



# Caveman, genius, artist, entrepreneur: success and self-realization from literary naturalism to advice literature

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## Abstract

This essay examines the dramatization of a new model of selfhood in U.S. naturalist fiction at the turn of the twentieth century and how it was taken up by advice literature during the interwar years. By tracing a lineage of the self through the characterological types of the caveman, genius, artist, and entrepreneur, the essay shows how the construction of the caveman as a more vital self than the bourgeois individual at the turn of the twentieth century morphed into a biologized notion of Romantic genius and further into configurations of artists and entrepreneurs as the century progressed. As the types shade into each other in naturalist fiction and advice literature, they represent a new model for successful working and living that fuses expressive and economic goals, and which anticipates contemporary constructions of work as a pursuit of creative self-expression and self-actualization.

**Keywords** Selfhood · Self-help · Naturalism · Success · Labour · Creativity

In 1914, the Progressive writer and political commentator Walter Lippmann provided a sweeping diagnosis of his times:

We are unsettled to the very roots of our being. There isn't a human relation, whether of parent and child, husband and wife, worker and employer, that doesn't move in a strange situation. We are not used to a complicated civilization, we don't know how to behave when personal contact and eternal authority have disappeared. There are no precedents to guide us, no wisdom that wasn't made for a simpler age. We have changed our environment more quickly than we know how to change ourselves. (p. 92)

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Lippmann's rhetoric may have been overblown, but his observation that the traditional fabric of society in the U.S. was unravelling, with the result that "our souls have become disorganized" (p. 100), hit a nerve. In the decades preceding Lippmann's diagnosis, a number of changes in the rapidly industrializing nation had severely shaken its longstanding republican faith in the autonomous subject. On the one hand, a new economic reality of entrenched inequality, mechanization, corporate consolidation, and consumer capitalism was undermining the myth of "possessive individualism."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, scientific developments in biology, psychology, and sociology were producing new accounts of the self as instinctive (the human animal), mysterious (the "hidden self"), and relational (the "social self").<sup>2</sup> These challenges to the liberal economic and philosophical bedrock of a nation that prided itself on its meritocratic promise of individual autonomy entailed a crisis in self-definition as well as in selfhood. As a consequence, cultural scripts of self and success in a world of growing complexity and waning traditions were changing.<sup>3</sup>

Yet normative models of subjectivity hardly change overnight. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison remind us, for a new model of self to become widespread, "[e]xempla and regulative ideals alone do not [...] bring selves into being. For a way of life to be realized, highly specific practices must be articulated and cultivated" (2010, p. 233). Rather than arising spontaneously from altered circumstances, new subject positions become socially embedded and institutionalized through repeated exposure and routine everyday performances of the self. As a genre centred around the practical application of steps toward self-transformation, advice literature embodies the kind of cultural work that Galison elsewhere refers to as "the micro-establishment of the self" (2004, p. 274). Unlike the "as-if" worlds of fictional stories and novels, advice books provide model selves for the explicit purpose of emulation. This refashioning of the self is promoted by the genre's procedural aesthetic, structuring advice around practical instructions (often in the form of lists) to be routinely enacted in the daily lives of readers. By combining ideal selves with the instrumental form of the manual, self-help literature mediates between abstract

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Macpherson (1962). On the much-discussed crisis of possessive individualism at the turn of the twentieth century, see Rodgers (1974, 1979), Lears (1981, 2009), Trachtenberg (1982), Livingston (1994), and Sklansky (2002).

<sup>2</sup> The idea of "primitive" remainders in modern subjects was widely discussed following the 1859 publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, although Darwin didn't elaborate on the common ancestry of man and animal until the appearance of *The Descent of Man* in 1871. William James refers to the unconscious mind as "The Hidden Self" in his 1890 essay for *Scribner's Magazine*, where he discusses Pierre Janet's experiments on multiple personalities. Charles Cooley uses the terms the "social self" and "looking-glass self" (p. 184) synonymously in his 1902 sociological study on *Human Nature and the Social Order*.

<sup>3</sup> Sociologists and cultural historians have described the shift in conceptions of selfhood at the turn of the twentieth century in terms of a transition from what Robert Bellah and his coauthors in *Habits of the Heart* (1985) have influentially termed a "utilitarian individualism" organized around the Protestant virtues of diligence and thrift to a neo-Romantic "expressive individualism," which instead values "a deeper expression of the self" (p. 33). Equally influential, Susman (1984) writes about a shift from a "culture of character," useful for an economy defined by scarcity and centred around production, to a "culture of personality," better adapted to the emerging consumer markets of the twentieth century defined by abundance.



cultural fantasies of success and selfhood and concrete practices of self-fashioning. Since advice books flourish during times of economic duress when traditional models of success are called into question, it's no surprise that self-help literature first rose to prominence as a mass market phenomenon at the turn of the twentieth century when traditional roles became "unsettled," as Lippmann put it.<sup>4</sup> By actively engaging millions of predominantly white, male, urban, middle-class readers in projects of self-making, advice books emerged at the time as a culturally pervasive technology of self. To the extent that upwardly striving Americans at the turn of the century rejected the kind of utilitarian individualism epitomized by Benjamin Franklin as obsolete in modern society, advice literature thus played a role in cultivating new expressive forms of selfhood supposedly better equipped for life in the twentieth century.

By focusing on two examples of self-discovery literature published during the interwar years—William J. Fielding's *The Caveman Within Us—His Peculiarities and Powers: How We Can Enlist His Aid for Health and Efficiency* (1922) and Stanwood Cobb's *Discovering the Genius Within You* (1932)—one purpose of what follows is to examine how changing normative models of self were articulated in the popular idiom of self-help. Another purpose is to show how the kind of selfhood that was circulated in popular advice during the 1920s and 1930s was drawn from the textual archive of American literary naturalism that rose to prominence at the turn of the century. Advice books may provide instructions for how to operationalize a model self, but they rarely create the model. Typically consisting of a patchwork of quotes, clichés, precepts, maxims, and anecdotes, self-help literature is a notoriously parasitic genre. Rather than generate new ideas about successful living, their purpose is to repackage already existing ideas in readily consumable formulas. Beth Blum describes this as the "curatorial function" of advice books, their aim being "to mine, collate, and reorganize the archive of textual counsel for the purposes of inspiring self-transformation" (2020, p. 41). Following Blum's claim that the boundary between literary fiction and advice literature is more fluid than conventionally understood, I argue that literary naturalism not only articulated new modes of being in response to the perceived crisis of the autonomous self, but that its rewriting of selfhood occurred both in productive tension with contemporaneous advice books and provided the cultural repertoire for later examples of the genre such as Fielding's and Cobb's.

My two case studies of *The Caveman Within Us* and *Discovering the Genius Within You* both draw heavily on evolutionary theory and tropes of the inner "brute" that American literary naturalism had popularized decades before. Although advice literature in the interwar years merged a biological language of instincts with psychoanalytical jargon that was not available to writers around 1900, the very notion that modern society had produced a rift between what Fielding calls "the Caveman and the Socialized Being" (p. xii) was also the premise of seminal naturalist novels like Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) and Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903). My argument thus traces how naturalist fiction—particularly the work of

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hilkey (1997).



London and Theodore Dreiser—which is usually considered deterministic and therefore strictly opposed to the idea of self-help, was a literary source for the kind of expressive selfhood that advice literature in the interwar years promoted. While the precise nature of this new self was hotly contested along lines that reflected class, race, and gender positions, naturalist fiction made the instinctive self that Darwin and others had postulated readily available as a thrilling vicarious experience to the reading public. The contribution of advice writers like Fielding and Cobb was to condense that self into a more tangible model for upwardly aspiring individuals. By streamlining forms of subjectivity that were first dramatized in naturalist fiction, advice books in the interwar years thus facilitated the establishment of a new order of self by providing it with a more practical foothold in everyday life than literary fiction alone, lacking any counsel for how to transform abstract models into concrete practices, could ever hope to do.

