

"We're Going in for Natural Training": Athletics and Agriculture in Jack London's *The Valley of the Moon*

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Abstract

Jack London was both an athlete and an environmentalist, and in *The Valley of the Moon* (1913) he represents athletics not as a distraction from environmental issues but as the model for the types of exercise that modern humans must perform to establish a more sustainable relationship to the natural world. Writing what at times resembles a fictional training manual, I argue, London taps into his contemporaries' anxieties about human physical degeneration and their pervasive fascination with sports, fitness and physical performance. At the same time, London also uses his novel to address environmental degeneration head-on, valorizing early 20th-century agrarian practices designed to regenerate American agriculture and establish American society as a whole on a more ecologically sound basis. *The Valley of the Moon* merits ecocritical interest, I find, because London uses athletics as a template for thinking about the forms of "natural training" that humans must engage in if they wish to evolve into responsible managers of both their own bodies and the natural environment.

Keywords: Agriculture, askesis, athletics, environmental crisis, environmental reform, Jack London, Peter Sloterdijk.

Resumen

Jack London era tanto un atleta como un ecologista, y en *The Valley of the Moon* (1913) representa el atletismo no como una distracción de los problemas medioambientales sino como el modelo de los tipos de ejercicio que los humanos modernos deben realizar para establecer una relación más sostenible con el mundo natural. Escribiendo lo que a veces parece un manual de entrenamiento ficticio, London aprovecha las ansiedades de sus contemporáneos sobre la degeneración física humana y su fascinación dominante con los deportes, la forma física y el rendimiento físico. Al mismo tiempo, London también usa su novela para abordar directamente la degeneración ambiental, valorizando las prácticas agrarias de principios del siglo XX diseñadas para regenerar la agricultura estadounidense y establecer la sociedad estadounidense en su conjunto sobre una base más ecológica. Creo que *The Valley of the Moon* merece interés ecocrítico, porque London utiliza el atletismo como una plantilla para pensar en las formas de "entrenamiento natural" que los humanos deben adoptar si desean evolucionar en gerentes responsables tanto de sus propios cuerpos como del entorno natural.

Palabras clave: Agricultura, ascesis, atletismo, crisis medioambiental, reforma medioambiental, Jack London, Peter Sloterdijk.

Introduction

Reflecting upon recent history in his book *Body Sense: Gymnastics, Dance, Sport* (*Körpersinn. Gymnastik, Sport, Tanz* [1927]), the Swiss composer Wolfgang Graeser remarked that

[s]omething new has appeared. It could be called a movement, a wave, a fashion, a passion, a new feeling for life; this is a reality that has inundated, pursued, inspired, reformed and influenced millions of people. . . . It had no name but was called by a hundred old names and a hundred new ones. . . . Body culture, gymnastics, dance, cult dances, the new corporeality, the new physicality, the revival of the ideals of antiquity, the new gymnastics, physical exercise and hygiene, sport in all its incarnations such as those played in the nude, nudism, life reform, functional gymnastics, physical education, rhythmical exercise with all its countless expressions, and so on. . . . The entire Western world and its sphere of influence has been transformed by this strange new sensibility and way of life—from America to Australia, from Europe to Japan. The individual manifestations may be different, but essentially it is always the same thing. (683)

The first decades of the 20th century were the golden age of sports, a time when athletics pervaded western modernity as thoroughly as in classical antiquity, when “the ideal body for young men and—to a lesser degree—women was the body capable of, trained for, and physically shaped by sports” (Guttman 186), and when popular and high-cultural artists began to fashion the modern genres of sports literature, culture and film (Green; Nielsen; Wedemeyer-Kolwe; Wilk; Zweininger-Bargielowska). Sports stars and fitness pioneers like the Prussian-British bodybuilder Eugen Sandow, the Danish ex-army lieutenant Jørgen Peter Müller, the German gymnast Hans Surén, the American exercise mogul Bernarr MacFadden, the Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman and the Lithuanian wrestler Georg Karl Julius Hackenschmid all touted body-cultural practices like nude gymnastics, cycling, weightlifting, martial arts, swimming, diving and Indian club swinging as roads to health, happiness and beauty. Modernity’s “extraordinary [...] preoccupation with physicality” (Segel 1) can appear antithetical to environmental values, fetishizing human beauty and performance to the exclusion of non-human beings, and separating winners from losers in ways that run counter to ecological core values like cooperation, symbiosis and connectedness. Sports theorist John Bale articulates the widely-held position that “as a cultural and not a natural phenomenon, sport [...], at root, is anti-nature” (39). In this essay, however, I discuss a popular and influential 20th-century figure—the American writer Jack London—for whom athleticism and pro-environmental behavior went hand-in-hand

