps us to understand the paradox of the realist project at its outer edges, where fidelity to the actual seemingly requires an abandonment of the very means of making the actual intelligible. This loss of meaning is felt, in the *Trilogy*, as a loss of *public* meaning, an inability to reach a shared account of the commercial forces that had come to dominate that very public. The density of financial documentation obscures rather than enlightens.¹⁶ In this aspect, Dreiser’s work stands as representative of what Robert Wiebe has called “the distended society,” swelled to a breaking point. When during Cowperwood’s trial the prosecuting attorney Shannon rhetorically asks his audience of jurors, “Could any human being wind through all the mazes of the complicated bookkeeping system which he ran?,” Cowperwood’s financial accounts come to signify the impenetrable complexity of the entire modern scene.

If Dreiser marks the economic sphere as the signifier of History in its modern conception (the life-like, the real, the actual), the *Trilogy* nevertheless problematizes an ideology of realism aimed at purging the aesthetic element. It is precisely in the moments when the weight of financial information slows the forward thrust of Dreiser's narrative to a near standstill, when narrative momentum threatens to collapse into pure description, that the aesthetic is re-introduced—located *within* the labyrinthine networks of money flow Cowperwood has built, not standing outside as an alternative to economic activity. My argument has some support if we consider the place of descriptive mode in the classical rhetorical tradition. In antiquity, description was associated with the epideictic, a ceremonial discourse intended to excite admiration rather than to persuade. It belonged to a different order than narrative, which suggested a teleological progression toward a communicable meaning; and it was defined against the more “expressly functional” legal and political discourses (Barthes 143). Accordingly, the descriptive mode carried within it “the very idea of the aesthetic finality of language.” In this sense, pure description, the piling up of non-functional detail, the very technique Dreiser uses to paint the economic realm as life-like, simultaneously renders this realm as the most highly aestheticized in the *Trilogy*. Just as we saw earlier that the career and personality of Cowperwood suggest an interconnection of the financial imagination and the artistic vision, Dreiser's *Trilogy* necessitates a view of realist discourse that re-conceptualizes the place of the aesthetic in relation to the economic.

Through superfluous documentary description, I have argued, the aesthetic is re-inscribed into Dreiser's historical realism, though its function has been altered. Aesthetic experience no longer provides a shaping intelligence to complex phenomena. Rather, it

approximates the texture of complexity, it submerges us in kaleidospic flux, in “the phantasmagoria of financial operations;” it is an aesthetic of the sublime in its emphasis on the essentially un-representable nature of the economic totality.¹⁷ The dialectical character of Dreiser’s art is in his approach to complexity. It is in the tension between his great belief in the truth-telling mission of art, the power of art to de-mystify—and his negative capability, his capacity to be astonished by “the mystery and wonder and terror of life,” his Nietzschean recognition of the interpenetration of reality and illusion.¹⁸ Defending the novelist against Lionel Trilling’s famous charge that his imagination was crudely positivist, Kazin wrote that Dreiser had always been misjudged, placed in the wrong tradition. He was a writer, like Whitman, through which ran a deep “strain of metaphysical wonder.” Dreiser’s greatness lay in “his reach as well as his grasp” (20).

The subject of business enterprise fired the imagination of Dreiser, just as it provided the most formidable fictional challenge of his career. The labyrinth of commerce seemed to call out for representation, yet in the end resisted capture. In *Cowperwood*, Dreiser created both a glorified double of himself, and a rival—a figure whose imaginative powers threatened to subsume his own. This personal ambivalence undoubtedly reflects the larger status anxiety of the artist in a nation dominated by the business mythology. “The physical act of writing for [Dreiser],” his biographer Richard Lingeman observed,

was akin to opening a valve, as one of his literary assistants once said. He had iron concentration, and the words flowed forth, steadily, the protruding wire on his stylographic pen whirling like a dervish as it stirred up ink in the barrel. He could sit completely immobile. He kept a stack of typewriter paper on his desk, filling one sheet after another, placing the finished ones on another steadily growing pile or letting them drift to the

floor to be put in order later. (81)

It is a striking image of Dreiser at work. The body immobile and the pen whirling in ink returns us to the author's own parable of the lobster and the squid, with its ambiguous significance. Is this a picture of the novelist as predator stalking his prey, eager to ensnare his historical subject in the nets of fiction? Or are the writer's clouds of ink his last line of defense, a sanctified space not yet surrendered to the insatiable beast of capitalism.

Notes

¹ The connections between Dreiser's life and his art have been emphasized in much of the major critical work done on the author. In this chapter, I have drawn most on this subject from Matthiessen's (1951) biography/critical study and volume II of Lingeman's biography (1990), supplemented by Lehan's (1969) and Pizer's (1976) critical monographs.

² Dreiser's remarkable ascendancy to prominence in the women's magazine trade will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. Before the Cowperwood novels, major characters in his fiction were drawn from material closer to Dreiser's own experience.

³ The trajectory of the Cowperwood novels is based on the three phases of Yerkes' business career. In his native Philadelphia, Yerkes started his own brokerage house and became wealthy by helping finance civil war bonds before being convicted for larceny and fraud in a scandal involving the city treasurer. He served seven months in the Eastern State Penitentiary. In 1881, he moved to Chicago with his twenty-four year old mistress, and became involved in the city public transportation system, orchestrating a series of financial stunts that brought him near-monopoly control over the city's three major street-railway lines. Ultimately defeated when his franchise bid was not renewed, Yerkes sold out and left for London in 1900 to try to develop and unify the underground transit system. He died in 1905 before the project was complete.

Dreiser clipped and saved a newspaper article from February 1906 entitled "The Materials of a Great Novel" which summarized the life of Yerkes and the decay of his great fortune after his death. It contains the following passage: "We could not expect Mr. Howells to deal with such a story. It is hardly for the young person. We shudder to think what might happen if Mr. James undertook it. The tale is too intricate and various and melodramatic for any kind of living novelist... By divine right it is the property of Balzac, with Daudet as residuary legatee. Both are dead" (qtd. in Lehan 101).

⁴ In *The Titan*, Cowperwood strives to squash newer technology, when it suits him. When James Furnivale Woolson, a newcomer to the city, proposes a more advanced and economical trolley system, Cowperwood does everything he can to delay the construction of the rival line.

⁵ After re-reading *The Titan* from the vantage point of the 1920's, Ford Madox Ford wrote, tongue-in-cheek, that the novel seemed rather tame. "It is just a rendering of normal life a few years ago when life was simpler and less corrupt" ("Portrait of Dreiser" in *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser* [1955]). Recent events, notably the financial practices resulting in the economic collapse of 2008, likewise seem to render all that came before simplistic. Financial instruments have become opaque to a degree where even the economists, the accountants, and the bankers themselves (!) throw their hands in the air.

⁶ See Cedric Cowing, *Populists, Plungers, and Progressives*, p. 5 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965), as cited in Michaels (1982).

⁷ The most significant episode of stock manipulation takes place when Cowperwood sells short on millions worth of American Match stock, bankrupting the founding duo of Hull and Stackpole and causing major financial damage to his rivals who were heavily invested in the promising new company.

⁸ Matthiessen also grants Cowperwood the status of "creative artist in his own medium."

⁹ In *Art & Money*, the title of which I borrow here in my chapter sub-heading, Marc Shell argues for the inevitable "interaction between economic and aesthetic symbolization and production" (4).

¹⁰ As Amy Kaplan makes the case, after experiencing success in the magazine industry, Dreiser acted the shrewd businessman in bringing out a second edition of *Sister Carrie*, buying stock in the newly-formed publishing house of B.W. Dodge Company and spending lavishly on marketing his own book, even including a one page "story of its suppression" on the first page.

¹¹ Dreiser was introduced to the ideas of Nietzsche by Mencken, whose book helped facilitate the reception of the philosopher's work in America. After the *The Titan* was criticized by the moralists and prudes, Dreiser complained to a reporter from the *Public Ledger* that Americans "tend to discard the opinions of those at the highest point of the intellectual scale for the prejudices and stupidity of the multitude. Everything is for the vast, ruling majority.... The idea that all men are created equal is one of the fundamental errors of our system of government. For to the distinguishing mind it is quite apparent that the degree of mental endowment with which individuals come into this world varies enormously. But to level down is the cry of mediocrity everywhere" (qtd. in Lingeman 104). Ultimately, Dreiser's defense of the theory of the superman is tempered by his belief in what he calls "The Equation Inevitable," an idea derived from Herbert Spencer's notion that nature creates its own system of checks and balances. No individual, no matter how powerful, can completely dominate society because his actions eventually create equally strong resistances, whether from the masses or from other great individual rivals.

¹² The early reviews are of the 1912 edition of the novel, from which Dreiser cut approximately 277 pages for the revised 1927 edition, some of which was masses of financial detail. In 2010, *The Financier: A Critical Edition* was published by Illinois UP, edited by Roark Mulligan, which uses Dreiser's uncorrected page proofs from 1912, making it even longer than the original. The interpretation of the novel in this chapter is based on the 1927 edition, which is what the majority of critics have relied on for decades (the old 1912 edition being long out of print). The recent publication of Mulligan's edition is likely to change that, if slowly. I am aware of the possibility that the argument I subsequently make about the aesthetic implications of the density of financial documentation might be strengthened by using the new edition, though I would also argue that my claims would hold even if that edition never existed.

¹³ Recent studies of *The Financier* that respond to the issue of financial density include David Zimmerman's reading of the novel in his *Panic!: Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2006), and Alison Shonkwiler's "Towards a Late View of Capitalism: Dehistoricized Finance in *The Financier*" in *Studies in the Novel* (Spring 2009, Vol. 41). Zimmerman is concerned with how modes of "accounting," legal, moral, and financial, colonize more and more space in the novel, ultimately engulfing their human subjects and creating an ever-expanding documentary volume that calls into question the limits of biographical narrative. He suggestively compares the uncontrolled spread of financial accounting during the Panic of 1871 to the spread of the actual Chicago fire that started

the panic. Shonkwiler also sees significance in the “peripheral details” of finance which point to the limits of narrative realism by “attempting to encompass more than they can represent” (59). In the final section of this chapter, I further develop these arguments about the connection between excessive detail and narrative limits by discussing the place of aesthetic experience.

¹⁴ For a fuller account of the cultural ramifications of the industrialism on urban life during the second half of the nineteenth century, see Alan Trachtenberg, (1982), esp. 101-140 on the “Mysteries of the Great City.” Also see Den Tandt (1998) on what he calls “The Urban Sublime,” that “paradoxical experience of terror and wonder” felt by the inhabitant of the great metropolis (4).

¹⁵ While *The Stoic*, the third and final novel of the *Trilogy*, covers events taking place during the years of 1898-1911, it was not published until 1947, two years after Dreiser’s death. After the first two parts of the *Trilogy* were completed, Dreiser’s interests shifted and he began other projects. The novel was written sporadically over the next twenty years, finally completed in 1945. *The Stoic* picks up the story of Cowperwood in 1898, as he and Berenice move to London. The first two thirds of the novel focus on Cowperwood’s attempts to finance and construct the London underground railway system, while the final third, in a significant thematic departure, traces Berenice’s dramatic conversion to Hindu mysticism, a reflection of Dreiser’s religious preoccupations later in life.

¹⁶ It is this facet of documentary realism that bothered Georg Lukacs, the great defender of the political meaning of the realist tradition. The closer a text moved toward pure “description,” the further it moved from illuminating that “epic totality” that de-mystified our relations with history. See Shonkwiler (2009). In Barthes’s terms, Lukacs would be understood as subscribing to the classical notion that History is the realm of the intelligible, and well-proportioned narrative the proper generic discourse for its expression.

¹⁷ In *The Urban Sublime* (1998), Den Tandt makes an analogous argument about Norris’s *The Pit*, which “defines as natural a relation to the urban scene that places isolated, fascinated observers—both characters and readers—against an incommensurable spectacle” (96). In depicting city sites such as the great stock exchange (in Norris’s novel it is the wheat pit, that centripetal vortex of the economic sphere), the naturalists regularly resorted to gothic and romantic tropes to convey their spectacular nature. Norris’s wheat pit, in my reading of the novel in chapter one, is indeed the privileged site aesthetic experience, despite the author’s efforts juxtapose the economic and the aesthetic realms.

