1. Introduction: the “men with the muck rakes"
On 14 April 1906, at the laying of the corner stone of the Cannon Building in Washington, DC, President Theodore Roosevelt delivered a speech entitled “The Man with the Muck Rake” in which he pointed out the dangers for American politics of a brand of journalism that carries out “indiscriminate assaults upon men in business or men in public life.” Journalists or essayists who cherish “hysterical sensationalism,” Roosevelt argues, are no better than “the Man with the Muck Rake” depicted in John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress—a character “whose vision is fixed on carnal instead of spiritual things” and who can therefore look “no way but downward” (Roosevelt). Though Roosevelt mentions no names, his attack was aimed specifically at David Graham Phillips, whose exposés of political corruption, serialized under the title The Treason of the Senate in Cosmopolitan (1906), had recently shaken US public life. In a broader perspective, the President’s tirade against the “lurid [...] and untruthful” broadsides of “the men with the muck rakes” targets an emergent group of literary journalists—Lincoln Steffens, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker—who, after the fashion of contemporary realist and naturalist writers, sought to document the social problems induced by large-scale urbanization in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Roosevelt’s protest notwithstanding, muckraking journalism became one of the hallmarks of the culture and politics of early-twentieth-century Progressivism. As such, it provided the representational landmarks enabling the American public to make sense of a still recent, unfamiliar, even threatening social scene.

The present paper provides a re-appraisal of this key moment in the early developments of American literary journalism. Specifically, I
focus on two dimensions of muckraking journalism—its position within the cultural field and its discursive strategies. Accordingly, the first section delineates the position of muckrakers at the nexus of literary naturalism, the press, and the social sciences. It also examines the changing reception of early-twentieth-century muckrakers in twentieth-century literary and cultural criticism. The second section revisits these issues in more concrete terms: It focuses indeed on an instance of Progressive-era documentary investigation—Jack London’s East End documentary *The People of the Abyss* (1903). The analysis of London’s text aims in the first place to explore the gamut of textual strategies available to early-twentieth-century literary journalism. It examines the various ways in which the investigative style feeds on pre-existing conventions in canonical and popular literature. This discursive heterogeneity is interpreted as an expression of the plural roles literary journalists were called to play in the cultural field. Overall, the analysis of London’s text is meant to evaluate whether Progressive-era literary journalism, when read in detail, deserves the sometimes harsh criticisms this corpus has been the target of in recent scholarly discussions.

2. Literary journalism and the early-twentieth-century cultural market.
Christopher Wilson’s *The Labor of Words* provides an enlightening account of the cultural and material context of early-twentieth-century muckraking. In the first place, Wilson anchors the practice of Steffens, Sinclair, and London in the technological revolution that made mass-circulation journalism possible at the end of the nineteenth century: “[S]team- and electric presses capable of tens of thousands of (larger) papers per hour,” he writes, replaced the mid-century individual presses that could at best crank out “hundreds of copies a day” (Wilson 18; emphasis in original). Wilson also makes clear that technological and market changes triggered a reshuffling of career and cultural roles both in the field of the daily press and of magazines. The ethos of mid-nineteenth-century journalism and magazine literature was dominated on the one hand by genteel, dilettante values and on the other by tolerance for partisan bias in journalistic editorials. Early-twentieth-century mass journalism on the contrary endorsed a professional ethos emphasizing speedy, accurate, supposedly neutral fact-finding (Wilson 20). The role of editors was reconfigured accordingly: The patrician “cultural custodianship” exerted by figures such as Richard Watson Gilder
at the *Century* or William Dean Howells at the *Atlantic Monthly* was superseded by the entrepreneurial spirit of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, coordinating hundreds of reporters in several regional newspapers (Wilson 21). Yet, Wilson argues, the new values of professionalism concealed less appetizing aspects, induced by what was fundamentally a capitalist redeployment. Competition was fierce, job turn-out high, sensationalist stunts were carried out, and even the faking of news for competitive edge was commonplace (Wilson 53).