Jack London was an athlete, an environmentalist and “the highest-paid, best-known, and most popular writer in the world” (Stone 65). In *The Valley of the Moon*, which was first serialized in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* in April-December 1913, London represents athletics not as a distraction from environmental issues, but as the model for the types of exercise that modern humans must perform to establish a more sustainable relationship to the natural world. Writing what at times resembles a fictional training manual, I first argue, London taps into his contemporaries’ anxieties about human physical degeneration and their pervasive fascination with sports, fitness and all aspects of somatic prowess and performance. He depicts how vulnerable modern selves can be

revitalized through various forms of physical discipline and exercise, and he makes a plea for spreading awareness of organized training methods beyond male members of the professional middle class.

In the second part of my essay, I go on to show how London also uses his novel to address environmental degeneration head-on, and especially how this concern with health and fitness leads him to valorize early 20th-century agrarian practices designed to regenerate American agriculture and establish American society as a whole on a more ecologically sound basis. *The Valley of the Moon* represents certain athletic activities and certain kinds of environmental reform as interrelated strategies for overcoming decadence, optimizing vitality, and becoming "faithful to the earth" (Nietzsche 6). Unlike some critics, I am less inclined to interpret London's late fiction as a psychological aberration or a betrayal of his political principles than I am interested in considering how such writing resonates with vital questions and challenges in our own age of intensified social and environmental crisis. To help me consider this, by way of conclusion, I briefly turn to the German philosopher and sports aficionado Peter Sloterdijk, who has emerged in his recent writings as a powerful environmentally-minded spokesman for the very type of *askesis*¹ that London advocated more than a century ago.

Physical Culture

Critics have discovered multifarious meanings in London's penultimate novel *The Valley of the Moon*, reading it as a proletarian novel, a regional novel, a picaresque romance, a road novel, a spiritual allegory, a race (or racist) polemic and a woman-centered *bildungsroman* (Kingman; Fine; Crow; Campbell; Kaufman, Furer; Reesman 245-257). Some have associated *The Valley of the Moon* with traditional American literary motifs such as pastoralism, agrarianism and anti-urbanism (Labor; Den Tandt 108-117; Shi; Bender). I interpret the novel as a body-centered narrative that is studded with references to contemporary sports stars and steeped in the lore of various athletic disciplines.

In the first part of the novel, set in Oakland, London offers a bleak assessment of 20th-century American youth's physical fortunes, presenting the modern industrial city as a harmful, degenerative and ultimately pathogenic environment. Nature and heredity have blessed the young working-class couple Billy Roberts (a teamster and prizefighter) and Saxon Brown (a laundry worker) with good looks and strong physiques. A tireless worker and "good-looker" (37) with a taste for elegance and finery, Saxon has inherited the willpower and beauty of her female Anglo-Saxon ancestors, who fought their way across oceans and prairies:

Hers was her mother's form. Physically, she was like her mother. Her grit, her ability to turn off work that was such an amazement to others, were her mother's. Just so had her

¹ In its original Greek context, as Michel Foucault observes, the word *askesis* (ἀσκησις) simply meant exercise, as in training, practice, or development. Furthermore, Foucault points out that in the Greek context, the term always had a positive and productive meaning: Exercising meant perfecting oneself, developing one's capacities, realizing a higher form of existence, becoming who one truly is (34-35).

mother been an amazement to her generation—her mother, the toy-like creature, the smallest and the youngest of the strapping pioneer brood, who nevertheless had mothered the brood. (40)

Meanwhile, Billy is said to combine "bulk and muscle" (22) with calm and poise, being "one of those rare individuals that radiate muscular grace through the ungraceful man-garments of civilization" (13). Having fought off many suitors, the two seem perfectly matched in fortitude and attractiveness, and after a short and somewhat artless courtship on Billy's part they are able to marry and set up a household in a small cottage behind a white picket fence.