¹⁸ Nowhere is this more apparent than in Dreiser’s description of the Black Grouper, a fish that possesses the remarkable ability to change color and blend completely with its surrounding environment, and which is meant as a concluding reflection on the reality-simulating powers of Cowperwood. “You cannot look at it long without feeling that you are witnessing something spectral and unnatural, so brilliant is its power to deceive.... Its markings change as the clouds of the sky.... An implement of illusion one might readily suspect it to be, a living lie, a creature whose business it is to appear what it is not, to simulate that which with it has nothing in common, to get its living by great subtlety, the power of its enemies to forefend against which is little” (*The Financier* 447). In such a world, he implies, doctrines like Christianity that naively separate reality and illusion are themselves the most dangerous kind of fictions, fostering a belief at odds with the observable world.

Chapter Four

“The Prose of Trade:”

The Businessman as Immigrant in Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*

No fiction about American business enterprise has emphasized the chasm between material and spiritual worlds so keenly, with as much passion, ambivalence, and insight as Abraham Cahan’s final novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). The story of a talented Russian Talmud scholar who arrives penniless in New York City’s Lower East Side in 1885 and eventually becomes one of the nation’s leading “cloak and suit men,” Cahan’s protagonist is regularly recognized by readers as a vital portrait of the successful American immigrant and the profound sacrifices that come with its precondition: assimilation. Levinsky’s nagging doubts about the price of his success are always with him, and the novel’s opening paragraph ends with this lament: “My present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command, and the rest of it, seem to be devoid of significance” (3). On the novel’s final page, the same note is sounded: “At the height of my business success I feel that if I had to live my life over again I should never think of a business career” (530). A middle-aged man who has failed to find love or to sustain a passion outside of his career as a manufacturer, David Levinsky is left with nothing but nostalgia for his days as a starving student in the Old World, a life he stubbornly continues to call his “inner identity.” “My wretched boyhood,” he writes, “appeals to me as a sick child does to its mother” (4).

In his introduction to a 1960 edition of the novel, John Higham places Cahan’s work among the “great business fictions of the Progressive era,” alongside novels by

Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris and Robert Herrick. The figure of David Levinsky, the immigrant greenhorn-turned-millionaire manufacturer, also calls to mind his fictional brethren Silas Lapham, Howells's sympathetically drawn *nouveau riche* trying to get a foothold in Brahmin Boston, and, in plots that are almost mirrored inversions of Cahan's, Henry James's American parvenus abroad in Europe.¹ But whereas James's Spencer Brydon in "The Jolly Corner" faints at the sight of himself as a successful real estate man and wakes up restored as an artist, Levinsky is unable to regain his old identity, and is stuck with his American self; his past and present, as he says, "do not comport well" (503). Likewise, the "rise" of Cahan's hero in some ways resembles that of Lapham. But Howells's eponymous paint mogul in the end rejects his commercial success and embraces the rural values that provide the bulwark of a morally anchored self.

If Levinsky is unable to escape from the role of soulless capitalist, like James's and Howells's characters, neither is he able to embrace it with the ruthless cynicism of Herrick's Van Harrington, who on the final pages of *The Memoirs of an American Citizen* (1905) is preparing to leverage his millions in "blood money" (he is a sausage tycoon) on a bid for a seat in the U.S. Senate ("the millionaires club," as Progressive critics called it), or Dreiser's financier and railroad mogul Frank Cowperwood, who learns as a ten year old boy that the world was for the strong, and never looks back at those he crushes along his way. Among all of the capitalist protagonists in the naturalist/Progressive period of American letters, Levinsky stands as the tortured soul, lamenting his lack of love and spirituality, and in the very telling of his story depicting the slow atrophying of sensibility endemic to a life devoted to commercial enterprise, rather than the pursuit of truth or beauty.²

Passing City College, the site of his earlier aspirations, the cloak and suit manufacturer muses that he should have been happier as a writer or a scientist, a sentiment that sets him apart from men like Lapham or Cowperwood. Nevertheless, Levinsky *is* a writer in the obvious (but usually overlooked) sense that Cahan's novel is Levinsky's memoir, and the manufacturer speaks to us in the first person voice throughout the narrative.³ A number of triumphant Gilded Age capitalists penned their memoirs, and a few like Carnegie wrote prolifically after building their wealth, both defending their achievements and offering moral advice to those at the beginning of their careers. Moreover, like other titans of industry, Cahan's Levinsky has much to be proud of. He has helped provide material comforts to a whole sector of the public, manufacturing thousands of lady's coats and men's suits of decent quality, helping lower the average price for the consumer and providing jobs for hundreds of workers, many of them fellow Jews from his native Russia. But while he occasionally basks in the triumph of the East European Jewry in the booming ready-made clothing industry, a conquest in which he has played a major part, Levinsky doesn't seem to take pride in recording his life story, and when he calls himself a "prosaic businessman" it is obvious that he isn't referring to the fact that he is writing his memoirs, but rather is making a self-deprecating remark about his social role. The point hardly seems worth making, except that questions about prose and poetry, and more generally about language (both written and spoken), are central to Levinsky's story.

In fact, the thematic equation of business with "prose" in *The Rise* functions simultaneously in two ways: on the one hand business is associated with the realm of the prosaic, the antithesis of the passion and spirituality of the Old World—the world of the

poet, the synagogue, and the romantic anti-capitalism that Levinsky projects upon his childhood. And yet Levinsky's intimate relationship with language, his abiding connection with the spiritual resonance of words—of The Word—suggests that even his life in the commercial world hasn't completely severed him from his intellectual heritage as a scholar of the Talmud.

A few episodes recalled from early in Levinsky's New York life will demonstrate the prevailing sentiment that in America matters of business and matters of spirituality remain separate, and at times antagonistic. On his first day in the city, Levinsky and his fellow ship-passenger Gitelson are approached as they walk up Broadway by a well-dressed man who addresses them in Yiddish, asking them their occupation. When Levinsky answers confusedly that he "reads Talmud," the stranger replies, "I see, but that's no business in America" (91). The man leaves with Gitelson, for whom he will find work as a tailor, and slips a quarter into Levinsky's hand, offering only vague encouragement. As a Talmud scholar in Antomir who spent all day reading in the synagogue, Levinsky had indeed lived off of the charity of others, a common practice in the Old World. It is nevertheless clear even to this greenhorn that the charitable handout he now receives is meant to buy him time to find work, most likely in a garment factory or a tenement sweatshop.⁴

After a spell in a cigar factory, Levinsky earns enough to try his hand at street peddling, selling from a basket full of collar buttons and garters, but is constantly borrowing money and on the run from his creditors. His friend Max Margolis advises him to give up selling and learn a trade: "It's plain you were not born to be a business man. The black dots [meaning the words in books] take up too much room in your head"

(141, author's parenthetical). During his sixteenth month in New York he chances upon the tailor Gitelson, who gives him the same advice, suggesting that he "[doesn't] seem to be fit for business, anyhow" (149). Gitelson then pays for his former shipmate to learn how to operate a machine in a cloak shop and, unbeknown to both, has ironically started in motion the chain of events that catalyzes Levinsky's spectacular rise to the ranks of the manufacturing elite. What no one in the novel seems to recognize is that Talmud study, the "black dots" that fill his head, far from hindering Levinsky, endows the Russian émigré with a perceptual apparatus and dialectical cast of mind that allows him to flourish within capitalist America. Likewise, commentators on *The Rise* have overwhelmingly emphasized the disjunction between the life of the Talmud scholar and the life of the commercial man, leaving unaddressed the hidden continuities between present and past in Levinsky's life.

Two exceptions are worth mentioning. In a seminal 1952 review of the novel Isaac Rosenfeld remarks that "The story is a simple one and fundamentally Jewish in conception, as it consists of an extended commentary on a single text, somewhat in the manner of the Talmud." The "single text" Rosenfeld has in mind is the opening paragraph of the novel, where the manufacturer first sounds the double theme of a consistent "inner identity" and a sense that his life at present is "devoid of meaning." Rosenfeld does not in fact go on to explore the Talmudic connection in any specificity, instead offering an analysis of the proto-American qualities of Levinsky's perpetual dissatisfaction. In his 1977 study of the novel, Jules Zanger does take up the issue in a sustained fashion, arguing that Levinsky's early program of Talmud study "shapes [his] perception of the world and his subsequent relationship to it," giving rise to a

“doubleness of vision and of values” often expressed as “a tension between the spiritual and the material world” (286).

We can, however, go much further by imagining that that the entirety of his adopted American culture, characterized by a youthful and vigorous capitalist spirit, presents itself to Levinsky in the manner of a slowly unfolding Talmudic text, one marked by a series of contradictions that take the shape of intellectual problems capable of being resolved through analysis.⁵ This chapter will pursue such a conceit, as I will show how it helps us understand how Levinsky’s life as an immigrant businessman is one that represents not a break from his previous pursuits, but rather a metamorphosis of those pursuits. The chasm between the commercial and the spiritual will thus come to be seen in a properly dialectical light, a light that captures the reflections of the past upon the present. The key to this connection is the structural resemblance of the Talmudic tension between material and spiritual, and the Marxian commodity form, which embodies this tension in the guise of use-value and exchange-value. Just as America appears to David Levinsky the scholar as an endless series of Talmudic “discrepancies,” it appears to David Levinsky the millionaire manufacturer as “an immense collection of commodities.”⁶ In *The Rise*, the past itself takes on the status of a commodity, perceived by Levinsky in the ghostly half-light of exchange-value.

Talmudic Vision

The Rise of David Levinsky is divided into fourteen sections with the first four sections devoted to young David’s life in Antomir, Russia. The boy grows up fatherless and poor, but his mother makes it her life’s work to see that her only son gets a proper

Talmudic education at a Yeshiva, an unlikely path for a boy of no economic means or social status. Nonetheless, David's natural aptitude and his mother's perseverance land him in a respected seminary at the age of thirteen, where he spends the next seven years of his life reading the Talmud, the sprawling collection of volumes comprising the ancient rabbinical commentary on the Torah. During this time David is tutored by the Rabbi Sender, a kind and "simple-hearted" man who also possesses one of the sharpest Talmudic minds in the seminary. The rabbi's "great delight," David remembers, "was to tackle some intricate maze of Talmudic reasoning. This he would do with ferocious zest, like a warrior attacking the enemy, flashing his tortoise snuff-box as if it were his sword" (31). The rabbi becomes a father-figure to David, encouraging the precocious scholar and providing intimate human companionship, but also scolding David when he shows too much pride in his talents. What fascinates David most is Reb Sender's ingenuity at discovering "discrepancies" in the text and "explain[ing] them away" with great subtlety and verve (38).

The Talmud itself is commonly regarded as more than a mere book; it is rather an entire "literature," containing discussions of legal matters, ethics, a body of ritual customs, passages of poetry, prayers, historical narratives, scientific and medical inquiry, and bits of folklore, among other things (*Understanding* 17). Its depths, as the Tannaim (the first generation of Talmud scholars) would say, are oceanic. "Can you fathom the sea? [...] Neither can you fathom the depths of the Talmud" (*The Rise* 28). The analogy of the Talmud and the natural world was treated quite literally by the Tannaim, however, with the result that scholars poured minutely over even "dead" issues, like scientists who study extinct species or archeological ruins. The historical consequences of this are that

the body of Talmudic literature has continued to evolve through the effort of the Tannaim to reconstruct the past through interpretation of the literature it produced. Every new addition to the Talmud would, becoming part of the natural world, give rise to new interpretations. It is seen by its readers as a kind of open text, less concerned with conclusions than with preserving a “slice of life,” capturing the nuance of debates at the time, with the overall effect being a deeply dialectical kind of truth emerging. It is the record of definitive solutions but retains the alternative solutions proposed and rejected (*Understanding* 21, Steinsaltz 56). The essential characteristic of the Talmudic mind, writes Adin Steinsaltz in his excellent overview of the subject, is “the untiring search for the alternative dimension of things.... The desire to see matters in a different light” (270). Such a mindset is exemplified in the common Talmudic phrases *ve-dilma ipkha?* (“And perhaps the opposite is true”) and *ipkha mistrbra* (“The opposite holds”) (270).