The rise of literary realism in the 1880s (William Dean Howells, the early Henry James; Mark Twain) and its metamorphosis into naturalism in the 1890s (Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London himself) was the second enabling factor for the development of muckraking. As had been the case in Europe previously, realism in the US represented a cultural response to new urban and industrial conditions. The new literature’s link to this reconfiguration of social life is particularly noticeable in American letters because the shift toward large-scale urbanization and industrial expansion was quite abrupt: Concentrated in the few decades of the postbellum period, this social change brought about a crisis of national self-image (White 226). While the early-nineteenth-century republic had endorsed Thomas Jefferson’ agrarian agenda, late-nineteenth-century Americans suddenly faced a polity structured by corporate capitalism, mass immigration, and metropolitan sprawl (Patterson 24; McCormick 252). The new America, historian Robert Wiebe contends, was perceived as “an incomprehensible world” clamoring for sociological investigation and social reordering (Wiebe 76). While classical realists such as Howells expressed their misgivings with regard to this social change (Kaplan 44-52; White 95-100), naturalists such as Crane, Norris, Dreiser, and London took it for granted that their literary idiom would be equal to the new social field. Therefore, realism, especially in its naturalist variant, legitimized the notion that writers, freed from the standards of aesthetic idealism or popular romance, had to render accounts of present-day conditions. Within naturalism proper, the project of a socially oriented literature was linked to a methodology highlighting experimentation and investigation. Emile Zola’s “The Experimental Novel”—the influential manifesto of the naturalist movement—specified that literary practice should model itself on scientific research—on the theories of French medical pioneer Claude Bernard, in Zola’s case. In this perspective, literature could not content itself with being descriptive: It was part of the broader scientific enterprise aiming to “master
nature” and it had to serve as inspiration for reforms in the social world (Zola, “Experimental” 178).

Literary journalism developed at the crossroads of this reconfiguration of the press market and of the literary scene. From the literary end of the spectrum, it is symptomatic that many realist and nearly all naturalist writers published nonfiction works with a documentary or journalistic purpose, or at least held editorial positions in magazines. Howells, through his highly praised tenure at the Atlantic Monthly, embodied the editorial old guard of Gilded-Age magazine publishing. Both Stephen Crane and Frank Norris worked as war correspondents during the Spanish-American war. Crane also wrote journalistic sketches of New York life (Trachtenberg 141). Theodore Dreiser worked as a reporter in the mid-West and in New York, and, intriguingly, was for a while appointed as the editor of a women’s magazine. Conversely, the texts that are now remembered as instances of purely journalistic muckraking—Steffens The Shame of Cities (1904), Tarbell’s The History of the Standard Oil (1904), Phillips’s The Treason of the Senate—were published in the same editorial environment as that which accommodated the contributions of literary naturalists. The fusion of literary and journalistic practice is embodied most spectacularly in the figures of Phillips and Sinclair. Besides the investigatory pieces that earned him the Presidential rebuke, Phillips wrote a spate of Progressive reform novels—The Second Generation (1906), The Conflict (1911). He is also the author of Susan Lenox (1917), a novel of education whose publishing history was plagued by censorship, but which is now being rediscovered as a major text of early-twentieth-century literature (Campbell 243). Sinclair famously turned his investigation of labor conditions in the Chicago slaughterhouses both into journalistic pieces and into the epoch-making classic of socialistic naturalism, The Jungle (1906).

3. The professional profiles of muckraking journalism
This brief survey of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century literary scene suggests that muckrakers had to define their professional profile within a cultural field featuring six main coordinates: the literary man, the hack-writer of the popular market, the reporter, the businessman, the expert, and the social reformer. The figure of the man of letters, with its connotation of elitist dilettantism and bohemianism, was in many respects the role Progressive-era writers were trying to outgrow. Wilson shows that the rules of Progressive-era magazine publishing were
elaborated in contradistinction to the Victorian stereotype of the gentlemanly “man of letters” devoted to stylistic elegance and to the moral decorum of domestic ideology (Wilson 20). Reporting, on the contrary, did have the allure of the modern, the manly, and the “timely” (Wilson 56): It was, as Howells himself put it, “a university of the streets” and a “school of reality” (Howells, *Years* 143). Still, it also carried the disadvantage of a standardized professional practice subjected to the discipline of dictatorial editors (Wilson 27, 48). It marked therefore a sharp reversal with regard to the privileges of autonomy enjoyed by Victorian-era magazine contributors.