From the beginning, however, Billy and Saxon's well-being is jeopardized by hostile factors including unsanitary living conditions, lack of nourishing food, unhealthy habits such as drinking and smoking, the incessant demands of the industrial workplace, and the stressful economic precariousness of working-class existence. Billy voices a keen sense of volatility and vulnerability already during one of the couple's first dates:

"I guess you're hep to what a few more years in the laundry'll do to you. Take me. I'm sellin' my silk slow every day I work. See that little finger?" He shifted the reins to one hand for a moment and held up the free hand for inspection. "I can't straighten it like the others, an' it's growin'. I never put it out fightin'. The teamin's done it. That's silk gone across the counter, that's all. Ever see a old four-horse teamster's hands? They look like claws they're that crippled an' twisted." (68-69)

Saxon, too, confronts the possible outcome of proletarian life in the shape of her hysterical sister-in-law Sarah, a broken-spirited harridan who is worn down by domestic work and child bearing to become "middle-aged, lop-breasted, hair-tousled, her face lined with care and fat petulance" (6). The first, pessimistic part of London's novel dwells on the causes of mental and physical decline, exposing its protagonists to a protracted deterioration that almost leaves them dead. When an industrial conflict breaks out, the couple's friend Bert is killed and Bert's demoralized and destitute wife Mary, who is "suffering from nerves" (219), becomes a prostitute to survive. Out of work, Billy takes to drinking and fighting, becomes abusive of his wife, has his arms broken in a brawl, attacks the couple's innocent lodger and finally ends up in prison "a sick man" (181). Meanwhile Saxon fails to recover from a miscarriage brought on by watching a "massacre" of strikers and scabs. Left to her own devices, suffering from malnutrition, depression and a nervous "illness that she did not know as illness" (197), she puts herself at risk by wandering around the city scavenging for food and firewood. Thus, while Billy loses his self-respect and takes to abusing his body with alcohol, tobacco and late-night carousing, Saxon suffers inexplicable blackouts and begins to wonder whether "[h]er bodily health was as it should be" (197). Upon consulting her doctor, she learns that she is "run down, out of condition" (199).

In *The Valley of the Moon*, the human body is beset by a host of dangers. Throughout the novel's first half, as David Fine points out, London revisits the styles and themes of naturalist fiction, whose popularity had peaked some years earlier with novels by Emile Zola, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris and Upton Sinclair. London's

novel, however, is both pathography and recovery manual, having a cure as well as a diagnosis to convey. The second part of the narrative debunks naturalism's "pessimistic materialistic determinism" (Becker 35), as Billy and Saxon, breaking an inevitable downward spiral, abandon "Oakland the man-trap" (London, *Valley* 229) and set out on a romantic journey in search for "chickens and a place to grow vegetables" (236). Traversing a modern, post-pastoral and distinctly multi-ethnic California, the couple fantasize a new life as small-scale independent farmers in what they playfully call "The Valley of the Moon": a harmonious "middle landscape" (Marx 77) halfway between wilderness and civilization. Somewhat miraculously, their romanticism is vindicated when after a year of travelling, observation and learning they locate precisely such a place and such a life in London's own home county, whose Native American name "Sonoma" means "The Valley of the Moon."

London uses the "California visionary romance" (Crow 6) plot of the novel's second half to initiate his protagonists—and readers—to key forms of modern *askesis*: techniques, disciplines and practices by which he believed that modern people could overcome their conditioning, strengthen their immune system, and lead healthier and more fulfilling lives. As Saxon puts it,

"[w]e've been brought up different, that's all. We've lived in cities all our lives. We know the city sounds and things, but we don't know the country ones. Our training has been unnatural, that's the whole thing in a nutshell. Now we're going in for natural training." (262).

As a crucial ingredient of this makeover, London demands that people "get . . . in shape" and "keep in condition" (51) through sports, fitness and what in the early 20th century was called "physical culture." An important episode in the second half takes the couple to Carmel on California's Pacific coast, where they spend a winter working out among a group of bohemian open-air fitness enthusiasts known collectively as the "Abelone Eaters":

Down from the dark pines and across the sandhills ran a man, naked save for narrow trunks. He was smooth and rosy-skinned, cherubic-faced, with a thatch of curly yellow hair, but his body was hugely thewed as a Hercules.

