INJURIOUS DISTANCES: MOBILITY, SPACE, REALISM

BY

FRANKLIN WAYNE RIDGWAY

DISSEPTION

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Stephanie Foote, Chair
Associate Professor Trish Loughran
Associate Professor William J. Maxwell, Washington University in St. Louis
Associate Professor Kathryn J. Oberdeck
Abstract

American literary realism and naturalism emerged in an era in which the forces of capital were remaking not only the American social landscape, but also the physical landscape as such. Social upheaval was accompanied by new experiences of physical speed, telecommunications, and the mechanization of the urban grid. As the traditional ordering of movement through space gave way to such new spatial phenomena as the Pullman sleeper, the stock-exchange floor, and the traffic jam, space itself quickly became more mediated by text. Text not only represented space, but textuality took on a more crucial role in the process of knowing and using spaces. This dissertation discusses how white middle-class authors of the American Gilded Age and Progressive Era struggled to interpret the fluidity of new American spaces. I argue that for Mark Twain, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser, physical motion and the continual remaking of the built environment enabled new kinds of subjectivity. Specifically, I assert texts such as Mark Twain’s early narratives, Norris’s The Octopus, and Dreiser’s An American Tragedy attempted to model ways of understanding new American spatialities, while betraying a persistent anxiety about the power of writing itself to render such spatialities transparent. Focusing on systems of mobility during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, I analyze the fundamental tensions in the texts under discussion, as well as on the way they addressed the material contradictions in systems of mobility around 1900. I argue that Twain, Norris, and Dreiser were ambivalent about the experience of motion and spatial ephemerality, and that that their writings therefore register the inherent difficulty in making sense of the technosocial systems undergirding those experiences.
To Susan Ann Gregson
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The town man [. . .] has overlaid and overwrapped nature with artifices; light, heat, and food come to him through mechanical media. In the country he lifted himself into apparently spontaneous and reciprocal relations with his material; in the town he still remains in automatic subordination to things. [. . .] Education must arouse him to the domination of his new world by stimulating eye and ear until he sees and hears fresh inducements to activity. It follows that he should be given a mobile body and mind in order that he may be made acquainted with the unimagined possibilities of his strange environment.


The fascinating thing about the study of crises, as of crowds, is that so far as they are in fact due to psychological causes, that is, so far as they are the result of the mobility of the communities in which they occur, they can be controlled.

— Robert E. Park, “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment” (1915)

I am the passenger and I ride and I ride I ride.

— James Osterberg, “The Passenger” (1977)
Contents

Introduction:
American Literature and the Invention of Mass Mobility .........................................................1

Chapter One:
A Husbanded Grandeur: Mark Twain, Steamboats, and Gilded-Age Space .........................52

Chapter Two:
Quick Enough to Interpret the Cipher Message of the Eye:
The Octopus and Railroad Perception ..................................................................................123

Chapter Three
Breakneck Pace: Limits to Mobility in An American Tragedy ...........................................181

Illustrations ..............................................................................................................................248

Notes ........................................................................................................................................254

Works Cited ..........................................................................................................................268
Introduction:

American Literature and the Invention of Mass Mobility

A defect in their narratives

In 1886, Charles Francis Adams—brother of Henry and Brooks Adams and great-grandson of president John Adams—published *Railroads: Their Origin and Problems*, an overview of railroad development in Britain, Continental Europe, and the United States. Adams’s purpose was to promote (voluntary) regulation of the main extant US trunk railroads by the Federal government. Oddly enough, however, the book begins with a foray into literary criticism. Indeed, Adams frames much of what is to follow by critiquing two earlier histories of British railroads—specifically the Manchester and Liverpool Railway—written by Samuel Smiles and John Cordy Jeaffreson. Adams begins with backhanded praise, commending Smiles’s “great literary skill” and writing that Smiles carries his readers along with him through episodes of opposition, discouragement, disappointment, almost defeat,—the interest in the narrative and the fortunes of its hero continually growing until it exceeds that of any work of fiction of the day, even though Walter Scott himself was then a living author,—until at last the great dramatic climax is reached in the memorable pageant of September 15th, 1830. (*Origins* 1-2)

Yet, for all this—indeed because of all this—Smiles’s account falls short of Adams’s standards of historiography. For, Adams writes, “Smiles’ appreciation of the dramatic fitness of things proved too strong for his fidelity to facts” (2). Even Jeaffreson, whose biography of Stephenson gives “a much more correct account [. . .] of the Manchester & Liverpool opening”
(3), falls short of factual accuracy because, having written long after the fact, Jeaffreson “sees what he undertakes to describe with eyes accustomed to railroads and locomotives and trains of cars”; his “narrative is “skilful,” but “it is, after all, not the narrative of one who was actually there.” Both Smiles’s and Jeaffreson’s narratives, therefore, are double mediated. They are mediated by time and by literary convention. They fail to take account of the experience of social and material shock, of how the railroad “burst rather than stole or crept upon the world.” Hence, in rendering the inaugural journey of Stephenson’s locomotive “literary,” Smiles glosses over such troubling events as the accidental death of MP William Huskisson, along with the presence of anti-Corn Law protestors who encountered the train along the way. Adams takes Smiles and Jeaffreson to task because they ignore both the material strangeness of the railroad as an intrusive presence in everyday European life and the social chaos of a world in which the British aristocracy simultaneously promoted railroad construction and desperately clung to the last vestiges of mercantilism.

Adams is more interested in the accounts of those who actually witnessed the event because such narratives more vividly register the social, technical, and corporeal crises occasioned by the advent of rail travel. An “element of spontaneity,” writes Adams, “gave a peculiar interest to everything connected with the Manchester & Liverpool railroad”:

The whole world was looking at it, with a full realizing sense that something great and momentous was impending. Every day people watched the gradual development of the thing, and actually took part in it. In doing so they had sensations and those sensations they have described. There is consequently an element of human nature surrounding it. The complete ignoring of this element by both Smiles and Jeaffreson is a defect in their
narratives. They describe the scene from a standpoint of forty years later. Others described it as they saw it at the time. To their descriptions time has only lent a new freshness. They are full of honest wonder. (5)

And yet, while Adams is quick to use, for example, Fanny Kemble’s account of the opening of the Manchester and Liverpool as evidence of the “honest wonder” of these earliest observers of the railroad, he is far from endorsing these first-hand views as a superior kind of historiographic narrative. On the contrary, if such narratives are more “interesting and life-like,” they for that very reason show how unprepared and astonished early Victorian railway passengers really were in their encounter with railroads. If representations too preoccupied with a “dramatic fitness of things” over documentary detail overlooked the technical disasters and social upheavals of the 15 September railroad trip, there was equally a shortcoming in the way the participants themselves thought about railroads. That, indeed, is precisely why Adams begins his discussion of railroad problems by narrating the catastrophe that lead to Huskisson’s death. Adams was himself an expert on railway accidents as well as on the political economy of rail transportation, and the Huskisson accident resonated simultaneously for him as a signifier for the cultural, technical, technical—and even epistemological—problems associated with railroads. He had already rehearsed the accident eleven years earlier in a serial article in the _Atlantic Monthly_ (the first installment of which, interestingly enough, followed immediately the eleventh chapter of _Roderick Hudson_ ) titled “Of Some Railroad Accidents.”

In this essay, Adams implicitly blames Huskisson, and more specifically his unfamiliarity with railroad spaces, for his own death. As the locomotive _Northumberland_ took on water outside Manchester, writes Adams, “disregarding every caution against their so doing, the excited and joyous passengers left their carriages and mingled together, eagerly congratulating one another
upon the unalloyed success of the occasion” (“Accidents I” 572). Even more recklessly, “Mr. Huskisson, though in poor health and somewhat lame, was one of the most excited of the throng, and among the first to thus expose himself.” If historians like Smiles and Jeaffreson had been blinded by too much literariness in their accounts, Huskisson was blinded to the dangers of the railyard by his own excitement; Huskisson then entered into a conversation with the Duke of Wellington and

As they were talking [. . .] the *Rocket* locomotive—the same famous *Rocket* which a year previous had won the five hundred pounds prize, and by so doing established forever the feasibility of rapid steam locomotion—came along upon the other track to take its place at the watering station. It came up slowly and so silently that its approach was hardly noticed; until, suddenly, an alarm was given, and, as every one immediately ran to resume his place, some commotion naturally ensued. In addition to being lame, Mr. Huskisson seemed also under these circumstances to be quite agitated, and, instead of quietly standing against the side of the carriage and allowing the *Rocket* to pass, he nervously tried to get round its open door, which was swinging out across the space between the two tracks in such a way that the approaching locomotive struck it, flinging it back, and at the same time throwing Mr. Huskisson down. (“Accidents I” 572)

Too much “honest wonder,” it seems, is indistinguishable from “commotion” and “agitation,” which can come along with a surfeit of self-congratulation—which had also been one of the problems with the accounts of Smiles and Jeaffreson. The distinction between these two epistemological poles—the overly-mediated and the too-immediate, the too-distant and the
too-close—collapses in Adams’s discussion because both tend to misdirect attention, to inspire mistaken confidence, and to render the origins of crises obscure. For Adams, misreading begets misreading. The chaotic, illegible spectacle of 15 September becomes—later, but still in the infancy of the railroad era—legible only as a spectacle of progress. Railroad passengers of the early Victorian era often literally couldn’t see what was coming; and, in their subsequent representations the advent of the railroad era, they compounded the problem by effacing their earlier blindness.

This rhetorical pattern structures much of the rest of Adams’s argument. When he turns to the railroad in America, for example, Adams emphasizes the lack of mechanical regularity and sophistication of the Best Friend, the first locomotive of the South Carolina Railroad; he calls it “[a] queer looking machine, the outline of which was sufficient in itself to prove that the inventor owed nothing to Stephenson” (39) and a “very simple product of native genius” (40). Significantly, he ties this backhanded praise of “native genius” to his satire of the “regional” character of the railroad itself:

Naturally, and even necessarily, inasmuch as [the Best Friend, actually constructed in New York] was a South Carolina institution, it was provided with a negro [sic] fireman. It so happened that this functionary while in the discharge of his duties was much annoyed by the escape of steam from the safety valve, and not having made himself complete master of the principles underlying the use of steam as a source of power, he took advantage of a temporary absence of the engineer in charge to effect a radical remedy of this cause of annoyance. He not only fastened down the valve lever, but further made the thing perfectly sure by sitting on it. The consequences
were hardly less disastrous to the Best Friend than to the chattel fireman.

*(Origins 42)*

Adam’s use of the word *master* here was undoubtedly especially evocative for his contemporaries. By relying on a “negro” fireman, the southern masters of chattel slaves showed they were no masters of railroad machinery. The distancing of the technical apparatus from direct control by white men arises “[n]aturally, and even necessarily” from a “peculiar” social form which itself depended on a double ideology of regional exceptionalism and agrarian romanticism. The black man shows his backwardness and naïveté by corporeally defeating the boiler’s automatic safety apparatus; by analogy, southern white men (and by implication, Americans generally) show their own ineptitude by trying to adopt an outmoded, eccentric, and place-bound social form to railroad operations. Adams adds that these perennial southerners—men who would later go to war to preserve their southernness and lose a war at least in part because of their inability to marshal the technics of modern warfare—did away with slave labor in the locomotive but preserved the regional character of the railroad by then adding to trains a “barrier car consist[ing] of a platform on wheels upon which were piled six bales of cotton” (43). The image of southern passengers huddling behind the shelter of stacked cotton bales, enjoying a “negro band, in general appearance very closely resembling the minstrels of a later day,” would have reminded Adams’s readers in 1886 of both the cotton-clad warships of the defeated Confederacy and the cliché of the pleasure-loving but backward and provincial white southerner. Like a cotton-clad vessel, a cotton-clad locomotive is not just an anachronism, but a dangerously deceptive one.

Adams, then, prefaces his much more polemical and elaborate discussion of railroad “problems” by characterizing their origins as piecemeal and haphazard, as mixed up with the
archaic and atavistic. He aligns a set of socioeconomic signifiers—the British aristocracy, the Corn Laws, African-American slaves, white southerners, cotton agriculture—with a preference for the “dramatic fitness of things” over “fidelity to facts.” He thereby yokes the fumbling origins of railroad technology to a flawed aesthetic and epistemological regime, to an era when “Walter Scott himself was [. . .] a living author” (1). If Adams here establishes a link between outmoded and parochial social forms and antiquated modes of representation, it is noteworthy that he had focused his discussion in 1875 on technical shortcomings in “linking” itself. In “Of Some Railroad Accidents,” Adams attributes many of the casualties of railroad accidents to the phenomenon of “telescoping,” which occurs when railroad “cars are closed up in each other like the slides of a telescope, under the immense pressure of the instantaneous stopping of a train in rapid motion” (“Accidents I” 577). Adams calls this the “most frightful danger to which travel by rail is liable,” but points out that telescoping accidents have been almost eliminated by “the atmospheric train brake” and “the Miller platform and buffer.” Adams writes that

By the first the velocity of the whole train in its every part is placed directly and immediately under the control of its engineer; and by the last the cars of a train are practically converted into one continuous body, in which there are no separate or loosely connected parts to be crushed into each other or piled on top of each other.

Centralized control of “the whole train in its every part” and the technical unification of the elements of the train “into one continuous body” helps prevent accidents and mitigates the dangers of accidents that do occur. If clumsy early train passengers just couldn’t help stumbling into hazards, trains themselves were anarchic jumbles before the advent of the
pneumatic brake and Miller buffer—rather like the United States in the years before 1865, in which such absurdities as “negro” firemen could be seriously contemplated (and, “by necessity,” were employed) in South Carolina.

All of this—for my purposes, the 1875 Atlantic Monthly article just as much as the first part of the 1886 book—is prelude to “The Railroad Problem,” the main section of Railroads: Their Origin and Problems, which argues for “some healthy control” (189) of the railroad companies, for the purpose of securing “a reasonable an equable system charges for carriage, permitting an unchecked flow of travel and commerce, the continuation of which may with safety be calculated upon” (190). “The present competitive chaos,” writes Adams, “must be reduced into something like obedience to law. Yet this apparently can only be effected when the system in changed into one orderly, confederated whole” (189). Adams’s “chaos” is itself ambiguous inasmuch as it seems to signify both spatial fixity and ephemerality; it interferes with “unchecked flow[s],” yet is itself “an increasing scale of wild fluctuations” (189); for Adams, flux is both fluency and fluctuation, at once productive motion and destructive vacillation. Nor is it sufficient to say that Adams merely opposes controlled motion to uncontrolled motion. Indeed, while Adams attacks the “lawless independence” (192) of the individual railroads, he reserves some of his most scathing criticism for those like the Chicago and New York boards of trade and the populist Granger legislatures who attempted to intervene in railroad practices in the name of “temporary local advantages” (188) and by means of “mere abstract laws aimed at the inequalities which arise out of railroad competition” (131). The boards of trade in the East and the Grangers in the West were, if anything, more arbitrary and myopic in their attempts to regulate railroad rates than were the railroads themselves. Adams attributes this shortsightedness to, first, the purely local interests driving
these interventions, and second, the complete lack of knowledge of or interest in the specific technical and organizational character of railroad transportation on the part of the regulators. In fact, while Adams consistently ties outmoded and atavistic modes of thinking with everyday geographic parochialism, he also relentlessly associates both of these with a glib ignorance of the material character of locomotives, rolling stock, boilers, and the rail apparatus as a whole. Adams, then, is less concerned with opposing stasis to motion, or controlled motion to uncontrolled motion, than with the idea that the social problem of the railroad must be rethought with explicit and methodical reference to the technical nature of railroads themselves. Here, he has recourse again to the Tory leaders of early Victorian Britain. He points out that the Duke of Wellington “is reported to have said that in dealing with [railroads] it was above all else necessary to bear in mind the analogy of the king's highway” (82). However, dismissing this “analogy” as “characteristic both of the individual and the [English] race,” Adams argues, it was essentially a false one. In no respect did the railroad in reality resemble the highway, any more than the corporation which owned and operated it resembled the common carrier. The new system was not amenable to the same natural laws which regulated and controlled the operations of the old one, and the more the principles and rules of law which had grown out of the old system were applied to it, the worse the result became.

Adams is adamant that the false analogy of the King’s Highway overlooks that “the railroad system was a thing sui generis” (83). Consequently and fatally, like those defective narratives, “The old analogy suggested by the Duke of Wellington, as mischievous as it is false, still maintains a strong hold on the legislative mind and belittles a great question.” For Adams, old
stories still colonized consciousness in 1886, perhaps because consciousness had been
paralyzed by the unexpectedly rapid development of the railroads. It would take a new kind of
storyteller—implicitly Adams himself, an expert in the shocks and fluctuations of both the
railroad apparatus and the railroad organization—to bring about a more perfect union of the
mobile republic.

Adams, therefore, is just as interested in narratives and analogies as he is in freight rates
and automatic safety systems. Rather, for him they are essentially elements of the same
problem. In short, his concern is that that railroads be brought under some kind of control, but
also that such control be effected on the basis of analogies and narratives proper to the railroad
itself. Beginning with a dismissal of romantic literariness that foreshadows the kind of
language William Dean Howells and Mark Twain would later employ in defending realism,
Adams argues that an overly scrupulous regard for the dramatic fitness of things and shopworn
literary topoi literally blinds passengers and managers to the material nature of railroads.
Moreover, Adams consistently associates such archaisms with the local and merely local ways
of knowing the world; Negro chattel slavery and the Corn Laws were barriers to the
“unchecked flow” of traffic, and Adams’s own stories of the 15 September accident or the
explosion of the Best Friend’s boiler emphasize that railroads managed according such notions
would have their unambiguously material revenge on railroad subjects. Adams uses these
stories to argue that eccentric practices based on local metaphors alien to mass mobility and
designed to maintain the centrality of places could only hasten both technical catastrophe and
the eventual falling into eccentricity of these places themselves¹. The conjunction of the
literary, the technical, and the socioeconomic in Adams evinces a concern that, I argue,
constitutes an attractor to which much American writing in the subsequent years returned
again and again; it is a center of gravity about which any number of texts, textual genres, and literary movements orbited—even when those orbits were distant or eccentric. This study, accordingly, explores the struggle to produce new, more refined and fine-tuned, narratives during the first decades of mass mobility in America. It argues that what is usually called American realism is both a literary double and integral social element of an entire constellation of institutions, discourses, techniques, and machines that together remade Americans as mobile subjects in the years 1869-1929. I want to show that mass mobility—or what I will sometimes call mass passengerhood—deeply informed the structure and thematics of realist writing, and that realist writing saw itself in turn as offering narrative solutions to the contradictions of everyday life under the regime of mass mobility. More specifically, I intend to show that American realist writing had a complex, often contradictory relation with mass mobility: It was at once a mode of literary representation influenced by the reorganization of the human sensorium occasioned by the advent of mass passengerhood, a didactic genre for reforming and refining social and corporeal practices of mobility, and itself a material textual practice that struggled to find a place for itself within the proliferating textualities associated with the technical apparatuses of mass transportation.