Given this professional context, the muckrakers’ relation to business values was tinged with ambiguity. On the one hand, realist writers and muckrakers alike advocated a refashioning both of the profession of authorship and of social structures in the name of “scientific management” (Wilson 52; see London, *People* 179). Yet writers were the first to point out the sense of alienation and exploitation induced by business values—a discontent expressed notably in London’s *Martin Eden* (1912), Dreiser’s *The “Genius”* (1915) and Sinclair’s *The Journal of Arthur Sterling* (1903; see Wilson 126). Symptomatically, market logic dictated that turn-of-the-twentieth-century writers who spurned the elitist bohemianism of their predecessors often had to resign themselves to producing literary hack work. Sinclair, Wilson points out, was very explicit about his decision to abandon highbrow literary ambitions. He was, however, more discreet about the apprenticeship he enjoyed as the author of a “well over a million words” of dime-novel prose (Wilson 120).

Science and social activism seem on first inspection to fare much better than business in the muckrakers’ strategies of professional self-definition. Symptomatically, scientists and activists feature prominently in pre-WWI fiction—including in fictional works by literary journalists. The muscular working-class protagonist of London’s socialist dystopia *The Iron Heel* (1908), in addition to being a socialist militant, is a social researcher in his own right. Fittingly, he marries the daughter of a Berkeley economist. The protagonist of Phillips’s *The Second Generation* needs the help of his wife, a physician devoted to new scientific conceptions of health, in order to grow from an overcivilized child of privilege into an enlightened entrepreneur. Ernest Poole’s *The Harbor* (1915) describes a social scene where business progressives interact with feminists and union leaders.
To some extent, the fictional image matches the muckrakers’ actual practice. Scientific expertise represented a model of professional legitimacy for literary journalists. Since the rise of the social sciences was still a recent phenomenon—some of the main academic societies had been instituted only in the late nineteenth century (Haskell 97)—non-academic investigators could feel on an equal footing with scientists. Not only could they rely on sociological research as documentary material, but they could entertain the hope of seeing their own collected data find its way into scientific reports. Similarly, social reform was both an ideal and an actual avenue of commitment—indeed the practical counterpart of social research. Jacob Riis’s 1890 investigations of the New York slums, which led to the redrawing of city norms concerning tenement housing, stood as a model of the possible contribution investigative journalism could bring to social change (Riis 227-28). Among Progressive-era literary journalists proper, Jack London and Upton Sinclair most consistently profiled themselves as actors in political life: They both acted as propagandists for the Socialist Party of America, and Sinclair campaigned to be elected governor of California in the 1930s.

4. Reassessing the politics of progressivism
The muckrakers’ positioning towards turn-of-the-twentieth-century science and politics has turned out to be a more contested issue than these introductory remarks suggest. The liberal narrative of early-twentieth-century cultural history—developed by literary historians such as Vernon Louis Parrington, Alfred Kazin, and Warner Berthoff—did view the contribution of muckrakers in the optimistic terms sketched out above: Literary journalism, Parrington suggests, was a decisive force in the “profoundly democratic” momentum of Progressivism (Parrington 346). Muckrakers, Kazin argues similarly, shared the “revulsion against ostentatious wealth that united the novelists of the early nineteen-hundreds” (Kazin 74). They could at worst be faulted for restricting themselves to a “naive” investigative approach, which left the “nature of the capitalist state [...] as mysterious and inscrutable to them as Melville’s white whale” (Kazin 82). On the contrary, mid- and late-twentieth-century historians—Richard Hofstadter, John D. Buenker, Peter G. Filene, Daniel T. Rodgers, Louis Galambos, Martin J. Sklar, James Weinstein, Samuel P. Hays, and Richard L. McCormick—have felt unable to endorse this fairly positive appraisal. The change of scholarly perspective they initiated proceeds from a skeptical re-
examination of the historical context in which muckraking developed. Their essays of indeed question the very viability of Progressivism as a historical concept or at least counter the belief that early-twentieth-century reforms were carried out at the initiative and for the benefit of the general public.