Along with the impulse to conserve the flavor of the past another imperative runs parallel. Beginning with the school of thought based on the work of the influential Rabbi Hillel in the 1st century B.C.E, the Tannaim had become increasingly involved in reading Talmudic Law in ways that would harmonize the ancient teachings with the contemporary world. The idea was that the Torah “would never grow antiquated so long as it was capable of reinterpretation to comply with new contingencies” (8-9). Key questions about laboring during the Sabbath and the legality of money lending, for example, were “solved” by the famous Babylonian scholar Hillel and his students, who carefully parsed the relevant Talmudic passages. Often, new readings of older laws were forged by paying special attention to such seemingly trivial matters as stylistic or grammatical imperfections or inconsistencies, repetitions or even anomalous spellings, as

these were “favored pegs upon which to hang a new interpretation” (*Understanding* 259). Such scholarly slicing and dicing earned the masters of *pilpul* (logical deduction) great fame while in many cases causing century-long controversy. Steinsaltz compares the greatest of these scholars to artistic geniuses who work at the very highest levels of creativity, possessing a deeper intuition into the beauty of the underlying Talmudic structure (263-264).

Rabbi Sender’s emphasis on “discrepancy,” then, marks him as a master of *pilpul*, and it is also this cast of mind that forms in his young and eager student. Reading in the synagogue day and night, David’s perception of the world outside of the text also begins to be shaped by his Talmud study, a fact we notice well before he arrives in America. An early example of this occurs when he sees Red Esther, a young woman with whose family he and his mother had shared an apartment when the two were children. While a girl, Red Esther had always annoyed him, but her emerging femininity arouses in adolescent David the first stirrings of sexual attraction, a feeling he immediately intellectualizes:

“I do hate her,” I once said to myself, as I heard that
laugh of hers.

“And yet you would not mind kissing her, would you now?”
a voice retorted.

I had to own that I would not, and then I cudgeled my brains
at the amazing discrepancy of the thing. (44)

Setting out to explain away the discrepancy David first reasons that kissing means “being fond of one,” because he kisses his mother, of whom he is fond. So how is it that he is “impelled” to kiss someone he is not fond of? His solution is to posit that there are two kinds of kisses: “the kiss of affection and the kiss of Satan” (44). The young scholar’s

heavy-handed creation of categories to solve a rather simple question (the difference between love and lust) is obviously over-intellectual, and when he submits his “discovery” to his fellow young Talmudists they dismiss it as a truism. Nonetheless, the episode is significant in that it provides an early glimpse into a characteristic pattern in his thinking.⁷ Moreover, and more generally, David’s tendency to smother his emotions with his intellect is a recurrent theme, one that ultimately has tragic consequences.

One spring, on a day when the Jewish Passover coincides with the Christian Easter, David is attacked by a group of Gentiles who laugh at his long-skirted coat and side-locks, then tear his cap off and beat him bloody. Upon his arrival home, his over-protective mother flies into a state of hysteria and runs out of the house vowing revenge. Fifteen minutes later she is carried back unconscious, and dies the same evening. There is a wave of sympathy throughout the town for the orphaned boy, but David is now forced to sleep in the synagogue where he studies, eating only when provided with a meal from a charitable family. His luck changes when his story is called to the attention of a wealthy woman in Antomir who supports poor Talmudists, and who immediately takes David in as a boarder. It is here that David’s experience expands, as he learns about the wider historical context of the anti-Jewish sentiment that led to his mother’s murder, and first hears about Jews in America, reading letters from immigrants who have successfully arrived in New York. But it is Shiphrah Minker’s daughter Matilda who has the most profound effect on David, exposing him to “Gentile books” and encouraging him to become “an educated man” by studying Russian (72). “It’s a crime for a young man like you to throw himself away on that idiotic Talmud of yours,” she tells him.⁸ David falls in love with Matilda but by this time has his mind set on going to America, where he feels

that by learning English he can both make money and get a college education. Rejecting David romantically, Matilda agrees to provide the money for his trip, and shortly after he leaves the old country.

With the intensive study of language already central to his habits of mind, it is only natural that Levinsky should become obsessed with mastering English, viewing this as the key to success in America. Taking to his new task with dogged determination, he quickly becomes the star student in an evening English class for Yiddish-speaking immigrants. Eventually Levinsky becomes proficient enough to teach evening classes himself in order to supplement his income from street peddling. Struggling (with dictionary) through Dickens's *Dombey & Son* in his attic loft by lamplight, he dreams of saving up money and enrolling as a student at City College, his new "temple." Levinsky sees in his future at City College the counterpart to his old synagogue days; it is "a symbol of spiritual promotion" that will place him in "the moral as well as the intellectual aristocracy" of his adopted country (169). But Levinsky's rapid *oysgreening* produces a doubt that articulates itself as a discrepancy to be analyzed. Halfway through the remarkable passage that follows, he pivots and provides the dialectical response to his first argument, creating the unresolved contradiction with which he ends the chapter:

There was an odd confusion of ideas in my mind. On the one hand, I had a notion that to "become an American" was the only tangible form of becoming a man of culture (for did I not regard the most refined and learned European as a "greenhorn")?; on the other hand, the impression was deep in me that American education was a cheap machine-made product. (167)

It is in this passage that America itself is first articulated as a paradoxical idea in Levinsky's mind. "Culture" here is associated with *place*, with a geographical space full

of things that are “tangible,” a place where spiritual refinement alone means nothing. Yet, the linking of culture with the material realm (“the tangible form”) simultaneously debases it—an American education is the artificial (“machine-made”) product of a culture where success is measured exclusively by the material.

The opposition is echoed during a conversation Levinsky has with the successful émigré clothing-manufacturer Meyer Nodelman, the son of his landlady. When Levinsky informs Nodelman of his plans to get a college education and eventually become a doctor of philosophy, the illiterate manufacturer initially tries to rebuff him, explaining that the “learned fellow” in his office works for *him*, not the other way around. Nodelman goes further, waxing philosophical:

What is a man without capital? Nothing! Nobody cares for him.
He is like a beast. A beast can't talk and he can't. “Money talks,”
as the Americans say. (181)

By the end of the conversation, however, the manufacturer has reversed course and begins to argue the merits of education, claiming that “[a] man without writing is just like a deaf mute” (181). The replicated analogy of the “mute” in Nodelman’s discourse is striking. How can it be that a man without money is a mute and a man “without writing” is a mute? Does America demand that we choose between dollars and education, becoming “beastly” for lack of the forsaken choice?

To finally rid himself of greenhorn status, Levinsky must master American-style politics, and, as we might expect, his political education also takes the form of contemplating a paradox. He is surprised to see a gentile east side judge frequent the Sons of Antomir synagogue in the weeks before election day. One evening he overhears two men in synagogue praising the judge: “He’s not a bad fellow.... If you have a trial in

his court he'll decide it in your favor" (132). Levinsky asks about the fate of other party in the case; the judge surely couldn't decide in favor of both. One of the men responds with what Levinsky assumes is a "riddle:" "There is no 'can't' in America" (132).

In autocratic Russia, there were no political parties—only a monarchy and underground revolutionary organizations. In democratic America, one of the freedoms enjoyed was the paradoxical freedom to sell one's vote, a practice that at first puzzles Levinsky because it would seem to undermine the system of representative government. When his friend Bender lectures him on politics in America, he claims that "[t]he principles of a party are its soul," and praises the "Jeffersonian ideals" of his Democratic Party. Levinsky, however, argues that there is "a screaming discrepancy" between Bender's talk of "Jeffersonian ideals" and the corrupt machinations of the party he witnesses. Bender ignores him, continuing his praise (132).

What Levinsky begins to recognize is that the American legal system and democratic institutions, unlike in Russia, are capitalist, and are therefore more flexible, able to be "bent" in the direction of capital. This realization is what finally allows Levinsky to understand the puzzling assertion that "there is no 'can't' in America." It is important, however, to see that his very understanding of such American institutions is undergirded by his view of them as essentially contradictory "open texts" susceptible to constant revision, and thus in a manner resembling Talmudic law.

It is during his time working in a cloak-making shop that Levinsky first begins to view the production of goods from an intellectual standpoint. Pulling the long hours customary in the industry during the "rush season," he doesn't open a book for three months, instead developing a passion for his trade, even seeking out other cloak-makers

to talk shop after hours. Finding that his strength on the sewing machine is “speed” rather than “skill,” the opposition between the two qualities (abstractly considered) becomes a subject of fascination. Speed, Levinsky realizes, is a matter of economy: reduce the amount of time spent passing between various parts of the cloth, and the garment will be finished more rapidly. He works out a precise system with the goal of minimizing these non-productive moments; he is constantly “pondering the problem and introducing little improvements” (157). Once viewed as an “intellectual problem,” garment-making becomes Levinsky’s new obsession, displacing his thoughts about City College. The following section of the novel, entitled “The Destruction of My Temple,” alludes to such a change of allegiance.

The Language of Capital

When does David Levinsky become a businessman? His own answer suggests that the designation is more about one’s state of mind than the amount of capital at one’s disposal. According to Levinsky, the pivotal episode comes on a day when his boss humiliates him in front of his peers for accidentally spilling a bottle of milk on some garments. The event causes the young cloakmaker to hate his boss, and hatred proves a galvanizing force on Levinsky’s imagination. Recognizing at once that he and his fellow workers are being exploited, his solution is to go into business for himself.⁹ His plan is to convince his fellow worker Ansel Chaikin to quit the sweatshop and become his partner. Levinsky knows that Chaikin’s designs, American replicas of French styles, are coveted

by a large retail house that gives the shop a significant percentage of its business, yet Chaikin works for a mere five dollars a week while the owners get rich.

After convincing Chaikin and (with difficulty) Mrs. Chaikin to agree to join forces, the designer produces a few samples that Levinsky shops around town, discovering potential buyers by reading a daily financial paper he borrows from a necktie manufacturer. Procuring an order from a Midwestern firm for five hundred cloaks, he successfully begs thirty days credit from a commission merchant and buys the raw material for the cloaks, an additional sewing machine, and hires two operators who work fourteen hour days for twelve dollars a week. The cloaks ship on time, and the payment is received, despite an almost ruinous delay. Levinsky has turned his first business deal and his “cloak-factory” is up and running.

Significantly, during the next several sections of the narrative (which depict the rise of Levinsky as a manufacturer) the Russian émigré’s further education in the English language is concerned primarily with learning the financial jargon necessary to do business in America. He follows the financial columns with a newfound feeling of belonging to a special “caste,” fervently combing over the words as he once did the Talmud, and later his small collection of Dickens and Thackeray.

Often, too, I would clip and put away a paragraph containing some curious piece of information or a bit of English that was an addition to my knowledge of the language. My inside pocket was full of all sorts of clippings. (269)

It is during his first year in business that Levinsky falls in love again, and again social circumstances prove a final obstacle. Dora is the wife of his friend Max Margolis, who runs one of the dancing schools popular on the Lower East Side at the time. The

longest section of *The Rise* is titled “Dora” and consists of alternating chapters where Levinsky narrates his emerging business and his deepening intimacy with the Margolis family, who eventually take him on as a boarder. One commentator detects an Oedipal pattern in Levinsky’s doomed quest for love, with Dora falling in between Matilda (the wealthy Russian who pays Levinsky’s ship fare) and Miss Anna Tevkin, daughter of the poet Abraham Tevkin (who will be discussed shortly).¹⁰ Dora, however, should be given special consideration as she forges a deeper connection with Levinsky than the other women. Whereas Matilda and Anna arouse Levinsky merely in the ideals they represent (Matilda is the seduction of the Western culture, Miss Tevkin is youth, beauty and ideological purity), Dora is to Levinsky a woman in the flesh and blood. He relishes her old world cooking and affectionately watches her raise her young daughter, Lucy. Most significantly, they share a passionate desire to master the English language and American culture, and for a brief period of time they share this quest. While Max is away nights at his dancing school, Levinsky falls in love with Dora as he watches her eagerly imbibe her daughter’s school lessons, striving herself to become an American in speech, writing, and manners.