When I speak here of mobility, I mean motion—but not mere movement. I do not mean the empirical fact of mechanized transportation. Nor do I only mean the kind of spatial evanescence of which de Tocqueville wrote in 1849, observing that the typical American “settles in a place, which he soon afterward leaves, to carry his changeable longings elsewhere” (622). In this study, “mobility” closely follows a definition proffered by Tim Cresswell:
First, when talking of human mobility, we are talking about mobility as a brute fact—something that is potentially observable, a thing in the world, an empirical reality. [. . .] Here mobility comes closest to pure motion and is at its most abstract. Second, there are ideas about mobility that are conveyed through a diverse array of representational strategies ranging from film to law, medicine to photography, literature to philosophy. These representations of mobility capture and make sense of it through the productions of meanings that are frequently ideological. [. . .] Third, mobility is practiced, it is experienced, it is embodied. Mobility is a way of being in the world. (3)

To Cresswell’s discussion I would add that mobility is not only corporeal and experiential, it is technosocial as well. It is tied up with the politics of the parliament of things. Creswell points out that “how we experience mobility and the ways we move are intimately connected to meanings given to mobility through representation” and that, likewise, “representations of mobility are based on ways in which mobility is practiced and embodied” (4). To this, I respond that even the brute fact of motion itself, its technical instantiation in history, bears a complicated relationship with textuality and perception. Here, I follow Nigel Thrift, who, following Raymond Williams in turn, defines mobility a “structure of feeling,” an aggregation of “new figurations of the self, new enunciative practices and new forms of ‘livedness’” (258). Thrift, now borrowing from the cyborg theory of Donna Haraway, maintains that mobility is a historically specific structure of feeling that registers “the difficulties associated with projects that divide the world into the human and the non-human” and emerges when people “live in an increasingly artificial, or more accurately, manufactured, environment” (260). Moreover,
mobility only comes into being in the late nineteenth century, when “increasingly ‘travel’ became a value in and for itself as speeds increased, another country with its own distinctive practices and culture” (267). Hence, mobility is materially and rhetorically tied to a world increasingly dominated by what geographer Ronald Horvath has called machine space, or “territory devoted primarily to the use of machines” (168). The inevitability of this process of spatial domination, in turn, suggests yet another aspect of mobility: its existence as the spatial modality of capitalism. In his magisterial study *The Limits of Capital*, David Harvey defines the specifically capitalist character of mobility as the abolition of “[p]hysical barriers to the movement of both commodities and money over space” (375). For Harvey, the development of the technosocial networks of mobility is at once precondition, result, and obstacle to the expansion of the capitalist mode of production:

> [C]apitalism seeks to overcome spatial barriers through the creation of physical infrastructures that are immobile in space and highly vulnerable to place-specific devaluation. [. . .] Value has to be immobilized in the land to an increasing degree, therefore, in order to achieve spatial integration and to eliminate spatial barriers to the circulation of capital. At some point or other, the value embodied in the procured space of the transport system becomes a barrier to be overcome. The preservation of particular values within the transport network means constrain to the further expansion of value in general. (379-380)

Both labor and capital must be mobile to realize their value; but the same means of transportation that make mobility possible can also eliminate spatial advantages of individual capitalists and lead to sudden devaluations of fixed capital. Mobility, then, always
paradoxically mixes ideas of material and cognitive freedom, autonomy, and agency with those of domination, menace, and enclosure by technē. Moreover, it perpetually seeks to find a way to resolve the stubborn contradictions between these poles.

American literary realism emerged as a “new enunciative practice” in an era in which the forces of capital were remaking not only the American social landscape, but also the physical landscape as such. Social upheaval was accompanied by new experiences of physical speed, telecommunications, and the mechanization of the urban grid. As the traditional ordering of movement through space based on animal and wind power gave way to such new spatial phenomena as the Pullman sleeper, the stock-exchange floor, and the traffic jam, space itself quickly became more mediated by text. Ticker tapes, circuit diagrams, subway maps, telephone books, user’s instructions for typewriters and phonographs, and cinematic intertitles were all new genres of writing that emerged simultaneously with American realism. Text not only represented space, but textuality took on a more crucial role in the process of knowing and using spaces. Discussing our own era, Thrift and Shaun French write,

For a long time, much of the human world has been on automatic, has expanded beyond the immediate influence of bodies and has made its way into machines. The expansion of humanity beyond bodies has taken place in two ways, as a result of the invention of writing and then print, and as a result of the invention of various machines; line-by-line instructions and rude mechanicals. “Software” and “hardware.” In the past, these two means of manipulating the world have often been held separate. But now what we are seeing is an age in which writing is able to take on many new mechanical aspects—what we are seeing coming into being, therefore, is an
age of software, but software so complex that it is beginning to take on
many of the features of an organism. But this is an organism with a passion
for inscription. (311)

I argue that American literary realism came into being coterminously with the birth of these
“new mechanical aspects” of writing, which Thrift and French explicitly tie to the rise of
systems of mass transportation. I contend that in the years between 1869 and 1929, textuality
was enmeshed with mobility, not only as reference and representation, but as production and
prosthesis. Herein, therefore, I examine the ways in which some middle-class authors of the
American Gilded Age and Progressive Era struggled to interpret the fluidity of new American
spaces. By examining their treatment of emergent technosocial systems of mobility, I argue
that for Mark Twain, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser, physical motion and the continual
remaking of the built environment enabled new kinds of subjectivity. Accordingly, such texts
as Mark Twain’s early book-length narratives, Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901), and
Theodore Dreiser’s 1925 novel *An American Tragedy* attempted to model ways of
understanding new American spatialities, while betraying a persistent anxiety about the power
of writing itself to render such spatialities transparent.

**The reformation of space**

Writing not only represented the remaking of American landscapes in the decades around
1900, it played a direct role in the remaking process itself. Reformers like Jacob Riis and Jane
Addams not only advocated for making the urban built environment more humane, but
implicitly drew parallels between the technical and cognitive aspects of authorship,
transportation and mobility, and the process of social reform. Passengerhood and
transportation appear as both metaphor and referent frequently appear in Addams’s writings—surprisingly so, considering her enduring and inevitable association with settlement houses\(^3\). For example, Adams explicitly ties mobility and the capacity to use transport systems to navigate Chicago’s cityscape to the development of democratic citizenship. In *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, she writes of “the curious isolation of many [...] immigrants,” including an Italian woman who refuses to believe that roses, which she associates with her European youth, could have been grown in the United States. Having lived six years in Chicago, according to Addams, the woman has yet failed to realize that she “had lived within ten blocks of a florist’s window [and] she had not been more than a five-cent car ride away from the public parks; but she had never dreamed of faring forth for herself, and no one had taken her. Her conception of America had been the untidy street in which she lived and had made her long struggle to adapt herself to American ways” (76). The isolation of the immigrant here is double: She does not know how close she is to her beloved roses, and she does not know that the streetcar is a means to overcome the distance that does intervene between them. Addams here implies that passengerhood is a way of knowing the world; but first, the world itself must be understood as a machine space, as overwritten by the text of technosocial networks. The underdeveloped mobility of Italian woman, then is implicitly contrasted with the German immigrants in rural Illinois whom her father had canvassed for subscriptions to “stock in the Northwestern Railroad, which was the first to penetrate the county and to make a connection with the Great Lakes at Chicago” (29). She writes,

> Many of the Pennsylvania German farmers doubted the value of “the whole new-fangled business,” and had no use for any railroad, much less for one in which they were asked to risk their hard-earned savings. My father told
of his despair in one farmer’s community dominated by such prejudice
which did not in the least give way under his argument, but finally melted
under the enthusiasm of a high-spirited German matron who took a share to
be paid for out of “butter and egg money.”

This narrative has, for Addams, the effect of a fable illustrating the persistent tension between
spatial fixity and flux in American life in the nineteenth century. The occasion of the tale is
John H. Addams’s return to the area to address a meeting of “old settlers” of the county, and as
he tells the story of the “German matron,” an “old woman’s piping voice in the audience called
out ‘I’m here to-day, Mr. Addams, and I’d do it again if you asked me.’” The moment of the
old woman’s reaffirmation of her embrace of the railroad is, itself, epiphanic for Jane Addams,
for it suggests an inseverable link between democratic public-spiritedness and an awareness of
the condition of mobility. The old German woman, breaking with the community’s resistance
to the railroad, declares her allegiance to the nation as figured by both a “connection” to
Chicago and the railroad’s “penetration” of Stephenson County. Whether she knows it or not,
the authentic American subject, Addams implies, is always-already a railroad subject; her true
homeland is machine space. Nor is this merely a national community imagined as constituted
by the technosocial, for it is everywhere conditioned by the material dialectic of connection
and penetration, of a built environment that is inherently ephemeral.

Middle-class (and “Anglo-Saxon”) passengers who do know how to use the transport
grid, however, may still need Addams’s guidance in the significance of mobility; Addams is
often at pains to show how the condition of mobility makes the larger world available to
middle-class Americans, and hence, how it brings home to them their democratic
responsibilities. In Democracy and Social Ethics, Addams asks her readers to imagine “a row
of people seated in a moving street-car, into which darts a boy of eight, calling out the details of the last murder, in the hope of selling an evening newspaper” (168). Addams contrasts the responses of the various passengers to the paper-selling boy: A middle-class man “buys a paper from him with no sense of moral shock [and] may even be a trifle complacent that he has helped along the little fellow, who is making his way in the world,” while a middle-class woman “make[s] up her mind [. . .] to redouble her efforts for various newsboys’ schools and homes, that this poor child may have better teaching, and perhaps a chance at manual training.” Finally, Addams conjures the image of a “workingman trained in trades-unions methods” who knows very well that he can do nothing in the way of ameliorating the lot of this particular boy; that his only possible chance is to agitate for proper child labor laws; to regulate, and if possible prohibit, street-vending by children, in order that the child of the poorest may have his school time secured to him, and may have at least his short chance for growth.

Here, Addams at first paints the streetcar as a location of alienation and anomie. No middle-class passenger, sympathy and good intentions notwithstanding, can see why the young vendor’s plight can be remedied by collective action alone; on the other hand, only the laborer, “because of [the] feebleness in all but numbers” of the proletariat, can perceive the need go beyond individual philanthropy toward “[b]oth public agitation and a social appeal to the conscience of the community” (169). Yet, Addams’s appeal in defense of labor organizing is itself directed toward middle-class readers, and it asks them to rethink their own role as passenger, to see the vendor through the eyes of the labor organizer, who, despite his differences with his fellow passengers, has passengerhood itself in common with them. Here,
Addams’s text is both supplement and double to the streetcar scene it narrates; it invites its readers to think reflexively about the social by seeing themselves in the scene of passengerhood, while also modeling a mode of passengerial reading of public space.

The idea of the built environment as an epistemological prosthesis, as a apparatus for seeing, informs much of Addams’s thinking about the settlement house itself. For instance, in *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, Addams narrates the development of the Hull-House Labor Museum, which she imagines as “build[ing] a bridge between European and American experiences in such wise as to give them both more meaning and a sense of relation” (155).

Echoing the rhetoric of the power of the streetcar to bring together the immigrant and the Anglo-Saxon, the city laborer and the “old settler,” she writes,

> [T]he power to see life as a whole is more needed in the immigrant quarter of a large city than anywhere else, and that the lack of this power is the most fruitful source of misunderstanding between European immigrants and their children, as it is between them and their American neighbors; and why should that chasm between fathers and sons, yawning at the feet of each generation, be made so unnecessarily cruel and impassable to these bewildered immigrants? (155-156)

The “power” to perceive life—life characterized both by the ephemerality of institutions and continual literal motion—as a unity, is to be encouraged by building bridges over chasms. Building bridges, however, is accomplished by building a museum:

> We found in the immediate neighborhood, at least four varieties of [. . .] methods of spinning and three distinct variations of the same spindle in connection with wheels. It was possible to put these seven into historic
sequence and order and to connect the whole with the present method of factory spinning. The same thing was done for weaving, and on every Saturday evening a little exhibit was made of these various forms of labor in the textile industry. Within one room a Syrian woman, a Greek, an Italian a Russian, and an Irishwoman enabled even the most casual observer to see that there is no break in orderly evolution if we look at history from the industrial standpoint; that industry develops similarly and peacefully year by year among the workers of each nation, heedless of differences in language, religion, and political experiences. (156-157)

The purpose of this museum, then, is, first, to reveal to the immigrant that her own apparent isolation is an illusion produced by underdeveloped technosocial competences, and second, to construct a progressive world-historical narrative by suppressing geographic difference. Addams proposes to do this by arranging a space in which the living museum exhibits are also spectators. Given Addams’s unstinting and sincere emphasis on enhancing the agency of the marginalized, then, it is remarkable that she wants so eagerly to instruct them is the almost Spencerian doctrine of “industry [developing] year by year among the workers of each nation, heedless of differences in language, religion, and political experiences.” Indeed, in Addams’s account, the Hull-House Labor Museum seems to have begun with the goal of celebrating the variety of the traditional, but ended up, in its very material form, instructing its audience in something like technocratic managerialism, in “history from the industrial standpoint.” It provides lessons in spectatorship as well as labor history, and it converts the material craft work of immigrant women into an apprenticeship in museum curation. Moreover, inasmuch as this is a paradoxically consumerist form of managerialism, both the material form and
Addams’s rhetoric of the Hull-House Labor Museum uncannily adumbrate the advent of the self-service supermarket. Indeed, when Clarence Saunders patented his “Self Serving Store” in 1916, he explicitly described it as both a means for bringing his customers into direct contact with his goods as industrial commodities and a kind of vision machine: “Another purpose [of the self-service layout is] to dispense with the employment of many clerks who are usually engaged to wait upon the customers; and to insure that the customers become acquainted with the variety of lines of goods in the store and with the various items in the several lines” (Saunders). Just as the tropes of passengerhood and the built environment as vision machine bring together the immigrant and the Anglo-Saxon for Addams, self-service supermarkets, for Saunders, eliminate the hierarchy of shopper and shopkeeper by displacing the specialized knowledge of goods onto the material form of the store, which is specifically designed to allow customers to select their own purchases “while making a circuitous path through the store [. . .] without confusion, and in an expeditious manner.” Here, the notion of “circuitousness” is as double-valenced as that of “flow” had been for Adams. In this case, however, both meanings are positive, as the notion of the circuit at once implies elaborate and aimless, and directed and productive, motion, as in the passage of current through a circuit. The space of the supermarket, in other words, is both maximum and minimum: Maximum vision for minimum effort (see fig. 1). Saunders’s patent application, along with the accompanying drawings, make the space of shopping a text to be read and an apparatus for producing a new spatial literacies—literacies in which, as in the Hull House Labor Museum, “history from the industrial standpoint” is encoded directly in the form of the text. But while something like passengerial citizenship is the implicit goal of the Labor Museum (and of Hull House as a whole), the circuitous path of self-serve supermarket leads always and only to the
The self-service supermarket, like Hull-House, is many texts with one meaning, but the leveling work it performs is that of commodity exchange, not democracy.

The axis of text, space, and mobility evoked by Addams and Saunders appears again and again as a way of thinking about the social in the years around 1900. One of the most audacious schemes for redesigning the built environment during the era was laid out in Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett’s *Plan of Chicago*, a document that not only reimagined Chicago’s cityscape as a mechanism for the production of “circulation,” but avidly advocated for “circulation” as a means both for the democratization of city life and for the edification and elevation of the interior lives of individual citizens. Chicago, write Burnham and Bennett, is situated between a vast prairie and an enormous lake, both of which are “immeasurable to the senses” and “give the scale” to the city (79). “Elsewhere, indeed,” they write, “man and his works may be taken as the measure; but here the city appears as that portion of illimitable space now occupied by a population capable of infinite expansion” (80). “Natural scenery,” they write elsewhere, “furnishes the contrasting element to the artificiality of the city” (53). They echo Emerson when they argue that “[h]e who habitually comes in close contact with nature develops saner methods of thought than can be the case when one is habitually shut up within the walls of a city.” Yet into this Emersonian rhetoric of the natural American sublime, however, they immediately insert the language of planning and artifacticity:

> Whatever may be the forms which the treatment of the city shall take, therefore, the effects must of necessity be obtained by repetition of the unit. If the characteristics set forth suggest monotony, nevertheless such are the limitations which nature has imposed [. . .]. On the other hand, the opportunity now exists to create out of these very conditions a city which
shall grow into both convenience and order, and shall possess all the means of making its citizens prosperous and contented.

It is in the grouping of buildings united by a common purpose [. . .] that one must find an adequate method of treatment; or again in far-stretching lines of lagoons inviting the multitudes to seek recreation along the endless miles of water front; or in broad avenues where the vista seemingly terminates with a tower by day, or in the converging lines of lights by night, in each case the mind recognizing that there is still space beyond. Always there must be the feeling of those broad surfaces of water reflecting the clouds of heaven; always the sense of breadth and freedom which are the very spirit of the prairies. (80)

Here, Burnham and Bennett imply that the limitlessness of the prairies and Lake are, paradoxically enough, “limitations which nature has imposed.” Moreover, it is the most artificial of architectural artifacts—“repetition of the unit,” manmade lagoons, straight and long avenues—that reveal the natural “spirit of the prairies to Chicago’s citizens. Burnham and Bennett imagine the remade Chicago much as Addams images the settlement house—as a vision apparatus, as a device that distances and brings closer at once, simultaneously projector and screen for the sublime image. They continue:

At no period in its history has the city looked far enough ahead. [. . .] The mind of man, at least as expressed in works he actually undertakes, finds itself unable to rise to the full comprehension of the needs of a city growing at the rate now assured for Chicago. Therefore, no one should hesitate to commit himself to the largest and most comprehensive
undertaking; because before any particular plan can be carried out, a still larger conception will begin to dawn, and even greater necessities will develop.

Burnham and Bennett now suggest that not only should Chicago be a machine for producing sublime, edifying visions, but that this very plan is itself already, before being put into practice, just such a vision. The city is to be what The Plan of Chicago already is—an optical device for seeing beyond the cramped present.

