

The Pacific Monthly

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Jack London—His Relation to Literary Art

By Porter Garnett



RESOLVED to sell no more muscle, and to become a vender of brains. Then began a frantic pursuit of knowledge."

Thus wrote Jack London in "What Life Means to Me," one of several essays under that title which appeared in the *Cosmopolitan* in 1906. How well he has succeeded is evidenced by the fact that, today, he is one of the most widely read and widely discussed authors in America, and easily the foremost in importance among the writers of the West, to which, unlike so many others of our *literati*, he belongs by birth and breeding. In the short space of six years (his first book, *The Son of the Wolf*, was published in 1900) he has produced no less than fifteen volumes, of which a complete list is as follows: *The Son of the Wolf*, *The God of His Fathers*, *A Daughter of the Snows*, *The Cruise of the Dazzler*, *Children of the Frost*, *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (with Anna Strunsky), *The Call of the Wild*, *The People of the Abyss*, *The Faith of Men*, *The Sea Wolf*, *The War of the Classes*, *The Game*, *Tales of the Fish Patrol*, *Moon Face*, and *White Fang*, to which are shortly to be added *Before Adam* and *The Iron Heel*. This is a remarkable showing, but it becomes phenomenal when the fact is taken into consideration that London is in his thirty-first year.

It is the purpose of the present article to deal with the work of Jack London in its relation to literary art, but it is well-nigh impossible to separate his manner from his matter—his style from his philosophy, for it is in his character as a philosopher, or rather as an interpreter of the philosophy of others, rather than in his character as an artist that London compels attention. With the exception of a few of his stories, and

these chiefly among his earliest work, his chosen line of endeavor lies along a well-defined groove. He may be said to have specialized in the interpretation of life from evolutionary doctrine and in the exposition of socialistic philosophy, to which he is unalterably committed and which he ever urges with the indomitability (a favorite word of his, by the way) which is as characteristic of his personality as it is of his literary manner. It is this indomitability of temper that has won him his success, and it is destined inevitably to carry him on to still greater achievement.

In order to illustrate my comments upon London's work it will be necessary to make a number of somewhat lengthy quotations. The first of these, which at once voices his creed and shows him at his best as a writer of English prose, I take from *The Kempton-Wace Letters*, in the production of which he collaborated with Anna Strunsky. For those who have not read the book I must explain that the letters purport to be written by Dane Kempton, a poet, and Herbert Wace, an instructor in economics, and consist of a discussion of Love from the idealistic viewpoint on the one hand and from the scientific on the other. The book is an interesting exposition of the opposing arguments and contains what is unquestionably the best literary expression to which London has attained. The passage follows:

There are two kinds of men: The wonderers and the doers; the feelers and the thinkers; the emotionals and the intellectuals. You take an emotional delight in living; I an intellectual delight. You feel a thing to be beautiful and joyful; I seek to know why it is beautiful and joyful. You are content that it is, no matter how it came to be; I, when I have learned why, strive that we may have more beautiful and joyful things. "The bloom, the charm, the smile of life" is all too wonderful for you to know; to me it is

chiefly wonderful because I may know.
 * * * I came into the world before you, and I made the way for you. I was a hunter of beasts and a fighter of men. I discovered fire and covered my nakedness with the skins of animals. I builded cunning traps, and wove branches and long grasses and rushes and reeds into the thatch and roof-tree. I fashioned arrows and spears of bone and flint. I drew iron from the earth, and broke the first ground, and planted the first seed. I gave law and order to the tribe and taught it to fight with craft and wisdom. I enabled the young men to grow strong and lusty, and the women to find favor with them; and I gave safety to the women when their progeny came forth, and safety to the progeny while it gathered strength and years.



And then, when of my blood and sweat and toil I had made room, you came, high priest of mystery and things unknowable, singer of songs and seer of visions.

And I did you honor, and gave you place by feast and fire. And of the meat I gave you the tenderest and of furs the softest. Need I say that of women you took the fairest? And you sang of the souls of dead men and of immortality, of the hidden things, and of the wonder; you sang of voices whispering down the wind, of the secrets of light and darkness, and the ripple of running fountains. You told of the powers that pulsed the tides, swept the sun across the firmament, and held the stars in their courses. Ay, and you scaled the sky and created for me the hierarchy of heaven.