The literary studies approach that I take here uses close readings of texts to demonstrate how ideas are constructed, revised, and circulated through language and different genres and media. My aim in what follows is thus to show how certain ideas about selfhood that became institutionalized in the postwar era were already circulating in naturalist fiction at the turn of the twentieth century and in advice literature during the interwar years.

The caveman, genius, artist, and entrepreneur of my title represent characterological types that have been explored and disseminated in advice literature from the 1920s until the present. As types, they refer to assemblages of character traits that function in advice literature as inspirational models for self-making or as indexes of psychic resources for the self to realize and manage. These types populate the self-discovery subgenre of advice literature that specializes in “discovering,” “awakening,” or “unleashing” a potential that supposedly lies dormant within readers. While self-discovery books present themselves as heuristic in the sense of helping readers find something hidden within themselves, their function is rather performative, encouraging readers to enact the selves they describe. Moreover, using the same tropes of self-discovery for awakening the “Power” or “Buddha” within as for awakening the “Leader” or “Entrepreneur” within, the genre not only exemplifies the historical entanglement of advice literature with religious instruction,<sup>5</sup> but also embodies the complementary relationship between economic and expressive selfhood that Micki McGee in *Self-Help, Inc.* (2005) argues is characteristic of contemporary advice literature.<sup>6</sup> Finally, while the types that I’m concerned with here have different lineages, they also overlap considerably. The caveman in *The Caveman Within Us* morphs into the genius in *Discovering the Genius Within You*, while both types shade into economic-expressive configurations of artists and entrepreneurs. My grouping of characters is therefore meant to outline a longer lineage from the

<sup>5</sup> A sample of contemporary self-discovery titles include *Discover the Power Within You: A Guide to the Unexplored Depths Within* (1968), *Awakening the Buddha Within: Tibetan Wisdom for the Western World* (1997), *Developing the Leader Within You* (1993), and *Awakening the Entrepreneur Within: How Ordinary People Can Create Extraordinary Companies* (2008).

<sup>6</sup> As McGee observes: “Ultimately, these competing and seemingly incommensurable notions of instrumental and expressive humanity have proven to be complementary and mutually reinforcing” (p. 29).



construction of the caveman as a more vital self than the bourgeois individual at the turn of the twentieth century to contemporary constructions of the artist as entrepreneur in the pursuit of creative self-expression and self-actualization through work.<sup>7</sup>

## Realizing the caveman within: Jack London and William J. Fielding

At the same time as advice literature was rising to the occasion as a popular genre in postbellum America to combat a growing sense of economic precarity, which called into question traditional virtues and their efficacy for upward mobility among a newly insecure population of white middle-class men, an unlikely candidate for the refashioning of modern identity was making its entry into popular culture. In the period spanning the discovery of the first Neanderthal in 1857 and the coinage of the term “cave man” in 1865 by the archeologist Sir John Lubbock to Edward Tenneyson Reed’s 1890s’ cartoon series “Prehistoric Peeps” in the British *Punch* magazine and the proliferation of Stone Age fiction during the Progressive Era, the figure of the caveman travelled from the pages of scientific journals into the spotlight of mass culture.<sup>8</sup> By the time William J. Fielding, a writer of popular science books, published his advice book *The Caveman Within Us* in 1922, scientific descriptions of prehistoric people had long since been transformed into a spectacle of frowsy, club-wielding humans in animal hides. Yet Fielding’s use of the caveman was different from the ubiquitous stock caricatures at the turn of the century. The comical point of Reed’s cartoons in Victorian England or Frederick Burr Oppen’s comic strip “Our Antediluvian Ancestors” in the U.S. was that the cave men and women they portrayed were no different from their contemporaries, facing the same trivial challenges of modern life, only dressed in fur and with dinosaurs anachronistically lumbering about. Reed’s and Oppen’s prehistoric people may have been scruffier, but they spoke and acted like contemporary magazine readers for the satirical purpose of showing cave dwellers fighting over wills or dealing with exorbitant doctor’s bills. As Oppen explained, “it seems to me that [prehistoric man’s] thoughts must have been very similar to those of the average man of to-day” (qtd. in Horrall).

Fielding’s caveman represents a very different kind of self. He doesn’t use the caveman for satire but as a shorthand for one part of the self, split off from our conscious selves. This is the caveman according to Freud, whose remark in response to World War I that “the man of prehistoric times survives unchanged in our unconscious” (1915, p. 296) is used by Fielding as a chapter epigraph (p. 43). In Fielding’s psychoanalytical framework, the caveman becomes “the deep, underlying personality within us—the Unconscious” (p. 117). The figure registers a “dual nature” (1) that outwardly resembles the split personality in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). “Aside from our intellectual self

<sup>7</sup> On the artist as model worker today, see McGee (2005), Brouillette (2014), and Bröckling (2016).

<sup>8</sup> For illuminating accounts of the invention of the caveman, see Clarke (2008) and Horrall (2017). For the particular link between the figure of the caveman and industrialization in the U.S., see Bender (2009, pp. 15–39).



which is characterized by conscious and directed thought, there is another force at work within us, always active and struggling for expression,” Fielding writes. “This is our primitive self, which functions through our unconscious actions and undirected, intuitive thought” (p. 132). Yet unlike the incorrigible Mr. Hyde, what Fielding discovers under “the veneer of civilization” (p. 15) is not merely a threat to modern subjects, but also a source of “health and efficiency,” as his subtitle promises. Freud ends his sombre reflections on the destructive impulses of the unconscious with the advice, “[i]f you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death” (p. 300). Fielding offers a more upbeat message: “this old troglodyte within us can be trained to cooperate and help us carry our burdens. It is true he is not intellectual or moral, but he is strong and robust. He is *vital*” (p. 2; original italics). Although Fielding’s advice is no less dualistic than advice literature’s more conventional message of rational self-control, where the disembodied mind is tasked with subduing the bodily passions, the hierarchy between the socialized and primitive self in Fielding is reversed. What propels the subject forward to success is not the disciplined will, but the “dynamic life-force” (p. 173) of primeval instincts and desires.

The notion that the modern subject was not only split, as in Stevenson’s psycho-thriller, but that the primitive self was also the more forceful, dynamic, and *vital* of the two is one that Fielding would have encountered not in mass magazine caricatures of the caveman but rather in the fiction of popular naturalist writers two decades before. Jack London’s novel *Before Adam* (1907), for example, is Pleistocene fiction that explicitly takes up the motif of a split personality by recounting the dreams of the modern narrator’s ape-like “other-self” (p. 85). The connection between primordial urges and regenerating vitality, however, is more explicit in London’s 1903 breakthrough novel *The Call of the Wild*. In the story, the anthropomorphized dog Buck, who is “jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things primordial” (p. 15) during the Alaskan gold rush, gradually awakens to his true potential as “instincts long dead became alive again” (p. 22). While the story builds on naturalist conventions first developed in France, such as in Émile Zola’s suggestively titled murder story *La Bête humaine* (1890), where characters are driven by irresistible hereditary impulses, London rejects the plot of decline that inevitably follows the eruption of instincts in Zola’s novels. *The Call of the Wild* transforms biological determinism into a success story. The “primordial beast” (p. 24) that awakens in Buck leads not to his downfall but to his successful adaptation to a world of Darwinian struggle. Buck’s journey upward to become “the head of the pack” (p. 86) depends on his journey backward to “the lives of his forebears” (p. 18)—replete with the cameo appearance of a “short-legged hairy man” (p. 73) who visits him in his dreams from the primordial “other world” (p. 73).