These revisionist views of the early-twentieth-century political scene imply, on the one hand, that the reforms and political initiatives that emerged between 1900 and the end of WWI were too heterogeneous to amount to a coherent political movement (Filene 20; Buenker 32). There is little common ground between, to take extreme examples, the temperance movement and the revolutionary syndicalism of the IWW. Progressivism may therefore at best be described as an era of “shifting coalitions” (Buenker 31), triggering fluid mobilizations around a spate of key social issues such as anti-trust legislation, the corruption of politics by business interests, and the need to outgrow nineteenth-century individualism in order to define better relations of interdependence among US citizens (Rodgers 123). On the other hand, revisionist historians contend that, beneath the surface of sometimes chaotic political and social campaigning, the early-twentieth-century decades witnessed a political and economic reconfiguration that worked to the benefit of dominant groups old and new (Hostadter 144; Hays 235; Weinstein, Corporate 3-5; McCormick 250). Antitrust agitation was, in this perspective, partly a political smoke screen hiding the dynamic that resulted in the final acceptance of corporations as pillars of the American economy (Galambos and Pratt). Likewise, the celebration of scientific expertise only allowed a new coalition of middle-class experts and upper-class capitalists to take control of economic and political life (Wiebe 193-95; Montgomery 229-37). The harsh accents of late-nineteenth-century social Darwinism, which legitimized the economic individualism emblematized in the unchecked acquisitiveness of the Robber Barons, was admittedly superseded by a mild ethos of scientific management, yet the logic of economic dominance was not thoroughly altered (Weinstein 15; Rodgers 126).

Literary critics of the 1980s and ’90s—June Howard, Walter Benn Michaels, Amy Kaplan, Mark Seltzer—have integrated the revisionist views of progressivism into the analysis of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century cultural scene. On this basis, they have articulated an utterly skeptical appraisal of the political legacy of realism, naturalism, and literary journalism. The specific pessimism of these literary critical essays is due not only to the fact that the scholars in question do not
regard turn-of-the-twentieth-century science or the reform movements of Progressivism as vehicles of emancipation. Above all, it is anchored in the New Historicist belief that literature cannot transcend the power games of the period in which it was produced. “[E]very act of unmasking, critique, and opposition,” Aram Veeser writes in a discussion of the New Historicism, “uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes” (xi). Accordingly, New Historicist scholars view realism and naturalism—the literary matrix of muckraking—as “conservative force[s] complicit with capitalist relations” (Kaplan, Construction 7).

The application of this New Historicist framework to Progressive-era muckraking can best be deduced from June Howard’s finely argued discussion of literary naturalism. Howard contends that the fiction of Crane, Norris, and Dreiser, though it had previously been praised for enlarging scope of literature beyond the perimeter of upper-middle-class life, in fact mobilizes the rhetoric of social Darwinism in order to portray working-class characters, immigrants, and racial Others as inherently inferior: Naturalism maps these characters as a mere gallery of beast-like “brute[s],” paradoxically both passive and irrationally violent (Howard 91, 95). The damning impact of Howard’s interpretation resides in the fact that her political critique is not exclusively aimed at the narrative contents of realist/naturalist works—at their ostensible reliance on bestial caricatures or even at the race-based paradigms writers and journalists unwisely borrowed from late-nineteenth-century social science. Its actual target is a deep-seated structure of the literary or the journalistic gaze. In this view, the naturalist stereotyping of working-class and immigrants masses is politically effective because of the scientifically validated subject-object relationship it sets up: The scientific gaze amounts to a performative “gesture of control” enabling sociological or psychological experts to look at lower-class subjects from a position of superiority (Howard 126). In this, Howard argues, American naturalist novels pave the way for the wave of reforms and for the journalistic investigations of the pre-WWI Progressive era—developments Howard does not regard as beneficial to the working classes or any other disempowered subject (131)

5. Jack London’s The People of the Abyss
The analysis of Jack London’s The People of the Abyss developed in the present section will allow us to gauge whether the pessimism of revisionist and New Historicist readings of turn-of-the-century authors
may not result in overly reductive interpretations of the politics of muckraking. I mean to determine whether literary journalism may have had the capacity to develop some autonomy of judgment with regard to the social factors and the discursive apparatuses that undeniably constrained it. We will see in this process that London’s text, despite the author’s socialist credentials, does corroborate to some extent Howard’s claim that the cognitive apparatus deployed by early-twentieth-century writers is covertly inegalitarian. In both his fiction and essays, London makes it quite clear that the brand of socialism he aspires to would be the reward of earnest, hard-working proletarians and of the virtuous middle-classes. The author’s disgust for what Marxist terminology calls lumpenproletarians is vividly expressed in The Iron Heel (1908), his otherwise remarkable socialist dystopia. The novel symptomatically contains a chapter entitled “The People of the Abyss,” referring to the East End documentary published five years earlier. Instead of poverty in London, though, “The People of the Abyss” chapter depicts in gothic terms a fictional riot among the Chicago underclasses of the near future. These harrowing visions of “the refuse and the scum of life” (535) do seem tailor-made to serve as ideological fodder for radical New Historicist deconstruction. Still, the East End documentary itself intriguingly fails to conform fully to this ideological pattern: Without reverting to naive positivism or bleeding-heart moral realism, one may venture that the direct confrontation with social facts that is the hallmark of the documentary approach does have the power, if not to break the mold of ideology, at least to shift its landmarks to a certain extent.