These things you did; but it was I who made you, and fed you, and protected you. While you dreamed and sang, I labored sore.

And when danger came, and there was a cry in the night, and women and children huddling in fear, and strong men broken, and blare of trumpets and cry of battle at the outer gate—you fled to your altars and called vainly on your phantoms of earth and sea and sky. And I? I girded my loins, and strapped my harness on, and smote in the fighting line; and died, perchance, that you and the women and children might live. * * *

And while your brows were bright, and you visioned things of the spirit, and rose above time and space to probe eternity, I concerned myself with the work of head and hand. I employed myself with the mastery of matter. I studied the times and seasons and the crops and made the earth fruitful. I builded roads and bridges and moles, and won the secrets of metals and virtues of the elements. Bit by bit, and with great travail, I conquered and enslaved the blind forces. I builded ships and ventured the sea, and beyond the baths of sunset found new lands. I conquered peoples, and organized nations and knit empires, and gave periods of peace to vast territories. * * * I solved methods of government and invented systems of jurisprudence. Out of my toil sprang forms and institutions. You sang of them and were the slave of them, but I was the maker of them and the changer of them.

You worshipped at the shrine of the idea. I sought the fact and the law behind the fact. I was the worker and maker and liberator. * * *

You were more beautiful. But not only was I more useful, but I made the way for you that there might be greater beauty. You did not reckon of that. To you the heart was the seat of the emotions. I formulated the circulation of the blood. You gave charms and indulgences to the world; I gave it medicine and surgery. To you famine and pestilence were acts of providence and punishment of sin; I made the world a granary and drained its cities. To you the mass of the people were poor lost wretches who would be rewarded in paradise or baked in hell. You could offer them no earthly happiness or decency. Forsooth, beggars as well as kings were of divine right. But I shattered the royal prerogatives and overturned the thrones of the one and lifted the other somewhat out of the dirt.

Nor is my work done. With my inventions and discoveries and rational enterprise, I draw the world together and make it kin. The uplift is but begun. * * * You may laugh at me and my work, but you shall not be absent from the feast nor shall your voice be silent. For, when I have conquered the

globe, and enthralled the elements, and harnessed the stars, you shall sing the epic of man, and as of old it shall be of the deeds I have done.

Here we have the key to London's philosophy, and, at the same time, an example of his literary skill. But London's style must not be judged by this excerpt, for in nothing else that he has written has he attained the felicity of expression of the above. He has presented the same ideas elsewhere and, indeed, has used some of the same phrases; but nowhere else is his style so well balanced and so well sustained. The passage stands out from all that he has written and may rightfully be regarded as expressing the height of his present powers. If such an example were characteristic of him the verdict would have to be that he is a writer of unusual ability, but his normal manner falls below the standard exhibited here, and in some of his recent magazine work there are evidences of degeneration.

I have always contended that it is possible, by a sort of qualitative analysis, to judge a writer's literary perception by reading a single page, or, for that matter, a single paragraph of his or her work. Thus it is possible to tell from such a brief extract that one author is artistically deaf, dumb and blind; that another has the sure literary touch. It is also possible to detect in such a "sample" the hand of the writer of skill and insight that has lost its cunning, as it is possible to detect the occasional felicitous accident of the writer who, normally, is without grace or quality. The bad writing of a good writer is never the same as the bad writing of a bad writer; the badness of one is a lapse, the badness of the other is absolute; it is the essence of him; it is the groping—pathetic when it is not ludicrous—of him who has ears yet hears not, who has eyes yet sees not and who has pen, ink and paper and insists upon advertising his own deficiencies. Now in reading London, whether it be in his rôle as a controversialist, an expounder of socialistic doctrine, a teller of tales, or a writer of descriptions, it is manifest that he writes well. There can be no question on this point whatsoever. He has his moments of transitory dullness—lapses, but he never writes with the badness that is absolute and hopeless. It is likewise true that his writing rarely