These scenes in the Margolis household are among the most poignant in the novel, representing the manufacturer’s final immersion in Yiddish hearth and home while he simultaneously witnesses the culture’s impending disappearance into the American melting pot.¹¹ After the love affair is consummated, however, Dora decides for her daughter’s sake that she will not break up her family, despite the fact that she has never loved her husband. Levinsky moves out and rarely communicates with the Margolis’s again. The story has a melancholy epilogue as well: Levinsky finds out years later that

Lucy has married a dolt of a businessman, in the end opting for material well-being over the more elusive promise of culture and higher education. Thus, the Dora/Lucy subplot echoes the larger narrative in its examination of the profound sense of loss that accompanies assimilation, and the ambiguous role of language acquisition in that process. It is a predicament beautifully characterized by Irving Howe, who has written that “the overarching paradox of Yiddish culture in America” is that “the sooner it began to realize its visions, the sooner it would destroy them” (524).

Having lost his love interest, Levinsky throws himself completely into his business affairs. Honing his sales pitch to department stores proprietors, he undersells his competition by an average of five dollars, explaining that while his overhead is very low, the larger manufacturers have “extra expenses” such as the upkeep of large factories. Moreover, his firm willingly works at a lower profit margin. Most importantly, Levinsky finds a way to avoid paying union wages. “The big men in the business wouldn’t even know where hands of this kind could be got. We do” (211). With this piece of rhetoric, the new manufacturer begins to exploit his status as a recent immigrant, turning a disadvantage into an advantage. A new initiate in the world of American business, Levinsky possesses a valuable connection to the primary source of profit in a capitalist economy: cheap labor. After all, he was very recently a member of this very immigrant underclass. His Yiddish past, as Philip Barrish notes, now serves a practical end, functioning as the cultural capital he spends in order to form ties with greenhorn countrymen, or, in his eyes, labor power. Access to (yet distance from) the Jewish cultural vernacular gives Levinsky a special advantage over American-born manufacturers.¹²

Nevertheless, it is somewhat startling how quickly Levinsky unapologetically takes up and defends the ideological position of the capitalist class once he feels he is a member. He frequently complains of socialism and unions to Meyer Nodelman, calling unionized labor “[a] bunch of good-for-nothings, too lazy to work, [who] will stir up trouble” (271). It seems that Levinsky retains a keen memory of his scholarly life in the old world, but is quick to forget his more immediate past as a sweat shop laborer in America. The labor question now presents itself to Levinsky purely in terms of the profitability of his enterprise—he no longer sees individual human beings at sewing machines, but rather masses of labor power. When the cloak and suit makers unionize, we might imagine that the question assumes for Levinsky the form of another Talmudic discrepancy to be solved. In other words, if cheap labor means higher profits, then the workers bargaining collectively for higher wages is sure to lower profitability: ‘how then can I view the unionization of labor in a manner that allows me to actually *profit* from the new circumstance?’ His solution is to get official union recognition for his shop (thus eliminating the risk of worker boycotts) while continuing to pay non-union wages. This he can do by secretly offering longer hours so that the workers can earn more money at his shop than at the larger outfits (closely under the eye of the union) forced to conform to the workday limits. His shop, “in full blast from 5 in the morning to midnight,” actually becomes a more desired spot for labor (272).¹³ When a group of cloak manufacturers decides to strike back by locking out all union men, Levinsky makes a show of going along but secretly continues to run his shop, which possesses the added advantage of being small enough to be mobile: when one of his machine-operators turns on him and lets the union leaders know of his whereabouts, he simply moves the shop.

After a successful union strike the following August, Levinsky resorts to even more elaborate means in order to maintain profitability: he is able to find union men who are willing to hoodwink their organization, accepting less money than the standardized payment amount labeled on their envelopes (with the promise of working longer hours to earn a larger total paycheck). When this practice is discovered, he hires men whom he initially pays the standardized rate in full (in case a union operative is checking envelopes outside the shop on payday) and has them “pay me back the difference between the official and actual wage” the following Monday (285). It is thus the very strength of the union and “the vigor with which it enforced its increased wage scale” that allows Levinsky to continue to undersell his competitors: “[t]he lockout and the absolute triumph of the union was practically the making of me” (285). Before long, the manufacturer can read about himself in the socialist Yiddish-language daily the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, which calls him a traitor to his class.¹⁴ Rather than shame, however, Levinsky’s vanity is flattered; after all, the same organ attacks the Vanderbilts, the Goulds, and the Rothschilds, he muses. “I felt in good company” (273).

Fittingly, when the manufacturer does take up literature again, it is the works of Darwin and Spencer, and he indulges in their ideas with narcissistic pleasure. Like many capitalists during the final decades of the nineteenth century, Levinsky finds in the theory of the survival of the fittest both a biological explanation and an ethical defense of his achievements. “The able fellows succeed, and the misfits fail. Then the misfits begrudge those who accomplish things.... A working-man, and every one else who was poor, was an object of contempt to me” (282, 283).¹⁵

Fortified by recent success coupled with his new social Darwinian outlook, the manufacturer has no use for the conventional morals of small-minded men. His business strategies become more and more Machiavellian. Tiring of his partner Chaikin's lack of business acumen and Mrs. Chaikin's constant suspicions that he is taking advantage of the couple, Levinsky buys the designer out and covertly hires an employee from one of the larger shops to steal the latest cloak designs for him.¹⁶ Leveraging the capital he has amassed, he begins to vertically integrate, buying out the entire seasonal product of a large wholesale textile mill for a discount and selling it to his smaller competitors at a profit. On the eve of complete economic triumph, with at very least an oligopolic stake in the retail cloak and suit market, Levinsky now fully shares in the enlightened cynicism of the "great men," those whose very success has given them a privileged glimpse under the veils of society that mercifully hide its jungle-like nature.

I saw that political speeches, sermons, and editorials had, with very few exceptions, no more sincerity in them than the rhetoric of an advertisement. I saw that Americans who boasted descent from the revolution boasted, in the same breath, of having spent an evening with Lord So-and-so; that it was their avowed ambition to acquire for their daughters the very titles which their ancestors had fought to banish from the life of their country.... So I pictured civilization as a harlot with cheeks, lips and eyelashes of artificial beauty. I imagined mountains of powder and paint, a deafening chorus of affected laughter, a huge heart, as large as a city, full of falsehood and mischief. (380)

Once the veils are lifted, a "worm-eaten" core of hypocrisy is revealed. The reality is naked ambition, and the only refuge from this animalistic state of affairs is a "self-sacrificing devotion to one's family," the "the only kind of altruism and idealism" that Levinsky "[doesn't] flout" (380).

Longing for a family life to fulfill the spiritual vacuum caused by his lack of a traditional religious faith or its secular socialist or progressive corollary, Levinsky begins to seek a marriage match, a project that only reinforces his alienation from both the old world and the new. He comes to regret his hasty engagement to Fanny Kaplan, the third daughter of a middle-class Jewish-American family. Despite her father's strict religious habits, Fanny, who only speaks English, turns out to be too *American*, and her shallow materialism repulses Levinsky. The Kaplan family's attempt to bridge tradition and modernity seems almost grotesque to their prospective son-in-law. During a visit to the Kaplan's house, the manufacturer is depressed by the family's "gaudy" parlor, with its "pink-and gold furniture" and "heavy bright carpet" all of which seem "out of keeping with a sense of home" (394). Sitting for *seder* dinner, he watches as Fanny's younger brother Rubie performs his knowledge of a handful of Talmudic passages at the request of his father. Although he tries to convince himself otherwise, Levsinky is bored and even embarrassed by the Talmudic gesticulations of the boy, which doubtless remind him of the fact that, despite his success as a manufacturer, he is still trying to rid himself of those very gestures, which occasionally plague him "like a physical defect" when he is in the middle of his business dealings (327). The engagement with Fanny is broken off.

The Liquidation of the Past

One of the fascinating developments in the later sections of *The Rise* is David Levinsky's attempt to recreate the Antomir of his youth within the confines of his expanding factory. Forty years old and a rich man, the manufacturer is lonely and

plagued by nostalgia. “Everything bearing the name of my native place touched a tender spot in my heart” (378). He offers a job to nearly anyone with “an Antomir accent” and gives them preferred treatment, continuing to employ many of them even during the slack business seasons. As Sanford Marovitz has pointed out, however, Levinsky’s recollections about Antomir are not to be taken as wholly accurate. He seems to forget that he was essentially an “arrogant, competitive, lustful young man” as a student in Russia (Marovitz 152). Along with falsified memories, Levinsky displays a warped consciousness about the real desires of his fellow countrymen who have come to America, convincing himself that fellow-feeling is a legitimate substitute for adequate wages and working conditions. As he explains to a fellow businessman,

“They need very little, and they love their work. They will stay in the shop from early in the morning till late at night.... In Russia a tailor works about fourteen hour a day. Of course I don’t let them overwork themselves. I treat them as if they were my brothers or uncles. We get along like a family.” (323)

As this passage makes clear, the word “green” has taken on an ominous second meaning: the status of greenhorn in America is a steady source of green (profit) for the capitalist who cashes in on his connection. The “Antomir atmosphere” in his shop safeguards him against union incursions and keeps the general wage levels low (378). The manufacturer and his employees form “The Levinsky Antomir Benefit Society,” and he begins to take on the role (at least in his own mind) of benevolent patriarch, indulging in such acts as paying the ship fare of an aunt or cousin of one of his employees—with the tacit agreement that the newly arrived will come work in his factory. Remarkably, Levinsky even mines his American past, which becomes a source of new labor. By the end of his narrative, he has hired his old English instructor Bender as an accountant and personal

assistant, has brought on his old partner Chaikin (who now designs cloaks for a basic wage), and hires a former rival, the brash salesman Loeb who had once poked fun at Levinsky's small-time outfit.

The pattern emerging from Levinsky's "rise" is one familiar to students of Marx, who emphasized the centrality of the commodity form in a capitalist society. The essence of the commodity, Marx argued, is its dual nature: it exists as an external object that satisfies a human need, while simultaneously doubling as a purely abstract quantity intelligible only in its ability to be exchanged for other commodities. Labor-power, he explains (with trademark sarcasm), is the one commodity that possesses "the occult ability to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or at least lays golden eggs." From this perspective, then, Levinsky, in striving to synthesize past and present, in recreating the old world in the context of his American factory, has stumbled upon the secret at the heart of capital—the exploitation of labor.

Recognizing that his prosperity stands in the way of a truly meaningful connection with the people of his birthplace (both inside and outside of his employ), Levinsky calls his success "a tragedy" (529). In attempting to resurrect the past, he has only managed to bring Antomir back to life within the rules of the commodity form: his townspeople now assume the phantom-like existence of exchangeable "values" rather than real human beings capable of connecting with him. His present life is empty and "devoid of meaning" precisely because he ceaselessly liquidates the past of its human content. He is trapped in the role of the capitalist who has sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.¹⁷

Perhaps the most poignant demonstration of Levisinky's alienation comes during a meeting with his old shipmate Gitelson. In the Spring of 1910, on the twentieth-fifth anniversary of their arrival in America, the manufacturer decides to invite the tailor to a luxurious dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria. His own attempt at business having failed, Gitelson had for years been employed as a wage-worker for a ladies' tailor shop, and the two men rarely crossed paths. The meal is painfully awkward, as it obvious that Gitelson has never been in such a place, and his embarrassment reminds Levinsky of the humiliation he once felt at his first business dinner, when he had to ask his prospective gentile client how to use the bewildering array of silverware in front of him. Tipsy from a glass of champagne, the tailor accepts a repayment, with interest, for the initial ten dollar loan (twenty-three years earlier) that gave Levinsky his start at the cloak shop.