The novel idea that London’s story dramatizes, and which Fielding’s advice book translates into a model for success, is not that there is a primordial self within us clamouring for expression, but that we should heed its call. The caveman should be allowed to “express his primitive personality” (Fielding, p. 174). At the same time, Fielding, a social scientist, is clearly not advising readers to give free rein to their passions. He promises that his book will help readers “open the doors of Self-mastery and Self-expression” (p. xv). If expressivity is a new goal for advice literature, self-mastery evidently is not. For Fielding, versed in the “talking cure” (p. 347),



venting the inner caveman serves a therapeutic purpose. As the caveman's vital energy—or *libido* (Freud), or *élan vital* (Bergson), or *horme* (Jung), in Fielding's borrowed terminology (p. 204)—“*will express itself*” (p. 173; original italics), seeking to repress it only leads to “outbreaks of the caveman” (p. 293): insanity, crime, riots, or the Great War that prompted Freud's remarks. To avoid such personal and social calamities, Fielding advises the “adjustment of the vital urge along socially constructive lines” (p. 57). Both the psychoanalytical concept of sublimation and the engineering goal of harnessing the forces of nature inform his counsel that readers conciliate their primitive urges with the demands of modern society. The brand of control that he advocates is not the bootstrap variant of traditional advice manuals but the psychotechnics of industrial psychology that channels psychic flows into greater productivity. While Fielding notes that “*control is a form of expression*” (p. 259; original italics), his advice that readers seek “psychic sunlight and intellectual oxygen” (p. 346) makes it clear that expression is also a form of emotive control.

Yet as the emphasis on finding a constructive outlet for the caveman reveals, expressing the inner caveman is more than a therapeutic exercise in mental hygiene. Fielding cites William James's popular lecture “The Energies of Men” (1907) on the “reservoirs of power” that usually lie dormant within people, but “which are nevertheless ready to pour forth streams of energy whenever the occasion demands it” (p. 37). Supplementing Freud's menacing unconscious with the virtual powerhouse of James's unconscious clearly boosts Fielding's uplifting take on the caveman's potential. But the combination of violent primitivism with a more sanguine belief in the untapped powers of the psyche was already rehearsed in *The Call of the Wild*. In a climatic passage as Buck chases a rabbit through the snow-covered landscape, he reaches “an ecstasy that marks the summit of life” (p. 33). In his elated state, Buck is described as “mastered by the sheer surging of life, the tidal wave of being [...] expressing itself in movement” (p. 34). Transported out of himself by blood-lust into a state of pure flow, Buck's expression of the life within him exemplifies Jackson Lears's observation that “longings for revitalization could be channelled into peak performance” (2009, p. 265). To the extent that Buck follows his inner calling, he becomes a paragon of the “health and efficiency” that Fielding teaches. He is also exemplary of a broader trend during the Progressive Era. As Lears puts it:

A preoccupation with releasing energy from previously untapped sources (body, soul, psyche) pervaded popular culture. [...] Those who craved revitalization sought increasingly to spend rather than hoard psychic resources, assuming they could tap a continuous flow of psychic energy. The celebration of intense experience, of spontaneous ‘real life,’ pervaded the literature of self-help. As economists conceived an upward spiral of production and consumption powering endless economic growth, psychologists imagined a fluid, vital self pursuing a path of endless personal growth. Psyche and economy were intertwined. (2009, p. 225)

Evidently, the idea of being impelled forward on the crest of life in *The Call of the Wild* has deeper resonances than London's own fascination with surfing. The story's liquid metaphor of life as a wave echoes the Transcendentalist conception of self, epitomized by Ralph Waldo Emerson's poet, who lets “the ethereal tides [...] roll



and circulate through him [...]” (1844, p. 229), or Walt Whitman’s “electric self” drifting on “the ocean of life” (1860, p. 394). It recalls William James’s “stream of consciousness” as well as the spiritual advice of Emerson’s namesake, Ralph Waldo Trine, whose New Thought advice book *In Tune with the Infinite* (1897) encouraged readers to “come into a conscious realization of our oneness with the Infinite Life, and open ourselves to this divine inflow [to] actualize in ourselves the qualities and powers of the Infinite Life” (p. 7). If American Romanticism developed the notion of a fluid self charged with cosmic power, it was naturalist writers like London, self-growth psychologists like James, and New Thought advice writers like Trine who demonstrated how the “electric self” might be plugged into the circuits of American capitalism.

But converting the caveman’s vitality into peak performance also required a new definition of work. If work was regarded as inherently painful by political economists from Adam Smith to Marx,<sup>9</sup> around the turn of the twentieth century work began to be considered a natural mode of human expression and therefore a source of personal satisfaction. Daniel T. Rodgers has shown how the Protestant ethic of work as a moral duty shifted during the Progressive Era to a conception of work as “a joyful bodying forth of inner energies that was akin to art” (1974, p. 75). Significantly, Buck’s experience of “the sheer surging of life” occurs while playing, but the experience itself is compared to the work of “the artist, caught up and out of himself in a sheet of flame” (p. 34). As Jonathan Auerbach’s observation that “*The Call of the Wild* dramatizes London’s own struggle to gain recognition as a writer” (1996, p. 88) suggests, the story models a form of artistic labour that dissolves the distinctions between work and play. “The famous ‘call’ that Buck heeds,” Auerbach writes, “has more to do with a vocation or professional calling than some mysterious instinctual pull toward nature” (p. 92).

While Fielding’s caveman may find expression through leisure activities, the primitive self also expresses itself through work—but only certain kinds of work. As his book seeks a brighter side to Freud’s unconscious, the caveman’s desires become “creative instincts” (p. 358). Yet if such instincts are to find an outlet in work, the work itself must also be creative. Informed by James as well as Thorstein Veblen’s “instinct of workmanship,” Fielding complains that “[t]he monotony of stereotyped or routine occupations, which fail to give an adequate outlet to the desire for creative expression, is responsible for untold psychic discord [...] whereas the constructive endeavour of craftsmanship gives play to an emotional spring lying deep in the primitive nature of man” (p. 357). From Darwin to Bergson, life itself is regarded as a creative force whose mode of reproduction through infinite variation is anathema to standardized mass production: repetition *without* variation. If the vital power of the caveman is channelled into the forces of capitalist production by aligning life with work, work too must be adjusted to the principles that organize life. Lears and others draw a straight line from Emerson’s fluid self to the demand for interpersonal skills in mid-century corporate culture, as they displaced earlier

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gallagher (2006).





entrepreneurial values of independence and competition.<sup>10</sup> But as the energies of the caveman are tapped by corporations, the industrial organization of work into large-scale corporations is also questioned. Forms of labour such as those represented by the skilled craftsman or the risk-taking entrepreneur that the industrial corporation replaced with routine protocols in the factory and office resurface as models of work better suited for the expression of “creative instincts.” Ulrich Bröckling notes how “[f]aith in the creative potential of the individual is the secular religion of the entrepreneurial self” (2016, p. 101). As the first literary millionaire in the U.S., London and his canine alter-ego are not only models of successful artistic labour, but of the entrepreneurial self who rejects life in the organized grooves of grinding upward mobility in favour of the re-masculinizing thrill of a vocation on the edge. In short, the call of the wild is also “the entrepreneurial call” (Bröckling, p. xviii).