approaches the distinction exhibited in the foregoing extract from *The Kempton-Wace Letters*, but the ineptness which I have pointed out in previous articles to be common to so many of our Western writers is never his. He has by nature a forthright diction which, by several years of earnest cultivation, backed by that indomitability expressed in his determination to fight with his brains instead of his brawn, he has got under what seems to be almost perfect control. He has had less schooling than many who cannot begin to write as well as he, which may be set down, I take it, to the facts that his perception is clearer and his brain better ordered than theirs. In the same way he has mastered a vocabulary of remarkable scope and there is abundant evidence in his work of skill in choosing the exact word. His mind seems to assimilate readily all that is poured into it, and from his reading, which has been very wide, he has drawn not only a mastery of compact and forceful literary expression, but many of the less subtle graces of refinement.

Whether it be in polemical discussion, in statistical exposition, in description or in sheer narrative, the dominant character in London's writing is force, which reflects his personality. He is a worshiper at the shrine of Action, and Action he interprets through the medium of Force. Even when most artful, as in the creed of Herbert Wace, it is force rather than subtlety or suggestion by which he gains his effect. Yet not always is he as temperate as we here find him. Here, there is undoubtedly rhetorical excellence, but, in the last analysis of even this admirable passage, the effect is dynamic rather than artistic. It appeals to Reason and to the larger emotions; it stirs the æsthetic sense only faintly. Through everything that London has written Force stalks with indomitable stride.

According to the rhetorics, Force is one of the three elements of style; the other two are Elegance and Simplicity. But, in spite of the rhetorics, Simplicity, Force and Elegance do *not* constitute style. What these factors do constitute is simply good rhetorical prose, and good rhetorical prose, notwithstanding the banalities of our novelists, is by no means uncommon. Books on scientific subjects are full of it. But style is an illusive quality which can be analyzed but

not synthesized. It is a leaven that is made up in varying proportions of beauty, nobility, dignity, delicacy, reserve, rhythm and, above all, and through all, taste. The refinement of force is nobility, of elegance beauty; the expression of these produces charm and it is by charm that we measure art. Now charm, which I have said is the measure of art, is diffused through London's writing in widely separated particles. It gleams here and there from the seething flux of his literary manner and when his work is complete, and the future analyst shall make the final assay, he will no doubt find traces of it in the bottom of the crucible.

London sometimes plays the 'cello of passion and even the viola of sentiment, but never the violin of the supernal sense. His temper is best expressed by

Braying of arrogant brass, whimper of querulous reeds.

He has more of the brass band in his idiom than of the string quartette. The analogy suggests a quotation from Arthur Symons's *Christian Trevalga* in his intensely human and supremely artistic *Spiritual Adventures*. Says the musician Trevalga: "When I play the piano I am always afraid of hurting a sound. I believe that sounds are living beings flying about us like notes in the air and they suffer if we clutch them roughly." Let us imagine, instead of a musician tender of the sounds he drew from his instrument, a writer tender of the words he uses. There are many such, Symons himself, for example, and only last month I spoke of one that I found in the stream of current fiction. This one was Mary McNeil Fenollosa, the author of *The Dragon Painter*. And yet how does this accord with the strenuous literary method of Jack London? In some one of London's books I was rather surprised to find a quotation from Symons. His acquaintance with the work of this most charming of modern idealists seemed strangely anomalous. From my own argument in the foregoing it might be supposed that the spiritual content of Symons's poetry was as foreign as p'ffians to the author of *The Iron Heel*. But the paradox is simple of explanation. London constantly shows an objective appreciation of the very things with which he has no subjective affinity. He has not the æsthetic consciousness. His mind reacts to Beauty, but his cosmos does not

include the *Desire* of Beauty. Nowhere in his works does he show that he understands the artist mind. He has drawn characters such as Humphrey Van Weyden and Maud Brewster in *The Sea Wolf* who have artistic sensibilities; but these sensibilities are interpreted only as they appear when brought into violent contact with the brute force of humanity as expressed in the character of Wolf Larsen. The characters of Humphrey Van Weyden and Maud Brewster are objectively conceived, that of Wolf Larsen subjectively. London does not comprehend the artist subjectively any more than he comprehends the sybarite subjectively. The quotation from *The Kempton-Wace Letters* will bear out this statement, I think. It is as impossible for a man with such a code as we have seen London's to be to understand, or, I should say, to feel, or to sense such a code as that which is expressed in the following. I quote from a fugitive article by Ambrose Bierce:

If truth is so valuable, why do not all truthful men succeed? Because not all truthful men have brains. Not all men of truth and brains have energy. Not all men of truth and brains and energy have opportunity. Not all men of truth and brains and energy and opportunity are lucky. And finally, not all men of truth and brains and energy and opportunity and luck particularly care to succeed; some of us like to ignore the gifts of nature and dawdle through life in something of the peace we expect after death. Moreover, there is a difference of opinion as to what constitutes success. I know an abandoned wretch who considers himself prosperous when happy; do you know anyone who considers himself happy when prosperous?

I have just finished reading *The Iron Heel* in manuscript and I do not hesitate to say that when the book is published (this is written on February 1), as it shortly will be, it will create a profound sensation—and that is the precise phrase. It may not be a popular success, but it is calculated to stir up discussion among publicists and clergy whose methods of reasoning (economic in the case of one, metaphysic in the case of the other) it arraigns with vigorous and cogent argument. If for any reason—and the very cogency of the argument makes it quite possible—his attacks are not met with serious attempts at refutation, there can be no doubt that *The Iron Heel* will make a

profound sensation among the publicists and clergy, though they be silent, against whom the attack is leveled.

The basis of reasoning in *The Iron Heel* is along the line of collectivist theory. He makes use of the co-operative commonwealth idea of Lasalle and argues from the absolutism of Karl Marx urging his doctrine of responsibility. It is this brand of socialism that London cleverly interprets in the form of fiction. *The Iron Heel* takes its name from the oligarchical government which is supposed to have sprung into existence in America in 1913, by which means the Plutocracy seeks to offset the increased power of Labor organized by Socialism. The beginnings of the Oligarchy ("The Iron Heel") are related in the Everard manuscript, which is discovered some seven centuries after it was written in 1932 by Avis Everard, a convert to Socialism and the wife of Ernest Everard, one of the Socialist leaders of the period, a character for which the author has patently used himself as a model. The manuscript is treated as an historical document with copious foot-notes by the commentator of seven centuries hence. Of course there is nothing new about this method of working out the theories of Socialism in the theater of the future; it has been done by H. G. Wells, Walter Besant, Edward Bellamy and others, but London's method is different from theirs. It is highly adroit and interesting, in spite of the fact that the first half of the book is given over to the exposition of socialistic philosophy only slightly relieved by a thread of narrative. The story culminates in a vortex of horror, a description of massacre in the "Chicago Commune."

This brings me back to the consideration of London as a literary artist. Nowhere are his extreme methods, his over emphasis, his "force" more absolutely exemplified than in the following passage:

It was not a column, but a mob, an awful river that filled the street, the people of the abyss, mad with drink and wrong, up at last and roaring for the blood of their masters.
* * * It surged past my vision in concrete waves of wrath, snarling and growling, carnivorous, drunk with whiskey from pillaged warehouses, drunk with hatred, drunk with lust for blood—men, women and children in rags and tatters, dim ferocious intelligences

with all the god-like blotted from their features and all the fiend-like stamped in, apes and tigers, anaemic consumptives and great hairy beasts of burden, wan faces from which vampire society had sucked the juice of life, bloated forms swollen with physical grossness and corruption, withered hags and death's heads bearded like patriarchs, festering youth and festering age, faces of fiends, crooked twisted misshapen monsters blasted with the ravages of disease and all the horrors of chronic innutrition—the refuse and the scum of life, a raging, screaming, screeching, demoniacal horde.