When London set about investigating living conditions in the poorest neighborhoods of the British capital, he enjoyed the paradoxical status of a famed popular writer who also served as propagandist for the Socialist Party of America. The People of the Abyss came about as substitute for a journalistic project that should have taken the novelist to South Africa in order to interview British officers involved in the Boer war. The trip was, however, cancelled due to the speedier-than-expected return of British troops to Europe (Barltrop 79). London then contacted Macmillan president George Brett and offered to take advantage of his boat tickets to Europe in order to carry out a research trip to the East End—an idea he had had in mind for some time. In a politically intriguing instance of news faking, the text of The People of the Abyss only offers an incomplete version of the practical arrangements necessary for the author’s investigative work. The text mentions that, as
a safety measure, London registered with the American consulate in London and that he sought the assistance of a plainclothes detective living in the East End. The latter piece of information conceals the fact that London relied on the help of members of the Social Democratic Federation, a group of British Marxists (Barltrop 80). Acknowledging this sponsorship would have exposed the text to commercial censorship, however. Similarly, a few criticisms of the English monarchy were, as London himself puts it “softened” (qtd. in Barltrop 82). Publishers’ interest for the manuscript was high, as several muckraking projects—the first instalments of Steffens’s and Tarbell’s most famous reports—had already been successfully serialized. London therefore received offers for serial publication, yet he insisted on seeing the text published in book form by Macmillan, possibly out of distrust of the constraints of magazine publishing (Wilson 97).

In terms of documentary facts, *The People of the Abyss* depicts locales, institutions, persons, and life experiences London regards as representative of East End poverty. The data presented in the narrative is collected in the first place on the basis of the author’s own observations, gathered to a large extent as he was exploring the East End undercover, impersonating a penniless American sailor stranded in Britain. In this guise, he was able to collect witness accounts and reconstruct life stories of several emblematic figures, referred to sometimes by name (“Johnny Upright,” the plainclothesman [15]; “Dan Cullen,” the broken strike activist [93]) or under generic labels (the “carpenter” [46], the “carter” [46], the “sea wife” [104]). The text also quotes substantial segments of social sciences essays and statistical reports, presumably made available to London by his socialist friends (Barltrop 80). Narratively speaking, the key moments of the documentary are the author’s depiction of his initial metamorphosis into a member of the underclass, his stays at the casual ward of a workhouse and at a Salvation Army shelter, his experience of spending the night roaming the streets with the homeless, his attending Edward VII’s coronation parade from the point of view of the poor, and his trip to Kent looking for employment as a hop picker. Towards the end, reflection and theory tend to displace observation as the author bitterly complains about the poor “[m]anagement” of the social issue (London, Abyss 179).

As a text, *The People of the Abyss* proves more discursively heterogeneous than one might expect of an early-twentieth-century muckraking documentary. In recent decades, largely under the influence of
Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, literary studies academics have been attentive to what Fredric Jameson calls “generic discontinuities” ("Magical 144; emphasis in original)—the coexistence within texts of several genre components. Whereas previous readers regarded this phenomenon as an unwelcome departure from organic unity, scholars have come to value it positively. There has admittedly often been an implicit agreement that felicitous discursive heterogeneity—in (post)modernist or magic realist writing, say—is a prerogative of literariness, not of non-literary prose. London’s documentary disproves this assumption. Accordingly, the discussion below analyzes the generic discontinuities of *The People of the Abyss* as discursively and sociologically significant. Emulating Jameson’s methodology, I read this textual interplay as a dialogue among several social stances: It proves indeed useful to link the text’s generic strands to the various professional roles with regard to which the muckrakers’ writing identity was defined. In this perspective, London’s documentary appears as a textual weave interlacing the idiom of the man of letters, the popular novelist, the local-color realist, the reporter, the expert, and the evolutionary philosopher.