"Gee!—must be Sandow," Billy muttered low to Saxon.

The runner passed them a dozen feet away, crossed the wet sand, never parsing, till the froth wash was to his knees while above him, ten feet at least, upreared a wash of overtopping water. Huge and powerful as his body had seemed, it was now white and fragile in the face of that imminent, great-handed buffet of the sea. But the stranger sprang to meet the blow, and, just when it seemed he must be crushed, he dived into the face of the breaker and disappeared. (297)

The Abelone Eaters group consists of middle-class male and female literati, intellectuals and academics: "athletes" (309) and "lighthearted young people" (315) who have turned their backs (at least temporarily) on the city to train their bodies and explore the pleasures of "simple living" (325). Prominent members include the Herculean Jim Hazard, a family father, author, football coach and "physical prodigy" (299) whom Billy first mistakes for the world-renowned German-born bodybuilder Eugen Sandow, and

the college professor and "Iron Man" Pete Bideaux. Later the group's leader, the poet Mark Hall, makes his appearance wearing nothing but swimming trunks and tennis shoes:

Saxon called to Billy, who was improvising a table from a wave-washed plank. She pointed seaward. On the far point of rocks, naked except for swimming trunks, stood a man. He was gazing toward them, and they could see his long mop of dark hair blown by the wind. As he started to climb the rocks landward Billy called Saxon's attention to the fact that the stranger wore tennis shoes. In a few minutes he dropped down from the rock to the beach and walked up to them.

"Gosh!" Billy whispered to Saxon. "He's lean enough, but look at his muscles." (304)

In the Carmel section of *The Valley of the Moon*, London explores sports' powerful techniques of self-transformation and self-purification. In the early 20th century, Carmel was a well-known hub of countercultural activity and lifestyle experimentation (Star 239-287). London bases his athlete characters in part on real-life acquaintances and in part on well-known turn-of-the-century world-class athletes, fitness gurus, celebrity bodybuilders and professional strongmen like Sandow, George Hackenschmidt, Jim Jeffries and Frank Gotch, all of whom are referenced in the novel, and several of whom were also successful authors.² London's Carmel is a neo-pagan athletes' heterotopia, a permanent "training camp" (316) or Bernarr MacFadden-inspired "healthatorium," where "[e]verybody . . . seems to go in for physical culture" (304). Here Billy and Saxon encounter an Olympian race of half-naked men and women engaged in stunning feats of *autopoeisis*. Renouncing the complacency of ordinary life, the Abalone Eaters have devoted themselves to the pursuit of fitness, excellence and virtuosity—what the ancient Greeks called *arete* (ἀρετή)—within their chosen disciplines, including boxing, ocean swimming, rock climbing, weightlifting, Indian wrestling and caber toss.

London's novel pits "despisers of the body" (Nietzsche 22) against those who face up to physical existence.³ Athletes and athletics fascinate Billy and Saxon (and London) because athletes shape, revitalize and enhance themselves through bodywork. Dumbbells, vegetarianism and open-air exercise saved MacFadden from muscular atrophy when he was at risk of becoming a "physical wreck" (qtd. Whorton 300). Claiming an analogous transformation, London's Jack Hall explains that "[t]he doctors gave me up. My friends called me the sick rat, and the mangy poet and all that. Then I quit the city, came down to Carmel" (307). The bodies of Hall, Hazard, Bideaux and their fellows become objects of desire, stimulating and directing Billy and Saxon's wish to make something (more) of themselves. Billy is no stranger to physical exercise, having boxed professionally from time to time to supplement his meagre wages. In Carmel, however, Billy becomes training partner to Hall and Hazard, exercising and competing in ways that often leave him "played out to exhaustion" (322). For example, when Billy is

² Sandow, for example, was the author of several books including the immensely popular *Strength and How to Obtain It* (1897).