Here we have unquestioned power, but such writing as this bears the same relation to literature as a shriek does to singing. Compare this passage, or those portions of *The Sea Wolf* and *Love of Life* and a number of the Klondike tales in which London has sought to depict the horrible, with the starving of the Barbarians in *Salammbô*, for example, or with the description of the shipwreck in that neglected masterpiece of adventure, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. The method of London is a sort of deliberate hysteria; the methods of Flaubert and Poe are the methods of the artist. In a few words they accomplish a more compelling sense of horror than does London with all his ravings. I remember at one point in the Pym narrative where Poe, after a description of a horrible episode (which, compared with the turgid style of the extract from *The Iron Heel*, would appear absolutely "sketchy" were it not so consistently artistic), uses the words "but I forbear." It is just this that London never does. He never forbears. He exhausts his ammunition, and produces about the same effect that actors of a half-century ago produced when they chewed soap and ranted with foaming lips and rolling eyes.

As a general rule the architecture of London's stories is well contrived. If he does not attain the effect of charm he almost invariably holds the reader's interest. This chaining of the interest is an important part of the writer's art; it alone will carry him far along the road toward popular success, and in this phase of the craft London has been highly successful. He is at his best in the arrangement of his story in *The Call of the Wild*. In *White Fang*, however, which is a thematic inversion of *The Call of the Wild*, one finds toward the end a

dwindling away of interest and art. This is also true of *The Sea Wolf* and *Before Adam*, which sag decidedly toward the close. London always succeeds, however, in bringing his stories well together at the end and clinches them with skill and force. It would seem that his diagram of interest for a long story is well devised, except that in his resolutions he allows himself to sink a bit too low after the highest point in the scale is reached. One of the most remarkable things about *The Iron Heel* is that therein he has apparently thrown to the winds all preconceived notions of story-writing and challenges the interest of his readers by indulging for the first hundred pages (the manuscript is about two hundred pages in length) in philosophical exposition, and yet, in spite of this doubtful and treacherous method he succeeds in holding the interest of the reader. The latter half of the book is a whirl of action, which culminates in wave upon wave of turmoil and horror. At the very end, after a chapter not inappropriately entitled "Nightmare," one is just given time to catch one's breath before the story comes to an abrupt close. The inherent interest of the story and London's large audience of fiction readers—an advantage that he has over other champions of Socialism—will undoubtedly give greater currency to this preachment of the doctrine than to any other book of the kind excepting, perhaps, the novels of H. G. Wells and Upton Sinclair's much-exploited *The Jungle*.

A great deal has been said of late about outside influence appearing in London's work. There have been charges of plagiarism made against him, based upon his stories *Love of Life* and *Before Adam*. In both cases he has defended himself satisfactorily, although in neither case was there a crying need for defense. It is London's method—and a wise one—when undertaking a subject to read very widely on that subject from the works of others. His refiltration of the ideas of other men, whether they be the socialistic concepts of Karl Marx or the prehistoric setting of Stanley Waterloo's *The Story of Ab*, cannot be regarded as the act of a deliberate plagiarist, that sneak-thief and petty-larcenist of literature. *Before Adam*, about which there has been raised such a to-do, is not original nor any of the other things that were claimed for it

in the editorial note which preceded the first installment in *Everybody's*. It bears a strong family resemblance, of course, to Waterloo's *Story of Ab* and to Wells's *A Story of the Stone Age*, but, as London himself says, this could hardly be otherwise in such a restricted field as the epoch of primitive man treated as a document in evolution. The most original—because it is not concerned with biology—and the most artistic treatment of a prehistoric theme is a short story by the French author Rosny, the name of which I cannot recall.

Before Adam is ingenious, but beyond that there is not much to say of it except that, in the matter of style, it is about the poorest thing that London has done. "Pictures, pictures, pictures" are the words with which he begins this transcription of dreams, but the limning of a long series of pictures, aside from being an extremely difficult thing to do well, is decidedly not in London's line. As a piece of humor, *Before Adam* is not without its merits, conscious and unconscious. The author has attempted a hypothesis without a sufficient number of established facts, and the result is the same as if he should attempt to construct a curve without a sufficient number of established points. Needless to say neither an hypothesis nor a curve can be produced by this method, and, when the facts or points are not established—"but I forbear."

It might well be that, because the anthropoid characters in *Before Adam* belong to an excurrent branch, as it were, from the direct line of our own descent, we might feel a sort of atavistic sympathy with their doings and beings; but, curiously enough, London has brought the dog-wolf and the wolf-dog of *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, those bestiaries of the North, much closer to us than he has brought the creatures of our own flesh and blood in his pre-historic fantasy; closer than human characters of our own epoch that he has drawn.