I made out a check for two hundred dollars; tore it and made out one for five hundred.

He flushed, scanned the figure, giggled, hesitated, and finally folded the check and pushed it into his inner vest pocket, thanking me with drunken ardor. (516)

Money serves as both a wall of separation between the immigrants and a sham substitute for a real human connection.

“Prosperity and Prose”

The “tragedy” of Levinsky's success and his doomed attempt to recapture the past call to mind a pair of Cahan's earlier fictional works. “The Imported Bridegroom” and “Tzinchadzi of the Catskills” are two of Cahan's most remarkable stories in their own right, and especially significant in this context for the comparative light they shed on

Levinsky. Several readers have observed a link between Levinsky and the titular character of “Tzinchadzi of the Catskills,” a story published in the August 1901 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Combining romance and realism, the story begins in a resort area of the Catskills, where the unnamed narrator meets a man garbed as a Circassian nobleman, who emerges from the surrounding forest on horseback in order to sell his exotic eastern wares to the vacationers. The mysterious stranger tells the narrator of his past, where in a small town in his native Georgia he had loved and lost the beautiful Zelaya. As the maiden had had two suitors, her father decided that a horserace would decide the bridegroom. A passionate and superior horseman, Tzinchadzi won the race but lost the maiden who fell in love with the other suitor out of sympathy, telling Tzinchadzi he was heartless. Fleeing to America where he has been invited to perform on horseback at the Chicago World’s Fair, Tzinchadzi meets a Jewish merchant who sells the horseman his wares and convinces him to go into business for himself, whereupon he sets for the Catskills.

From this moment on, like Levinsky, Tzinchadzi’s relation to his past life is mediated by commerce. The wares he sells, artifacts of his native land, appear to him as mere objects of exchange, and thus his past life can only rise as a specter that haunts his present, trapped within the logic of the commodity form. “The Americans are kind: they like my horsemanship and buy my trinkets. I make plenty of money, but can it buy me Zelaya? Can it turn the Catskills into the Caucuses?” (qtd in Sanders 241). When the two men meet again on a New York ferryboat six years later, Tzinchadzi is clad in a blue American suit and a derby. He has changed his name to Jones (“it’s easier for Americans to pronounce”) and is now a wealthy merchant and real estate man who “glistened with

prosperity and prose” (qtd. in Sanders 242, italics mine). Just as Levinsky cuts off his Talmudic sidelocks, Jones has rid himself of his Circassian garments and in doing so has severed himself from his native land. Tzinchadzi/Jones tells the narrator that he no longer yearns for his youth, but instead can only yearn for his old pain, that residue of a lost life: “The pain is gone, and with it my happiness.” Even more than Levinsky the manufacturer, Jones the real estate man, living in the numbing vacuum of a present dominated by the commodity, is an embodiment of the sacrifices Cahan associates with success in capitalist America. As the narrator’s linking of “prosperity” and “prose” suggests, the chasm between Tzinchadzi and Jones is the chasm between the poetry of the old world and the prose of American commerce.

In “The Imported Bridegroom,” a novella published in 1898, Asriel Stroon, a wealthy and recently retired Jewish-American businessman beset by nostalgia and a undergoing a religious awakening, travels back to his native Polish village to visit the graves of his ancestors. With a mixture of satiric nuance and moral undercurrent reminiscent of Hawthorne, Cahan depicts a tragicomic series of events precipitated by the American parvenu’s return to the *shtetl*. During a visit to the synagogue, a bidding contest erupts between Stroon and Reb Lippe, Pravly’s leading citizen, over the right to perform the honorary task of reading of the weekly Pentateuch. When Asriel outbids his rival but Lippe’s name is still chosen as the reader, Asriel vows his revenge. Reb Lippe had been negotiating for the marriage of his daughter to Shaya Golub, a young Talmudic prodigy of rare ability. Aware that housing and providing for such a scholar was considered a noble deed of highest order, and confident of his economic superiority (“I can buy up all of Pravly, Reb Lippe, his gold lace and all, and sell him at a loss, too!”),

Stroon challenges the rabbi to another bidding war for the rights to the prodigy, whom he will take home for his own daughter to marry (109). The businessman easily triumphs, carrying his prize back to America with him. His success, though, has come at a price: whereas when he first arrived in Pravyly, Stroon had been enchanted, noticing that seemingly nothing had changed in his absence, now “[a]ll the poetry of thirty-five years’ separation had fled from it, leaving a heap of beggarly squalor.... The only interest the town now had for him was that of a medium to be filled with the rays of his financial triumph” (111).

Though she initially rejects Shaya as hopelessly medieval (she dreams of marrying a fully assimilated Jewish-American doctor with a top hat and a buggy), twenty-year-old Flora Stroon begins to see the raw potential in her young and brilliant marriage match, and she tries to reform him, giving English lessons to the *Illoui* and introducing him to western literature. The effect is not what she had anticipated, and Cahan clearly relishes in the irony. Rather than metamorphosing into a polished American bourgeois (Cahan’s Yiddish-English neologism was “allrightnick”), Shaya, like many Jewish-American intellectuals of his generation, transfers his energetic Talmudic dialectics into a passionate interest in the Western enlightenment traditions. Asriel disowns his son-to-be, denouncing him as an *appikoros* after he has spied him reading “the gentile books” in the Astor library and eating in a “Christian restaurant” on the Bowery. Though Flora and Shaya are secretly married at City Hall, the narrative closes on the dark comedy of the couple’s wedding night, where the bride is perplexed to find her newly wed in a smoky upstairs apartment room sitting around with a group of grotesque characters, engrossed a heated debate over the niceties of Comtean positivism.

As the narrator pans the camera from the clustered apartment back into Flora's thoughts, the final lines of this story attest to the power of Cahan's fiction at its best:

Flora was going to protest and to threaten to leave without him, but she could neither speak nor stir from her seat. A nightmare of desolation and jealousy choked her—jealousy of the Scotchman's book, of the Little-Russian shirt, of the empty tea glasses with the slices of lemon on their bottoms, of the whole excited crowd, and of Shaya's entire future, from which she seemed excluded. (162)

Shaya, the imported bridegroom, has escaped the grasp of both his importer and his bride, though he has done so without malice or even conscious intent.

Like *The Rise*, "The Imported Bridegroom" examines what happens to spiritual values when they enter the marketplace. It poses the question "Can one buy a Talmud scholar with American dollars?" and answers in the affirmative, then in naturalistic detail traces the consequences of the fact. Like Levinsky and Tzinchadzi/Jones, Asriel Stroon finds out that his artifacts of the old world are not the same after having made the trip across the ocean. As commodities that have acquired an exchange value, Levinsky's Antomir sewing machine operators, Jones's "oriental" trinkets, and Stroon's Talmud scholar have all undergone a mysterious transformation. These "products" have assumed fantastic forms rendering them unrecognizable.

"The Imported Bridegroom" is an important predecessor to *The Rise* because it allows us to re-conceptualize the relationship between David the scholar and Levinsky the manufacturer on the model of buyer and seller. In other words, we might conceive of David Levinsky as a synthesis of Shaya and Stroon. Like Shaya, David's Talmudic energies are diverted when they come into contact with western thought, beginning with Dickens, an English dictionary and grammar class, and later Darwin, Spencer and other

intellectual heavyweights. When David enters the business world and becomes Levinsky the manufacturer, he doesn't get rid of his Talmudic cast of mind so much as he appropriates it, using it cynically in order to gain certain commercial advantages, whether it is quoting a piece of Talmudic lore in order to cement a business relationship, or spinning dialectics in order to convince himself that union wages are a detriment to his workers.¹⁸ Just as Stroon has purchased a Talmudic bridegroom, David Levinsky in effect "purchases" his former Talmudic self, which has in the process of exchange become something quite other than it was upon arrival.

If David Levinsky resembles Tzinchadzi/Jones and Shaya/Stroon, to what extent does he resemble Abraham Cahan?¹⁹ There are numerous biographical parallels between Levinsky and Cahan. Both grew up in villages in Eastern Europe and were exposed to a traditional course of Jewish religious study (Cahan's father was an esteemed Rabbi and his father was a teacher at the Yeshiva). Both arrived in New York during the wave of immigration that followed the revolutionary tumult of 1881. Both studied English intensively and passionately, mastering the language enough to become teachers of their fellow countrymen. Both worked briefly in cigar factories. Certain names, too, are imported from Cahan's life into the novel. Anna is Cahan's wife and the poet Tevkin's daughter. Cahan himself, of course, gave his own first name to Tevkin. Finally, Cahan endows his protagonist with his own prodigious memory of childhood details, a talent that causes Levinsky much suffering (Marovitz 154).

Just as obvious are the glaring oppositions between the two. Whereas Levinsky graduates from the sweatshop and goes on to become a union-busting capitalist, Cahan

dedicated his life to the education of the burgeoning Jewish proletariat in New York's Lower East Side. As editor of the most influential Yiddish newspaper in New York, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, he was a leading voice of the left, guided by his passionate belief that if socialist doctrine was to reach the masses, it would have to be on their own terms.²⁰ When Levinsky reads about himself as "a fleecer of labor" in the *Arbeiter Tseitung*, it is Cahan (or one of his associates) who is presumably writing the copy.²¹ The divergent paths of author and character have prompted Werner Sollors to speak of Levinsky as Cahan's "ironically inverted anti-sel[f]," his "shadow" (171). For Sollors, Levinsky's successful business career is the path Cahan didn't take, opting instead as he did for a life serving the interests of his community.

Linking Jewish and African-American tales of assimilation under the neologism "bluish writing," Sollors sees a parallel writer-protagonist thematic at work in Cahan and James Weldon Johnson, author of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912). In both cases,

Descent stands for those facets of self-realization which the retrospective mind of imaginary *practical men* perceives as the lost potential of childhood or as a sacrifice made to consent-America. It is the *visionary*, artistic and socially engaged quality somehow associated with descent which these characters (though not their creators) have surrendered to selfishness and practical success. (171)

The terms "descent" and "consent" stand at the center of Sollors's argument about assimilation. The immigrant's identity in his adopted country involves a difficult negotiation between fidelity to one's racial and ethnic bloodlines (on the one hand) and the desire to make one's own destiny (on the other).²² While Sollors's argument implies that Levinsky and the ex-colored man (a talented stride pianist) have sacrificed their

imaginative faculties on the altar of success, it is possible to see Levinsky's imagination as playing a vital part in his negotiation with his past. When Levinsky looks back on his life, he is essentially telling a bifurcated tale: he recounts his life as a manufacturer and simultaneously constructs a hypothetically parallel path where he went to City College and became a philosopher or a scientist, careers that he imagines are more intimately connected to his childhood in Russia and would have brought to fruition his early promise as a scholar. At the end of his narrative, Levinsky mentions several successful musicians, songwriters, sculptors, and the like who are "of my country and race," which would seem to indicate a way of transcending Sollors' descent/consent bind. These artists have managed to maintain an authentic connection with their biological and cultural bloodlines and yet have gained consent in America. Lamentably, they only serve to remind Levinsky that he is "locked down as a money-bag striving to play the Maecenas" (530). His imagined role of patron of the arts just reinforces his sense of his failure to live up to a more worthy calling.

Sollors's understanding of Levinsky as Cahan's "anti-self" probably oversimplifies the relation, though, to be fair, he also uses the term alter-ego, which implies a more complex scenario. Cahan was unquestionably a successful literary artist by critical measures. After his first novella in English, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) was published, William Dean Howells called him a "rising star of realism," and compared him with his contemporary, Stephen Crane. In their stories, Cahan and Crane were pioneers of a style of writing that appropriated the vernacular of the ghetto in order to convey a more truthful representation of New York's vibrant and gritty neighborhoods. Cahan also wrote two novels,²³ and *The Rise* is widely considered a minor masterpiece of

America's literature of immigration, nearly unmatched in its depiction of the Lower East Side in the final decade of the nineteenth century.