³ London's relationship with Nietzsche was intense, complex and ambivalent, and in 1915 he wrote that "I have been more stimulated by Nietzsche than by any other writer in the world. At the same time, I have been an intellectual enemy to Nietzsche" (*Letters* 3: 1485).

defeated in a thrilling rock climbing contest, he devotes himself to rigorous training in order to improve his "beginner's" performance:

"I ain't ashamed of admittin' I was scairt," Billy growled. "You're a regular goat, an' you sure got my goat half a dozen times. But I'm mad now. It's mostly trainin', an' I'm goin' to camp right here an' train till I can challenge you to a race out an' around an' back to the beach." (309)

Before long, he is able to fulfill his "sporting proposition" (320) of defeating Hall in a repeat race.

Women's participation in physical culture was controversial at London's time, but the female members of the Carmel circle are no less vigorous than their male counterparts, and one "strapping young amazon in a cross-saddle riding costume" (316) even bests Billy three times in a wrestling contest. Having always "exercised the various parts of her body" (118), Saxon, too, benefits from "natural training," and at the end of their stay her lithe physique earns her admiring comparisons to the Australian elite swimmer and pin-up model Annette Kellerman (334). London echoes Juvenal's phrase *mens sana in corpore sano* ("a healthy mind in a healthy body"), when he shows how training boosts resilience and confidence, building mental as well as physical strength. Thus, as a result of "swimmin' . . . boxin', wrestlin', runnin' an' jumpin' for the sport of it" (341), Billy and Saxon "fared better physically, materially, and spiritually; and all this was reflected in their features, in the carriage of their bodies" (334).

Permanent Agriculture

Besides being a "sports novel" (Oriard, *Dreaming* 6) documenting the cult of life, vitality, physical expression and "clean living" (Engs) that swept across Europe and North America in the early years of the 20th century, however, *The Valley of the Moon* also functions as an "environmental text" in which "human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation" (Buell 7). This is because another, equally important dimension as of Billy and Saxon's "natural training" program concerns their re-education as farmers, and especially their assimilation of new reformist agricultural techniques in response to what London and many others perceived as the threatening environmental collapse of modern America.

Saxon and Billy leave Oakland nourishing inchoate dreams of "makin' a go in the country" (312), but their utter lack of capital, contacts, theoretical knowledge and practical experience weaken their prospects of realizing "independent farming life" (278). Moreover, the couple's first hands-on experiences at a family-owned farm suggest that the days of successful agriculture are already in the past:

Farm and farmer were old-fashioned. There was no intensive cultivation. There was too much land too little farmed. Everything was slipshod. House and barn and outbuildings were fast falling into ruin. The front yard was weed-grown. There was no vegetable garden. The small orchard was old, sickly, and neglected. The trees were twisted, spindling, and overgrown with a gray moss. The sons and daughters were away in the cities, Saxon found out. One daughter had married a doctor, the other was a teacher in the

state normal school; one son was a locomotive engineer, the second was an architect, and the third was a police court reporter in San Francisco. (265)

London includes in his novel an outspoken critique of the monocultural farming practices of the "old type farmer," who is led by "stereotyped ways" that amount to "almost unthinkable . . . stupidity" (273). More specifically, observations made on the road and interchanges with informants who ventriloquize London's own views help Billy and Saxon grasp how California farmers, by failing to realize their historical situation and by refusing to consider the long-term effects of their practices, have exhausted soil fertility built up over millennia, caused enormous harm to biodiversity, and brought the ecosystem to the brink of collapse. In London's analysis, the abundance of space and land once available in the West has engendered a rapacious, speculative and exploitative "bonanza" (370) approach to the land, which is viewed as a disposable source of short-term capital gain rather than a durable asset to be protected and conserved. In the words of one of London's mouthpieces, the writer, war correspondent and farmer Jack Hastings,

"The 'movers.' . . . lease, clean out and gut a place in several years, and then move on. They're not like the foreigners, the Chinese, and Japanese, and the rest. In the main they're a lazy, vagabond, poor-white sort, who do nothing else but skin the soil and move, skin the soil and move. . . . In three years they can gut enough out of somebody else's land to set themselves up for life. It is sacrilege, a veritable rape of the land; but what of it? It's the way of the United States." (348-349)

Disregarding signs of pervasive change and imminent crisis, London charges, American farmers have ignored the consequences of their actions and continue to farm as though new land were endlessly available. London implicates American slash-and-burn farmers in the rampant environmental destruction wrought by the pioneer spirit: "They destroyed everything—the Indians, the soil, the forests, just as they destroyed the buffalo and the passenger pigeon" (331-332). The abundance of "worked-out land" (370) and the multitude of failed or failing farms that dot the map of California signal a crisis that is both moral and epistemological. "Lazy" as well as "ignorant," American farmers lack both the strength and the knowledge to farm in the post-wilderness, post-frontier, multi-cultural and densely populated world of the new 20th century.