Regarding his skill in character drawing there is an interesting side light to be found in one of his recent magazine stories. Therein he has taken one of his characters from real life. Now the man that served as a model for this character I know as one knows one's best friend, and I am in a position to say that London's interpretation, beyond a certain superficial description of

his appearance, is "as false as an obituary." This seems to point another limitation of London's powers in the realm of realism, which, strictly speaking, is not his realm, in spite of such studies therein as *Love of Life* and *The Game*. He is a dreamer without being an artist. He dreams a Wolf Larsen or an Ernest Everard, but he cannot put his friend in a book.

London's earliest work, his short stories of the Klondike, are noteworthy for their marked individualism. They show the beginnings of the command of idiom displayed in his later work, together with a certain immaturity and youthfulness of outlook which expresses somewhat the sentiments of a boy filled with ambition to go into the Bad Lands and hunt Indians. In many of these stories, such, for example, as *A Hyperborean Brew* and *The Wife of a King*, there is a rich vein of humor, and in many others admirable character-drawing aided by a deftness in the use of dialect. They are full of action, interest, and an unmistakable freshness, and with these qualities they were quite in harmony with the public taste for the elemental which was at its height when they were published. The reaction toward romanticism had not then made itself felt to an appreciable degree, although the tide has now set strongly in that direction, as witness the newer tendency in Kipling.

In *The People of the Abyss*—an unadorned but forceful and interesting relation of the author's experiences while investigating conditions in the slums of the East End of London—there occurs a description of Coronation Day which exhibits the writer in one of his more literary moods. The passage in question, appearing as it does in the midst of a welter of misery and filth described with uncompromising detail and in the direct manner of an eye-witness to and a participant in the hardships of the poor, is like a lily—a tiger-lily in a cess-pool. Here it is:

The line of march was double walled with soldiers. The base of the Nelson column was triple fringed with blue-jackets. Eastward at the entrance of the square stood the Royal Marine Artillery. In the triangle of Pall Mall and Cockspur, the statue of George III was buttressed on either side by Lancers and Hussars. To the west were the red coats of the Royal Marines and from the Union Club to the embouchure of Whitehall swept the

glittering massive curve of the First Life Guards—gigantic men mounted on gigantic chargers, steel-breastplated, steel-helmeted, steel-caparisoned, a great war-sword of steel ready to the hand of the powers that be.

But hark! there is a cheering down Whitehall; the crowd sways, the double walls of soldiers come to attention, and into view swing the King's Watermen in fantastic mediaeval garbs of red, for all the world like the van of a circus parade. Then a royal carriage filled with ladies and gentlemen of the household, with powdered footmen and coachmen most gorgeously arrayed. More carriages, lords and chamberlains, viscounts, mistresses of the robes—lackeys all. Then the warriors, a kingly escort, generals bronzed and worn from the ends of the earth come up to London Town; volunteer officers, officers of the militia and regular forces. Spens and Plumer, Broadwood and Cooper who relieved Ookiep, Malthias of Dargai, Dixon of Vlaktefontein; General Gaselee and Admiral Seymour of China; Kitchner of Khartoum; Lord Roberts of India and all the world—the fighting men of England, masters of destruction, engineers of death! * * * Pell-mell, peers and commoners, princes and maharajahs, equerries of the King and Yeomen of the Guard. And then the colonials, lithe and hardy men; and here all the breeds of all the world. * * * And here the conquered men of Ind, swarthy horsemen and sword-wielders, fiercely barbaric, blazing in crimson and scarlet, Sikhs, Rajputs, Burmese, province by province, and caste by caste.

And now the Horse Guards, a glimpse of beautiful cream ponies, and a golden panoply, a hurricane of cheers, the crashing of bands—"The King! The King! God save the King!"