If the creative potential of the caveman is stifled by industrial organization, however, clearly not everyone has the privilege of being called to a creative occupation. As McGee asks, “if everyone is busy making sure that they get to ‘be all they can be,’ then who will clean the house, cook the dinners, diaper the babies, and nurse the infirm, not to mention labour in the factories, sweep the streets, drive the taxis, and load the sanitation trucks?” (2005, p. 173). The answer to McGee’s question is hidden in plain sight in naturalist texts. To the extent that turn-of-the-twentieth-century vitalism upturned a social hierarchy that ranked human beings on a scale of unequally distributed rationality, Donna V. Jones shows how it also reintroduced “a hierarchy of living things ranked in terms of their capacity to experience and become anything at all” (2010, p. 68). The fact that Buck, who is likened to a natural aristocrat and gentleman (p. 6) is called by the wild, while his fellow huskies are not, implies an uneven distribution of the capacity for self-actualization that elsewhere in London finds a starkly racialized expression.<sup>11</sup> It is also no coincidence that as white female authors at the time like Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman sought the right to realize themselves through work, the care labour historically allotted to women is passed on to racialized others to whom the burden of reproductive labour supposedly falls more naturally. Likewise, when African Americans begin to assert the potentialities of their own fluid selves, such as the naturally gifted artist-protagonist of James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), this creative potential is only apportioned to what W. E. B. Du Bois called the “Talented Tenth” of the Black population.<sup>12</sup>

Consider the example of Chopin’s suggestively titled *The Awakening* (1899). The novel’s cultivated protagonist Edna Pontellier may be worlds apart from London’s

<sup>10</sup> See also Newfield (1996) and Sklansky (2002).

<sup>11</sup> Most notoriously in his essay “The Yellow Peril” (1904).

<sup>12</sup> Du Bois’s 1903 essay “The Talented Tenth” helped popularize the term coined by Northern philanthropists in the 1890s, but Du Bois also expressed the idea of differential aptitude in *The Souls of Black Folk* published that same year, such as in his exposition on what he calls “the rule of inequality: — that of the million black youth, some were fitted to know and some to dig; that some had the talent and capacity of university men, and some the talent and capacity of blacksmiths [...]. And to seek to make the blacksmith a scholar is almost as silly as the more modern scheme of making the scholar a blacksmith” (p. 421).



primordial beasts, yet she too feels “the animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (1899, p. 611). The story exploits the naturalist trope of civilization as a “veneer” for its plot of female liberation. As the unhappily married Edna awakens to “the deeper undercurrents of life” (p. 630), she asserts her own independence by rejecting the patriarchal institution of marriage in favour of a “taste of life’s delirium” (p. 584). Stirred to action by sexual forces within as well as the lush climate of Creole Louisiana symbolized by the seductive “voice of the sea” (pp. 526, 535, 654), Edna embarks on a path of self-discovery: “She was seeking herself and finding herself” (p. 581); “she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (p. 587). Casting aside her socialized self along with the oppressive security of marriage has a tonic effect on her: she “seemed palpitant with the forces of life” (p. 601). It also awakens her to unrealized talents. “I am becoming an artist. Think of it!” (594), she exclaims.<sup>13</sup> Yet her artistic independence is dependent on the servants of colour whose mute existence in the novel provide the care infrastructure of her conjugal as well as her liberated state. In a telling scene when Edna is home alone, she asks the cook “to take all thought and responsibility of the larder upon her own shoulders” (pp. 604–605). She then retreats to the library to read Emerson and “determine[s] to start anew upon a course of improving studies now that her time was completely her own to do with as she liked” (p. 605). The story is not only a tale of its white heroine’s emancipation. Put strongly, it illustrates how individualization and exploitation go hand in hand in a capitalist economy whose division of labour has fallen historically along not only gendered but also racialized fault lines.

Considering that Fielding was writing about human nature during the peak interest in eugenics, he has surprisingly little to say about race. Although he perpetuates the old racial dichotomy of “civilized” and “savage,” his point is that *everyone* has a caveman within. The relatively subdued racial ideology of *The Caveman Within* no doubt has more to do with the genre that Fielding was writing in than his actual beliefs [he describes the eugenic movement as an “inestimable benefit to the race” (p. 61)]. If success is strictly, or even primarily determined by heredity, what use is there for advice literature? Napoleon Hill’s classic success manual, *Think and Grow Rich* (1937), puts it succinctly: “There is but little, if anything, which can be done for people who are born with a deficiency in brain power” (p. 100). Self-help literature per definition encourages work on the self, while the subgenre of self-discovery literature emphasizes the work needed to realize one’s own potential. But if that

<sup>13</sup> The extent to which Edna Pontellier’s artistic awakening is ironic or not has been hotly debated ever since Chopin’s work was rediscovered by critics in the 1970s. See, e.g., Stone (1986), who sums up the scholarship on the novel that views Edna as another romantically deluded Emma Bovary, while still making the argument that the novel represents its protagonist in terms of a creative rebirth. Indeed, the point of the story is not to depict Edna’s development as an artist, but to demonstrate her potential for creative development—a potential thwarted by social conventions. While her sketching is described as “dappling” “in an unprofessional way” (p. 532), artistic expression for her is nevertheless a source of self-realization: “She liked the dappling. She felt in it satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her” (p. 532). Moreover, her lack of training is more than made up for by what the narrator calls her “natural aptitude”: “She handled her brushes with a certain ease and freedom which came, not from long and close acquaintance with them, but from a natural aptitude” (p. 533).



potential is either lacking or automatically overcomes every obstacle to its realization, then the work of self-discovery is as redundant as the divination of fate.

Francis Galton's eugenic study *Hereditary Genius* (1868) is a case in point. The book redefines the Romantic concept of genius in biological terms as "natural ability." By this term, Galton explains, "I mean a nature which, when left to itself, will, urged by an inherent stimulus, climb the path that leads to eminence, and has strength to reach the summit—one which, if hindered or thwarted, will fret and strive until the hindrance is overcome, and it is again free to follow its labour-loving instinct" (pp. 37–38). Galton's genius doesn't need advice books to succeed. And yet the compulsive striving to work that Galton attributes to genius resonates with Fielding's idea of the inner caveman seeking creative expression. A chapter of Fielding's book titled "The Caveman and the Genius," which catalogues the qualities of famous men as evidence of their inner caveman, underlines the close affinity between the two. In contrast to the arch-Victorian Galton, for whom the animal instincts discovered by Darwin (his cousin) should be bred out for the smooth operation of industrial society, Fielding sees the caveman in the genius: "Everywhere in the realm of Genius, he is in evidence" (p. xiv). Whereas Galton biologizes Romantic genius, Fielding in turn romanticizes the caveman's biology as the expression of genius. To the extent that Fielding's "creative instincts" build on the racialization of genius as a genetic resource, the book's focus on "discovery" requires a concept of genius that doesn't assert itself independently. This is why Fielding takes the eugenic movement's "thoroughly one-sided picture of the racial problem" (p. 233) to task: its focus on nature over nurture. In contrast, Fielding urges us to consider the "twisting and degrading influences of a pernicious environment" (p. 231) on even the most gifted people. Genius may be a gift, but it is "a gift to which has been applied some positive measure of training or preparation" (p. 303). When "[o]ur whole social organization at present encourages, aids and abets mental subnormality" (p. 240), realizing one's potential is a task that needs the sort of guidance that Fielding provides.