If the text is a means for seeing the future, it follows that the city itself should be as much like a text as possible. The idea of the “repetition of the unit” already suggests something like alphabeticity, a texture made up of a limited number of perpetually interchangeable modules. Burnham and Bennett, however, are even more concerned with making the physical negotiation of space as frictionless as vision as they are with the aesthetics of vision itself. They write,

The proposed street plan of Chicago is based on a system of circuits and radials. This is also true of the railroad and traction systems. [. . .] [T]he heart of Chicago is surrounded by a circuit of railways [following] Michigan Avenue, Canal Street, Sixteenth Street, and Kinzie Street. Following the same lines, a subway circuit may be constructed for handling freight, and another for passengers, the latter running, however, on Twelfth and Washington. To this circuit would be tangent three others enclosing areas increasing in size [. . .]. By means of these circuits a complete system of distribution of passengers and freight may be secured. To the inner circuit will relate the various services of distribution of the elements of life,
produce, and commodities for manufacture; and on it should be placed the
freight substations, the markets for general produce, the main post-office,
and postal substations. The various services for water, sewers, power,
television, and telegraph also may be schemed on the inner circuit as a
basis. (68)

Here, no less than the most rigorous scientific manager, Burnham and Bennett ruthlessly
subject human passengers to the same spatial logic as freight and even sewage. Moreover,
when transportation of freight is strictly rationalized, it begins to attain the near-inmateriality
of the postal parcel, which, after all, has now already been enchained in the machine processes
of typewriter, the Linotype machine, and offset lithography. In fact, the logic of the “circuit”
subsumes the movement of these material things under the metaphor of the immaterial motion
of electric currents and telephone and telegraph signals. This ontological leveling, both
presupposed and produced by the transportational system, follows much the same pattern as
the cultural leveling already proposed by Jane Addams and later appropriated by Clarence
Saunders. For Adams, Saunders, and Burnham and Bennett, mobility is agency, liberation,
uplift; yet it requires an unceasing and total remaking of everyday practice according to the
requirements of machine space. All of this, perversely, both echoes and challenges the kind of
argument made by John Ruskin about industrialized transport around half a century earlier in
*The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. In a screed against rail travel, Ruskin had written that

[t]he whole system of railroad travelling is addressed to people who, being
in a hurry, are therefore, for the time being miserable. [. . .] The railroad is
in all its relations a matter of earnest business, to be got through as soon as
possible. It transmutes a man from a traveller into a living parcel. For the
time he has parted with the nobler characteristics of his humanity for the sake of a planetary power of locomotion. Do not ask him to admire anything. [...] Carry him safely, dismiss him soon: he will thank you for nothing else. [...] There never was more flagrant nor impertinent folly than the smallest portion of ornament in anything concerned with railroads or near them. Keep them out of the way, take them through the ugliest country you can find, confess them the miserable things they are, and spend nothing upon them but for safety and speed. (121)

Ruskin here famously accused industrialized transport of transforming travelers into parcels and thereby separating them from “the nobler characteristics of [their] humanity for the sake of a planetary power of locomotion.” And Adams, Saunders, and Burnham and Bennett would have agreed: Think of the passenger, the shopper, the citizen, as a circulating body; by all means eliminate the clutter and excess of ornament; being in a hurry is what it means to be modern. But for these Americans of the Progressive Era, this transformation was ennobling. Indeed, the very system that ontologically elides the difference between passenger and parcel is the technosocial foundation for the emergence of liberal agency, because the entrainment of the passenger in the system of circuits allows her to, as it were, sort herself out, to find her own path, to plan a unique journey through space. To be sure, this kind of self-production is unambiguously just that—production. Because she must keep moving, for example, the shopper in Saunders’s supermarkets is obliged by the technical form of the store to shop, even if she buys nothing. Consequently, the difference between production and consumption is confounded when shopping is always a labor of reading and no longer simply socializing or loitering. There are no Bartlebys in a Piggly Wiggly.
What interests me here, though, is less the thorny problem of reconciling discipline and autonomy in spaces of mobility than that of the formal and generic schisms that traverse these texts themselves. *The Plan of Chicago*, for example, announces itself as a vision of a vision, as a model for the way the proposed city plan will elevate and purify the moral vantage of Chicago’s citizens. The technical base of the aesthetic superstructure must be largely self-effacing to do its work; for Burnham and Bennett, indeed, this is the whole point of promoting “circulation.” However, if in the Chicago of the future, technical rationality is to be the handmaiden of both public harmony and private edification, in the book *The Plan of Chicago*, these elements are merely arranged serially on the printed page. They jostle each other. In other words, the automatic sorting and distributing performed by the transportation system outlined in the book has no double in the book itself. *The Plan of Chicago* calls for unity and order, but is itself rhetorically, generically, and materially multiple. It is both a “plan” and a portable museum that lays bare the materiality of the urban planning process. It is at once a theatrical spectacle and a manual of stagecraft. And yet, we know that this textual heterogeneity did not undermine the persuasiveness of the *Plan*. Arguably, this is because it did not only advocate rhetorically for a certain kind of city planning; nor did it merely serve as a training manual for living in the kind of city it proposes; rather, it performed both of these functions and also interpellated its audience as a certain kind of readers. That is, the book thinks of city spaces as texts to be read, but also implicitly mandates a kind of reading practice that adumbrates the urban mobility it explicitly calls for. The text presupposes a reader who will cognitively assemble the new Chicago from the collection of print genres, graphic modes, and rhetorical registers contained by the *Plan*. The reader is to perform the same kind of labor with the book as the transportation network does in the book. I call *The Plan of Chicago* a
representative text of mobility, then, not just because it represents the condition of technosocial mobility, but because it also seems to train its readers in epistemological practices directly related to the mobile practices it advocates.

**Fictions of passengerhood**

Of all the figures we can associate with American realism, surely Henry James is the one who most resisted, or at least resented, the techniques and function of mobility. James, by his own account of himself, was a veritable anti-passenger. And yet, writing as a British subject in 1907, James produced one of the most intriguing examples of the writing of American passengerhood. In *The American Scene* James narrates his return to the environs of New York City from the Midwest; from his rail carriage, James sees the Hudson River shine [. . .] as a great romantic stream, such as could throw not a little of its glamour, for the mood of that particular hour, over the city at its mouth. I had not even known, in my untravelled state, that we were to strike it on our way from Chicago, so that it represented [. . .] so much beauty thrown in, so much benefit beyond the bargain—the so hard bargain, for the traveller of the American railway-journey, at its best. That ordeal was in any case at its best here, and the perpetually interesting river kept its course, by my right elbow with such splendid consistency that, as I recall the impression I repent a little of having just now reflected with acrimony on the cost of the obtrusion of track and stations to the Riverside view. One must of course choose between dispensing with the ugly presence and enjoying the scenery by the aid of the same—which but means, really, that to use the train at all had been to put one’s self, for any proper justice to the scenery, in a false
position. That, however, takes us too far back, and one can only save one’s dignity by laying all such blames on our detestable age. [...] A possible commerce, on the other hand, with one’s time—which is always also the time of so many other busy people—has long since made mince-meat of the rights of contemplation; rights as reduced, in the United States, to-day, and by quite the same argument, as those of the noble savage whom we have banished to his narrowing reservation. (144)

Here, James seems to stand in full opposition to those who implicitly or explicitly argued that there was no contradiction between the “ugly presence” of the transportation network and an unobstructed “enjoyment” of spectatorship. James admits that the starkly industrial railroad apparatus both produces and obscures the sublime vision of the Hudson, but he laments that it must be so, suggesting that this kind of vision is inferior—“false”—in comparison to some more presumably authentic vista of the River—perhaps one from a rivergoing steamboat, which, he writes has “for the true raffiné, [a] particular note of romance.” James’s view contrasts directly with those like Adams, Saunders, and Burnham and Bennett for whom the presence of technoscientific mediation is, if anything, a guarantor of a true relation between spectator and spectacle because machine-mediation displaces older spatial conventions that keep people in their places and obstruct the advance of democracy. Yet even James seems ambivalent about the “ugliness” of the transportation infrastructure, for if he implies here that the Pennsylvania Railroad tracks along the Hudson both produce and mar a vantage of the River, he elsewhere quite rapturously describes visions of this very same network from vantages physically impossible without the intervention of the machine system.
Earlier in the book, James narrates his circumnavigation of Manhattan Island from Jersey City to Brooklyn via the Pennsylvania Railroad “car float,” a system of barges that transported rail cars across New York Harbor:

I had arrived at one of the transpontine stations of the Pennsylvania Railroad; the question was of proceeding to Boston, for the occasion, without pushing through [New York] [. . .] and the easy and agreeable attainment of this great advantage was to embark on one of the mightiest (as appeared to me) of train-bearing barges and, descending the western waters, pass round the bottom of the city and remount the other current to Harlem; all without “losing touch” of the Pullman that had brought me from Washington. This absence of the need of losing touch, this breadth of effect, as to the whole process, involved in the prompt floating of the huge concatenated cars not only without arrest or confusion, but as for positive prodigal beguilement of the artless traveler, had doubtless much to say to the ensuing state of mind the happily-excited and amused view of the great face of New York. The extent, the ease, the energy, the quantity and number, all notes scattered about as if [. . .] nature and science were joyously romping together, might have been taking on again, for their symbol, some collective presence of great circling and plunging, hovering and perching sea-birds, white-winged images of the spirit, of the restless freedom of the Bay. (70-71)

If the Hudson River passage sounds, however ambivalently, like something from Ruskin, in this passage James seems almost Whitmanesque in his (again, ambivalent) technophilia. In the
first passage, the railroad infrastructure interrupts the pristine view of the Hudson River, and even if James admits it also makes such a view possible, he implies this interruption spoils what would otherwise be an organic encounter with the majesty of the landscape. It makes “mince-meat of the rights of contemplation”; it cuts into experience from the outside, and because it is out of place in the landscape, it also displaces and fragments the spectator’s consciousness. By contrast, a river steamer may be artificial, may even be “ugly,” but it is at home on the Hudson and never reminds the spectator of some other place or effaces the uniqueness of places. Here, however, the ubiquity of the rail network, its capacity to subsume even fluvial transport, is precisely what produces a sense of continuity, an “absence of the need of losing touch,” which, in turn, leads to “beguilement,” or the very enjoyment that he later says is flawed by its having been mediated by the rail infrastructure. Indeed, James’s beguilement by the fact of not losing touch was practically a literary commonplace in 1907. Just four years earlier in *The Pit* Frank Norris provided his heroine Laura Dearborn with a sublime kaleidoscope of urban life as seen from a speeding streetcar: Laura experiences an epiphany of “tremendous” life mediated by technology as “[a]ll around, on every side, in every direction the vast machinery of Commonwealth clashed and thundered from dawn to dark and from dark till dawn.” Even earlier, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), William Dean Howells makes the elevated trains of New York a means by which Basil March and his wife Isabel come to know the city; seeing the urban landscape from the train, write Howells, Basil feels himself a part of it all “no matter what whimsical, or alien, or critical attitude he took” (276); he feels as if “[a] sense of the striving and the suffering deeply possessed him, and this grew the more intense as he gained some knowledge of the forces at work—forces of pity, of destruction, of perdition, of salvation (276-277). Like these characters in Norris and Howells,
James finds the experience of passengerhood to be, itself, a realist way of seeing the city, somehow both directly connected to it yet making a space for “beguilement.” What is even more “realist” about James’s take on rail travel, however, is that both critical and celebratory narratives of passengerhood stand side-by-side. James registers the shock, the discomfort, the disorientation of mobility while nevertheless presenting himself, even in middle age, as an eager apprentice in passengerhood. Only together do these two passages from *The American Scene* demonstrate the real problem of mobility and its relation to literary realism. Together they reveal both an embrace of new ways of seeing occasioned by transportation technology—and specifically by the networks of transportation that putatively “seamlessly” integrated liberal subjectivity and machine space—and a stubborn skepticism about such networks, not just as spiritual affronts to the humanistic subject, but as materially dangerous, chaotic, and unknowable.

If the most celebrated American realist could be said to have embraced mobility grudgingly at best, it might still be said that American realism and the passengerhood narrative had their birth at the same moment, namely with Howells’s first novel, *Their Wedding Journey*, published in 1872. This fiction, in contrast to Howells’s earlier European travel narratives, continually emphasizes both its Americanness and the centrality in America of spaces of travel. In the novel, the newly-wed Marches take a journey from Boston to Niagara Falls by way of New York City. At Boston’s South Station, Basil and Isabel observe passengers constantly coming and going, and in this welter of movement, “they formed many cordial friendships and bitter enmities upon the ground of personal appearance, or particulars of dress, with people whom they saw for half a minute upon an average” (11). An “old gentleman with vigorously upright iron gray hair, who sat fronting them and reading all the
evening papers” and “a young man who hurled himself through the door, bought a ticket with
terrific precipitation, burst out again and then ran down a departing train before it got out of
the station”—Basil and Isabel struggle to imagine these and other passengers as if they were
their nearest neighbors, constructing biographies and forming moral evaluations of them.
Howells here and everywhere gently satirizes the kind of ambivalences James may have had
about passengerhood, comically making Isabel in particular seem as provincial as those she
herself judges as gauche and rude. In fact, when Howells writes that, as the crowd increases in
the station, Basil and Isabel “became once again mere observers of their kind, more or less
critical in temper, until the crowd grew so that individual traits were merged in the character of
multitude” (14-15), he could almost be satirizing—a quarter century avant la lettre—James’s
attitude toward public transportation in The American Scene. What James writes of the various
ethnic “types” he encounters in New York could just as well have been the Marches’s reaction
to the regional and class types they see at South Station: “The [electric streetcar], again and
again, is a foreign carful; a row of faces, up and down, testifying without exception, to
alienism unmistakable, alienism undisguised and unashamed” (122). Social homogeneity is the
veritable condition of the passenger, suggests James, and yet this also means that

The great fact about [James’s] companions was that, foreign as they
might be, newly inducted as they might be, they were at home, really more
at home, at the end of their few weeks or months or their year or two, than
they had ever in their lives been before; and that he was at home too, quite
with the same intensity: and yet that it was this very equality of condition
that [. . .] made the whole medium so strange.
A carful of strangers feeling at home precisely because they are all together on the streetcar, because they are all always-already passengers, evoking a sense of alienation in James—one that he nonetheless writes makes him feel at home, which make the very condition on passengerhood both comforting and strange. This, too, is the sentiment felt by Basil and Isabel March at South Station, where they were already as completely cut off from local associations and sympathies as if they were a thousand miles and many months away from Boston. They enjoyed the lonely flaring of the gas jets as a gust of wind drew through the station; they shared the gloom and isolation of a man who took a seat in the darkest corner of the room, and sat there with folded arms, the genius of absence. In the patronizing spirit of travellers in a foreign country they noted and approved the vases of cut-flowers in the booth of the lady who checked packages, and the pots of ivy in her windows. (12)

A citizen in the republic of passengers must not only sympathize with the “genius of absence,” he must, in spite of himself, identify with it; indeed, doing so is a product of having been “cut off from local associations and sympathies” in the railway station. The—in this case edifying—state of being cut off from local associations, however, is both a material condition and a cognitive competence. It is neither a direct result of the mere fact of the rail network, nor does it follow immediately from the discursive idea of the railway. Moreover, solidarity among passengers is not a straightforward matter of affective identification. The rail station is profoundly unfamiliar for Basil and Isabel; it is specifically not an “imagined” extension of the local community. Observing “an acquaintance of the ticket-seller” visiting his friend at work, Basil remarks, “[T]his is very strange. I always felt as if these men had no private life, no
friendships like the rest of us. On duty they seem so like sovereigns, set apart from mankind, and above us all, that it’s quite incredible they should have the common personal relations.”

Basil seems rather disappointed to discover that the ticket agent passes the time with his “private” friend; his condition of “sovereignty” may set him apart from mankind, but in a railroad station that seems like an enviable circumstance, and it’s the intrusion of familiarity itself here that is “strange” and discomforting. But passengerhood is not mere affective estrangement, either. Like James, but without James’s consternation or resistance, Basil and Isabel begin to find themselves at home in the spaces of the railway—oddly almost as much because of the technical character of the as in spite of it.

The streetcar, the car float, the urban rail station: all paces at once strange and familiar, at once marked by both an interruption of experience and by a continuity and interconnectedness of experience. These are what Marc Augé calls “non-paces,” places in which “thousands of individual itineraries” meet, and in which these paths encounter

the uncertain charm of the waste lands, the yards and building sites, the station platforms and waiting rooms where travellers break step, of all the chance meeting places where fugitive feelings occur of the possibility of continuing adventure, the feeling that all there is to do is to “see what happens.”

Augé’s non-paces are paradoxical sites of waiting and hurrying. Moreover, they defy traditional premodern hierarchical notions of space like those of the distinctions between city and country, castle and village, sanctuary and nave. They, however, are not simply points in abstract space; rather, they give direct material substance to Taylorist and Fordist mathematical ideas of space, in the process producing new—often contradictory and
heterogeneous—technosocial practices that escape and subvert the rationalist principles that
gave birth to them. In this respect, it is helpful here to remember John Kasson’s discussion of
antebellum representational practices in *Rudeness and Civility*. Writing of “the problem of
reading the city” in America during the decades just before the Civil War, Kasson examines
“[t]wo primary strategies” of knowing urban spaces: “the bird’s-eye view and what might be
called the mole’s-eye view—the splendid urban panorama and the searching urban
exploration,” a literary genre that includes Melville’s “Bartleby” and Poe’s “The Man of the
Crowd” (72-73) Bird’s-eyes views were a genre of illustration, a hybrid of map and landscape
painting, that, according to Kasson sought to “rise above disparate surfaces of the city, either
literally or imaginatively, in order to read it as a coherent structure, its various parts
subordinated to the whole” (73). “Mole’s-eye views,” in contrast, were often sensationalistic
and lurid fictions and journalistic essays that “presented the city primarily from the shadowy
depths to emphasize its degradation and chaos” (74). The bird’s-eye view was a map of a city
as a legible whole; the sensationalistic fiction or exposé was a guided tour of an unreadable
labyrinth. Arguably, however, the advent of the non-place itself occasions a blurring of these
two representational modes. In the years between 1869 and 1929 these perspectives become
entangled; the constructed technical whole becomes too extensive and complex to be known
all at once, while it becomes increasingly difficult to navigate interior spaces without the
mediation of cartographic and diagrammatic texts. Cartographic views begin to fragment,
proliferate, and compete; on the other hand, practices of everyday life becomes more and more
characterized by the need to know about distant spaces and the technical means to reach them.
Non-places are meant to be read from the perspective of the bird’s-eye view, but we
nonetheless keep encountering derailments, delays, lost luggage, traffic jams—we must,
therefore, keep constructing new mole’s-eye views. These narratives of passengerhood both supplement and critique the celebratory stories of the bird’s-eye view. They teach us how to live in non-spaces; they constantly register the limits imposed on us by non-spaces.

Basil and Isabel March learn to remake themselves as middle-class subjects in South Station. On one hand, they find their class differences partially effaced by the way passengerhood makes them, like passengers of all classes, mere parcels to be moved across the country. Yet this very condition, or rather their consciousness of it, is the scaffold upon which a new, reformed, middle-class identity is constructed. Even Henry James seems to concede something new and enlightening about “absence of the need of losing touch,” and for Howells, it is precisely the degree to which this novel and new kind of continuity is threatened that the new mode of middle-class subjectivity is threatened. Howells’s narrator warns of “the many dangers” that face the speeding rail traveler:

The draw-bridges that gape upon the way, the trains that stand smoking and steaming on the track, the rail that has borne the wear so long that it must soon snap under it, the deep cut where the overhanging mass of rock trembles to its fall, the obstruction that a pitiless malice may have placed in your path, —you think of these after the journey is done but they seldom haunt your fancy while it lasts. The knowledge of your helplessness in any circumstances is so perfect that it begets a sense of irresponsibility, almost of security; and as you drowse upon the pallet of the sleeping car, and feel yourself hurled forward through the obscurity, you are almost thankful that you can do nothing, for it is upon this condition only that you can endure it [. . .]. (18-19)
Howells may tell us that all these potential catastrophes “seldom haunt [the] fancy” of the rail passenger, but this stipulation cannot keep them from haunting imagination of the novel itself—or ours. The narrator has already shown us passengers rushing to “be off to some place that lay not only in the distance, but also in the future—to which no line of road carries you with absolute certainty across an interval of time full of every imaginable chance and influence” and tells us that this scene is “not a particularly sane spectacle” (15), implicitly equating that which is beyond the railroad’s control with what is not represented by the novel itself. The possibility of the broken rail or missed signal is always there to threaten the frictionless world of non-spaces. And yet the novel consistently good-naturedly lampoons those like Isabel March who worry too much about such questions. The novel constantly asks us to disregard the very dangers that it evokes. Returning from Canada by rail at the end of the novel, “Basil's life became a struggle to construct a meal from the fragmentary opportunities of twenty different stations where they stopped five minutes for refreshments” (284). This improvised gustatory mobile practice seems to comment on the ambivalent view Their Wedding Journey takes of mobility; mobility, the condition of an “absence of the need of losing touch,” subsists somehow both in technosocial networks of transportation and in the passenger himself, in the way he improvises his travel practices. It is as if the fluidity and efficiency of mobile being, which is supposed to be inculcated in the subject by the encounter with the transportation system, must nonetheless already be available as cognitive habit for the passenger in order for mobility to work at all.