Ironically, *The People of the Abyss*, even though it explores social areas remote from the drawing-room universe of novels of manners or from the neverland of romance, relies on the discourse of the man of letters to a surprising extent. The most visible appropriation of the idiom of high literature appears in the epigraphs introducing the various sections of London’s documentary: A fair number of them are quotes from poems by nineteenth-century poets (James Russell Lowell [2], Omar Khayam [23], Sidney Lanier [35], Rudyard Kipling [42]). Similarly, James Russell Lowell’s “Challenge” is quoted in full at the end of the text (People 183-84). This type of intertextuality is not uncommon in nineteenth-century literature: Harriet Beecher Stowe resorts to it in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Both in Stowe and London, such poems are meant to mark emotional punctuations in texts that offer tales of suffering. Accordingly, this device links *The People of the Abyss* to the nineteenth-century sentimental tradition—an unexpected yet understandable link, since the marshaling of emotion against suffering is a component of the latter tradition (Tompkins 147).

Conversely, it is less surprising that echoes of Dante’s *Inferno* should crop up in London’s text. The author admittedly never mentions the Italian poet by name, yet he does declare the gothic sights of the East End worthy of Gustave Doré’s “flights of fancy” (39). The allu-
sion is both appropriate and comically effective: It equates London himself, touring the East End with the help of several poverty scouts (Johnny Upright, the carpenter, the “burning young socialist” [35]), with Dante and his nether-world guide, Virgil. In broader terms, *Inferno* provides what in Bakhtinian terms would be called the documentary’s “chronotope” (Bakthin 84; emphasis in original): its specific mode of interweaving space and time. *The People of the Abyss* is indeed reminiscent of Dante even at the unconscious level because, like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, its material requires a spatiotemporal pattern defined by the descent into what are metaphorically speaking circles of hell—locales such as the workhouse, the Salvation Army ward, the streets, the charity hospital. The discovery of poverty, the text constantly signals, involves a movement downward, a descent, or even the process of “being [...] engulfed” (21).

The descent into hell also evokes a more recent intertext: Victorian slumming narratives—one thinks of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Slumming is an awkward issue for Jack London: Since his own social origins are modest—he hails from the borderline area between the working and the lower middle-class—, he is all the more conscious of the fact that he is visiting the East End from the vantage point of a successful foreign author used to the comforts of modern living. Symptomatically, a passage from the beginning of the documentary acknowledges that East Enders might spot him as “a gentleman living a double life” (17). More ominously, the text also alludes to the prospect that the desperate “wild beasts” from the East End might turn into wild revolutionaries and might accordingly “go ’swelling’ down to the West End to return the ’slumming’ the West End has done in the East” (134). In the opening chapters, London at least manages to negotiate this problem by overwriting the inegalitarian cliché of the slumming gent with a more appealing image borrowed from popular literature: The scene in which the author bargains for the used clothes that will make him indistinguishable from the London poor is reminiscent of dime novels. The protagonists of these popular romances are indeed masters of disguise, conducting investigations undercover in social circles quite different from their own (Denning 147). By the same token, Jack London is given the reassuring guise of a dime-novel hero. Similarly, plainclothesman Johnny Upright is compared to “Sherlock Holmes” and to dime-novel detective “Old Sleuth” (17).
Finally, many passages of *The People of the Abyss* resort to an idiom that seems consubstantial to the literary representation of poverty at the turn of the twentieth century: “naturalist gothic” (Den Tandt, *Urban* 124). I use this term to designate the rhetoric that equates the essence of urban life with spectacles of unspeakable destitution or terrifying crime. Typically, naturalist gothic mingles repellent realistic touches with hyperboles implying that the spectacle of misery the writer seeks to depict surpasses the powers of language. Such rhetorical shock tactics appear predominantly in the early sections of *The People of the Abyss*, where they serve as warnings to readers that they are following the investigator into a hellish place entirely different from their own round of life. For instance, when first beholding the multitude roaming the “slimy pavements” of the East End (10), London is smitten with the “fear of the crowd” (10): The mass assails him as “a vast and malodorous sea” (10). This moment of gothic immersion is followed by the less threatening, yet slightly unappetizing clothes-swap routine where the author resolves to put on “a very dirty cloth cap” as well as “a pair of brogans which had plainly seen service where coal was shovelled” (11). More tactically offensive are the passages where London mentions that his East End companions, the carter and the carpenter, pick up bits of food “from the slimy pavement” and start “eating them” (48; emphasis in original), or where he depicts the workhouse as a gothic dump. Workhouse inmates, London tells us, are asked to wash “in the same water” (64) as their fellows in misery and to feast on scraps from the neighboring charity hospital—thus on “the leavings from the fingers and mouths of the sick ones suffering from all manner of diseases” (66).