According to London, the forces that render the human body a "wreck" (168) also threaten to destroy the natural environment. Billy and Saxon are on a "quest" (219) for land that they can "love and care for and conserve" (349), however, and along their pilgrim's progress they also encounter several helpers who take the couple under their wings and train them in the up-to-date habits and techniques of modern-day small-scale farming. London's protagonists find an empowering role model, for example in Mr. Benson, a college-educated "up to date" and "sharp" (281) farmer who employs Billy to plow his field and lets the couple ride in his automobile. Benson is given to pessimistic harangues against his fellow American farmers, but he impresses the couple positively with his efficient and well run farm. Jack Hastings, too, has a record of "conserving the soil" by "draining and ditching to stop erosion and experimenting with pasture grasses"

(349). And towards the end, when Billy and Saxon arrive in the Valley of the Moon, they are welcomed by the kindly Mr. and Mrs. Hale, who, acting as substitute parents to the orphaned couple, help them gain financial foothold and begin their own agricultural careers. Yet another benefactor figure, Mrs. Mortimer of San José, is a former librarian who has transcended her conventional bourgeois background, reinvented herself as a middle-aged single woman farmer and rebuilt a 20-acre "rattletrap ruin" (274) into a flourishing cottage industry combining agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry and the production of "homemade jams and jellies" (271). Contemptuous of all received wisdom coming from "the old style American farmer" (272), Mrs. Mortimer has applied her impressive book learning to her new career, gleaning valuable knowledge from "agricultural reports and farm publications" (279). Making repeated appearances and interventions, she tutors her protégés in successful marketing strategies and the advantageous methods of diversified agricultural production.

Farming is the site of conflict between the "last human being[s]" (Nietzsche 22), who slavishly perpetuate already worn-out routines, and the "free spirits" (79) who risk everything on bold experiments to redeem the morass of 20th-century America. Mr. Benson, Mrs. Mortimer and the Hales are avant-garde prototypes of what London calls "the 'new' farmer" (*Valley* 398). More specifically, these characters practice forms of polyculture, or what turn-of-the-century agricultural reformers referred to as "permanent agriculture," that London derived from his extensive travels, his experiences as owner and manager of his "Beauty Ranch" near Glen Ellen, and his reading of agrarian reform writers like Edward J. Wickson, Piotr Kropotkin, Bolton Hall, J. Russell Smith, Cyril G. Hopkins and especially Franklin Hiram King, whose *Farmers of Forty Centuries; Or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan* (1911) attracted him to Asian farmers' traditional agricultural methods and soil conservation techniques. The term "permanent agriculture" was coined roughly a century ago to describe forestry and farming practices that combated key issues of the day, especially erosion and degradation of farmland, by imitating the diversity of natural ecosystems and by ensuring that as many nutrients as possible were returned to the soil (Paull). To achieve these ends, permanent agriculturalists recommended techniques like composting, crop rotation, combination planting, water retention, resource recycling and the use of plant and animal wastes as fertilizer. London uses his novel to catalogue and promote many of these techniques, much as he advertises the potential benefits of various athletic disciplines. Thus, at key points of their California journey Billy and Saxon admire the Chinese practice of multicropping, which involves planting "two crops at one time on the same soil . . . radishes and carrots, two crops, sown at the same time" (340). Elsewhere they marvel at the Portuguese "trick" (248) of interspersing different crops within the same space – a method known to permanent agriculturalists as intercropping or alley cropping:

"Look at that . . . Not an inch wasted. Where we got one thin crop, they get four fat crops. An' look at the way they crowd it – currants between the tree rows, beans between the currant rows, a row of beans close on each side of the trees, an' rows of beans along the ends of the tree rows." (250)

At another moment, London lets Mr. Benson recommend the labor-intensive technique of terrace cultivation, practiced throughout Asia and the Mediterranean, which maximizes arable land in variable terrains and reduces soil erosion and water runoff:

"First thing, in Japan, the terraced hillsides. Take a hill so steep you couldn't drive a horse up it. No bother to them. They terraced it – a stone wall, and good masonry, six feet high, a level terrace six feet wide; up and up, walls and terraces, the same thing all the way, straight into the air, walls upon walls, terraces upon terraces, until I've seen ten-foot walls built to make three-foot terraces, and twenty-foot walls for four or five feet of soil they could grow things on. And that soil, packed up the mountainsides in baskets on their backs!" (293)

The new century calls for new role models and for new practices in "building up the soil" (349) as well as in making the "body sweet and clean and beautiful" (280). Forming a loosely-knit network of visionaries, eccentrics, autodidacts and iconoclasts, characters like Mr. Benson, Mrs. Mortimer and the Hales practice modes of *askesis* that complement but go beyond those of "Mark Hall and his Carmel crowd" (350). London's privileged agricultural characters have all outgrown the wasteful, indifferent and destructive habits of the "old-style" American farmer. Rising above "dogmatic and prejudiced beliefs" (273), they have adopted a new and austere regimen and been reborn—or rather, given birth to themselves – as environmentally conscious stewards of the land. Towards the end of his life, London became engrossed in the project of building his Sonoma ranch into a "model farm" (Stone 280), hoping that he could "leave the land better for my having been" and "enable thirty or forty families to live happily on ground that was so impoverished that an average of three farmers went bankrupt on each of the five ranches I have run together" (*Letters* 1378). Similarly, in *The Valley of the Moon*, the Benson, Mortimer, Hale and similar farms are infused with a pedagogical *eros* that inspires love and the wish to imitate. "[M]odel[s] . . . for independent farming life" (278), these habitations lend substance and clarity to Saxon and Billy's hazy pastoral visions: "Saxon, revisioning the little bungalow they had just left, repeated absently: 'That's it—the way'" (280). By the end of the novel, Saxon and Billy's own farm in Sonoma is itself flourishing into a "model of orderliness and beauty" (376), providing a similar empowering template of "this new mode of life" (323).

Conclusion: "Join the Gym to Save the Planet"

Although he struggled against obesity, alcoholism and tobacco addiction, Jack London was an avid participant in boxing, fencing, short put, swimming, sailing, surfing, horseback riding and shooting. London collaborated with fitness entrepreneur Bernarr MacFadden, told an interviewer in 1905 that "if he had any religion it was physical culture" (qtd. Starr 211), and enjoyed few things more than letting himself be photographed striking muscular poses in athletic garb.⁴ Labelled "the father of American sports fiction" (Oriard), London also figures as an "outdoorsman and environmentalist"

⁴ Some of these photographs can be viewed at <http://london.sonoma.edu/images/>.

(Dwyer 15), a "nature writer and conservationist" (Elder 708), who practiced a pioneering but financially unsuccessful form of sustainable agriculture at his "Beauty Ranch" in Sonoma Valley (Koster; Praetzellis and Praetzellis).

The Valley of the Moon is a sprawling, heterogeneous, generically hybrid and densely intertextual text that combines sports fiction, environmental protest tract, small-scale farm manual and therapeutic survival guide to modern life. The novel renounces collective mass mobilization through the tragic figures of Saxon's brother Tom and Billy's friend Bert, both union activists and socialist party members who have been taught to believe, erroneously, that progress and justice will follow if workers collectively confront "capital" (163). While some critics find that *The Valley of the Moon* harks back to the traditional themes of Jeffersonian agrarianism (Campbell 247), others argue that London's novel contains "ecological wisdom . . . decades ahead of his time" (Shi 103). In my reading, London's back-to-the-land novel merits ecocritical interest primarily because he uses athletics as a template for thinking about the forms of "natural training" that humans must engage in if they wish to evolve into responsible managers of their own bodies and their own "little acres" (244). Abandoning his previous role as agitator, London moves from socialism to somatism, revolution to evolution; he reinvents himself as ascetic critic of modern civilization and as healer, guru or coach guiding free-spirited readers toward healthier habits and more disciplined and nature-conscious ways of life.