Written circuits

The March 1897 issue of Godey’s Magazine included the following editorial gloss on the article “Standard Time and Time-Tables,” written by the pseudonymous Juncus:
Few indeed are they who really know how to correctly read a railroad time-table; and those who have been literally “left,” because they failed to note the marks on their time-tables, are not a small portion of the American community. […] Modern railroad management has become almost an exact science—if one may use this term for lack of a better—in which no allowances are made for assumptions and guess-work of any kind. The time-table is a part of this exact system, and is made to correspond in every detail with the schedule of the train service. Intelligent study of one’s time tables will be found a very useful part of the traveller’s education. It is never safe to take it for granted that your time-table gives you a privilege of latitude in your interpretation of its contents. It always means just what it says—no more, no less. (320)

This editorial note represents the railroad timetable as both a perfect map and a perfectly functioning technical element of the railway system. The timetable is a necessary and sufficient textualization of the railroad; because the timetable obviates “guess-work” and “assumptions,” the *Godey’s* editors suggest that discontinuities and errors in rail travel are always the fault of the traveler: “Every little symbol, each single letter, no matter how small, and even the variations in the styles of types used in printing a time-table mean something definite, which, unnoted by the traveller may lead to trouble and annoyance, for which none but himself is to blame.” Yet this screed against unobservant travelers is itself rich in ambiguities and contradictions. Indeed, its claim that timetables transparently mean exactly what they say directly contradicts the article to which the editor’s comments refer; in fact, Juncus himself writes, “The lack of knowledge about time-tables is partly the fault of their
diversity. It is necessary to use arbitrary signs in order to get the required information into little space; but unfortunately, the abbreviations and signs are not given uniform meanings by all railroads” (277). For Juncus, moreover, the proliferation of different graphic representations of the rail systems results from the piecemeal, hence arbitrary, adoption of the railroads of Standard Time, a convention he writes was “invented solely for the benefit of the railroads.” In essence, suggests Juncus, problems with reading timetables arise because the railroads themselves have failed to conform both their transportational and textual practices to the “theoretical map” of standard time (279). While the Godey’s editors blame delays and missed trains on too much “latitude” in passenger’s reading practices, Juncus attributes being “left” to the writing practices of the railroads themselves.

To an extent, however, the Godey’s editors and Juncus are not at odds: Reliable mobile practices must also be reliable literate practices. Mobility should be directed by texts, which themselves must take their character from the “exact science” of industrialized transportation. Both of these texts, one commenting on the other even as both comment on timetables, presuppose the technical unity and completeness of the rail system. Likewise, both texts, in asserting the authority of the timetable, tautologically authorize themselves as guides to understanding how timetables work. In establishing the timetable as the only legitimate means for negotiating passengerhood, they thereby ally themselves as well to mobile practices and announce themselves as part of the textual apparatus of mobility. What remains obscure is how exactly these texts imagine their relationship to their own readers and to the timetable itself. The editorial commentary, for example, ambiguously addresses both the many who cannot correctly read timetables and the mobile élite who can. It seems to scold its readers while simultaneously inviting them to join in the scolding. Moreover, its implicit gesture of alliance
with timetables undermines its explicit claim for their representational completeness. It asserts that the rail timetable is self-interpreting and unambiguous, yet it refers to another text that explicitly critiques the plurality of graphic schemes used by different railroads. By presuming to intervene in the material relationship of timetable and reader, then, the commentary challenges the absolute authority of timetables. On the other hand, it also implies that any reader who can grasp its argument about the consequences of failing to read timetables can also understand timetables themselves. While the explicit rhetoric of the note urges its readers to be better readers in order to be passengers, its very act of intervention tends to elide any difference whatsoever between literacy and passengerhood. To that extent, the editorial does not so much instruct its readers in a literate practice as interpellate its them into an ideology of passengerhood. It works implicitly to affirm the perfection of the rail system as something self-evident to literate passengers.

The Godey’s editors, then, are just as concerned with literacy as with passengerhood. Moreover, they address their readers ambiguously, raising anxieties about mobile practice as both a form of etiquette and a species of technosocial competence, while at the same time suggesting that élite readers are, by definition, élite travelers, and vice versa. Arguably, then, their commentary implicitly does what Their Wedding Journey and The American Scene do explicitly. It imagines a moment in which various ethnic, gender, class, and regional subjects, formerly spatially separate, have been brought together in the non-places of the transportation systems; more significantly for my purposes, it also registers the emergence of passengerhood as a mechanism by which social groups sort themselves out. However, even as it thinks an American civilization divided into passengers and non-passengers—one in which technosocial differences supplant sociocultural distinctions—it struggles to find a place for textuality itself.
These texts, that is, raise the question of whether all writing should strive to be like the self-evident and self-sufficient railroad timetable. This study asks a similar question about the place of literary prose. If inscriptive genres like the timetable, the circuit diagram, the organizational chart, already “correspond in every detail” with the world they purport to represent, of what use is a play, a novel, or an expository essay? On the other hand, if these kinds of representation are somehow incomplete, flawed, or deceptive, how can literature simultaneously supplement them and convincingly portray a world in which they have come to dominate much of everyday life? Can and the literary text be other than the timetable without being a distraction from the timetable, thereby running the risk of causing its readers to be “left”? What becomes of the literary text that not only narrates a world in motion, but must address an audience in motion—an audience whose mobile practices are already increasingly mediated by printed texts? This question is a thread running through all of the texts I examine in this study. Railroad maps and passes in *The Gilded Age*, railway maps (again) and ticker-tapes in *The Octopus*, tourist auto maps in *An American Tragedy*—all play a decisive role in each of these fictions. Each of these novels thematizes the kind of mobile literacy urged by Juncus and the *Godey’s* editors; and each registers the emergence of a kind of mediated immediacy—reading as direct technical agency—as an element of mobile subjectivity. The literary itself became increasingly enmeshed in networks of mobility in the years around 1900; as Janice Radway has written, the literary producer of the these years was “a corporate, prosthetically augmented, creative agent whose capacity to produce reading material was significantly expanded [. . .] by systematic integration into a carefully managed and controlled, mechanically assisted system” (133). This study, therefore, asks how such texts as *The Gilded Age*, *Life on the Mississippi*, *The Octopus*, and *An American Tragedy* framed themselves as
narratives about the rise of such systems, as addressing an audience of such agents, and as themselves elements of such a prosthetic augmentation. At the same time, it looks at the ways each of these novels struggled to maintain a privileged position for literary prose.

On the other hand, each of these texts also betrays troubling reservations about the limits of this mode of literary mediation. If they register conflicting desires both to imitate the print genres of mobile systems and to reserve a place for the literary, they are also haunted by persistent doubts about the knowability of mobile systems themselves. In each of them, mobile systems are often incomplete, discontinuous, hazardous. In *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, Wolfgang Schivelbusch weaves a remarkable network of connections between, on one hand, late nineteenth-century industrial accidents and Marx’s explanation of capitalist economic crises, and Freud’s examination of traumatic neuroses observed in World War I veterans, on the other. According to Schivelbusch, the paradox of “shock” in industrial society is that the large-scale coördination of productive, military, or transportational forces—their economic rationalization, temporal regularization, and mechanization—raises the “falling height” of such forces and paves the way for catastrophic crises. He writes,

> The precondition for this [kind of catastrophic “shock”] is a highly-developed general state of dominance over nature, both technically [. . . ] and physically [. . . ]. The degree of control over nature and the violence of that control, in shock, are proportionate: the more finely meshed the web of mechanization, discipline, division of labor, etc., the more catastrophic the collapse when it is disrupted from within or without. (158)
Importantly, for Schivelbusch “control over nature” also includes the development of those social practices which mediate individual consciousness and the industrial machine ensemble in which they are embedded. Rail travel educated the senses in what Schivelbusch calls “panoramic perception,” a kind of reduction of the distant landscape to a quasi-cinematic image, which “in contrast to traditional perception, no longer belonged to the space of the perceived objects: the traveler saw the objects, landscapes, etc. through the apparatus which moved him [sic] through the world. That machine and its motion it created became integrated into his visual perception: thus he could only see things in motion” (64; emphasis in original). Therefore, what Marx calls the “annihilation of space by time” (Grundrisse 524), a process of both the acceleration of industrial processes and the relentless assimilation of geographic space into the social space of capitalist production and circulation, simultaneously produced the increasing potential for perceptual disorientation, physical trauma, and social disorder, and new, more mediated and regulated, modes of perceiving the world.

Schivelbusch draws on Freud’s arguments in Beyond the Pleasure Principle to suggest that both rail travelers themselves and railroad companies adopted a constellation of practices that naturalized the traumatic experience of integration into the machine ensemble of railway travel while simultaneously fostering new modes of perception. Following Freud, he argues that these practices, both technological and cultural, came to constitute a “stimulus shield” that “enabled the traveler to lose the fear that he formerly felt towards the new conveyance” (160). Amy Kaplan has suggested a function for late nineteenth-century realism remarkably resonant with Schivelbusch’s description of ameliorative rail practices. In her discussion of Howells’s critical writings on realism, Kaplan writes that realist literature was expected to “make known to middle-class, ‘cultivated’ readers people, culture, and ways of life that are foreign to them,”
but not to “jar readers with the shock of otherness”; realist representation should, then, “represent diversity in an unthreatening shape” (23). Much as panoramic perception saw the world as separate from the perceiving consciousness, Kaplan argues that realism developed the representation of inwardness and “character,” relegating broadly social contexts to the status of mere background or environment. However, Schivelbusch suggests that such practices intended to mask the industrial character of the rail apparatus—practices such as outfitting rail cars with sumptuous seats and draperies and constructing opulent classical rail stations—could not anticipate the increased “falling height” of rail travel catastrophically revealed when trains derailed or collided. Rail accidents, despite the domestication of the rail experience, were still perceived as traumatic, violent, and disorderly. In short, such practices failed to ameliorate the shock of industrial-capitalist crisis under circumstances that were the most catastrophic.

Schivelbusch’s discussion bears directly on my own because it hints at how literary fiction around 1900 thought the transportation accident. I have already shown how Their Wedding Journey establishes railroad spaces as sites of a (potential) social utopia while simultaneously warning readers of the dangerous gaps and obstacles that may lie just beyond the passenger’s horizon. This tendency both to soothe and warn, to titillate with direct reference to collision, chaos, and mayhem, while formally containing such discontinuities within narratological bounds, characterizes all three of the novels discussed in this study. Each of these texts has a primal scene of technological violence that sets narrative in motion and proleptically announces the narrative’s thematics. The portions of The Gilded Age authored by Mark Twain present us with a corporate protagonist, a family literally constituted by a steamboat journey across the southern United States and by the witnessing of a steamboat explosion that leaves them “richer by twenty-four hours of experience in the contemplation of
human suffering and in learning through honest hard work how to relieve it” (34). Yet those experiences will not give the Hawkins family the competence to foresee or avoid the crises and turnabouts of the future, and the novel will present the murder of Col. George Selby by Laura Hawkins as both a consequence and delayed repletion of the *Amaranth* explosion. Likewise, in *The Octopus*, the Eastern dandy Presley’s hair’s-breadth escape from a speeding locomotive, “shooting by in a sudden crash of confused thunder; [and] filling the night with the terrific clamour of its iron hoofs” (49), is at once a corporeal trauma, a trope (as Leo Marx has famously argued) for the power of technology invading and subsuming that of “nature,” and a figure for the explosive acts of violence that occur throughout the rest of the novel. In this case, it has been a matter of debate among readers whether Presley does learn anything from his violent encounters with the railroad and its spaces. Finally, Dreiser’s Clyde Griffiths’s fatal auto accident, a collision with a small child on the streets of Kansas City, implicitly rehearses the “murder” of Roberta Alden for which he is eventually convicted—an event which, at least according to Clyde’s attorneys, is itself more a transportation accident than a deliberate homicide. In each case, the repetition of the transportation accident by the literary narrative seems to contain and naturalize the accidents repeated within it. Yet, as I will argue, this very narration of repetition often, in various ways, undoes the meliorative work of narrative as such. In these texts, collision and catastrophe often take on a life of their own, often standing both as moral lessons in the dangers of misreading the spaces of mobility and as examples of the kind of verisimilitude realism claimed as its hallmark. William Greenslade has seen this dichotomy as a reflection of the bifurcation in evolutionary thought in the nineteenth century:

> Whereas Lamarckian biology [. . .] had stressed the organism’s creative adaptation to the impact of change, in [. . .] neo-Darwinian accounts,
development proceeded erratically, randomly, alarmingly. The organism
now learnt [sic] nothing from experience but re-made itself on the sole basis
of chance adaptation. Indeed the impress of the contingent and the
haphazard threatened to obliterate memory, tradition and rationality. (16)

Greenslade is writing here specifically about British literature of the nineteenth century,
arguing that this difference in evolutionary models the difference between “realism” and
“naturalism” in Britain. I, however, see both of these paradigms often flourishing side-by-side
in American literature of the same era. But Greenslde’s point holds nevertheless: During the
years 1869-1929, transportation accidents are both puzzles to be solved and the ineluctable and
implacable background noise of modernity. In other words, transportation accidents—not just
collisions and explosions, but also breakdowns, delays, missed connections, and wrong
turns—often themselves hovered unsteadily between functioning as metonymy and metaphor.
Each one could be read a trope for any other, or each could be read as precisely what evades
metaphoricity entirely. They are figures of both the known old and the unknowable new.
Hence, as paradoxical figures for contingency itself, that is, they are as troubling for writers
and readers as they were for transportation managers and passengers.

Thus, this study examines two closely related ambiguities in American writing of the
realist era: that of literary fiction’s specific cultural work in an era where mobility brought
with it new textual mediations of everyday life, and that of the knowability of large-scale
technosocial systems themselves. Herein, I present an arc or triptych of chapters that examine
the vicissitudes of realism’s handing of these contradictions, which I argue are closely related.
The first chapter, “A Husbanded Grandeur: Mark Twain, Steamboats, and Gilded-Age
Spaces,” investigates the complex role of the steamboat in the early work of Mark Twain. I
look specifically at the steamboat itself as both a trope and a material example of the spatial incoherence of antebellum America, and argue that Twain often uses the steamboat—a technosocial system linking the North and South—as a metaphor for the problem of the material interdependence of reactionary and progressive spatial regimes before the Civil War. I also examine the representations of the steamboat in *The Gilded Age*, Twain’s collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner, to show that Twain never fully accepted the victory of northern technosocial rationality over southern sham and charlatanism. Finally, I argue that Twain’s close reading of steamboats in *Life on the Mississippi* at once seeks to make writing an instrument for distinguishing the reactionary from the progressive and registers the futility of ever disentangling pure spectacle from technical efficiency and progress. The next chapter reads Frank Norris’s 1901 novel *The Octopus* in the context of the simultaneous development of the middle-class American reader, the industrial manager, and the railroad passenger. In “Quick Enough to Interpret the Cipher Message of the Eye: *The Octopus* and Railroad Perception,” I suggest that *The Octopus* was part of a much larger textual network that not only represented, but also materially participated in, contemporary railroad systems. Much writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries encouraged readers to imagine themselves in the place of railroad managers—who were in turn, represented as skilled users of textuality. Similarly, in his nonfiction work, Norris often presented himself as a privileged guide to the labyrinthine spaces of turn-of-the-century technosocial systems; yet, in his critical writings he also implies that the work of writing itself—not the author’s innate imaginative power or sensibility—is what makes such spaces legible. Drawing on these texts, I argue that Norris’s implicit solution to the kinds of historical problems that plagued Twain is realist fiction itself—or, as Norris would have insisted, the “naturalist” novel—as a literate technique.
The final chapter, “At Breakneck Pace: The Limits of Mobility in *An American Tragedy,*” argues that, while Twain and Norris may have seen mobile competence as the key to an authentically autonomous liberal subject, in *An American Tragedy,* Theodore Dreiser represents the chaos of capitalist mobility as a corrosive to agency. Dreiser represents the spaces of automobility as a fundamentally unknowable industrial territory characterized by contingency and crisis. Consequently, the movement from the optimism of *Sister Carrie* to the pessimism of *An American Tragedy* is also a return to the skepticism of *The Gilded Age.* Yet, while Twain and Warner’s novel holds out the hope of satire as a corrective to the recrudescence of older and regressive spatialites, *An American Tragedy* sees mobility itself as a decentered and arbitrary mechanism of social power. If earlier writers of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era could see mobility as liberation, Dreiser, by the middle of the 1920s, sees it as a machinery of entrapment.