As a journalist chronicling his milieu and setting the cultural agenda for his readership, Cahan was most certainly a "visionary." Beginning in 1903, during his second tenure as editor-in-chief of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, through a combination of ambition, intelligence, and stubborn persistence in the face of opposition, Cahan began to establish himself as the principle voice of the Lower East Side Jewish population. What made the *Forward* different was Cahan's uncanny feel for the pulse of his readership. Perceiving a profound psychological link between religion (Judaism in particular) and socialism, he was careful never to denigrate what many of his colleagues would have called retrograde or magical thinking. In Jewish folklore, Cahan saw the seeds of powerful political mythmaking (Sanders 109).

The *Forward*, unlike its heady social Democratic rivals, strove to be both popular and serious, featuring educational articles on the theory of surplus value and reporting on contemporary capital/labor issues, right next to sensationalized crime tales and village gossip, a veritable mix of "kindergarten and the university," according to Irving Howe. Cahan's most successful journalistic innovation came in 1906 when he introduced the "Bintel Brief" ("Bundle of Letters"), an advice column with the editor in the role of sage. The "Brief," as Howe remarks, rapidly became "a collective voice, an academy of manners, and forum of opinion, a bulletin board on which to post news of missing husbands and errant wives, a medium of outcry and relief" (537). However, while Cahan's responses always attempted to discover the nugget of socialist truth in the diversity of troubles that poured in from his readership, his critics frequently complained

that the *Forward* wasn't really socialist at all anymore, having excessively watered down its core doctrines in an attempt to gain popularity.

The very ethos of the *Forward*, which set itself up as a populist alternative to the theoretical, introspective, and bitterly factional organs of the left, clearly demonstrates Cahan's "practical" nature while the soaring popularity of the paper was evidence of his commercial savvy. He was a pragmatist who recognized that theory was only worthwhile if it precipitated change (in this sense he was faithful to the spirit of Marx).²⁴ The practical and the visionary in Cahan's case were far from antithetical. The question is whether the *Forward* had lost sight of what kind of change it had originally stood for. In moving away from its core doctrines, had Cahan, like Levinsky, sold his birthright for a mess of pottage? Such was the charge of Cahan's ex-colleague-turned rival, Louis Miller. During the election season of 1906, a heated series of editorials between the *Forward* and Miller's paper, the *Wahreit*, turned personal, and the following passage is found in an article of Miller's entitled "The Soul of the Bintel Brief:"

There once were people who believed that Abe Cahan had "ability," had a "soul." If ever that was so, it is long, long past and forgotten. Among all the dead of the old movement, whose shadows hover about in Purgatory waiting for redemption, the Almighty God's pity is above all reserved for Abe Cahan. (Qtd. in Sanders 38)

The genesis of *The Rise* took place in 1912, five years before the novel was published, when Cahan was invited by *McClure's Magazine* to write a series of sketches on the success of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the burgeoning garment trade. This was where he first conceived of Levinsky's character. The first two installments of "The Autobiography of an American Jew" proved so popular that Cahan was commissioned to write two more. The sketches, however, were a mere "skeleton"

compared with the full-bodied complexity of Levinsky in the novel (Marovitz 137). In his detailed portrait of the editor of the *Forward* in *The Downtown Jews*, Ronald Sanders observes that if Cahan was going to write a novel-length first person narrative, he needed to create a character with whom he could identify. His choice of a businessman who was also an intellectual considerably complicated a tale meant as a critique of capitalism, but yielded a far richer result. It is plausible to suggest that as Cahan became more invested in the project of depicting the “autobiography” of a Jewish businessman, he actually began projecting aspects of his own life, began work on his own autobiography “in the guise of a businessman.”²⁵

Sanders, Howe, and (more recently) Richard Pressman have all argued the parallels between Cahan’s dominance of the Yiddish press and Levinsky’s increasing market share in the cloak & suit trade. During the period of 1904-1907, the paper’s readership was expanding so quickly that it was outstripping its existing capital. In 1904, the *Forward* purchased its own building on East Broadway and a year later became the first Yiddish language paper to have its own printing plant. Increasing expenditures (an expanding staff) and difficulty selling its advertising space (the paper was still nominally socialist) led to a temporary bankruptcy in 1907 (Sanders 384). By 1910, however, the paper had reached a circulation of one hundred thousand, a landmark coinciding with the editor’s fiftieth birthday. It had the largest Yiddish readership in the world and a ten story skyscraper was being built to serve as a new headquarters. At a fiftieth birthday celebration thrown for Cahan at Carnegie Hall, the auditorium was filled to capacity with an array of personages from his past—many of these men had once been close friends of his; now they came to pay tribute to a great man.

At the age of fifty, David Levinsky had also trounced his competitors. He was by now operating out of a newly built skyscraper on Fifth Avenue near 23rd St., with a state-of-the-art factory and large showroom.²⁶ Neither man was happy. Irving Howe detects a stoic detachment pervading Cahan's letters and the five-volume autobiography he later wrote, a work in which he said almost nothing about his final novel. This was a man who "kept becoming more and more defensive, a hard-shelled man who after a time was besieged by confusions of value such as have become commonplace in our culture" (526). "A film of irritation," Howe writes, "coats the events of *The Rise of David Levinsky*; it is an irritation that encompasses Cahan's life as well" (527).²⁷ Perhaps, then, Sanford Marovitz's phrase "dissonant autobiography" most effectively captures the unresolved question of the relationship between Cahan and his final protagonist (153). On the one hand, no amount of biographical and psychological parallels can erase the elementary political dissonance between the socialist and the capitalist. The phrase also, however, seems to reflect the solitary, "dissonant" nature of both men's existence; they stood both above and apart from those whose lives they dominated.

"The Prose of Trade"

If Levinsky experiences America as an unfolding series of cultural paradoxes, or "discrepancies," as I have argued, his encounter with the Hebrew poet Tevkin serves as the intellectual climax of the narrative. Tevkin has thus far assumed a very minor part in critical assessments of *The Rise*, which is surprising given that he is the final fully-

developed character introduced into the novel. Yet it is Levinsky's friendship with this man that brings him one final time into an inquiry into the mystery of his adopted country.

A character anticipating the fictional creations of later writers like Bellow and Malamud, Tevkin is a poet, but he is also equal parts dreamer, schlemiel, trickster, and old-fashioned family man. Levinsky had first heard the name Abraham Tevkin during his brief stay at Matilda's before his arrival in America. A romantic poet of revolutionary Russia in the years leading up to and after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, by the time Levinsky meets Tevkin he is a shadowy figure haunting the cafes of New York's Lower East Side, his three slim volumes long out of print. The meeting between the two men had come about in a roundabout way. On his way to spend a weekend with the Kaplans, Levinsky stops off for a night at a resort in the Catskills, where he becomes infatuated with a young woman whom he later learns is the poet's daughter. While still in Russia he had heard Tevkin's name in connection with a memorable story told by a friend of his at synagogue. A young poet at the time, Tevkin had successfully courted the beautiful daughter of a celebrated Hebrew writer and doctor in Odessa. His strategy had been to address his passionate love letters to the girl's father, convincing the doctor of his love for the girl. In the end, the power of his letters win him to the father, and he marries the daughter. In a doomed attempt to emulate this strategy, Levinsky tries to win the love of Tevkin's daughter by forging a relationship with the poet.²⁸ At first, Levinsky tries to approach Anna Tevkin directly while they are both still at the resort, but he is rebuffed several times. Vowing to continue his efforts, he breaks his engagement off with Fanny and decides to seek out the poet when he returns to the city.

After combing the bohemian section of the Lower East Side, Levinsky eventually finds Tevkin in a dim corner of Yampolsky's cafe, standing over a game of chess. Levinsky flatters the poet by telling him he has visited the Astor library in order to read his three volumes. When the manufacturer asks the poet why he no longer writes, he receives from Tevkin a business card and a short reply: "This is the kind of poetry that goes in America" (457). The irony of the scene is unmistakable: momentarily escaping the bustle of his factory and showroom, Levinsky enters the bohemian underworld (a world he both loathes and is infatuated by) to find his poet, and instead discovers a man who describes himself as a "general business agent and real-estate broker." Tevkin, it turns out, earns a modest income acting as a middle-man for people buying and selling newsstands, grocery stores and the like. "Business is business and poetry is poetry," he says, "I hate to confound the two" (457).

Despite the widespread poverty and persecution of the Jews in his native Russia, Tevkin says, he still prefers it to America; there is "too much materialism here, too much hurry and *too much prose*" (459, my italics). But after Levinsky manages to engage the poet in a discussion of some of his older work, Tevkin surprisingly recites several sets of recent lines, written in Hebrew:

Since the destruction of the Temple instrumental music has been
forbidden in the synagogues. The children of Israel are in mourning.
They are in exile and in mourning. Silent is their harp. So is mine.
I am in exile. I am in a strange land. My harp is silent. (458)

Most song-birds do not sing in captivity. I was once a song-bird,
but America is my cage. It is not my home. My song is gone. (459)

Sensing a discrepancy between the beauty of the words and their message, Levinsky declares that the poems “give [themselves] the lie” (459). The idea that America is a prison that deadens the spirit and silences the poet is refuted by the existence of these very poems. (The caged bird sings his new theme: his lack of song).

Yet what disconcerts Levinsky is not that Tevkin provides a forceful counterargument to this bit of dialectics, but rather that the poet leaves the matter “unanswered.” Tevkin explains that his goal is quite simply to earn enough money so that his sons and daughters will no longer have to work. The idea itself is slightly unreasonable, considering the poet’s advanced age and the fact that his four children are already well-educated young adults capable of providing for themselves. Nevertheless, he claims, “it is sweet to earn one’s own living,” despite the “humdrum occupation” it requires. The third poetic fragment Tevkin recites for Levinsky addresses this feeling directly:

There are instances when the jewel of poetry glints out of the prose
of trade. (460)

Like the businessman Meyer Nodelman, who reversed his position on the relative merits of money and education, Tevkin’s line would seem to contradict his earlier tautology emphasizing irreconcilable worlds (“Business is business and poetry is poetry”). Are there indeed instances when mere commerce is elevated to the level of poetry? The context of the passage suggests that Tevkin feels providing materially for one’s family can have a spiritual, even poetic quality, which is certainly plausible, though he doesn’t really develop this. Perhaps it is all just talk and nothing more. Tevkin, after all, is something of a trickster figure who succeeds in drawing the manufacturer into an intricate web of real-estate speculation in the rapidly developing areas of Brooklyn and

northern Manhattan, and it remains ambiguous whether the poet has lured the lonely millionaire with the promise of “spiritual friendship” in order to gain access to Levinsky’s capital for his own investments. The poet’s genuine self, like his daughter Anna, remain tantalizingly out of reach, and Levinsky’s manufacturing interests are momentarily endangered by his flirtation with the high risk/high reward gamble of real estate games.²⁹

Nevertheless, Tevkin’s poetic fragments (or are they just empty rhetoric?) take us back to the analogy posed at the beginning of this chapter—the equation of business with the realm of the prosaic (“the prose of trade”), at the same time as they point beyond, suggesting “instances” when commerce may rise to the level of the aesthetic. In the end perhaps this synthesis is only possible if we recognize Levinsky as a writer as well as a businessman, as the author of his memoirs, which constitute Cahan’s novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*. As the creator of an imaginative portrayal of himself, Levinsky transforms the meaning of “prosaic businessman” so that it simultaneously suggests a life spent in the prosaic world of commerce, and a life recollected within the aesthetic detachment of the written word. Like Tevkin, he too is a caged bird who sings his lack of song. If his prose is at times “stiff” and “lifeless,” it is in order to accurately convey his emotional state.³⁰

Werner Sollors is right when he makes the case that a “fusion” of “birthright” (artistic potential) with “mess of pottage” (financial success) is recognized as possible only “through the process of aesthetic creation” (172). Yet Sollors privileges Cahan over Levinsky, denying the latter the status of artist. Of the two, he claims, only Cahan has managed to successfully integrate commercial and artistic worlds. Despite his love of

music, “Levinsky cannot become an Irving Berlin. The gap between an unfulfilling business life and self-realization in music divides David’s real life from the dream of his innermost self” (173). Sollors’s unwillingness to consider Levinsky as a memoirist testifies to the power of the analogy between business and the prosaic, which functions to occlude the possibility of the artistic sensibility coexisting with the “business life.” At most, trade may become the subject of imaginative prose fiction written by, tautologically, a writer. A businessman’s imaginative projection of his own life is implicitly discounted. One of Cahan’s favorite tactics was to claim that his opponents were “like Talmudists overly attached to the tradition of Halacha—of legalistic intellectual analysis—at the expense of that of Haggadah—of storytelling for the purpose of spiritual instruction” (Sanders 265). In his work as a journalist, Cahan himself aimed to balance analysis with storytelling. Likewise, if, David Levinsky rises in capitalist America by applying the dialectic, Levinsky’s final gesture, the retelling of his life in business, marks him as a storyteller as well, full of “prosperity and prose,” indeed.