One might argue that such sensationalist details are as much part of the reporter’s palette as they are of the literary naturalist. The presence of naturalist gothic in both writing practices illustrates indeed the turn-of-the-twentieth-century overlap between these two writerly functions. Yet in the case of *The People of the Abyss*, I would rather regard as purely journalistic those less spectacular, more coolly realistic moments when London chronicles his visits to courts of law or his conversations with expert witnesses (152-58). Conversely, there are signs that the text’s gothic prose is meant to be recognized as a literary gesture: A whole section, entitled “A Vision of the Night,” provides a horrifying dream vision of the East End, rewriting in the mode of dark fantasy the sense of despair otherwise communicated through realist means. The vision of London’s poorest neighborhoods overrun by “a
mess of unmentionable obscenity” (163) resonates with the previous gothic passages, anchoring the text in the grim tradition initiated by Zola and emulated by Stephen Crane and Frank Norris.

In a hard-nosed realist perspective, one might suspect the numerous literary elements of The People of the Abyss of hampering the author’s investigatory project. Writerly devices might indeed be regarded as parasitical flourishes that at worst mark the author’s attempt to secure cultural prestige and at best act as some neutral carrier wave upon which the genuine documentary payload is encoded. In what follows, I argue on the contrary that the textual economy of The People of the Abyss does require these features. In order to make this point, however, it is necessary to determine how London handles the discourse of expertise and the social sciences. The importance of the latter may be gauged by the fact that nearly the whole second half of The People of the Abyss consists of a more or less narrativized sequence of poverty and urban-studies statistics. While such material is undeniably pivotal for London’s project, it raises two important problems. On the one hand, London’s socialistic perspective must struggle against the often conservative cast of late-nineteenth-century sociology, Darwinian or other. On the other, even a compassionate account of poverty is likely to remain abstract and lifeless if it restricts itself to enumerating social-sciences data compiled by third parties.