I see mobility as providing a uniquely useful vantage on the material circumstances that conditioned the emergence and waning of American realism. More precisely, reading mobility shows us the conditions of realism’s decline already in place as it came into being in the 1870s. Writers like Charles Francis Adams and William Dean Howells may have seen a clear pathway from mass mobility leading to a kind of passengerial American community, but in his earlier works, Mark Twain sometimes seems already to see obstacles in the road; in particular, he worries if Gilded-Age American culture will keep up with the rapid rationalization of production effected by the unification of both the American polity and the American rail system. Can representation remake itself to keep pace with invention? Or, will the antebellum culture of sham and hoax ride the rails as it had the steamboat? Often, Twain’s writing seems to warn against this possibility while also resigning itself to its inevitability. I argue, therefore,
that much of “naturalism’s” reaction to early realism’s (putative) just-so mobile narratives is already present in the ambiguities and turnabouts of Twain’s satire. On the other hand, while Norris may have famously argued that “naturalism” is “a form of romanticism, not an inner circle of realism” (“Zola” 86), his own realist fiction, I suggest, merely turned the realism of Howells or Twain (or James) inside-out; the smashups and breakdowns that, in earlier realism, either happen offstage or appear as straightforward consequences of bad judgment, are brought centerstage in Norris and stripped of their satiric or moralistic character. I suggest that Norris’s realism is not the inner circle of realism, but realism at the limit. The Octopus doesn’t imagine a bourgeois world materially within, but cognitively safely outside, the collisions and swerves of machine space; it imagines a literary mode that can train readers in interpreting and managing these very catastrophes. If Twain, James, and Howells seek to merge mobile practices with literate practices, Norris works to refound the role of the passenger-reader (not to mention the author) on the model of the railroad manager-engineer. Accordingly, Norris moves his drama from the space of the railroad to the spaces being conquered by railroads; he takes us closer to the scene of the catastrophe to help us see how it fits into the evolution of the network itself. Finally, I see An American Tragedy as a fully-fledged critique of realism’s love-affair with mobility. The 1925 novel repudiates even Dreiser’s own ambivalent embrace of mobility in Sister Carrie (1900); unlike Twain and Norris, Dreiser writes enmeshment in networks of mobility as a foreclosure of agency. In An American Tragedy, the rationalized spaces of mobility are exactly what Addam’s or Burnham and Bennett’s plans were intended to reform: Piranesian, labyrinthine spaces of danger and uncertainty. More contemporaneous with the gloomy outlook on mobility of Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (1925) and Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury (1929) and Light in August (1932), An American Tragedy is also more
distant from the progressive take on networks in *The Gilded Age* and *The Octopus* than either of these texts are from each other. This progression of fictions shows how the problems of mobility—problems that hovered around mobility’s margins, disappearing or already all but invisible—became mobility as problem. It shows how what, for Jane Addams or Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett, was a new way of knowing things—modeled on, and a model for, writing—became not only unknowable, but tragically so.
Chapter One:

A Husbanded Grandeur: Mark Twain, Steamboats, and Gilded-Age Spaces

Curiously confused and commingled

Many readers of *Life on the Mississippi* have observed that for Twain, river navigation requires a privileged reader of sublime, mysterious Nature; it calls for a specific kind of labor that makes the river legible, that turns its noises into signals. However, Twain’s lay observers, the audience to the spectacle of river navigation, also see the riverboat itself as sublime, as something that resists reading. In Twain and Warner’s *The Gilded Age*, the enslaved Uncle Dan’l and Aunt Jinny, along with a group of white children, observe the approach of a river steamer:

A deep coughing sound troubled the stillness, way toward a wooded cape that jutted into the stream a mile distant. All in an instant a fierce eye of fire shot out from behind the cape and sent a long brilliant pathway quivering athwart the dusky water. The coughing grew louder and louder, the glaring eye grew larger and still larger, glared wilder and still wilder. A huge shape developed itself out of the gloom, and from its tall duplicate horns dense volumes of smoke, starred and spangled with sparks, poured out and went tumbling away into the farther darkness. Nearer and nearer the thing came, till its long sides began to glow with spots of light which mirrored themselves in the river and attended the monster like a torchlight procession

“What is it? Oh, what *is* it Uncle Dan’l?”
With deep solemnity the answer came:

“It’s de Almighty! Git down on yo’knees!” (21)

The racist comedy that Twain derives from Uncle Dan’l’s gullibility and superstition only partially masks the fact that the narrator himself really believes that the steamboat is in some sense, and from a certain perspective, “de Almighty.” The narrator makes the spectacle of the craft completely overwhelm the sublime “grandeur and solemnity” of the river itself, the ship’s cyclopean eye simultaneously casting a panoptic gaze onto the river and plowing a path through it. This rhetoric makes even the steamboat’s windows into lesser eyes, seeing the spectators but only obscurely seen by them, and transforming the surface of the river into a field of glimmering duplicates. For observers, the Mississippi steamboat really does reorder the whole space of the river and distances the slaves and children—local subjects—from that very space. Uncle Dan’l plays an odd double role here: His provincialism and crude emotion infantilize him even as he struggles to establish himself as a privileged interpreter for the white children. As we are signaled to laugh at Uncle Dan’l’s religious misreading of the technological spectacle, we are nevertheless invited to see it through his eyes; we are thereby simultaneously put in the place of the astonished spectator and that of the sophisticated insider.

Arguably, the ambivalent stance of The Gilded Age toward the steamboat—at once cynically aware and naively ecstatic—not only doubles the perspective of the narrator himself, but it doubles the way many readers have characterized Mark Twain’s attitude toward both his provincial beginnings and his mature status as a cosmopolitan literary figure. Richard Gray, for example, writes that in Twain’s treatments of the steamboat, “the glamour of the past is dismissed at one moment and then recalled with elegiac regret the next, [and] the pragmatism
and progress of the present is welcomed sometimes and at others coolly regretted” (105). Gray concluded that Twain

lacked the language to reconcile his different attitudes to the past. All he could do, evidently, was take over the familiar vocabularies of his region, with their patriarchal dreams of the past and their populist hopes for the future, and their confused mixture of progressivism and nostalgia, utopianism and elegy; apply these vocabularies with far more enthusiasm, frankness, and energy than any of his contemporaries; and, in doing all this, offer his readers what can only be describes as a verbal equivalent of a double vision. (106)

Other scholars have debated Twain’s ambivalence toward the profession of piloting itself. Lawrence Howe has suggested that in *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain opposes realist writing’s “multi-voiced structure” to the authoritative homoglossia of the steamboat pilot’s language (438). He argues that by shifting “value from actual to textual experience,” Twain narratively reinvents himself in the mode of a Franklin or a Douglass and establishes his own literary voice over and above that of the experienced pilots (421). More recently, Brian McCammack has suggested that Twain’s nostalgic memory of the steamboat pilot’s “level-headed competence” was itself the model for his conception of realist authorship (9). For Howe, the steamboat pilot was precisely the kind of romantic hero Twain rejected in the work of Sir Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper; for McCammick, on the other hand, the steamboat pilot’s “negative capability”—his ability to improvise and adapt his practices to the river’s vicissitudes—allowed him to resist the kind of cant, dogma, and hubris that hindered late nineteenth-century technoscience. Despite the apparent diametric opposition of these two
arguments, both Howe and McCammick presuppose the actual mastery of the steamboat pilot as historical fact; moreover, neither considers the historic and technical specificities of the steamboat itself and its limits. For Gray, Howe, and McCammick, the ambivalence is all on the side of words or ideas about the steamboat, not in the steamboat itself.

This silence is all the more remarkable since the steamboat makes at least a perfunctory appearance in almost all of Twain’s fiction set in the nineteenth century. The Gilded Age, specifically, treats steamboats, steamboat passengerhood, and steamboat spaces with an apparently incoherent mix of reverence and satire. Significantly, for example, the novel begins with the backwoods Tennessean Silas Hawkins proclaiming his faith in steamboats to his wife Nancy:

“Nancy, you’ve heard of steamboats, and maybe you believed in them—of course you did. You’ve heard these cattle here scoff at them and call them lies and humbugs,—but they’re not lies and humbugs, they’re a reality and they’re going to be a more wonderful thing some day than they are now. They’re going to make a revolution in this worlds affairs that will make men dizzy to contemplate.” (11)

Silas’s zeal for the steamboat, like, Uncle Dan’l’s, arises from an peculiar mix of insider knowledge and outright ignorance. He understands the growing importance of the boats, but wildly overestimates the likelihood that steam navigation will bring prosperity to his own corner of Tennessee. Like his friend Beriah Sellers, he also perceives the potential of deposits of coal and “black gummy oil” on his land, but—again like Sellers—he cannot seem to distinguish between the mere fantasy of a “revolution in this worlds affairs” effected by steam navigation and the actual ability to realize any profit from such a revolution. For Silas, coal
and rivers make technosocial revolutions all by themselves, and people profit from them by their mere spatial connection to them. He continues to harangue Nancy:

“Well, do you know [the railroads have] quit burning wood in some places in the Eastern states? And what do you suppose they burn? Coal!” [He bent over and whispered again:] “There’s whole worlds of it on this land! You know that black stuff that crops out of the bank of the branch? well that’s it. You’ve taken it for rocks; so has everybody here; and they’ve built little dams and such things with it. One man was going to build a chimney out of it. Nancy I expect I turned as white as a sheet! Why it might have caught fire and told everything. [. . .] Then he was going to build it of copper ore—splendid yellow forty-per-cent. ore! There's fortunes upon fortunes of copper ore on our land! It scared me to death, the idea of this fool starting a smelting furnace in his house without knowing it, and getting his dull eyes opened. And then he was going to build it of iron ore. There’s mountains of iron ore here, Nancy—whole mountains of it! [. . .] Pine forests, wheat land, corn land, iron, copper, coal—wait till the railroads come, and the steamboats! We’ll never see the day, Nancy—never in the world—never, never, never, child. We’ve got to drag along, drag along, and eat crusts in toil and poverty, all hopeless and forlorn—but they’ll ride in coaches, Nancy! They’ll live like the princes of the earth; they’ll be courted and worshiped; their names will be known from ocean to ocean. Ah, well-a-day! Will they ever come back here, on the railroad and the steamboat, and say ‘This one little spot shall not be touched—this hovel shall be sacred—for
here our father and our mother suffered for us, thought for us, laid the
foundations of our future as solid as the hills!” (12; emphasis and brackets
in the original)

Karl Marx famously wrote that “while the miser is merely a capitalist gone mad, the capitalist
a rational miser” (Capital III 254); the miser accumulates for the sake of accumulation, while
the capitalist accumulates by augmenting mere hoarding through the production process. In
Silas Hawkins, however, Twain has given us a figure who is neither a miser or a capitalist;
more precisely, Silas isn’t mad enough to be a miser and isn’t rational enough to be a
capitalist. In fact, what Silas dreams of becoming is a rentier; he fantasizes about neither
hoarding nor production, but of withholding what he already owns from the circuit of
production. Rentier income, of course, is precisely the kind of income appropriated by the
gentry, men called “Squires,” which is also what the residents of Obedstown call Silas. Silas is
given this appellation, though, not because he owns land, but because of his position as
postmaster of his little town—“not that the title properly belonged to the office, but because in
those regions the chief citizens must have titles of some sort” (7-8). Silas, in other words, has
already managed to parlay his connection to national networks of transportation and
communication into a sham medieval authority. As in his steamboat dreams, Silas does not
actually actively participate in the distribution of mail. Both the mail carrier and the local
citizenry come to Silas; Silas stays in place. And yet the satirical point of the Hawkins chapters
of The Gilded Age is that Silas cannot stay in place; his profligacy (and the influence of
Sellars) has driven his from Virginia to Kentucky, and then to Missouri. Drifting from place to
place, vaguely following the path of the Ohio westward, Silas dreams of mastering the spaces
of the steamboat yet finds himself in the position of a bit of flotsam impelled by a historical bow wave.

Twain will later retell the story of the Hawkins land as his own story. In the collection of writings redacted by Charles Neider and published as Twain’s *Autobiography* in 1917, Twain writes of his own family land near Jamestown, Virginia. Twain writes that his father John Marshall Clemens,

had always said that the land would not become valuable in his time but that it would be a commodious provision for his children some day. It contained coal, copper, iron, and timber, and he said that in the course of time railways would pierce to that region and then the property would be property in fact as well as name. (24)

However, just as Twain confirms the story of the bountiful Clemens land as fact, not imaginative satire, he contradicts himself, writing that his father “had never seen a railway and it is barely possible that he had not even heard of such a thing” (29). “Curious as it may seem,” he adds, “as late as around 1860 there were people living close to Jamestown who had never heard of a railroad and could not be brought to believe in steamboats.” In this version of the story, John Clemens is less a charlatain than a product of his era and place, but it reinforces the earlier text’s ambivalences about its own situatedness. On one hand, Twain constantly insists on the Virginia tenure of the Clemenses as his own prehistory; he writes that everything he tells us about Jamestown is, like his stories of his family’s glorious medieval past, based on “hearsay, not from personal knowledge” (24). Twain implicitly presents himself as a westerner and a product of an American landscape dominated by transportational systems, as someone who finds it “curious” that people could be unaware of railroads as late as 1860, and not as a
product of the antebellum southern backwoods. On the other, by rewriting fiction as autobiography, Twain makes an identificatory gesture toward the kind of people who had never heard of railroads or steamboats. Moreover, Twain narrates his first encounter with a steamboat as hallucination and sham, not as passengerhood. He writes that, at the age of fifteen, under the influence of an itinerant “mesmerizer,” he “fled from snakes, passed buckets at a fire, became excited over hot steamboat-races, made love to imaginary girls and kissed them, fished from the platform and landed mud cats that outweighed me—and so on, all the customary marvels” (67). In passages like this, Twain paints his youthful self as little different from Uncle Dan’l or Silas Hawkins, as a naïf for whom the steamboat is part of a universe of unlikely adventure and the supernatural.

The ambivalence over the spaces of mobility in *The Gilded Age* adumbrates the passage in *Life on the Mississippi* in which Twain recalls the arrival of steamboats in antebellum Hannibal; the townspeople swarm the wharves and “fasten their eyes upon the coming of the boat as upon a wonder they are seeing for the very first time” (65). Twain insists that the fascination with the ship, which both sets the town in motion and immobilizes it like a theatrical audience held in their seats by a “mesmerizer,” is not simply mass delusion:

> And the boat *is* a rather handsome sight, too. She is long and sharp and trim and pretty; she has two tall, fancy-topped chimneys, with a gilded device of some kind swung between them; a fanciful pilot-house, all glass and “gingerbread,” perched on top of the “texas” [sic] deck behind them; the paddle-boxes are gorgeous with a picture or with gilded rays above the boat’s name; the boiler deck, the hurricane deck, and the texas deck are fenced and ornamented with clean white railings; [. . . ] the captain stands
by the big bell, calm, imposing, the envy of all; great volumes of the blackest smoke are rolling and tumbling out of the chimneys—a husbanded grandeur created with a bit of pitch pine just before arriving at a town; [, . . . ], and an envied deck-hand stands picturesquely on the end of it with a coil of rope in his hand; the pent steam screaming through the gauge-cocks; the captain lifts his hands, a bell rings, the wheels stop; then they turn back, churning water to foam, and the steamer is at rest. (65).

Here again, this passage satirizes the indolent townspeople for their fascination and astonishment. For his literate readers, on the other hand, Twain provides a glimpse behind the curtain, literally laying bare the steamboat’s theatrical devices, anatomizing the sublime spectacle into a jargon-laden list of “pilot boxes,” “paddle-boxes,” and “gauge-cocks.” Moreover, while we are shown the steamboat’s gilt, its ornament, its theatrical “husbanded grandeur,” we also see the really productive labor of the stoker who feeds the boiler with pitch pine. Twain also emphasizes the way the townspeople themselves participate in the theater of the ship’s appearance, as upon the first sign of the boat’s approach, “instantly a negro drayman, famous for his quick eye and prodigious voice, lifts up the cry, ‘S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin’!’ and the scene changes!” As Uncle Dan’l attributes omnipotence to the steamship, thereby helping to produce the steamboat spectacle in The Gilded Age, this passage stages the collaboration of ship’s crew and townspeople in the production of a social ritual. Like Silas Hawkins and Uncle Dan’l, the townspeople are spectators, not actors; or rather, since they participate in the steamboat system without grasping the humbug involved with its appearance, they are actors only to the degree that they are spectators. They are interpellated imperfectly by the steamboat; they recognize that it is significant, but cannot read its meaning. To the extent
that the humor here derives from the false or mistaken way the townspeople perform what I have called passengerhood, however, the text itself invites its readers to identify with the operators of the steamboat itself.

The technological sublime as fetishism seems, likewise, to be precisely what separates the townspeople from the steamboat crew. The townspeople see only the spectacle, but not themselves producing the spectacle. In apparent contrast, surely the steamboat’s crew are aware of what they are doing when they unfurl the flag, stoke the boiler fires with pitch pine, and appear theatrically on deck. Yet Twain, in one of the most famous passages in Life on the Mississippi, seems to attribute something like this same attitude to the boatmen themselves. When Jerome Bixby attempts the dangerous Hat Island crossing in Chapter VII, “A Daring Deed,” he is accompanied by an audience of veteran pilots, the very pinnacle of the river elite who—in contrast to the shiftless rubes of Twain’s youth—“bore themselves with a dignity proper to men of solid means and prodigious reputation as pilots” (80). As Twain’s boat, the Paul Jones, approaches the island in near-darkness and the visiting pilots—once again in contrast to the busy and swarming townspeople—congregate anxiously around Bixby, “The dead silence and sense of waiting became oppressive,” and everyone strains to hear the leadsmen’s calls:

The cries of the leadsmen began to rise out of the distance, and were gruffly repeated by the word-passers on the hurricane deck.


Mr. Bixby pulled two bell-ropes, and was answered by faint jingling far below in the engine room, and our speed slackened. The steam began to
whistle through the gauge-cocks. The cries of the leadsmen went on—and it was a weird sound, always, in the night. Every pilot in the lot was watching now, with fixed eyes, and talking under his breath. Nobody was calm and easy but Mr. Bixby. He would put his wheel down and stand on a spoke, and as the steamer swung into her (to me) utterly invisible marks—for we seemed to be in the midst of a wide and gloomy sea—he would meet and fasten her there. (82-83)

On one level, the scene in the pilot house could not more different than the one from Twain’s youth, with its grotesque and rustic mélange of pigs, watermelon rinds, town drunks, scattered freight pallets, and drowsy clerks; no-one here sees Mr. Bixby as the equivalent of a “clown” or a “negro [sic] minstrel,” as the youthful Twain imagines the steamboatmen. “[W]aiting” and quiet, jargon-laden talk in the pilot-house replace the “hurrying” and “scrambling” of the Hannibal docks; a carnival scene is replaced by a nineteenth-century version of Mission Control. Nonetheless, the two passages contain unmistakable resonances. In both passages, a youthful witness observes other watchers, who in turn observe and comment on a technological spectacle; in both scenes, an audience is fascinated, mesmerized, or “fixed” by what it sees. More importantly, both scenes imply a fetishistic misrecognition on the part of the audience. In the first passage, the grandeur of the steamship appears as divine fire and cloud; the actual laborers producing the spectacle, in turn, seem like attendant lords, their own glamor as merely reflected glory. In the Hat Island anecdote, on the other hand, the pilot himself is deified, made into a demiurge who effortlessly commands the ship and its crew as if they were mere prostheses; everything is attributed to Bixby even though the other pilots know very well that the crossing was the product of collaborative labor, of the training and
competence of the engineer and the leadsmen as much as the skill of the pilot. The scene makes these other workers literally invisible, turns them into ghostly voices, the sound of bells, signals transmitted by elaborate relays. Moreover, the persistent halo of glamor, romance, and heroism attributed to river navigation elides the historical and technosocial milieu which makes the boatmen’s collaborative labor possible—the system of shipwrights, woodlots, dockworkers, snagboats, deckhands, instruments, and regulations presupposed by the existence of the “mental laborer” of the pilots.

In spite of the differences between the two scenes, then, both present an unmasking of a process of reification. However, I want to observe provisionally that only in the second does the specifically capitalist form of reification begin to appear—that is, the form of reification that not only contributes to the reproduction of social forms, but to the production of surplus value itself. Twain’s provincial townspeople (including Silas Hawkins, Uncle Dan’l, and his own younger self) relate to the industrial transportation apparatus as spectacle; for them, the only difference between the steamboat and a medieval mystery play is that the nineteenth-century *deus ex machina* is considerably more elaborate. Unlike mystery players, however, Twain’s boatmen are not simply engaged in the production of theatrical spectacle, but in production as such—that is, the production of relative surplus value, the driving-down of necessary labor-time that makes the production of a surplus possible. For the townspeople, who are both geographically and socially outside the mainstream of industrial production, the attitude of fetishism results from the production of spectacle; for the boatmen, it seems to result from the spectacle of production. In this scene, Bixby’s omnipotent mastery appears to his colleagues because the pilot’s role in the division of labor is misrecognized as the determining role in the technosocial apparatus, the role of the brain in the otherwise unruly
body of capital. Bixby’s calm mastery recalls Georg Lukacs observation that with the role of the bureaucratic manager in advanced capitalism, “we witness [how] the contemplative nature of man under capitalism makes its appearance” (98). Lukacs explains further: “The specialised ‘virtuoso,’ the vendor of his objectified and reified faculties does not just become the [passive] observer of society; he also lapses into a contemplative attitude vis-à-vis the workings of his own objectified and reified faculties” (100). For Lukacs, then, thinking appears to the mental worker as the polar opposite of “brute” labor. Although the mental worker is actually dependent upon an entire network other workers—and of the material means of production themselves—his successful accomplishment of his own tasks presupposes that he imagines himself at the center of this network, as the point through which all production must “naturally” pass.