Notes

¹ Cahan’s title is an homage to his mentor William Dean Howells, who “discovered” the Lithuanian émigré and promoted Cahan’s early American fiction, helping to get his first novel *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) published and writing several important early reviews of Cahan’s work. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885, which traces the unlikely business success of a rural Vermonter and his subsequent attempts to find a place in urban America, provides an archetype for Cahan’s story. For an excellent comparison of Levinsky and Henry James’s Christopher Newman, protagonist of *The American* (1877), see Donald Weber’s “Outsiders and Greenhorns,” *American Literature*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Dec. 1995).

² Another character Levinsky resembles, as Werner Sollors has suggested, is the unnamed protagonist of James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), a talented piano player who “sells his birthright for a mess of pottage,” giving up his earlier pursuits and “passing” as a white real estate man in New York. Sollors argument will be discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter.

³ Cahan, as John Higham remarks, is careful never to step outside of his protagonist's voice and character, his "angle of vision." For accounts, more generally, of the telling differences between Cahan's language and his characters', see Chametsky (62-63, 102) and Marovitz (149, 154).

⁴ In a survey conducted in 1890, roughly half of the working Jews living on the Lower East Side were employed in the garment trade. For overviews of the working environment at the time, see Sanders (47-53), and Howe (154-159).

⁵ Zanger argues that whereas in the Russian synagogue Talmudic discrepancies could be resolved into "the eternal unity of God," Levinsky in America "can only discover them and live unhappily ever after in the fragmented world they reveal (293). On the contrary, I argue that Levinsky's "success" is predicated on his unique ability to resolve the contradictions engendered by capitalism.

⁶ Marx: *Capital*: Volume 1 (125).

⁷ In a parallel scene during Levinsky's street-peddling days in America, he sleeps with a prostitute from his hometown. He knows that prostitutes are "hideous creatures in every respect," yet he feels "at heart she was one of the most respectable people I had met." Levinsky exclaims that it is "one of the most astonishing discrepancies I had discovered in the world," again demonstrating his tendency to over-intellectualize (128). The young woman is of course merely the 'whore with a heart of gold,' a stock fictional character.

⁸ The theme of the Talmudist who is corrupted by Western books is prevalent in Cahan, as in such works as "The Imported Bridegroom," which will be discussed later.

⁹ In this important passage Levinsky gives no thought at all of organizing amongst his workers. Only later does he reflect on what might have been if he had been exposed to the ideas of Karl Marx. Sanders points out that it is unrealistic that Levinsky, a Jew living in the Lower East Side during a ferment of leftist and revolutionary ideas, would not have heard of Marx. In his earlier story "A Sweatshop Romance," Cahan had imagined a worker rebellion arising in response to a similar situation.

¹⁰ Marovitz sees Dora as playing the "the combined role of mother and harlot" (147).

¹¹ Irving Howe assesses Cahan's overall contribution to Jewish-American life along similar lines: "It seemed at times as if having been granted a dour vision of the final outcome of the whole Yiddish enterprise, Cahan took it as his special burden to carry through that vision to its end. Helping to lay the foundations for the immigrant Jewish culture, he worked mightily to undermine them: as if creation and disintegration were for him equally terms of fate" (525).

¹² The argument focuses on Levinsky's strategies of "self-division," which are the "primary mechanism for his rise." By focusing on Levinsky's often-repeated phrase "I said to myself," he makes a persuasive case for a close reading of Levinsky's language as the key to understanding the manufacturer's identity. For another reading of the significance of Levinsky's conflicted identity, see David Engel: "The 'Discrepancies' of the Modern: Toward a Reevaluation of Abraham Cahan's *David Levinsky*." *Studies in Jewish American Literature* Vol. 2, 1982. Engel reads the alienation resulting from the discrepancy between inner and outer selves in a wider historical context, seeing it as a quintessential symptom of modernity itself.

¹³ As Irving Howe points out in a discussion of the struggle to unionize the Jewish laboring masses, the dominant ideology among the workers was to earn as much as possible in as short a period of time in order to send passage fare for their relatives. As a result, workers were likely to tolerate the intolerable, for at least the short term. Needless to say, this made unions far less stable and worked against the long term interests of labor. See Howe (101-115).

¹⁴ Cahan wrote for the paper from 1890-1897, for a time serving as its editor. It is therefore not unlikely that he would have written the article critiquing his protagonist. In a subsequent section, I deal in more detail with the relationship between Cahan and Levinsky.

¹⁵ Compare Robert Herrick's sausage tycoon Van Harrington: "But what was this almighty society, anyhow, save a lot of fools and scamps with a sprinkling of strong souls, who were fighting for life—all of them fighting for what only a few could get?... Suddenly a meaning to it all came to me like a great light. The strong must rule: the world was for the strong. It was the act of an idiot to deny that truth" (75). Or Jack London's eponymous frontiersman-turned-capitalist Burning Daylight: "*Thou shalt not steal* was only applicable to the honest worker. They the supermen, were above such commandments. They certainly stole and were honored by their fellows according to the magnitude of their stealings.... It was life, and life was a savage proposition at best. Men in civilization robbed because they were so made. They robbed just as cats scratched, famine pinched, and frost bit" (164-165)."

¹⁶ It is plausible that the Chaikin subplot is a conscious echo of Howells's narrative, with a twist. On the verge of a lucrative breakthrough in his paint business, Lapham "lets" his former partner Milton Rogers withdraw his capital from the enterprise. Rogers reappears later in the novel as a prod to Lapham's conscience. Levinsky, the social Darwinist, has no such scruples, and hires his former designer at an hourly wage.

¹⁷ The phrase is from Genesis 25:29-34, when Esau exchanges his familial inheritance for a bowl of lentil stew. This sacrifice of the spiritual for the material is quoted in the final lines of Johnson's *Autobiography*, which will be subsequently discussed: "I cannot repress the fact that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (211).

¹⁸ See Zanger (289-291) and Barrish (654-656).

¹⁹ The question is considered in virtually all serious critical assessments of the novel.

²⁰ For the best discussions of Cahan's journalistic career in the wider context of the Yiddish labor press, see Sanders, Ch. 5, 7, and 11; and Howe (101-115).

²¹ Besides working for the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, Cahan had a brief but formative stint at Lincoln Steffens's muckraking *Commercial Advertiser* before co-founding the *Forward*.

²² Sollors's argument is more nuanced when discussing earlier tales by Johnson and Cahan, where he shows how the marriage institution complicates the relations between descent and consent, nature and law.

²³ In *The White Terror and the Red: A Novel of Revolutionary Russia* (1905), Cahan explores the dilemma that split the allegiances of Russian Jewish socialists during the events surrounding the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Cahan's protagonist Pavel, a new revolutionary convert, struggles with whether to see the first stages of a genuine class war in the riotous anti-Jewish behavior of the peasant masses.

²⁴ In one editorial Cahan fulminates against his wrongheaded contemporaries: "When Karl Marx gave us to understand that real socialism is the struggle of the working class and the emancipation of the worker through his own power, he did not mean to construe the working class as some fanatical, selfish little Hasidic circle" (Qtd. in Sanders 264-265).

²⁵ Ronald Sanders sees a generational difference between Cahan and later Jewish writers like Saul Bellow who "explored the paradox of being an exiled European intellectual" in America, yet "no longer found it necessary to tell their story in the guise of a businessman" (452).

²⁶ Cahan was doubtless aware that City College was located on 23rd Street at the time.

²⁷ Howe suggests a possible historical model as well, the Austro-Hungarian émigré Louis Borgenicht, who became wealthy twice over in the garment industry (159-161).

²⁸ For a reading of the novel emphasizing homoerotic motifs, see Marovitz (141-145).

²⁹ Richard Pressman does devote some consideration to the poet, critiquing him in a much more straightforward manner. For Pressman, Tevkin is a figure who reveals that all poetry in America is “undermined by prosaic capitalism.” The poet, “under the pressures of American capitalism, becomes “the crassest of characters.” Tevkin in my opinion is a more complex figure, struggling, like Levinsky, to synthesize contradictory sets of values.

³⁰ A charge made by Chametsky (139-140) and Marovitz (149) who want to separate the prosaic Levinsky from the artistic Cahan.

Afterword

The collapse of 2008-2009 and ensuing economic turmoil have once again thrust business practices, and especially the activities of the financial sector, into the headlines and the national consciousness. Nevertheless, as sober observers of the economy such as Paul Krugman dutifully repeat, the 2008 market crash was not so much an anomalous financial event, our “100-year flood,” as it was the latest recursion in a disturbing pattern of speculation-driven boom and bust, where the architects of the bubble walk away relatively unscathed, and the public is left to foot the bill.¹ From the vantage point of 2012, and in the midst of a global recession and debt crisis, one surveys the previous quarter century and sees tectonic shifts in America’s socio-economic landscape: ever greater portions of the public domain are being aggressively privatized, the social safety net is alarmingly frayed, while a staggering wealth has once again been amassed in the hands of the few. While the middle class shrinks, and while the poor are marginalized and criminalized, a “super-rich” have risen that would make Veblen’s “leisure class” blush. Steady deregulation of the financial sector, the chipping away at Glass-Steagall and other Depression-era safeguards, has licensed the rich and powerful to turn the economy, comprised of the savings and investments of the working classes, into a dangerous casino resembling the early days of stock and commodity markets during the nineteenth century. Americans have a new set of capitalist villains for a new Gilded Age.

Some names—Kenneth Lay, Angelo Mozilo, Lloyd Blankfein—arouse public wrath; others—Warren Buffett, Bill Gates—inspire admiration, though all fall short of evoking the kind of collective awe that attended their late-nineteenth-century predecessors. This is because the nation is over a century removed from what

Rockefeller's apologist Allan Nevins called "The Heroic Age" of American Enterprise. Power had long ago shifted from the individual to the faceless corporation, capitalistic "charisma" passing into increasingly bureaucratic structures guided by the merciless logic of the profit-motive, as Max Weber and his followers have argued, and into elaborate managerial hierarchies, as Alfred Chandler has shown.² We speak now of the pathology of the corporation, protected as an individual but possessing none of the human capacities for compassion and doubt, crucially lacking a sense of limits.³ The outpouring of public emotion after the recent passing of Steve Jobs was notable above all else for its singularity, the death of a maverick, a late-born capitalist hero. By and large, however, the aura of mystery surrounding the great entrepreneurial figures of the nineteenth century is now reserved for the corporations themselves—Exxon, Walmart, Pepsi—whose monomaniacal goal of financial growth is the institutional counterpart of the uncompromising "business vision" of a Gould or Rockefeller.