Early 20th-century *askesis* is re-actualized and re-valORIZED, within the context of contemporary global crisis, by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who has recently begun to exert a powerful theoretical influence within the environmental humanities (Andersen; Bergthaller; Welters). Not unlike London, Sloterdijk is a prolific, complex and often contradictory writer who incites frequent controversies, counts Nietzsche as an important ancestor, is vitally engaged with sports, athletics and body culture, and takes environmental crisis very seriously. The provocative thesis of Sloterdijk's 2009 *You Must Change Your Life*, which takes its title from a sonnet by Rainer Maria Rilke, is that religion does not exist and never has existed. All that exist, Sloterdijk insists, are different forms of exercise or training, manifestations of what he calls "practicing humans" (78). Whether they are prompted by a master or impelled by individual ascetic ambitions, humans have always been engaged in self-disciplinary techniques of improvement and transformation. "[F]armers, workers, warriors, writers, yogis, athletes, rhetoricians, circus artistes, rhapsodists, scholars, instrumental virtuosos or models" (110): all have in common the fact that they are "human[s] in training" (110), "acrobats" (13) walking tightropes and performing deeds of near-impossible difficulty that amaze the rest of us and accelerate the transformation of the human being into something greater than him- or herself.

According to Sloterdijk, the athletic craze leading to the resurrection of the Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 marked an epochal change of human behavior, manifesting a "re-somatization or a de-spiritualization of asceticisms" (27), as self-formation was loosened from its economic underpinnings and metaphysical scaffoldings. In the last chapter of *You Must Change Your Life* and in related comments

and interviews, Sloterdijk links the history of *askesis* to the current ecological crisis. Noting that the "ascetic imperative" now resounds with increased insistence and gravity, he dwells on the "acrobatics" (*You Must* 47) that must be practiced if humanity is to survive on Earth:

"You can see the catastrophe approaching. We face enormous challenges. We need to transform our entire civilization, the complete technology needs to be rebuilt. Fossil fuels are . . . a subterranean forest which has stopped growing, and which we only burn. That will disappear over the next hundred years. We must use technology to develop a different civilization . . . Without nuclear energy, without the old fossil fuels. The sooner we begin this transformation, the better. That's all in this new imperative. But you must change your life also has other components: one relates to sports, another to diet, another to our association with nature, yet another to agriculture." (Giesen [my translation])

Writing a form of "coach discourse" (*You Must* 28), Sloterdijk like London is concerned to valorize and synthesize different "anthropotechnic" practices that express what he calls "vertical tension"—that is, the impulse that drives people to transcend their limitations, take on daunting challenges, and seek a more perfect being-in-the-world. The extreme commitment of top athletes, Sloterdijk claims, mirror and inspire the equally extreme forms of "de-passivizing" (195) that we must each practice to their fullest potential to reduce our CO2 emissions, limit our ecological footprints, and transition to a low-energy and low-consumption lifestyle before it is too late. For Sloterdijk, who only half-jokingly calls on people to "join the gym to save the planet" (Giesen [my translation]), it is the professional Tour de France cyclist rather than the worker, the outlaw, the migrant, the soldier, the revolutionary, the artist or the astronaut who best embodies the utopian energies and hopeful prospects of modernity (Sloterdijk, "Tour de France"). Exercising fastidious economies of input and output, athletes have already metamorphosed into ascetic super-humans, and now the rest of humanity is summoned to climb "Mount Improbable" (*You Must* 118).

In an interview, Sloterdijk casts a backward glance and states that "[t]he 20th century ended with the realization that the revolutionaries were wrong and the life reformers were right" ("Ein Stecker" [my translation]). What writers like Nietzsche, Rilke and London understood, we might say, is that radical change cannot be engineered and imposed from above, and that the self-shaping human being remains the best—or indeed the only—source of hope. Today, we experience a drastically radicalized version of the crisis confronted by reformers approximately 100 years ago, as we find that we must realize a mode of life compatible with the existence and well-being of seven billion human co-citizens as well as countless non-human species and a severely endangered ecosystem. Realizing that the global crisis challenges individuals to change their lives in unprecedented ways and on unprecedented scales, as part of a still unimaginable "co-immunism," we must ever more urgently seek "the good habits of shared survival in daily exercises" (*You Must* 452). Innovative and convivial programs of "natural training" must be launched to shape human culture into a total work of art compatible with globalization and ecology.

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