Importantly, however, the steamboat pilot is not an industrial manager, despite his command of a process of industrial production. Rather, his role is an odd hybrid of a feudal guild-master and an industrial manager. Lukacs points out that managerial labor, the labor of one who stands in for the capitalist himself, calls for the abandonment of technical practices rooted in “the empirical, the concrete, and the traditional” (97). Managerial labor, on the contrary, appears to be the application of abstract “rational calculation” and the “working-out of the probable effects of [a priori] ‘laws’ without making the attempt to intervene in the process by bringing other ‘laws’ to bear [ . . . ].” (98). The manager both does everything (nothing is done without him) and does nothing (his labor is abstract calculating power as such; it has no positive empirical characteristic tying to the body of the worker). But this model of mental labor seems to be a poor description of the pilot’s work, with its “pretty hardly learned” and tradition-bound interpretative skills and filiative mode of institutional
reproduction. Moreover, the elevated pilot-house notwithstanding, the steamboat itself materially resists any panoptic managerial stance on the part of the pilot. When Bixby and the young Clemens leave the *Paul Jones* to take a job on “a big New Orleans steamer,” Clemens discovers the luxuries of a more elaborately maintained pilot house: “[H]ere was a sumptuous glass temple; room enough to have a dance in; showy red and gold window-curtains; an imposing sofa; leather cushions and a back to the leather high bench where visiting pilots sit, to spin yarns and ‘look at the river’ [. . . ]” (77). This space is bourgeois, to be sure; but it suggests leisure, ritual, and ostentation, not calculation and supervision; Twain writes that he saw the steamer as a whole as “dainty as a drawing-room,” implying a space into which the bourgeois subject withdraws from business and production. The elevated and glassed-in pilot house gives the young Clemens a towering vantage over both the ship and the river—so much so that he seems “perched on a mountain”—but Twain’s language aestheticizes this view, and the spatial division between the pilot house and the boiler room interrupts, rather than furthers, the possibility of surveillance over the work going on below. Here, the language of showiness, gilt, fringe, and pomp by the co-author of *The Gilded Age* evokes a odd and contradictory compromise between gilded cage and control tower. Moreover Twain’s seeing the workers as a “regiment of natty servants” (78) further reinforces a sense of feudal social separation, rather than capitalist cybernetic management.

Twain’s picture of the western steamboat is literally one of a feudal superstructure arbitrarily bolted onto an industrial base whose technical development is impeded precisely because of this yoking; it, in fact, portrays the internal space of the steamboat in a condition of uneven development. Other observers of the era communicated a sense of the western steamer itself as somehow an awkward and unwieldy hybrid of industrial power and feudal humbug.
For example, for Charles Dickens, the steamers lacked both technical and aesthetic unity, and they were simultaneously risible and dangerous. He insists that because they are not modeled on the traditional lines of a seagoing vessel, the steamer “might be intended, for anything that appears to the contrary, to perform some unknown service, high and dry, upon a mountain-top” (143). He further describes the parts of the superstructure as “jumbled as oddly together as though they formed a small street, built by the varying tastes of a dozen men” and observes that “in the narrow space between this upper structure and [the] deck are the furnace fires and machinery, open at the sides” to the elements. Emphasizing its “jumbled” and “varying” character, Dickens’s portrayal of the steamer both ridicules the superstructure’s pretense of grandeur and worries about the safety and effectiveness of the machinery below. Dickens’s rhetoric, moreover, multiples this grotesque heterogeneity, reading the ship as an incoherent text, something more like the shifting and untrustworthy river itself than an instrument for the technical mastery of the river. Not only is the feudal opulence of the superstructure contaminated by the industrial squalor of the space below, but the industrial space itself is inefficient and disunified, a “great body of fire [ . . . ] that rages and roars beneath the frail pile of painted wood.”

Similarly, Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park and antislavery theorist, writes of his “amuse[ment]” upon discovering that parts of a steamer’s hull were sometimes literally hacked away in the rush to navigate bars and shoals, pointing out “how little account the boat was considered, in comparison with the value of time” (29). Olmsted’s observation highlights the technical inefficiency of the boats in accomplishing (beyond simply facilitating the previously arduous upriver journey) the supreme technical goal of capital: the reduction of socially necessary labor-time. Moreover, Olmsted points out that the boatmen were usually
desultory about keeping schedules—in sharp contrast, say, to the way postbellum railways were managed. Olmsted observes that it was a “matter of luck” if passengers could depart “a matter of hours [. . .], not days” later than a scheduled departure time” (23). He is further astonished to see a steamer make a special landing to deliver as single box of raisins to an isolated farmer: “Think of a huge ‘floating palace,’ of 600 tons, with 200 passengers on board, spending a quarter of an hour on such an errand!” (24). Olmsted’s account again gives an impression of a preoccupation with speed coupled with an indifference to efficiency; although the western steamboat was an industrial artifact, the drive for speed here seems so disconnected to shrewd capitalist management that it has the air of feudal or gentlemanly sport, not production. The French Saint-Simonian Michel Chevalier—like Dickens and Olmsted, a reformer of urban and industrial space—also saw the steamers as a heterogeneous and incomplete combination of technical sublimity and aesthetic quaintness. He called the superstructures of the western steamers “huge houses of two stories” and compared their appearance to that of “the Vigier baths on the Seine” (217). He continues, “Two large chimneys of columnar form vomit forth torrents of smoke and thousands of sparks; from a third a whitish cloud breaks forth with a loud noise; this is the steam-pipe. In the interior they have that coquettish air that characterizes American vessels in general; the cabins are showily furnished, and make a very pretty appearance.” However, Chevalier also insists that “when the feeling of curiosity is once satisfied, a long confinement” in such a craft is tedious and even dangerous. Despite his initial admiration for the boats, he compares them to “floating barracks” (219) and points out that “[e]xplosions of the boilers are frequent” (220). For Chevalier, the steamboat in the 1830s was simultaneously a weapon against untamed nature and a restoration of a Lockean state of nature, a site where discipline “is more complete that in
the camp,” but where, as in the military camp, life “consists of a mixture of absolute independence and absolute obedience” (225). For Twain’s characters, especially the “naïve” ones, the steamboat is the cosmopolitan writ large, the “almighty” itself; conversely, Chevalier admires the boats, in spite of their technical shortcomings, as the ephemeral harbingers of something more permanent to come.

The readings of Dickens, Olmsted, and Chevalier especially resonate with Twain’s account of steamboat racing in “Racing Days,” Chapter XVI of *Life on the Mississippi*. Twain writes that “[w]hen the ‘Eclipse’ and the ‘A.L. Shotwell’ ran their great race many years ago, it was said that pains were taken to scrape the gilding off the fanciful device that hung between the ‘Eclipse’s’ chimneys, and that for that one trip the captain left off his kid gloves and had his head shaved” (140). Here, Twain indicates that, when the boats were pushed to the limits of speed, the steamboatmen easily understood superfluity of the trappings of opulence. For the steamers to become as lean and mean in reality as they were in spectacle, the apparatus of spectacle itself was expendable. Moreover, Twain tells his readers that they “should be on board when they take a couple of those wood-boats in tow and turn a swarm of men into each; by the time you have wiped your glasses and put them on, you will be wondering what has become off the wood” (141). Unlike the earlier scenes of the technological sublime on the river, this portrayal emphasizes both the collaborative and technosocial nature of steamboat labor (“a swarm of men” working on the woodboats); it also suggests that this labor, because it happens while “you have wiped your glasses,” is performed specifically without concern for spectacular production.

However, Twain also suggests that during races production itself had to be sacrificed for speed. Twain writes that “[i]f the boat was known to make her best speed when drawing five
and a half feet forward and five feet aft, she was carefully loaded to that exact figure—she
would n’t enter a dose of homœopathic pills in her manifest after that” (140). Moreover,
keeping the boat absolutely trim meant that “[h]ardly any passengers were taken” because
“[t]hey always run to the side when there is anything to see, whereas a conscientious and
experienced steamboatman would stick to the centre of the boat and part his hair in the middle
with a spirit level.” Such descriptions imply that if under normal conditions technical
efficiency was sacrificed for speed and profitability, during races, speed and efficiency were
often achieved at the expense of productivity. The comic representations of the lengths to
which steamboatmen went in driving down travel times also suggests both the highest
development and the limits of the kind of steely competence evoked in the Hat Island passage.
If Bixby’s navigation of Hat Island had evoked Auguste Dupin’s purely mental interpretive
efficiency, coupled with his characteristic immobility (in Bixby’s case, paradoxically used for
achieving motion), “Racing Days” portrays pilots anxiously rearranging their hair and even
shaving their heads to reduce draft and keep the boat in trim, and engineers “constantly on the
alert, trying gauge-cocks and watching things” (139), thereby emphasizing both the materiality
of piloting labor and the unruliness of the steamboat itself. Here, the serene and sovereign
reader of the river whose thoughts are almost effortlessly converted to productive action is
replaced by the overtaxed technical laborer restlessly and unrelentingly testing the limits of a
technical system imperfectly adapted to the task of speed. If “A Daring Deed” portrays the
pilot’s immaterial labor overcoming the natural obstacles involved in steamboat navigation,
then, “Racing Days” depicts this same labor becoming starkly corporeal again in the process of
overcoming its own limits.
The denouement of “Racing Days,” stages the return trip, as it were, of the journey that began with “The Boy’s Ambition,” the first essay in a series of articles in The Atlantic Monthly, collectively titled “Old Times on the Mississippi,” which was later incorporated into the first half of Life on the Mississippi. The first installment of “Old Times” gave readers a glance behind the curtain and revealed the theatrical chicanery of the steamboatmen, thereby satirizing the rustic view of the steamboat as a fire deity and of the workers as its votaries. The final installment, conversely, not only exposes the shortcomings of the steamboats themselves, but reveals that under frontier conditions, the production of spectacle cannot so simply be superceded by the spectacle of production. Driving steamboatmen’s competencies beyond their normal uses exposes the limits of the steamboat system; likewise, the Dupin-like skill of the pilot breaks down when the demands of speed push the technical system to the limit. Under normal circumstances, that is, reading the river may seem to come automatically to the pilots, but reading is not in itself piloting. The river must be, as it were, written upon; and, the pilot’s skill notwithstanding, this writing is not always produced without effort. On the contrary, if it is produced at all, it is often produced haphazardly, laboriously, and inefficiently.

Like Chevalier, Dickens, and Olmsted, then, Twain struggled to locate the steamboat within the process of the industrialization of spatiality. For Twain, the steamboat was both a self-sufficient, moving extension of eastern industrial efficiency and vigor, and a space where such power encountered an inherent limit. The steamboat was both an agent of capitalist spatial rationality and a space which registered the irrationality, the illusoriness, the stubborn conservatism of antebellum spatiality as a whole; it was a historical instrument of industrialized space, but not fully integrated into it. Moreover, while the steamboat system inaugurated the takeover of the West by the Northeastern capital, serving as both apparatus
and site of this process, American hybrid geographic spatiality was materially and multiply reproduced within the steamboat itself. Not only did the twin functions of the steamboat as “floating palace” and industrialized transport system come into conflict, but because the technical system of the steamboat evolved in the economically undeveloped conditions of the West, it could not be further developed without first improving its technosocial infrastructure—a development which, in turn (as the second part of *Life on the Mississippi* demonstrates), would render the steamboat obsolete.

But if Twain saw the material disorganization of the western steamboat as an effect of the “piecemeal” human geography of the antebellum frontier, that same disorganization can by implication be read as a figure for the political contradictions of American spatiality before the war. Steamboats could ascend as well as descend the rivers of the Mississippi system, and thereby could exploit the natural routes of the Mississippi much better than the flatboats and keelboats that preceded them; but since the southbound trip was the primary profit-producing one when the steamboat system was inculcated, these routes were only profitable as long as capital investment was kept minimal. Steamboat traffic and tonnage increased rapidly up until the late 1840s, when development of the system stalled because further development required greater investment—investment of capital the steamboat operators lacked precisely because the steamboat system produced only meager and inconsistent surplus-value in the first place. Consequently, the steamboat enterprise—along with ambiguously mediating the developed East and the underdeveloped West, as well as the domestic and international economies—also stood ambiguously between industrial capitalism and merchant capitalism. The steamboat, although superceding the keelboat and flatboat because of its industrially-enhanced speed and versatility, subtracted profits from the simple and unorganized *arbitrage* of haphazard,
varying, and fortuitous differences in geographically-dispersed surpluses. Olmsted’s anecdotes about the chaotic and inefficient scheduling and routing of the steamers attests to this dependence of the boats to *arbitrage*. Similarly, Erik F. Haites, James Mak, and Gary M. Walton’s discussion of the steamboat’s “backhaulage problem” caused by “the unused space on the upstream voyage” (in turn caused by underdeveloped demand in the hinterland) (42) contrasts instructively with William Cronon’s elaboration of the many ways railroads, thirty years later, actively fostered both new industries and the capitalist rationalization of older ones in order to solve a similar predicament. Industrialized meat packing and refrigeration, the grain elevator and grading system, and the nationwide system of lumber distribution and standardized house construction all developed to exploit differential rates in eastbound and westbound traffic; these enterprises, however, presupposed a degree of both spatial flexibility and technical regularity impossible for the more environmentally-constrained steamers.

But why, after all, did the steamboat system survive during the antebellum years? Why did it not simply develop, in the West, into a more unified rails-and-rivers system before the war, instead of afterward? One answer is that the reciprocal development of markets, transport systems, and industrial production were deliberately obstructed by the southern slaveowning oligarchy. Charles Sellers has written on the often paradoxical and incoherent matrix of aligned and opposed economic interests of southern planters and farmers at mid-century, writing that “planters supplemented cotton production for market with corn and hogs for plantation subsistence” while smallholders “supplanted production for subsistence with a few bales of cotton for taxes and modest store purchases” (408). Large planters, therefore, depended much more on advanced transportation systems, and, consequently, on the state-funded “internal improvements” that supported them, than did upcountry white farmers.
However, there is a certain unity in this apparent opposition, which itself is not reducible to the simple one of bourgeois commodity producer and prebourgeois peasant. Despite their Jacksonian hostility to “internal improvements,” upcountry farmers became more and more dependent on reliable systems of transport as they moved to cheaper lands in the southwest; on the other hand, while slaveowners needed a way to get cotton from the alluvial interior to international ports without incurring prohibitive transaction costs, they strongly resisted the development of free labor, and hence any development of an internal commodity market or system of industrial production. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese argue that while middling antebellum whites occasionally produced cotton for sale, they resisted being drawn permanently “into the cotton economy at high social risk without [. . .] much in the way of financial returns” (256) and consequently “even resisted railroad development despite its apparent economic advantages” (253). The planters, for their part, “built their transportation systems colonial-style: it bound the staple-producing plantation districts to the ports and largely bypassed the upcountry. In general and by design, the system did not facilitate commodity exchange within a national or regional market” (50). Both smallholders and planters, then, required precisely the kind of technosocial system represented by the steamboat—robust and fast enough both to facilitate the turnover of slaveowner’s capital and to serve the limited and intermittent needs of the smallholders, yet (as Cronon suggests) wholly unfitted to serve the needs of industrial development. Hence, although both Sellers and Adam I. Kane insist that the steamboat system accompanied and fostered a vast expansion of both immigration and commerce in the trans-Appalachian West (Sellers 131-132; Kane 16-24), their analyses concur that (barring shipbuilding and associated trades) the production in the West under the steamboat regime was almost completely dominated by agriculture and
pre-capitalist and purely local or regional craft enterprises such as “gristmills, tanneries, and distilleries” along with the work of “blacksmiths, coopers, shoemakers, tailors, doctors, and lawyers” (Sellers 132). For both Kane and Sellers, the steamboat brought the “market revolution” to the West, but failed to bring either large-scale industrial production or the necessary influx of what Marx calls vogelfrei landless labor. Conversely, railroad development in the North spurred the movement of both capital and free labor; as Sellers succinctly puts it, compared to the close technosocial fit between industrialized transport and vogelfrei labor, “[m]achinery agreed less well with slavery” (394). Like Fox-Genovese and Genovese, he points out that while subsistence practices “sustained southern resistance to market culture, scattered one-crop plantations generated much less year-round freight than diversified northern production” (392). If the steamboat was, as Sellers suggests, a courtier to King Cotton, the railway was allied to the “universal Yankee nation” (392-393); and while both systems were instruments in the conquest of the West by the East, the contest between the two in many ways was a foreshadowing of the American Civil War, fought on the terrain of technology.

Spatiality under the domination of merchant capital, like merchant capital itself, appears simultaneously as one of the most advanced and anti-feudal elements of early capitalism and as one of the most arbitrarily intractable and archaic elements to be confronted by advanced industrial capital. In “Old Times on the Mississippi,” the steamboat and its enlightened pilot seem like transitional phenomena and heralds of the future; but in Life on the Mississippi as a whole, they seem like a historical dead-end and failed experiment. If the steamboat was an agent of capitalist spatiality but not part of it, it was even more so because it was part of, was proper to, a régime of merchant capital—specifically, that of the cotton South. The cotton
South, dominated by the political preservation of chattel slavery and obstruction of “internal improvements” was, in turn, a place without a “place” in industrial capitalist spatiality, an absurdity integral to one stage of “rational” capital, but standing in the way of its further development. Accordingly, Twain’s own description of the antebellum South evokes the same kind of archaic, irrational heterogeneity as that of the steamboat itself: In the South,  
the genuine and wholesome civilization of the nineteenth century is  
curiously confused and commingled with the Walter Scott Middle-Age sham civilization and so you have practical, common-sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works, mixed up with the duel, the inflated speech,  
and the jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead, and out of charity, ought to be buried. (327) 
For Twain, if the steamboat, as a technical system, registered the heterogeneity and chaos of the antebellum East’s encounter with the antebellum frontier, it also stands as a metonymy of the South’s political resistance to both the deterritorializing power of industrial capital, broadly speaking, and “internal improvements” specifically. And if the steamboat acted as a progressive—but flawed—instrument in the East-West encounter, it was flawed precisely because it mixed up “progressive works” and “jejune romanticism,” reflecting, in turn, the way antebellum economic spatiality was contaminated and paralyzed by the political interventions of the South. 
Accordingly, while the first part of Life on the Mississippi—or, rather, the parts constituting “Old Times”—deals largely with the steamboat, celebrating it but also revealing its grotesqueries and flaws, much of the second part is devoted to Twain’s critique of the artificiality and puerility of southern culture. Rather than seeing this difference as obstructing
the “unity” of the final book, I argue that this apparent heterogeneity encodes a resonance between the representation of the steamboat in the first half with the polemics against the South in the second. On one hand, the troubling and inherent flaw in the steamboat system, the intractable paradox that obstructs the heroic steamboatman’s struggle for simultaneous production, speed, and efficiency, turns out to have been not only the underdevelopment of the technosocial infrastructure, but also the underlying specifically southern political strategy of spatial underdevelopment. Scraping off the steamboat’s gilt to enhance its speed only reveals that, in its very materiality, the steamboat’s “genuine and wholesome” deterritorializing power is “curiously confused and commingled” with a political strategy of enforced territoriality. Conversely, the second part’s unrelenting attack on southern humbuggery and sham can be seen as an attempt to scrape the gilt off a system that in its very spatiality—like a disordered house, haphazardly built but ostentatiously decorated—irrationally and artificially impeded the development of the built environment of nineteenth-century America.