In this the effect produced is almost wholly a dynamic effect. A striking visual effect is achieved by the laying on of splashes of raw color, but it is its pulsing rhythm with something of the relentless periodicity of the great march movement in Tchaikowsky's Sixth Symphony that gives the passage its power. Contrast it with Gautier's superb description of the triumph of Pharaoh in *The Romance of a Mummy*, with all its lavish beauty, its picturesque immensity, its delicacy, cadence, and charm. The one is literary journalism, the other great literature.

In the minds of many the Gautiers and Beauty are out-moded and it is the Londons that speak with the new—the modern voice. The man who regards literature as an art is "anæmic" and "spineless" say the Apostles

of the New. "Give us 'the man with good red blood in his veins,' who 'reflects his times,' " is their cry.

It may be held that, in *The People of the Abyss*, a relation of observed social phenomena, and *The War of the Classes*, a treatise on Socialism, there is little or no opportunity for the display of literary grace, and yet we have only to turn to *The Anatomy of Negation* or *The Philosophy of Disenchantment*, a digest of pessimistic philosophy by Edgar Saltus, or to Poe's *Eureka* to be convinced that exposition is not inimical to stylistic expression.

The conclusion that these considerations brings us to is that London's stylistic deficiencies are due not to a deficiency of perception, but to an arrested development on the idealistic side of his nature. Idealism he has, but it is limited in expression to the prosaic. The poetic quality which gives to prose of the highest order its chiefest grace crops out here and there in his work, but it is invariably overwhelmed and smothered by the onrush of his vigorous prose. I have said that he has not the subjective sense of Beauty; he is too much of the veritist, too much the analyst, and too little the poet.

Yet it must not be concluded from this that it does not lie in London's power to master metrical expression. Should he be minded to apply that determination and indomitability by virtue of which he has attained a characteristic expression in prose to learn the mere mechanics of verse structure, he could undoubtedly in time produce sonnets and sestinas that would be perfect in form. There is no doubt, also, that they would possess the savor of poetry as his prose now and again possesses that savor, but that they would be poetic in essence is not within the bounds of possibility.

I shall quote two passages from *The Call of the Wild*—which, taken all in all, is London's masterpiece in spite of the fact that the fallible majority so regards it—to illustrate what I have called the savor of poetry that occurs ever now and then in his writings. Take, for example, this:

He loved to run down dry watercourses, and creep and spy upon the bird life in the woods. For a day at a time he would lie in the underbrush, where he could watch the partridges drumming and strutting up and down. But especially he liked to run in the dim twilight

of the Summer midnights listening to the subdued and sleepy murmurs of the forest, reading signs and sounds as a man may read a book, and seeking for the mysterious something that called—called, waking or sleeping, at all times for him to come.

Or this, which is more beautiful. more poetic still:

In the fall of the year they penetrated a weird lake country, sad and silent, where water-fowl had been, but where then there was no life nor sign of life—only the blowing of chill winds, the forming of ice in sheltered places, and the melancholy rippling of waves on lonely beaches.

Here is poetry, absolute poetry and poetry perfectly expressed. But it is not an injustice to London to say that such isolated jewels as these are accidents, the accidents of an idealism of which the development has been arrested—clogged like a stream by the boulders of prose which by sheer brute strength he seeks to heave up the Parnassian mount—a hopeless task.

It will be held by his followers, who admire London no more sincerely than I do, although, I am afraid, more blindly, that this analysis of his idiom is beside the mark; that his work is to be judged more for the message it delivers than by the hyper-refinements of literary expression. And this I grant to be perfectly true. London will take his place in the encyclopedias as a philosopher and a propagandist rather than as a literary artist. He has applied his energy to the enunciation of his doctrines of civilization and life through the medium best suited to his subject, and the result of this application is a style which has force, directness, clarity and contour. Viewed in its extent, his writing exhibits only the profile of language; it lacks modelling and perspective, but it is touched not infrequently with a sort of rude grace and in a few rare instances gives us a fleeting and tantalizing glimpse of the exquisite and the beautiful. The display of originality in many of his stories is more than sufficient to offset whatever lack of this quality may appear now and then in his work. His sincerity, his keen perception, his skill as a weaver of tales, and his mastery of a vigorous idiom have given him a high place among writers of his time, and America as well as the West may well be proud of him.