## Realizing the genius within: Theodore Dreiser and Stanwood Cobb

One year after the Panic of 1893 triggered one of the worst economic depressions in U.S. history, sending millions into unemployment and sparking widespread unrest, Orison Swett Marden published his advice book *Pushing to the Front, or, Success Under Difficulties*. While Marden acknowledges that success in industrial America presents "difficulties," he also buckles down on the older idea that where there is a will there is a way. To be sure, "will" for Marden is not simply instrumental reason. What one chapter heading calls "An Iron Will" is closer to the Schopenhauerian will to live that drives London's wolfish philosophy of success. *Pushing to the Front* militarizes the will, invoking Napoleon and Bismarck as role models for achieving "almost superhuman undertakings" (1894, p. 56). The advice book doesn't aim to manage inner resources through a regimen of mental hygiene and creative work as Fielding does; it aims to force the caveman into compliance. Marden's ruling



metaphor is conquest; his goal, to help the reader “act the Columbus to his own undiscovered possibilities” (p. iii).

To drive home his point that the key to success is perseverance, Marden cites an interview with Edison:

‘Are your discoveries often brilliant intuitions?’ asked a reporter of Thomas A. Edison. ‘Do they come to you while you are lying awake nights?’ ‘I never did anything worth doing by accident,’ was the reply, ‘nor did any of my inventions come indirectly through accident [...]. No, when I have fully decided that a result is worth getting I go ahead on it and make trial after trial until it comes’. (p. 341)

Refuting the possibility that the success of Edison might be attributed to innate genius, and thus out of bounds for ordinary Americans, Marden summarily draws the meritocratic lesson from the interview that “[a] man who thus gives himself wholly to his work is certain to accomplish something” (p. 341). “Genius darts, flutters, and tires; but perseverance wears and wins” (p. 341), he aphorizes.<sup>14</sup> “The slow penny is surer than the quick dollar. The slow trotter will out-travel the fleet racer” (p. 341). And so on. Even if Marden’s approach to success has taken on martial aspects, Benjamin Franklin is alive and well in the advice he gives to his depression-hit readers.<sup>15</sup>

That Marden makes his point about the importance of perseverance over inspiration by drawing on the interview with Edison is deeply ironic. Not because Edison was a genius, but because the unnamed reporter is none other than Theodore Dreiser. As a young freelance writer, Dreiser contributed around 30 articles to Marden’s newly launched *Success* magazine, most of them inspirational interviews with people who had “made it.”<sup>16</sup> While Dreiser was consumed by the idea of achieving success, the kind of “enormous drudgery” (p. 353) that Marden celebrated held little appeal to him. Marden warned that whoever “fluctuates from opinion to opinion, from plan to plan, and veers like a weather-cock to every point of the compass, with every breath of caprice that blows, can never accomplish anything great or useful” (p. 340). Dreiser would have found this disturbing, because it perfectly encapsulates his own self-conception. “My natural tendency was to drift” (p. 128), he recalls in his 1922 memoir *A Book About Myself*. “I was little more than a pulsing force, with no convictions, no definite theories or plans. [...] Not I but destiny, over which I had no control, had me in hand” (p. 359). Presenting himself as the protagonist of

<sup>14</sup> The uncredited aphorism is from the pastoral advice writer George Sumner Weaver.

<sup>15</sup> While Marden is commonly associated with the New Thought movement that stressed the psychological benefits of positive thinking over the moral virtues of duty and self-discipline, his advice in *Pushing to the Front* oscillates between the older ideals associated with “character” and the newer ones associated with “personality.” See Susman (1984, p. 279) on Marden’s changing views.

<sup>16</sup> See Lingeman (1986, pp. 184–191), Hakutani (2003), and Diebel (2014) on Dreiser’s work for *Success* magazine. Dreiser’s interview with Edison was published in *Success* 1 (February 1898). Since Marden’s book was first published in 1894, Marden must have included the excerpt from the interview in a later expanded edition, although I have not been able to find evidence of any discrepancy between different editions of *Pushing to the Front*.



a picaresque novel—"I was an Ishmael, a wanderer" (p. 430)—the events that led up to his success as a writer are attributed to a combination of factors he has little control over. One is chance. Stumbling upon various jobs, "fortuitous events [...] seemed to assist me, far above my willing or even my dreams" (p. 156), he writes. Another factor is what he calls "the gross favouritism practiced by nature" (p. 139). Selves are made by nature's "chemistry," leaving little room for self-making: "some people are born dull, some shrewd, some wise and some undisturbedly ignorant, some tender and some savage, *ad infinitum*," Dreiser writes. "Some are silk purses and others sows' ears and cannot be made the one into the other by any accident of either poverty or wealth" (p. 111). Marden curated Edison's views, but elsewhere in the interview Edison validated Dreiser's suspicion that hard work was useless if one was not dealt the right hand by nature. "Do you believe that invention is a gift, or an acquired ability?" Dreiser asks. Edison replies, "I think it's born in a man" (1898, p. 117).<sup>17</sup>

Dreiser's feeling that a fortuitous birth was the only way to achieve success echoes Galton as well as the reverse biological determinism of naturalists like London: that if nature propels some people downward, it propels others upward. At the same time, a fortuitous birth for Dreiser is not racially determined, but accidental. While Galton wanted to regiment life, to subject it to statistical rules, Dreiser's response was to queer life: "What a queer, haphazard, disconnected thing this living was" (1922, p. 375). Life may come down to a mechanical question of chemistry, but it is an erratic mechanism that escapes predictable rules let alone eugenic control. "[N]othing is really fixed," he writes in his essay collection *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub!* (1920), "within the bounds of an unknown arc of equation anything may happen—anything" (p. 61). Although Dreiser resented his religious upbringing, his negative theology of life bears a striking resemblance to the doctrine of predestination. It also had a similar effect of generating a sort of anxious introspection in the search for signs of salvation. Without control over his own destiny, and terrified of failure in a society where poverty was ever conspicuously looming, Dreiser engaged compulsively in self-writing, producing several tomes about his life and fictional characters who performed the kind of selfhood he identified with. In *Sister Carrie* (1900), he writes that "Carrie had little power of initiative, but nevertheless she seemed ever capable of getting herself into the tide of change where she could be easily borne along" (p. 321). This is character analysis as self-analysis. Dreiser's major fictional characters are all versions of himself with characteristics accentuated or muted to explore variations of self that lead to failure or success in modern America.

Philip Fisher has influentially described the doomed protagonist of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925) as "a blank center engulfed by worlds" (1985, p. 147). But this is not a character flaw for Dreiser. The tragedy of the novel is that society is organized in a way that prevents the subject from realizing itself. One paradox

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Zanine (1993) on the impact of Darwinism on Dreiser's conception of heredity: "Taking the Darwinian observation of variation within species, Dreiser, like the other social Darwinians, would suppose that a variation of talents like intelligence, industriousness, discipline, and ambition were parceled out to individual humans at birth by some mysterious, predestinating process" (p. 25).



of self-discovery literature is that the self that the genre seeks to discover is not a personal self. The aim is to reveal a larger and more powerful self than the individual ego—a generic force with labels such as “Caveman,” “Genius,” “Power,” or, in Emerson’s Ur-formulation, “Over-Soul.” The model subject of self-discovery literature is a transparent medium for expressing what Chopin calls “the deeper undercurrents of life” (p. 630). In this sense, the blankness of Dreiser’s characters, the self as a “pulsing force” with a current instead of a core, is a more potent form of subjectivity than Marden’s militarized self: not iron will but pure potential. Moreover, the pulsing self’s planless drift in a sea of circumstance is also a better reflection of what Dreiser considered the queer drift of life. “As one looks back on youth so much of it appears ridiculous and maundering and without an essential impulse or direction, and yet as I look at life itself I am not sure but that indirection or unimportant idlings are a part of life’s method” (1922, p. 423), he reflects in his memoir. The pulsing self may be at odds with the way society is organized, but it is in tune with “life’s method.” Dreiser’s compulsive literary expression of a pulsing, picaresque self in novels and autobiographical writings aligns him with the irrepressible life force within. His memoir about his failure to break through in the newspaper world thus paradoxically embodies a new success formula based on expressivity.