**Printing’s no bagatelle, I can tell you**

In *Roughing It*, Twain’s account of his time on the Far Western frontier, he writes of a nineteen-year-old telegraph operator who made himself rich by watching the mining telegrams that passed through his hands and buying and selling stocks accordingly, through a friend in San Francisco. Once when a private dispatch was sent from Virginia announcing a rich strike in a prominent mine and advising that the matter be kept secret till a large amount of the stock could be secured, he bought forty “feet” of
the stock at twenty dollars a foot and afterward sold half of it at eight hundred dollars a foot and the rest at double that figure. (330)

Twain also narrates the story of another telegraph operator who, having been “discharged by the company for divulging the secrets of the office,” makes a deal with “a moneyed man in San Francisco to furnish him the result of a great Virginia mining lawsuit within an hour after its private reception by the parties to it in San Francisco.” The ex-telegrapher poses as a teamster and loiters around a “little wayside telegraph office in the mountains.” Finally he hears the encoded news about the disposition of the suit,

and as soon as he heard it he telegraphed his friend in San Francisco,

“Am tired waiting. Shall sell the team and go home.”

It was the signal agreed upon. The word “waiting” left out, would have signified that the suit had gone the other way. The mock teamster’s friend picked up a deal of the mining stock, at low figures before the news became public, and a fortune was the result. (331)

Despite the superficial resemblance these schemes bear to those of Silas Hawkins and Bariah Sellers in *The Gilded Age*, they have the distinguishing characteristic of being successful. Moreover, Twain himself seem to approve of these stratagems, asserting that “the community at large was as much benefited by their riches as [the men who planned and performed them] were themselves—possibly more, in some cases” (327). Arguably, what separates these “nabobs” from mere charlatans like Hawkins and Sellers is not so much personal merit as technosocial competence. The telegrapher’s special skill in coding and decoding, implicitly contrasted with credulous reliance on rumor or custom, legitimately makes them rich even if the specific path to wealth is illicit. Furthermore, coding and decoding Morse Code is itself
labor; it materially participates in the work of the communications network. As a communications worker, the telegrapher’s function contrasts with Hawkins’s position as postmaster, which interrupts the propagation of information to the extent that it makes postal clients come to him for their mail. Twain, then, figures the difference between confidence game and what we might now call insider trading as a technosocial distinction between parasitism and mutualism. Twain approves of the ethics of the insider bonanza because it is a legitimate reward for having participated in the circulation of knowledge, rather than hoarding it. In the process, Twain’s nabobs also effect the spatial advance of technosocial networks of communications and transportation; men like Hawkins and Sellers, conversely, merely drift from point to point within it.

Arguably, then, the racket that most clearly contrasts with the machinations of the telegraphers is Sellers’s comically elaborate plan for building the Salt Lick Extension of the Pacific Railroad. More accurately, Sellers plans to build a city ex nihilo in the route of the rail line being built by his crony Jeff Thompson. Twain’s joke, as it plays out throughout the novel, is that the success of the town depends on the arrival of the railroad, while the railroad itself has been laid out haphazardly so that it runs through every hamlet in which subscribers to the railroad can be found:

[Thompson] did not bother himself much about details or practicabilities of location, but ran merrily along, sighting from the top of one divide to the top of another, and striking “plumb” every town site and big plantation within twenty or thirty miles of his route. In his own language he “just went booming.” (124)
This farcical way of planning railroads reflects Silas Hawkin’s fanciful, unscientific attitude toward spaces of mobility in the novel’s beginning. It also recalls the dismissive attitude Charles Francis Adams takes toward the South Carolina Railroad in *Railroads: Their Origin and Problems*. This is a kind of cargo-cult version of mobility, a burlesque in which people (like the real-estate speculators who are the implicit villains of *The Plan of Chicago*) scramble chaotically to make places important, rather than, like the wily telegraphers of *Roughing It*, profiting cannily from the new fluidity of spaces. Again, the Salt Lick scheme is both less and more than mobility: It proceeds from gross ignorance about technical “details or practicabilities,” but it booms along ludically nonetheless. Even Twain’s description of Thompson, whose main traits are *bonhomie* and drunken companionableness, evokes the name of the doomed South Carolina locomotive the *Best Friend*:

> There was nothing that Jeff wouldn’t do, to accommodate a friend, from sharing his last dollar with him, to winging him in a duel. When he understood from Colonel Sellers how the land lay at Stone’s Landing, he cordially shook hands with that gentleman, asked him to drink, and fairly roared out, “Why, God bless my soul, Colonel, a word from one Virginia gentleman to another is ‘nuff ced.’ There's Stone’s Landing been waiting for a railroad more than four thousand years and damme if she shan’t have it.” (117)

If this portrait of the “engineer” were not enough of a regional grotesque, Twain goes to the very limit in making him a preposterous hybrid of thespian and scientist, of southerner and Yankee: As the railroad surveyors make camp for the evening, Thompson sings “the Star Spangled Banner from beginning to end” (121). Here, Twain makes Thompson a veritable
double of Twain’s own image of the steamboat in *Life on the Mississippi*, writing that “[i]t proved to be his nightly practice to let off the unexpended steam of his conversational powers in the words of this stirring song.”

In the satire of the Salt Lick railroad plan, Twain equates failed mobile consciousness with inauthentic or incompetent literate practices. Perhaps the most sustained comic passage in the novel, one that comes literally in the middle of the book, is Sellers’s recherché slapstick explanation of the railroad scheme to his wife Polly. Sellers, calling the plan a “dead moral certaint[y]” to soothe her doubts, constructs an elaborate map for Polly out of various household utensils and *tchotchkes*: “‘For instance, call this waiter St. Louis.’”

“And we’ll lay this fork (representing the railroad) from St. Louis to this potato, which is Slouchburg:

“Then with this carving knife we’ll continue the railroad from Slouchburg to Doodleville, shown by the black pepper:

“Then we run along the—yes—the comb—to the tumbler—that’s Brimstone:

“Thence by the pipe to Belshazzar, which is the salt cellar:

“Thence to, to—that quill—Catfish—hand me the pin-cushion, Marie Antoinette:

“Thence right along these shears to this horse, Babylon:

“Then by the spoon to Bloody Run—thank you, the ink:

“Thence to Hail Columbia—snuffers, Polly, please—move that cup and saucer close up, that’s Hail Columbia:
“Then—let me open my knife—to Hark-from-the-Tomb, where we’ll put the candle-stick—only a little distance from Hail Columbia to Hark-from-the-Tomb—downgrade all the way.

And there we strike Columbus River—pass me two or three skeins of thread to stand for the river; the sugar bowl will do for Hawkeye, and the rat trap for Stone’s Landing—Napoleon, I mean and—you can see how much better Napoleon is located than Hawkeye. Now here you are with your railroad complete, and showing its continuation to Hallelujah, and thence to Corruptionville.

“Now then—there you are! It's a beautiful road, beautiful. Jeff Thompson can out-engineer any civil engineer that ever sighted through an aneroid, or a theodolite, or whatever they call it—*he* calls it sometimes one and sometimes the other—just whichever levels off his sentence neatest, I reckon. But ain’t it a ripping road, though? I tell you, it’ll make a stir when it gets along. (194)

This discourse continues along these line for the remainder of the chapter, Sellers continually putting forward *ad hoc* justifications for such things as spending a fortune for bridges over the Columbus River, even thought the railroad itself elsewhere meanders like a river. Much of the comedy here, though, comes from the equally arbitrary and heterogeneous material form of Sellers’s map. This, after all, is a spurious map of a spurious railroad. Like much of what Sellers, Thompson, and Brierly do here, it is theater posing as writing; and, inasmuch as this “map” contrasts directly with the mining maps that Philip Sterling uses in the Warner-penned chapters—prepared according to “the opinion of the best geologist [Sterling] could consult”
it also represents a specious kind of reading, based in fancy and wishful thinking, rather than science.

If we read the critique of spatiality here in the light of the telegrapher anecdotes, we can provisionally observe a certain resonance between Twain’s ideas about writing—or what more accurately, following Lisa Gitelman, we should call inscription—and contemporaneous discourses about mobility. Mobility, again, was for Twain’s contemporaries not just a matter of movement, but of “efficient,” reliable, and consistent movement. As I have argued, mobility is opposed both to stasis and to random, uncontrolled, or dangerous motion; in fact, mobility renders these two extremes as approximately the same thing. Twain seems to have a similar attitude toward mass inscription; material forms of writing can be vitiated either through privation or through spuriousness and excess. Writing of this link between mobility and inscription, Gitelman has examined the fact that Life on the Mississippi was one of the first book-length texts prepared entirely from either previously printed material or typescript. In Gitelman’s reading, Twain struggled to reproduce textually the experience of river navigation; she argues that typescript itself became a way for Twain to double the representational comprehensiveness of the painted panorama while simultaneously communicating the cognitive complexities of piloting steamboats. According to Gitelman, although Twain learned that “[t]he spatial literacies required by authors and printers are much different than those required of a riverboat pilot,” the former—unlike the theatrics of the panorama lecturer—were a legitimate way of making the latter fungible, of putting steamboat mobility into circulation after the historical fact of the steamboat (“Mississippi” 336). The textual encoding of typescript, that is, directly doubles the technical work of river transportation in a way that images (or at least images like the panorama whose material form depends on the fixity of the
theatrical backdrop) cannot. According to this logic, we might see the novel *The Gilded Age* as implicitly representing itself as a legitimate version of Sellers’s own illegitimate map; to the extent that the novel encodes on paper the distinctions between deceptive and truthful inscriptions in the years after the Civil War, it is, as it were, a true map of a false map. Because the novel makes such an issue of maps, however, it’s worth mentioning that the first 1873 edition included a specially-printed centerfold insert illustration of Sellers’s kitchen diagram of the Salt Lick Branch (fig. 2). The map images are apparently taken from stock engravings or woodcuts, and there is no attempt to reconcile the scale of the various images or imply any sense of verisimilitude to their spatial organization. The “map” resembles a rebus, but an exaggeratedly heterogeneous one; hence, it is itself neither a true cartographic representation nor a meaningful text. The shift from narration to pictorial reproduction here presents a problem for any proposal that makes authorship—especially authorship as literally or figuratively typographic (or technologically mediated, in any case)—a means of doubling and even surpassing mobility. On one hand, the fold-out map moves the primary site of literary production from the author’s desk to the printer’s composing room; it circulates inscription even more directly than the process that moves manuscript to editor, back to author, back to editor, and finally to press. To that extent, it materializes the ideal of inscription as mobility. As an artifact that only exists in the world of inscription, it directly anticipates the means by which Gitelman says Twain submitted the manuscripts for *Life on the Mississippi*: “corrected tear sheets of his *Atlantic Monthly* articles as chapters 4 through 17, and for everything else [. . .] eight ‘batches’ of typescript” (“Mississippi” 329). Yet, to the extent that this image is a traditional illustration, it undermines the absolute authority of the printed text, giving us, as it were, a theatrical staging of the map scene. The difference between image and text, that is,
interrupts precisely the textual seamlessness that Gitelman argues Twain struggled to realize in *Life on the Mississippi*. Even the facts that the map is printed on special heavier stock, and that must be unfolded to be read, underscore the gross materiality of the book, reminding us that it is a thing that moves through the world, not—like the messages of the clever telegraphers—merely encoded information. Arguably, then, the book, by materially doubling what it wants to satirize, becomes the kind of thing it is satirizing. Thereby, it challenges the idea of an authorship based purely on the navigation of the spatiality of texts.

The problems of mobile competence as a model for authorship appear again in the final installment of the original memoir “Old Times on the Mississippi.” Even as Twain comes to the conclusion of his original memoir, he also encounters another limit—that of the nostalgic, picaresque, and comic *Bildungsroman*. In the last *Atlantic Monthly* essay, much of the narrative of personal experience and tutelage under men like Brown and Bixby disappears, replaced by a much more distanced historiographic, journalistic, and ethnographic kind of writing. More specifically, the qualitative shift in the mode of narratorial distancing in the essay “Racing Days” implies and adumbrates the shift between the original *Atlantic Monthly* articles and the chapters added to form the book *Life on the Mississippi*. For not only does Twain begin to abandon either direct experience or the tradition handed down by Bixby in favor or reporting what “was said” anonymously by steamboatmen and river dwellers in general, but he also begins to rely much more on historical research and textual citation. For most of “Old Times,” Twain’s experience as a pilot authorizes him as a narrator, and the mixture of admiration for, and ironic distance from, the steamboats and their workers arises from the contrast between the perspective of the young, naïve Clemens and that of the older, experienced one. “Racing Days,” conversely, anticipates the later writing by deriving its
authority from textual competence, as Twain either confirms or challenges what “was said” by appealing to what was written; more importantly, while Twain’s authority as a pilot derived from his direct filial connections to Bixby (a filial alliance, by implication, against Brown), Twain’s new recourse to inscription allows him to play one printed source against another, as when in chapter XXVI, “Some Imported Articles,” he uses various passages from earlier travel narratives to demonstrate that although personal aesthetic impressions of the river may differ, “in certain of its aspects the Mississippi has undergone no change” since the colonial and antebellum periods. Accordingly, Lawrence Howe has suggested that this process of shifting “value from actual to textual experience” allows Twain to perform a form of authorial self-invention in the mode of Franklin or Douglass by establishing his own voice as a literary author in opposition to those of the experienced pilots (421). I would argue that the book, however, also anxiously wrestles with the possibility that the material forms of inscription in the nineteenth century—writing as such, the institutional apparatus of the publishing industry, and the actual circulation of printed material—tend to undermine the very possibility of authorial self-fashioning. Even in some of his earliest works, that is, Twain often finds that the very networks of circulation that challenge the antebellum craft model of authorship also fragment and undermine all claims to authority about any spatiality at all.

In the second half of Life on the Mississippi, Twain makes a generic switch from memoirist to travel writer, recounting his return to the river as a passenger in the spring of 1882. If Twain establishes his authority on “textual experience” here, he also focuses on textuality itself as evidence of the way the South in particular has overcome its feudal, merchant-capital, spatially-limited past. For example, Twain is at pains to praise the newspapers of New Orleans. Writing that newspapers were “not a striking feature” of
antebellum New Orleans, Twain insists that New Orleans now “get[s] the new, cost what it may” and that an 1882 contained “forty pages; seven columns to the page; two hundred eighty columns in all; fifteen hundred words to the column; an aggregate of four hundred and twenty thousand words”—almost, Twain adds, “three times as many words” as in *Life on the Mississippi* itself (303). Yet, Twain also contends that postbellum New Orleans “editorial work is not hack-grinding, but literature.” This claim on the part of “literature” and against “hack-grinding” would seem incongruous alongside his praise of the purely quantitative and economic fecundity of New Orleans’s news industry, if it were not for the implicit argument throughout *Life on the Mississippi* that “hack-grinding” is to be condemned not for its industrial or capitalist origins, but for the way it hijacks textual productivity in the name of shopworn rhetoric and cant. The glowing praise of New Orleans’s journalists in the second part of the book can be contrasted with the first part’s odd depiction of the distribution of “religious tracts” by antebellum steamboat clerks (103-104). Clerks, writes Twain, exploited the scarcity of printed matter on the river to propagate the faith to “small-fry rascals,” the crews of keelboats and flatboats taking advantage of the spring floodwaters. Scarcity of text, resulting from the backward state of production and distribution, turns this scene into a parody of medieval religion, the clerks disseminating religious doctrine *ex cathedra*, as it were, and playing jackleg bishop to the pilot’s king. Here again, the grotesque comedy arises from the archaic and premodern “mixed up with” the progressive and enlightened, from medieval and superstitious practices imposed on nineteenth-century literacy by spatial underdevelopment.

Twain, then, praises textual productivity as an antidote for the persistence of literary commonplace and cant while hailing the abolition the privilege of place (both literally and socially speaking) by technical means; hence the fulsome acclaim for the coming of the
railroad, which, along with streetcars and sanitary sewers, has simultaneously inaugurated a more national spatiality in such places as St. Louis, Natchez, and New Orleans and begun to flush out the last remains of stagnant premodern culture. Twain makes this linking of inscriptive and spatial fluidity and fecundity even more explicit with his attack on the railway pass in Chapter XL, “Castles and Culture.” The passage criticizing the of distribution of “dead-head passes” as (tacit) bribes to influential passengers revives, once again, the specter of a rigidly hierarchical and inefficient medievalism by labeling the bribe-takers “objects of charity,” “chattel,” and the “railroad company’s pauper[s]” (298). Decrying the “quite common” practice of “(otherwise) respectable Americans [begging] for passes, Twain then conjures a railway image of “one, or two, or half a dozen, well-dressed and well-appearing persons exhibit[ing] to the conductor” their passes, all the while abjectly enduring the official’s “searching questions.” Evoking the earlier scene of the distribution of religious tracts by the river clerks to the wretched boatmen, this passage portrays railroad passengers as debased recipients of the scarce paper held by the railroads. Seemingly going against the grain of the book’s stark contrasts of pre- and postwar spatiality, it suggests that railroad passes reinscribe an archaic and foreign social hierarchy within the otherwise inherently progressive railroad system.