Late-nineteenth-century social essays devoted to urban life in America indeed draw on ideological traditions that do not encourage empathy with the plight of the very poor. On the one hand, texts such as Charles Loring Brace’s The Dangerous Classes of New York (1872) or Josiah Strong’s Our Country, Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis (1885) are anchored in the Jeffersonian tradition of agrarian republicanism. As such, they view city life as a menace to political virtue and the protestant work ethic. Cities, in this logic, embody a pathological form of economic and population management. Strong, quoting a British social-sciences pamphlet, compares slums to “‘pestilential human rookeries [...] swarming with vermin’” (130)—places where the ethos of hard work and disciplined character surrender to pauperization. On the other hand, the dominant paradigm of sociological treatises at the turn of the twentieth century was Darwinism—a theoretical corpus Jack London, like most naturalists, militantly endorses. Social Darwinism has often been suspected, especially among left-wing-liberals, of legitimizing dog-eat-dog economic competition: Evolutionary philosopher Herbert Spencer, who coined the phrase “the
survival of the fittest,” was notoriously hostile to any state tampering with laissez-faire economics (Hofstadter 39). Historians of evolutionary thinking such as Richard Hofstadter and Robert Bannister encourage us, however, to resist clichéd views of Darwin’s and Spencer’s political legacy. They point out that most of the American debates on biological evolution focused on its compatibility with arguably liberalized versions of Christian theology, thus with doctrines that accommodate notions of charity and cultural progress (Hofstadter 28-29; Bannister 62-63). Still, Darwinism makes it difficult for authors to articulate an agenda of cross-social solidarity. Instead, it favors sociological paradigms that legitimize hierarchies among human groups—racial distinctions, in particular. Symptomatically, Richard L. Dugdale’s The Jukes: Study in Crime, Pauperism and Heredity (1875) and Henry M. Boies’s Prisoners and Paupers (1893) make biological criteria and atavism key factors for the study of the pathologies of poverty. Even Jacob Riis’s How the Other Half Lives (1890) structures its investigations of the New York slums according to a racialized urban geography. The People of the Abyss positions itself with regard to this sociological material both by flatly denying its premises in the name of observable fact and, more obliquely, by developing a brand of literally inflected social sciences discourse that deflects dominant ideological paradigms. In the first place, London’s undercover investigations of the East End debunk the customary work-ethic condemnation of pauperization: The author points out that the work-house and Salvation Army practice of detaining the poor and assigning them to valueless forced labor spoils their chances of obtaining a genuine job. “I came here for breakfast in order that I might be in shape to look for work,” he tells an astonished Salvation Army warden who wants to oblige him to attend lengthy religious services (79). Only after elaborate pleading is he allowed to leave early. Back on the street, he “[can’t] quite make up [his] mind whether,” during his stay at the shelter, “[he] had been in the army or in prison” (81). London’s rebuttal of Darwinian principles is far more unexpected, since evolutionary psychology constitutes the ideological bedrock of his stories of the North—White Fang (1906) or The Call of the Wild (1903), for instance. Still, the discovery of the “obscenities and vulgarities” to which the East End underclass is reduced compels the author to cry out iconoclastically that “the survival of the fittest can go hang” (125). Though this surprising outburst does not mark London’s break with Darwinism—the latter is still central to The Iron Heel—, it illustrates the logic by which Progressive-era
authors, responding to the evidence gathered during their field research, initiated the gradual deligitimization of Social Darwinian beliefs (Kazin 102).

Secondly, London integrates his sociological findings within a vitalistic discourse that, without refuting his Darwinian credo, leaves room for an ethos of solidarity. Vitalism—the belief that history is propelled by the life force—is an important yet seldom explored component of turn-of-the-twentieth-century literature and sociology. One remarkable characteristic of vitalism is its capacity to serve as mediating ground between opposite philosophical and aesthetic claims. In particular, it is able to hold in balance the biological principles of evolutionary science and, on the other hand, an idealistic, even mystical belief in the value of life (Den Tandt, ” ’Web of Life’” 99). Thus, in The People of the Abyss, vitalism allows London to reshuffle his Darwinian philosophy within a biologizing framework compatible with his socialist agenda. His indignation at degrading conditions is predicated on the belief that social welfare should be based on an appraisal of “life in terms of manhood and womanhood” (97). Instead, he claims, the British capital renders “life [...] so cheap that perforce it perishes of itself” (28). A “flood of vigorous strong life” comes from “rural England” (28), is absorbed by the “monster city” (22), and “perishes by the third generation” (28). This sociological model might be described as a Darwinian rewriting of American pastoralism with a socialist twist: It enables the author to condemn the presumably unnatural tendency of capitalists to view “life in terms of shares and coupons” (97). Also, the most intriguing instance of London’s vitalism appears in passages where the novelist resorts to this discourse in order to articulate a condemnation of British imperialism. As he watches Edward VII’s coronation ceremony, the author reflects that the life energy that is denied to “starved and runty toilers” (83) from the East End is unfairly channeled into the “well-fed” (83) bodies of the “strapping Life Guardsmen of the West End (83). From a working-class perspective, the building of the Empire amounts indeed to the process by which “the best [individuals the English workers] breed are taken from them” (129) and “haled forthwith into the army” (130).

- Narrativizing evidence
  - In order to avoid the abstract character of statistical evidence, London’s text aims towards the “dramatic method” (Lubbock) or
the “lived” narrative (Lukács), which present facts according to the perception process of an individual witness.

- In this way, literary strategies further the investigatory agenda

- Negotiated disclosures

  - By aiming for a “lived” narrative based on sociological fact, London’s text triggers negotiated disclosures: It offers revelations about the social world that partly break the framework of existing ideological discourses but are inevitably negotiated within an ideological framework, albeit partly reconfigured.

  - Disclosures are made possible by journalistic research, but they are also empowered by the text’s literary devices, which break the routine of existing social sciences paradigms.
Works Cited