Dreiser most famously dramatizes expressive capacity as a criterion for success in *Sister Carrie* when Carrie’s unconscious “frown” (p. 446) on stage turns her into a national celebrity. Carrie succeeds because she feels and is able to channel “the pathetic side of life” (p. 482) that results from insatiable desire: the pulsing self can never be satisfied because it has no stable core to realize—it can only continue to express the inexhaustible vitality it reflects. But as her desires represent the life within that is larger than any individual, expressing herself doesn’t mean self-gratification but self-erasure. Her mentor Robert Ames, who critics suggest is modelled after Edison,<sup>18</sup> puts it this way: “You and I are but mediums, through which something is expressing itself. Now, our duty is to make ourselves ready mediums” (p. 485). Like Edison, Carrie is a conductor of natural energies. She embodies the impersonal subject of self-discovery literature as a medium for the currents of life. As such, she also reflects the impersonal style of literary realism and naturalism originating with Flaubert, in which writers would reject aesthetic conventions that “preach” in favour of a more immediate expression of life.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the literary aim of becoming a medium that channels life into art anticipates the avant-garde project of closing the gap between everyday life and art. And like the avant-garde, the result of merging life and art is not only to revitalize art, but also to aestheticize life.

In Dreiser’s semi-autobiographical novel *The “Genius”* from 1915, which follows Eugene Witla from his inauspicious beginnings in a small Midwestern town

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hussman (1975).

<sup>19</sup> As Guy de Maupassant wrote of *Madame Bovary* (1857): “This was no longer the novel as it had been written by the very greatest, a novel where you are always somewhat aware of the author and his imagination, [...] a novel where the writer’s intentions, opinions, and ways of thinking show themselves. It was life itself making an appearance” (qtd. in Becker 1963, p. 89).



to his success as a renowned painter of the Ashcan School, the term “genius” is the nodal point that connects the pulsing self, artistic labour, and the aestheticization of life.<sup>20</sup> Originally meaning a tutelary god or guiding spirit, genius was first linked to the creative imagination during Romanticism, then biologized by Galton as a hereditary trait toward the end of the nineteenth century. In all of these variations, genius connotes a subject through which supernatural or natural forces are channelled. Although the protagonist of Dreiser’s *Künstlerroman* is never called a genius by the narrator, he is routinely referred to as one by other characters in the novel. Assessing his character at one point when Eugene—temporarily exiled from his true calling as an artist—is a managing director of a large publishing house, the owner of the house rebukes him: “You’re a genius, I fancy, if there ever was one, but like all geniuses you are afflicted with tendencies which are erratic” (p. 663). If being erratic prevents Eugene from prevailing in the corporate world of publishing, however, his erraticism is also the engine that propels him to success in the first place.

Unlike his hard-working father, Eugene “liked to lie in the hammock at home, spring, summer or fall, and look at the blue sky showing through the trees” (p. 11). This reflexive quality of “wondering about life” (p. 11), of incessantly “pondering” and “brooding” about the world and “the depth and subtlety of his nature” (p. 278), is what makes for greatness in Dreiser’s world—it’s also, of course, self-description. Reflexivity provides Eugene with a detached gaze that makes him “keenly interested in life as a spectacle” (p. 144), which becomes crucial for his ability as an Ashcan painter to convert everyday life into art. The novel ends where it begins with Eugene staring into the firmament contemplating its mysteries. But idle speculation is a productive source of inspiration to the creative worker: “Great art dreams welled up into his soul as he viewed the sparkling deeps of space” (p. 736). If the mystery of life is the resource that supplies his creative drive, the shortness of life supplies its urgency: “His mind was full of the necessity of living *now*. He was young *now*; he was vigorous *now*; he was keen *now*; in a few years he might not be” (p. 149; original italics). Dreiser provides success with the kind of existential spur that McGee argues is a common call to action in advice literature (p. 148). Moreover, Eugene’s restless drive allows him to move effortlessly between the corporate world of publishing and bohemian art circles. Yet seizing the day in Dreiser’s world of existential capitalism doesn’t mean seizing control of it. Eugene is not “cold” enough to achieve the financial heights that Dreiser’s other fictional double Frank Cowperwood ascends to in *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914). “At bottom,” another corporate executive tells him, “I don’t think you have the making of a real cold business man in you” (p. 444). This is because Eugene has the making of an artist instead. He doesn’t seize success like a businessman; he drifts into it. Like Carrie, who converts longing into artistic expression and creative capital into hard cash, Eugene in the end exhibits paintings “in which he expressed deeply some of his feeling for life” (p. 732)—not just anywhere, but in a bank. Creative genius for Dreiser is the quality that converts life into art and art into money.

<sup>20</sup> The scare quotes in the title around “genius” were added after pressure from his friend and critic H. L. Mencken, who disliked the novel. See Lingeman (1990, p. 111).



If it was as easy for the genius to actualize its potential as Galton claimed, however, Dreiser would not have needed 736 pages to illustrate the process. The obstacles that Eugene faces on the path to success are twofold. First, Dreiser presents success as performative. In this, he was in line with the New Thought movement, for which success depends on the right attitude.<sup>21</sup> Belief that one will succeed leads to success. In other words: *Think and Grow Rich*. Dreiser showed the importance of self-presentation in *Sister Carrie* when George Hurstwood begins his descent into the gutter. As Hurstwood starts yearning for the security he lost instead of the future he might have, he is mentally and physically transformed to the extent that business partners and would-be employers suspect his “weakened vitality” (p. 491). New Thought slogans like “think and grow rich” may sound ludicrous, but the psychic economy that Dreiser dramatizes, where financial precarity is a depressant that leads to further setbacks and dejection in a downward spiral, represents the dark side of what C. Wright Mills would later describe as white-collar work’s “personality market” (1951, p. 182). Success depends on the self that one projects as much or more so than on the skillset one has acquired—on the performance of *what one is* instead of *what one can do*. Clearly, the increased importance of emotional skills in the labour market created a demand for advice books that promise to teach readers how to boost their personalities.<sup>22</sup> *The “Genius”* too has a lesson. Regarding the enthusiasm that enhances his chances of success, Eugene’s genius is both an advantage and a liability. Following the stigmatization of genius as psychic instability in the psychopathology of the late nineteenth century,<sup>23</sup> the novel presents Eugene as strung between two poles of excess, pendulating between “superabundant vitality” (p. 103) and “morbid gloom” (p. 725). Endowed with the manic as well as depressive birthright of the genius, it comes as no surprise when Eugene becomes “nervously depressed” (p. 252). Not only does he lose faith in his artistic abilities, he loses the oomph that finding regular employment requires. “His mental sickness was, of course, the first great bar,” the narrator explains. “It made him appear nervous and discouraged and so more or less objectionable to anyone who was looking for vigorous healthy manhood in the shape of an employee” (p. 305). It takes a work cure for Eugene to recover his vigour. His convalescence only begins when he manages to find a job “working as a day labourer for his health” (p. 315).