The transition from an earlier phase of heroic striving to a bureaucratic capitalism associated with the 20th century was already underway in the final decades of the nineteenth century, as Alan Trachtenberg and others have argued, though the American public hadn't yet retired the myth of the solitary capitalist hero (and today's right wing still hasn't). In the first decade of the 20th century, the titanic battles between the financial giants Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Morgan had given way to oligopolistic cooperation, and the Roosevelt administration's attempts to restore "competition" were so much sound and fury. By the time America had joined the allied forces in World War I, the cast of the economic landscape had been set, the spoils had been divided among the survivors, "the formative period in American industry" had ended (Chandler 364). As

the Progressive Era waned, the “Liberty Bond” drives during 1917 and 1918 helped to acclimate the middle class to the concept of investment in securities which had the effect of drawing unprecedented numbers of Americans into the stock market, psychologically diminishing the divide between businessmen and the public at large. Everyone was now a capitalist. During these years, as Lawrence Mitchell observes, the stock market itself “had come to fulfill the role that land had played in the early republic;” the market now served an important *psychic* need, a symbolic open space after the closing of the frontier (97). But this new economic frontier was in a sense already domesticated territory, divided and neatly parsed into consumable stock lots. Capital investment, even after the war efforts, had come to seem a national duty, signaling participation in collective economic growth rather than individual conquest.

Summarizing this new spirit, an observer of the 1920’s remarked, “the era of creation and struggle has given way to one of maintenance and conservative mastery” (qtd. in Josephson 452). New commercial enterprises might come onto the scene and capture market share, and gambling among the powers on Wall St. still occurred (and in part precipitated the great crash of 1929) but business, in a cultural sense, had ceased to be heroic. There was thus a diminishing of the particular creative tensions, the undercurrents of antagonism and secret connection between businessmen and artists that gave rise to the most ambitious business novels of the previous era, works I have considered in this study. The power and complexity of Twain’s fantasy in *A Connecticut Yankee*, his ambivalent projection of a capitalist superman onto medieval Europe, draws from the same larger cultural narrative about business as Dreiser’s fantasy of the financier as an imaginative master of men and money, despite great differences in each

writer's style and temperament. In both cases, the efficacy of art and the imagination, and by proxy Twain's and Dreiser's own identities as novelists, is harnessed to the mythical power of the capitalist hero. Norris's efforts to connect business enterprise with the power of the natural world, his ambivalent battle against the aesthetic which he considered a superfluous imitation of life, register acutely these same tensions; his artist-surrogate Presley rebels against "literature," while his business villains act in commercial spheres that come to resemble the theatrical stage. And David Levinsky, who rises to dominate the New York cloak and suit trade, is still a projection of an authorial fantasy, as I have shown, despite Cahan's commitment to socialism.

In the context of this discussion, however, the career of Levinsky might be seen as transitional. The manufacturer's own emphasis, despite his millions in profits, on the "prosaic" nature of business, can be explained by the fact that he carries over a different conception of heroism from his culture of expatriation, a set of values seemingly inimical to money-getting. But Levinsky's story also suggests the beginnings of a change in the cultural status of the businessman in American literature, a reflection of the evolving cultural narrative about business itself, manifest in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922). Before creating the eponymous real-estate man and Good Fellow, Lewis had already produced several sketches of various "middle men" of the commercial sphere: traveling salesman, advertising and public relations men. The types that engaged Lewis were far from the brilliant masters of capital that fascinated Dreiser and obsessed Twain, and the author's remark that his most famous character is "all of us Americans at 46, prosperous but worried, wanting—passionately, to seize something more than motor cars and a house before it's too late," made plain the shift in model from superman to everyman, from

entrepreneur to company man (qtd. in Lingeman xi). In *Babbitt*, the “business vision” is satirized, rather than feared, as it was in James’s “The Jolly Corner.”

Babbitt’s spectacles had huge, circular, frameless lenses of the very best glass; the ear pieces were thin bars of gold. In them he was the modern business man; one who gave orders to clerks and drove a car and played occasional golf and was scholarly in regard to Salesmanship. His head appeared not babyish but weighty, and you noted his heavy, blunt nose, his straight mouth and thick, long upper lip, his chin overfleshy but strong; with respect you beheld him put on the rest of his uniform as a Solid Citizen. (12)

Unlike the menacing “great convex pince-nez” dangling from the neck of Spencer Brydon’s ghost, Lewis’s real-estate man, whose spectacles are of “the very best glass,” is treated in the mock-heroic mode. The mindless conformity and compulsory optimism of the booster club, the complacency of the respectable middle class “Solid Citizen,” the naïve faith in the virtues of capital—all of this is subjected to the satirist’s pen. If Lewis is sympathetic to his protagonist, it is in his attempt to endow Babbitt, in all his mediocrity, with the dignity of the common man, who must nevertheless dream he is a prince. His relationship with his fictional businessman is thus of an entirely different order than the tense and ambivalent identifications I have analyzed in the works of Twain, Norris, Dreiser and Cahan. For Babbitt and his clan, Lewis writes, tongue-in-cheek, “the Romantic Hero was no longer the knight, the wandering poet, the cowpuncher, the aviator, nor the brave young district attorney, but the great salesman, who had an Analysis of Merchandizing Problems on his glass-topped desk, whose title of nobility was ‘Go-getter’” (143).

In *Babbitt*, moreover, the blurring of the art/business binary, a source of anxiety for Twain and Norris, is now treated with parodic self-consciousness through Lewis’s

free indirect discourse, which allows Babbitt (in the guise of the narrator) to remark on the “artistry” of commercial men like his neighbor T. Cholmondelay Frink, “Famous Poet and distinguished advertising agent” (119). The rather benign Frink, author such phrases as “TRY LIFE’S ZIPPINGEST ZEST—THE ZEECO,” is far removed from the angst-ridden Tevkin, Cahan’s exiled Russian poet-cum-real-estate speculator, just as Babbitt’s notion of the realtor as “seer of the future development of the community” is a parodic relative of Cowperwood’s commanding visions of the coming geographies of urban public transit (120, 46). Lewis’s characterization of the businessman as philistine defuses the power of the business/art dialectic and implicitly reasserts the sphere of the aesthetic as the exclusive province of the creative artist.

Above all, it is Babbitt’s dim perception that life is elsewhere, that adventure and romance lie just beyond the borders of his middle-class routine, which makes him the archetype for the fictional businessmen of mid-century America, men like Charles Gray in John Marquand’s *Point of No Return* (1949), whose promotion to vice-president of the Stuyvesant Bank at the novel’s conclusion seems merely “an inevitable result, a strangely hollow climax.... It was what he had dreamed of long ago and yet it was not the true texture of early dreams,” or Tom Rath in Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), trapped in “the matter-of-fact, opaque-glass-brick-partitioned world” of the United Broadcasting Company, haunted by memories of the war (Marquand 441, 440; Wilson 22). In the hands of the playwright Arthur Miller, the businessman is a tragic everyman: Willy Loman shuffles through *The Death of A Salesman* (1949) muttering to himself, his skills deteriorating, powerless against mounting household bills, a suicidal figure, symbol of the false promise of the American Dream.

If the business novel had contracted in scope and become the office novel at mid-century, fictions of the office explode in anguish and black comedy in the 1970's and 1980's. Through the claustrophobic and interminable monologue of Bob Slocum, insurance man and narrator of Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), the office is depicted as the locus of an alternating boredom and terror. Slocum's is the laughter of the stoic: "I have exchanged the position of fetus for the position of corpse" (340). The masochistic resignation of Heller's office worker and suburbanite is mirrored in the sadistic activities of Bret Easton Ellis's Patrick Bateman of *American Psycho* (1991), an investment banker who nightly departs from his hyper-conformist Wall St. office to engage in acts of shocking violence, including a serial murder spree. In an episode that associatively links the symbolic violence of the financial sector, the dismantling and liquefying involved in corporate "restructuring," with the physical acts of brutality that he compulsively repeats, Bateman sees a bleeding ATM machine on the street in a dream-vision.

The desperation and monotony of the career salesman is counterbalanced by sheer linguistic exuberance in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), a play comprised of the acidic verbal exchanges among a group of foul-mouthed, chain-smoking real-estate brokers who cajole their clients in a dingy Chicago office. In Mamet's play, the language of business, the sales "talk," at times wildly inventive and improvisational, has become something creative again, even if it is the creativity of the street hustler. A similar linguistic energy buoys William Gaddis's *JR* (1975), a comic novel of great power and scope. Gaddis's eponymous protagonist is a stubborn eleven-year-old who turns a shipment of surplus navy picnic forks, a defaulted bond issue, and a single share of

common stock into a paper empire encompassing a bizarre array of industries and interests, and becomes a menacing and mysterious force in the stock and commodity markets, all by operating from his “office,” a cramped pay phone booth in the Long Island junior high school he attends. A singular work, *JR* nevertheless ties together several thematics of business novels that preceded it. Comprised nearly entirely of dialogue, and registering the verbal tics of hundreds of voices, the languages of commerce—finance, public relations, advertising, “what America is all about”—are wonderfully warped by contact with the discourses of education, philosophy, the family, and the arts. A brilliant satire of the worlds of advertising, high finance, and an educational system compromised by pecuniary interests, *JR* is also a highly aesthetic work in the same respect as Dreiser’s Cowperwood Trilogy—in its very excesses of financial discourse, its Barthesian superfluity, speech is paradoxically freed from the burden of signification, and rendered as pure *performance*. Gaddis’s financiers and ad men, like Mamet’s salesmen, are essentially performers.

If Dreiser’s trilogy and Gaddis’s comic epic strike us as the most contemporary of all the business novels, it is because the financial markets are once again at the center of economic scandal, and the figure of the financier, acting through ghostly “disturbances” of the system, has once again risen as master creator and destroyer of wealth. Since Gaddis’s work was published in 1975, the steady deregulation of the financial sector has expedited the money medium’s race toward the asymptote of pure and content-less symbol, as Georg Simmel had previously argued. *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) appears quite prophetic in fact, in the light of twenty-first century finance. In today’s derivative markets, business is conducted on a level of unprecedented abstraction: hedge

funders buy future options on investment “products” that are “manufactured” from bundles of debt, the bundles themselves pre-packaged and assembled from a heterogeneous complex of loans. In the year 2000, “the estimated annual value of derivatives approached \$100 billion... [an amount] which exceed[ed] the total quantity of the world’s physical currencies” (Godden 415). The astonishing economic fact that “debt” has become America’s leading export indicates just how inverted the relation between product and profit has become. Once a manageable space, a dizzying chasm has opened between the material world and an increasingly rarefied economic sphere. In these times, today’s masters of capital appear to us once again as “a breed.... rather unreal, unimaginable, precisely not rooted in the human life of feeling and behavior upon which the notations of fiction depend” (Berthoff, *Ferment*).

I will close this brief and selective survey of the business novel after 1917 with a note on Stephen Millhauser’s *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer* (1997), which might serve as a fitting conclusion to the study as a whole, as it is an historical novel that takes us back to the “heroic” period of American enterprise. In Millhauser’s hands, the business novel becomes a work of magical realism. Skillfully navigating a brilliantly imagined New York at the turn of the 20th century, Martin Dressler rises from cigar store clerk to proprietor of a chain of innovative lunch cafes, then, grown rich, from builder of hotels to builder of The Grand Cosmo, a place so new and strange that even Dressler can’t define it. Dressler’s final creation, The Grand Cosmo is a miniature city-within-the-city, an attempt to abolish the outside world, or at least render it superfluous.

Millhauser's tale is the story of the businessman as poet of the city, possessed of immense powers of imaginative synthesis, only tolerant of the complexity of the metropolis if he is able to conceive it as an aesthetic whole. Like Dreiser's Cowperwood, Dressler isn't interested in the structures themselves, only in their combinations—"his passion was for working things out, bringing things together, arranging the unarrangeable" (123). He embodies, beyond even Cowperwood, Terry Eagleton's observation that capitalists are secretly allergic to the material world. In Millhauser's work, Dressler's imagination itself becomes the violent force responsible for the creation and destruction of the city: "Even as his new building rose story by story it was already vanishing, the trajectory of the wrecker's ball had been set in motion as the blade of the first bulldozer bit into the earth" (260). This is the novel that restores a mythical power to the businessman, a power that once haunted some of our greatest writers.

Notes

¹ See Krugman and Wells, *The New York Review of Books* (July 14, 2011), pgs. 38-39.

² Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Chandler, *The Visible Hand*.

³ The trope of the corporation as psychopath is explored in the documentary *The Corporation* (2003).

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