The other obstacle that Eugene faces presents an even greater challenge. His genius may be the fuel he runs on, but desire is the spark that ignites it. The gratification of desire means being cut off from the source of power. This is a recurring theme in Dreiser’s work.<sup>24</sup> Eugene’s “desire for expression” (p. 103) has two outlets—sex and work—resulting in the novel’s contrapuntal organization between his romantic exploits and his achievements at work. Although the novel refuses to

<sup>21</sup> See Diebel (2014) on *Sister Carrie*’s affinities with the New Thought movement.

<sup>22</sup> Novels can also serve this function. As Illouz (2008) writes: “Both novels and advice literature, each in different ways, offer scenarios through which actors can cognitively rehearse their emotional experience and reflect on others’ emotional transactions and expressions” (pp. 18–19).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Reckwitz (2012, pp. 129–133).

<sup>24</sup> See Chapter 1 of Michaels (1987).





moralize its hero's "sex appetite" (p. 44), with the result that the book was effectively censured until its republication in 1923, it turns out that in the novel's zero-sum psychic economy the satisfaction of worldly desires like sex vitiates creative expression. Eugene falls into a depression shortly after his marriage to Angela Blue, because it leads to his "over-indulgence in the sex-relationship" (p. 252). Devoted to her husband's artistic career by excelling in domestic economy, Angela is the Victorian "angel in the house" equipped with a libido. But like the institution of marriage, she represents the bourgeois security that Dreiser considered a cage for his roaming desires. Much as Dreiser was fascinated with the economically independent and sexually liberated New Woman, *The "Genius"* exploits the biblical idea that women are temptresses who lead men astray. Only the stakes are different: the fall from grace has become the fall into poverty that results when the get-up-and-go necessary for success is consumed by sexual gratification. As corporeal satiation leads to the kind of apathy that dooms Hurstwood, the pulsing self must remain in perpetual circulation. This is a technology of self as "flow technology"<sup>25</sup>: like the streamlining of natural flows to reduce friction in the engineering discourse at the time, the goal of self-cultivation for Dreiser is not to create something out of nothing, but to remove the obstacles that prevent the self from expressing itself freely. Moreover, keeping the self in circulation also doubles as a salvation technology. The self is only able to remain in motion through the pursuit of immaterial goals like religious or aesthetic experience that gratify the spirit—or genius—rather than the body. In short, while sex consumes resources within, artistic work conducts them. Although most critics have read Dreiser's insatiable self as a consumer subject,<sup>26</sup> the channelling of inner energies into endless work clearly entails a new producerism as well. Ames advises Carrie: "If you have powers, cultivate them. The work of doing it will bring you as much satisfaction as you will ever get" (p. 483). The only satisfaction available to Carrie and Eugene is the expression of their dissatisfaction through work. Even as Dreiser renounces the Protestant work ethic, he reimagines delayed gratification and endless work as the cure for the crass materialism of capitalism. It doesn't take a Max Weber to see that the ghosts of dead religious beliefs are prowling around in Dreiser's fiction.

If *The "Genius"* dramatizes the artist as a new model for successful selfhood, not only in marginalized bohemia but also as a model producer able to scale the heights of corporate America, this model is still restricted by Dreiser's fatalistic view of heredity. The arc of the novel, not to mention the connotation of Eugene's name with "good breeding," bears out Eugene's conviction "that he was born to be an artist" (p. 50). He doesn't develop into an artist because he always was one. Like Dreiser, Stanwood Cobb's 1932 advice book *Discovering the Genius Within You* similarly takes the artist as a model worker. But it also lifts the impractical—for advice literature—restriction of being "well-born" as a condition for success. The first chapter is titled "The Universality of Genius." It begins by asserting

<sup>25</sup> See Seltzer on naturalism's investment in "flow technology" (1992, p. 164), by which he means the engineering of production to correspond with laws of nature.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Michaels (1987) and Fluck (2002).



that “there is a spark of the creative nature” in all human beings, lamenting that most people “have never realized their own possibilities” (p. 3). As such, Cobb anticipates the positive psychology of Abraham Maslow first articulated a decade later. In this new model of the psyche, everyone is pathologized because they are underperforming in comparison to what they’re capable of. Andreas Reckwitz notes how positive psychology “constituted a structural change in the psychological techniques of subjectivization. Instead of search and destroy missions on undesirable psychic conditions, psychology was now there to mobilize potentially unlimited psychic capacities for improvement and enhancement” (2012, p. 140). Cobb packs this message into a neat aphorism with auto-suggestive potential: “You are richer than you realize” (p. 7).

The first step toward universalizing genius, however, is rolling back its exclusive Romantic and racialized connotations. Genius is no longer the exception but the norm that everyone should aspire to. “The man of genius is normality itself,” Cobb writes, “normality developed to the highest and most astonishing degree” (p. 63). The difficulty for Cobb is that the category of genius by definition is exclusive. Unlike the caveman, whom everyone has caged up within them, the label “genius” makes no sense if everyone is one. Cobb tries to solve the term’s resistance to universalization by watering it down. While “genius” in the nineteenth century was strictly distinguished from the less divine concept of “talent,” Cobb collapses this distinction. In fact, genius for Cobb doesn’t really mean genius at all, but “some gift of personality, some quality of uniqueness, which is of the same substance as genius” (p. 5). Discovering the genius within only means realizing “this uniqueness of the Self” (p. 5). But if democratizing genius as everyone’s special ability breaks down the hierarchy between the genius-born and the rest, it erects other hierarchies internal to the category of genius. First of all, if everyone has a genius within, not everyone has realized it. Cobb refers to such people as “bovine souls” (p. 184), and likens them to the conforming protagonist of Sinclair Lewis’s satirical novel *Babbitt* (1922). “Like cows,” he explains, “they graze in the pastures of life with heads down, wholly absorbed in satisfying their immediate personal needs” (p. 184). Materially glutted, they have lost their “appetite for living” (p. 45). Cobb’s advice is not directed at such Babbitts, since only the “tonic” of “hardship” will “startle them out of their bovine, less-than-human stupor” (p. 185). His dehumanization of conformists follows and—through the popular genre of self-help—mainstreams a bohemian hierarchy of life. “Who is the man that ‘has life most abundantly’?” Cobb asks. “It is the man who creates. It is the man whose vitality goes outward and expresses itself in deeds and achievements beyond himself” (p. 6). Just as in Dreiser, satisfaction for Cobb spells doom because it smothers the life force of desire. It also throws us out of sync with life: “Life is always moving, and we should move with it” (p. 104), Cobb writes. To flow with life, the self must continually renew itself through creative expression, because “our real self is Protean, ever changing in its modes of expression” (p. 104). The task of streamlining oneself may be as demanding as the martial self-mobilization that Marden tasks readers with, but to those protean selves able to accomplish it, Cobb promises even greater rewards: “If you remain expressive, you, too, will retain your youth, for expressiveness is the very essence of youth” (p. 121).



For Cobb, such continual renewal is the hallmark of artistic labour. A decade later, Joseph Schumpeter would suggest that continual renewal is also the hallmark of the entrepreneur, who struggles heroically against the encroaching hierarchies of managerial capitalism. Schumpeter's creative-destructive take on capitalism replaces the image of the Bourgeois entrepreneur of the nineteenth century with a figure-head closer to Ayn Rand's daring superhumans. As Bröckling writes, the entrepreneur for Schumpeter "is not driven by hedonistic motives but by the desire for independence, for struggle and victory, for success, and finally by the joy of activity and creation" (2016, p. 71). Although this revitalized version of the entrepreneur as Romantic hero was not yet available to interwar advice literature, both Fielding and Cobb would have recognized the "flash of genius" (1942, p. 132)—whose creative potential is suppressed by micromanaged work—that the entrepreneur represents for Schumpeter. The conflict between the erratic Eugene and rigid corporate protocols dramatizes the incompatibility of the artist's spontaneous outpouring with the hierarchical organization of work. For Cobb too, the work of the artist is self-directed: "The direction of their efforts is not imposed on them from outside: it is the natural expression of their own gifts and interests" (p. 8). "Why are men of genius able to preserve their spontaneity?" Cobb asks. His answer could have been voiced by the counterculture three decades later: "It is because they are not working against the grain. [...] They have never let themselves be cowed into subordination to an institutional machine. They are not standardized. They have the courage to be themselves" (Cobb, p. 99). The artist as model worker may have fostered a new producerism for industrial capitalism. But it also helped undermine its organization through what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello call the "artistic critique," whose focus on "the everyday oppression and sterilization of each person's creative, unique powers produced by industrial, bourgeois society" (1999, p. 199) precipitated a new entrepreneurial spirit of capitalism. If the entrepreneur never appears by name in Cobb's book, the type appears *avant la lettre* in the opposition he sets up between the creative self realized through spontaneous work and the oppressive institutional machinery of society.

Yet even for those "living on the creative level" (p. 4), Cobb operates with degrees of vitality that organize genius into a scale of higher and lower levels of creative achievement. Moreover, because everyone is unique, everyone realizes their vital powers in different ways. Cobb's goal may be that we all "become artists in life" (p. 241), but there is a difference between becoming an artist and becoming an artist *in life*. Making the artist a model of creative living to be achieved in everyday life and work dissolves the distinction between art and life, but it also means that all work can become creative. What matters is not what we do but how we do it. This bohemian idea allows Cobb to universalize the genius at the same time as he retains its hierarchies. In *The Call of the Wild*, Buck is the only one called to be wild, but everyone is called to be something. Regarding the other sled dogs, the narrator comments: "The toil of the traces seemed the supreme expression of their being, and all that they lived for and the only thing in which they took delight" (p. 19). The same logic of segmentation underwrites Cobb's universalization of genius. "It is when we do just the thing we are most fitted for," he writes, "that we too find inspiration and fulfilment in our work; and achieve with relative ease and joy—each according to



his unique and special talents—just as the genius does” (p. 281). It comes as no surprise, then, that women realize themselves through their “genius for motherhood” (p. 153), or that people of colour realize themselves through domestic service. “Such people are expressing the best that is in them; they are contributing to others to the best of their ability; they, too, are living the creative life” (p. 160), Cobb notes cheerfully. There is no little irony in how he paraphrases Marx’s famous slogan for equality—“From each according to his ability, to each according to his need”—to justify a gendered and racialized division of labour.

Such inequity is probably inextricable from the self-help genre whose liberal subject, as McGee points out, has its origins in the slave states of ancient Greece (p. 173). “As long as the satisfaction of human needs is subject to a social division of labour with inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities,” she writes, “any version of occupational satisfaction is double-edged, with the desire for vocational happiness serving as a powerful means of social control” (p. 130). Yet as the Marxian spectre of freedom from necessity in Cobb’s book suggests, there are more spirits than the entrepreneurial one haunting his advice. Even as he prescribes the tonic of poverty to “bovine souls,” Cobb was writing at the height of the Great Depression, when millions were being educated in the school of adversity without showing apparent signs of being reinvigorated by it. In order to restore joy at work, he doesn’t propose the kind of happiness engineering practiced in some workplaces today, but a profit-sharing plan for workers (p. 57). He also proposes socialized insurance to “relieve the ordinary man of much of his financial anxieties” (p. 182). “Freed from strain and anxiety,” Cobb writes, “he would find himself able to develop his capacities to the utmost, to enjoy life to its fullest, to give up his best joyously both in work and out of it” (p. 182). Cobb may prescribe social Darwinism for some, but for others he prescribes social security. While the ostensible aim of self-help literature is to help readers gain control over their own lives, Cobb’s attention to the economic basis necessary for projects of self-actualization suggests that selves need help from society to become autonomous.

## Conclusion

As I have argued here by tracing the evolving affinities between the types of the caveman, genius, artist, and entrepreneur, the reformulation of selfhood that naturalist fiction first dramatized and which advice books in the interwar years taught readers to apply to themselves anticipated the postwar, but particularly post-Fordist transformation of work as a site of creative fulfilment and self-actualization. The point has been to show how cultural formations in the early twentieth century provided the cultural conditions for practices of self that have become socially embedded in the creative economy today. Noting the present conjunction of expressive and economic values, Sarah Brouillette observes how the “[e]mbrace of the primacy of the therapeutic self, motivated by nonmaterial or postmaterialist goals and committed to constant indeterminacy and self-evolution, converges with the neoliberal image of the flexible creative worker whose career is her primary site of self-discovery” (2014, p. 14). To counter the naturalization of the artist-entrepreneur as a



model for successful working and living, Brouillette calls for more attention to “the particularity, historicity, emergence, and spread of the vocabulary that makes contemporary labour an aesthetic act of self-exploration, self-expression, and self-realization” (p. 54). While Brouillette interrogates the vocabulary of the creative worker through examples from contemporary literature, the lineage that I have traced here suggests a much longer cultural history of the entrepreneurial self.

And yet, if denaturalizing the model of the artist-entrepreneur by historicizing it is one function of tracing such a lineage, another might also be to ask what foreclosed possibilities such a lineage reveals. If the economic basis for individual autonomy is the elephant in the room that Cobb incidentally spots, but which advice books as a rule ignore, the permeability of the self is another feature of the genre that might be redeemed for progressive purposes. Both naturalism and self-discovery literature represent the self as porous: the successful subject is not a self-contained individual, but one who opens up channels to vital resources within that are greater than the self. Dreiser is particularly adept at showing how selves are porous in a double sense: the interiority of his characters is both shaped by externalities and is itself externalized through desire for objects outside of the self. What Dreiser refers to throughout his work as the “tangle of life” (e.g. 1922, pp. 128, 344) suggests how selves are entangled with each other and their environments, where the boundary between interiority and exteriority becomes blurred. James Livingston has shown how this redefinition of the self as relational opened up the possibility for new forms of sociality in the course of the twentieth century. As he argues, the “naturalist notion of selfhood as the effect of entanglement in externality enables a new, discursive model of personality that lives another underground (or rather apolitical) existence from the 1930s to the 1950s, when [...] it reshapes the languages of both popular culture and radical politics” (1994, p. 138). While Livingston examines how corporate capitalism made new subject positions available with the potential for dialectically transforming their economic conditions of production, critics of liberal humanism from Donna Haraway to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing have similarly argued that postindustrial capitalism has rendered the autonomous self obsolete in ways that enable new modes of being and relating. As Tsing writes: “We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge” (2015, p. 27). That subjects are “contaminated” is central to notions of selfhood in naturalist fiction and self-discovery literature. But while this loss of autonomy prompted writers like Dreiser—as well as New Thought writers and their descendants—to seek inward for new sources of power, it might also occasion us to seek outward. Once the permeability of the self is established, help doesn’t only have to come from within, but can also come from without. There may be plenty of potential power for selves to discover, but we need to recognize that it resides in what Tsing calls “latent commons” (p. 255), not in latent selves to be realized. Moreover, as my discussion of naturalist and self-help writers here shows, we can’t think self and sociality apart from political economy and changing demands in the labour market. What is needed to realize “latent commons” is not abstract theories of entanglement and relationality, but concrete material practices that establish new modes of being through their routinized enactment in everyday life.



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