However, in The Gilded Age, Twain made the railroad itself a metonymy for both corruption and the kind of humbug associated in the later book with antebellum spatiality, and, by implication, with the “gilded” steamboats. Much of the satire in The Gilded Age, in fact, is aimed at corrupt “internal improvements” schemes designed to swindle the federal government. Moreover, textual production figures much more ambiguously here. Besides ridiculing both the railroad pass and religious journalism as vehicles for corrupt politics—used
respectively as bribes and pious “uplift” whitewash for pork and boondoggles—Twain explicitly singles out the proliferation of printed material as a corrupt practice. When the wayward and incompetent “engineer” Henry Briarly—who has already made good use of fraudulent and fanciful maps, charts, petitions, and “a copper-plate card with ‘Engineer-in-Chief’ on it” (197) to help secure a Congressional appropriation for his river improvement scheme—visits the offices of the Columbus River Slack-Water Navigation Company in an attempt to draw funds for the operations at Stone’s Landing, he is told that the funds have been used up by printing costs. Among the printed materials used to swindle Congress and investors are “‘your maps, your tinted engravings, your pamphlets, your illuminated show cards, your advertisements in a hundred and fifty papers at ever so much a line’” (200). Likewise, when an imperious railroad conductor ejects Henry’s virtuous friend Philip Sterling from a train for the offense of coming to the aid of an insulted woman passenger, a local paper’s report about incident seems preposterously skewed in favor of the railroad, calling the unassuming Philip a “young sprig from the East” and describing the boorish conductor as “gentlemanly and efficient” (209). The polemic against railway passes in *Life*, then, resurrects the earlier text’s broad skepticism about the railroads. Moreover, if *Life* seems to treat literary production as a kind of corrosive against the corrupting gilt of humbug and medievalism, *Age* finds no contradiction between the two; in the earlier book, sham and theater are everywhere the printed word is—not just in the pages of Sir Walter Scott. If the railway pass diatribe comes as an exception to the general optimism of the second part of *Life*, it fits perfectly with the tenor of *Age*, which treats corruption and fraud as atavistic evils unmitigated by the progressive teleology of the later writing.
However, the markers of realist authenticity in Twain’s own textual practices in *Life on the Mississippi* also differ somewhat from those of *The Gilded Age*. In spite of its collaborative production, *The Gilded Age* represents itself as a unified fiction; the novel is a Dickensian social-realist satire with a clear beginning, middle and, end. *Life on the Mississippi*, conversely, is an autobiographical memoir putatively dominated by a unified narratorial voice; yet unlike *The Gilded Age*, it fairly revels in its own formal heterogeneity. Not only was the text as a whole produced piecemeal over a period of years, but the individual parts—especially in the second half—rely largely on quoted voices and texts. Arguably, this strategy of citation and documentation finds both its ultimate and most paradoxical expression in the inclusion of a “fac-simile” of the railroad pass itself. Here, Twain goes beyond the authority of citation, documentation, and textual interpretation and dissemination. The image of the railroad pass is not text about the pass, or even a pre-existing text cited and brought into combination with others; the image, on one level, is the thing itself. Yet, a “fac-simile” is by definition not the thing itself, but a reproduction—a mechanical reproduction and not a representation. The image of the pass in “Castles and Culture” is neither a writing about passes, nor a legitimate pass, nor a counterfeit pass; like the fingerprints that figure so prominently in both an earlier chapter of *Life* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, it is a material trace—emphatically printing and not writing—that blurs the distinction between text and thing. In fact, Twain’s use of the productivity of the printing press to disseminate the image resembles the way an attorney or reporter might distribute an incriminating photo among the public or a jury as evidence of a criminal or corrupt act. Not only do material traces provide direct evidence of hidden crimes, but the very act of reproducing the trace retrospectively establishes a distinction between the honest inscriptive labor of the reproducer and the covert and shamming practice of the author.
Just as Warner has the celebrity lawyer Braham in *The Gilded Age* introduce the letters of Major Lackland as material evidence in support of his otherwise sensationalistic and sentimental insanity defense of Laura Hawkins, producing a material trace can establish good faith, demonstrating that impartial, objective, and rational detective work has led to an account of events (397). Moreover, the image of the pass, is freely available, like a ticket, to anyone who has the cover price of a copy of *The Gilded Age*. Conversely, the pass itself, marked, as Twain points out, “‘Account of Supreme Court,’” is also explicitly marked as not transferable, and good only “when countersigned by J.H. PHYFE” (298). These proper names, which overtly attest to the infungible character of the pass, also make the pass a contract establishing a covert and personal yet hierarchic relation between the railroad operator and the bearer. But image of the pass, like a copy of *Life on the Mississippi*, is infinitely fungible, which means that no imperious agent of Twain will ask the reader “a string of searching questions” establishing the right to either the book’s use value or its exchange value.

In simply exhibiting the trace of the paper instrument of the corrupt railway pass, then, Twain reaches the *ne plus ultra* of his authorial strategy in the 1882 chapters of *Life on the Mississippi*. For, as Twain goes beyond producing a rhetorical text to producing the evidence, the trace, of the thing itself, he simultaneously seems to announce his own labor as the honest production of a fungible good and as not (corporeal) labor at all. In simply placing before our eyes the image of the railway pass, Twain makes his own work infinitely available, as if to ensure his own personal accountability for the value of the book; on the other hand, Twain’s labor, to the extent that it is not rhetoric, does nothing more than divert the material trace from its normal and otherwise automatic path from printing plate to bearer. More properly speaking, the trace usually follows an automatic path, like a regular ticket; but when such a path is
interrupted by the intervention of the railway official J. H. Phyfe, who arbitrarily determines who can and cannot be a bearer of the pass, a personal, artificial, and feudal hierarchy is imposed on what ought to be a matter of markets and exchange. Twain, then, merely restores the inherent and “natural” iterativity to the image, returning it to free circulation; he therefore performs the ideology that he wants to advocate—that, as we would say today, information wants to be free (even if books and tickets want to be paid for). It is a game of one-upsmanship with printing presses, with Twain cannily performing the keen detective work of sorting the data into signal and noise and transmitting the former.

Here, the space of textual production becomes the “control room”—the antecedent to the hacker’s workstation, the spy’s listening post, the scientific crime lab—that the steamboat’s pilot house ought to have been, but could not be because of the limits to the pilot’s control over the apparatus as well as the physical limits to the steamboat’s speed and geographical range. Michel de Certeau calls this space the “nowhere of paper” (135) in front of which “every child is put in the position of the industrialist, the urban planner, the Cartesian philosopher” (134). But while de Certeau writes of “trac[ing] on the page trajectories that sketch out words, sentences, and finally a system,” Twain in his railway pass polemic experiments with going beyond composing words and sentences to directly presenting the things that bear the “compositions” of others—directly intervening in the system by reordering it materially. This idea, then, presupposes not just the “paper nowhere” of generalized literacy or even the mercantile basis for the dissemination of printed matter, but the technical means for the mass production of texts. Moreover, since this control-room labor simply intervenes in a process that is otherwise fully automatic (save the corrupt intervention of the railway official), it becomes a kind of reading that is immediately writing; it is intellectual labor with
immediate material consequences. It becomes precisely the kind of work that characterizes Lukacs’s specialized virtuoso, a kind of cybernetic mastery that imagines itself as somehow both utterly outside the system of fixed hierarchies (like that between the pass’s bearer and J. H. Phyphe) and infinitely able to act within it. Finally, this kind of labor goes beyond the labor of the steamboat pilot by occupying a virtual social place that is itself infinitely fungible; conversely, while the pilot contributes to the production of motion, his place in the division of labor is doubly limited by the same factors that limit the steamboat itself. Howard Horwitz has written that in the first part of Life, this kind of automaticity is in fact ascribed to piloting itself: “Piloting interpretation is work that is not work, mastery that is ease, power that is effortlessness” (256). However, as we have already seen, Life challenges this very ideology, showing pilot’s labor to be automatic interpretation that fails to realize itself as production; the pilot’s reading is automatic, but it is not automatic writing. Twain’s detective work in the matter of the railroad pass, however, overcomes this limitation. If, as Edgar J. Burde writes, “writing is [Twain’s] substitute for piloting” (881), he also seems not only to want to give his readers an imaginative steamboat surpassing the real one, but he also seems to strive to produce a book—with is name inscribed upon it—that can do things and go places the steamboat could not. In fact, what Twain wants is to make a book that, unlike the inscriptive productions of some contemporary southern authors, will have more than a “slight currency”—with all of that word’s implications of both exchange and fluency (Life 328). Twain, that is, wants to have his name affixed to a book that will “[go] upon crutches no longer, but upon wings” which will “carry it swiftly all about America and England, and through the great English reprint publishing houses of Germany” (328-329), like the books of Joel Chandler Harris and George Washington Cable. The well-written book—the book
stripped of “mediaeval chivalry-silliness”—will work on its own, or in conjunction with the presses, without any help from the author himself, who works by paring away and combining, not by adding material. Twain’s language of mobility and speed facilitated by the \textit{literal} operation of the printing press here suggests that scraping away the drag and friction—the gilding—from writing will streamline inscription itself, allowing its iteration to become authentically productive.

For a moment, at least, it seems as if Twain has found a way to resolve the problem of inscriptive proliferation as it appears in \textit{The Gilded Age}; the humbug and counterfeit propagated by means of paper are to be countered by yet more paper. Not simply text instead of experience, nor merely a pragmatic and objective way of reading instead of a romantic and sentimental one—but a kind of efficiency and automaticity of textual production itself, an authorship located more in the virtual space of the flowchart than the imaginary space of theater. Invention rather than dramaturgy, and scientific management more than either, seem to be Twain’s models. By a kind of reflexive turn, Twain works here not only to represent, but to instantiate, the replacement of the production of spectacle by the spectacle of production. However, problems nonetheless begin to appear later in the book, anticipating the resurgent skepticism of \textit{A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court} and, especially, \textit{Pudd’nhead Wilson}. Much of the time, this skepticism is only hinted at, and even disavowed. An example is one of the first chapters added to the original “Old Times” sketches for the 1883 book, Chapter XXIV, “My Incognito Is Exploded.” Here, Twain poses as an eastern naïf in order to elicit from the pilot of the \textit{Gold Dust} the kinds of tall tales he himself must have told passengers as a pilot. Twain writes in knowing judgment of the young pilot’s “tranquil spool of lies” (178), wondering patronizingly if the pilot “was going to rupture his invention” but
admitting that his pretense “always stood the strain, and he pulled through all right” (179). If, in the first part of the book, Twain pits the pilot as the cosmopolitan against the overawed rubes of the backcountry, here he tries at first to preserve the scheme by inverting it. Twain, as a new kind of privileged interpreter, takes the pilot himself as a quaint rustic whose speech can be profitably converted into regional humor. However, the *Gold Dust* pilot turns the tables on Twain by revealing that he has known all along about Twain’s imposture:

> “Here!” (calling me by name), “*you* take her and lie a while—*you’re* handier at it than I am. Trying to play yourself for a stranger and an innocent!—why, I knew you before you had spoken seven words; and I made up my mind to find out what was your little game. It was to *draw me out*. Well, I let you, didn’t I? Now take the wheel and finish the watch; and next time play fair, and you won’t have to work your passage.” (183)

The humor of the pilot’s re-reversing the positions of Twain’s “game” is not the whole story, however. Certainly, Twain is upstaged by the pilot; but Twain’s mistake is in underestimating both the pilot’s literary competence and the ubiquity of his own reputation. In an uncanny way, his literary product has, by iterating itself beyond all limits, obstructed his ability to perform the masquerade that allows him to gather the raw material for his next book, a masquerade now necessary because he is neither an anonymous eastern journalist nor (any longer) a pilot. However, the game of one-upsmanship here cannot be settled by recourse to a privileged place of knowing, because both men are equally well positioned to benefit from “textual experience.” A literate regional subject like the *Gold Dust* pilot, who can parody the expected role of the exaggerating steamboatman precisely because this stereotyped has been so thoroughly disseminated by the book industry, has already combined the competencies of
direct experience and ironic citationality. Moreover, while Twain derives literary value from the anecdote, he does so only by ironically representing his own distance from “life on the Mississippi” and irrevocably and indefinitely perpetuating the process by which his authority shifts from “direct” to “textual” experience; paradoxically, he thereby continues the erosion of his privileged place as a local informant among his (potential) market competitors, even as textual competence itself was to have compensated for the loss of the value of his steamboatman’s knowledge.

The game of one-upsmanship here ends in a stalemate that threatens Twain’s own position as a privileged interpreter of both the frontier and antebellum American history. Not long after his encounter with the Gold Dust pilot, Twain sees a steamer named for himself; the incongruence of this observation and the half-hearted attempt at humor by which he tries to justify it highlight Twain’s ambivalence about “this species of honor” and amplify the ironic flavor of the earlier episode. Here we see Twain’s name being “carr[ied] all about America,” proliferating seemingly automatically. The steamboat bearing his name is both evidence and agent of the marketplace success of Twain’s books. At the same time, however, the material form of the name also literally associates the name “Twain” with the riverboat, and hence to the antiquated riverboat system. The steamboat rewrites Twain’s nostalgia while diluting the force of his satire, suggesting that the market success of a book is not the same thing as communicative effectiveness. As the anecdote of the Gold Dust pilot shows how Twain’s role as a privileged realist interpreter has been undermined by the widespread dissemination of realist ways of knowing, the story of the steamboat Mark Twain reveals the degree to which market success can work to limit the ways a book can be read.
We know Twain was ambivalent about these possibilities. Although he frequently and vigorously polemicized against the power of public opinion, even arguing that (in contrast to the steamboat pilot) “writers of all kinds are manacled servants of the public” (*Life* 122), he also embraced the theatricality and notoriety of his public authorship, indeed earning much of his celebrity as a man of letters not from the books themselves, but from the lecture circuit. Twain’s fictions, however, reveal a great deal of anxiety about the literary mode of presenting the body and voice as a trace of experience, as opposed to producing textual traces of the world. After Twain praises Joel Chandler Harris’s fiction for its potential to go “upon wings,” for example, he nevertheless recounts that Harris “deeply disappointed” a group of children at a public appearance by being white—that is, by not being Uncle Remus (330). On the other hand, Twain himself repeatedly calls Harris “Uncle Remus” in *Life on the Mississippi* and points out what an “easy trick” it was for him and Cable to vocally perform their own texts for the young audience. The choice Twain, Cable, and Harris face here is either to perform to public expectations or to be effaced in favor of those expectations. These authors, who strive to overcome the institutional and spatial limitations of a theatrical model of authorship by adopting the Lukac’s ideal of the specialized (exual) virtuoso—the journalist-detective-technician—find themselves trapped by their audience’s reception, and by the need to have a reception which marks their textual competence as successful, thereby confirming the market value of their work.

As early as *The Gilded Age*, Twain hinted at the difficulty of keeping these two models apart, of distinguishing between success in the “nowhere of paper” and the social world of fixed roles, theatricality, and traditional narratorial techniques. In *Age*, the scheming ingénue Laura Hawkins uses a fragment of Congressman Trollop’s own speech—supposedly written
by her covertly, but in fact written by her friend Mr. Buckstone—to procure the congressman’s cooperation in the Knobs Industrial University bill. Much as Twain uses the railroad company’s own paper ephemera to confront the railroad’s practices, Laura turns the congressman’s hired speech against him, threatening to embarrass him by simply disseminating the incriminating fragment. However, only Laura’s successful performance as bonne vivante and coquette gives her access to the inner workings of Congress in the first place, and her inscriptive schemes, in the end, seem to serve no other purpose than to allow her to continue that performance; if Laura works almost effortlessly to expose humbug, to turn its traces back on itself, she herself is almost as much of a fraud as her sponsor, Beriah Sellers. In The Gilded Age, writing is so corrupt that even the mere production of traces, even while performing its corrosive work on sham and humbug, must, in the last instance participate in the economy of fraud. Hence, even when the newspapers reporting on Laura’s shooting of her betrayer, the Confederate Colonel Selby, confine themselves to the simple collation of facts of the crime—including “diagrams illustrating the scene of the shooting, and views of the hotel and street, and portraits of the parties” (333) along with “encyclopaedic information about other similar murders and shootings” (334)—they serve the purposes of hokum, which in this case means the refiguring of this information onto sentimental, theatrical, or mythic and pseudo-erudite narratives. This contradiction extends to the courtroom scenes themselves; for if the theatrical celebrity lawyer Braham must produce the traces of the Lackland correspondence in order to demonstrate his theory of Laura’s congenital madness, his presentation to the jury must rely on sensationalism and the topos of “tragedy” to convince the jury (391-392). Consequently, the meaning of the clearest material evidence produced by Braham—the Lackland letters suggesting a congenital (as we would say, genetic)
predisposition to madness—is actually obscured in his presentation to the jury. In other words, the letters make inherited insanity a plausible material cause of Laura’s behavior, but the proliferation of “efficient” causes for the murder—explosion of the steamboat *Amaranth* that separated her from her parents, her betrayal by Selby, the encouragement of the jealous Harry Brierly—reduce the letters to one element in a confusing mix of the plausible and implausible, retrospectively seeming to have confirmed, to the satisfaction of the law, the implication that Laura inherited madness from her natural father, but making the insanity defense itself rely on a narrative that makes Laura a melodramatic heroine.

The problem for the jury in Laura’s trial is to determine whether madness drove Laura Hawkins to kill Col Selby; the equally vexing problem for the reader, on the other hand, is teasing out the knots of reasoning and imagination that actually convinces the jury to acquit.

Courts of law, writes de Certeau, are precisely the kind of place where the “paper nowhere” intersects the real social world:

In order for the law to be written on bodies, an apparatus is required that can mediate the relations between the former and the latter. From the instruments of scarification, tattooing, and primitive initiation to those of penal justice, tools work on the body. [. . .] Today the instruments range from the policeman’s billyclub to handcuffs and the box reserved for the accused in the courtroom. These tools compose a series of objects whose purpose is to inscribe the force of the law on its subject, to tattoo him in order to make him demonstrate the rule, to produce a “copy” that makes the norm legible. This series forms an in-between; it borders on the law (it is
the law that provides it with weapons) and it aims at the body (in order to mark it). (141)

De Certeau, however, might have added that this corporeal inscriptive process itself mediates between the social imaginary of winners, losers, victims, and villains, and the purely symbolic realm of circulation, equivalence, and accumulation of things. Writing itself bears an operation in both these registers and intervenes on both sides, as inscription and as well as narration; writing is also intervened in from both sides. It can either be interpreted, troped, summarized, explained, or it can be encoded, edited, concealed, displayed, copied, and recorded; it can be made to both mean differently and do differently. According to de Certeau’s reasoning, trials “[refer] on one side to the symbolic corpus and on the other to carnal beings”; but trials also make “carnal beings,” by either imprisoning them or by setting them free, refer on one side to facts and, on the other, to narrations. Nor can this process come to an end; for the real “arbitrary” choice to either set free or incarcerate—a choice based on ascribing a coherent interpretation to the inconclusive facts—becomes, in turn, a fact caught in a fantasmatic net.

This is, in fact, exactly what happens in *The Gilded Age*. The jury’s choice to set Laura free retrospectively validates Braham’s insanity defense; the trail also produces the immediate transference of the audience’s positive imaginary identification to Braham himself, to his heroic defense. It is as if the public imagination of Laura as a woman driven mad by Selby’s villainy is cancelled by her public acquittal—an acquittal based, at least technically, on her unsound mental state, not her victimization. This cancellation simultaneously bars Laura from resuming her career as a manipulative ingénue (because the “fact” of the madness behind the performance has been exposed) and makes her guilt an open question again (because the “real meaning” of those facts is open to interpretation). As far as the law is concerned, Braham’s
defense robs Laura of her capacity for either guilt or innocence because it “essentializes” her captivating mercuriality as pathology (if not guilt); at the same time, the theatricality of this defense allows this mercuriality to persist in the public imagination as an oscillation between a judgment of guilt and one of innocence. As Twain has really become a quaint relic of the steamboat era, as Harris has really become Uncle Remus, Laura has really become either a scheming murderess or a helpless victim, the oscillation between the two now completely out of her control.

Laura Hawkins’s story in *The Gilded Age* demonstrates the risk of being arrested in the social, hierarchical world, despite exercising inscriptive competence in the “nowhere of paper”—precisely because value only becomes property in the social imaginary. The possibility of owning what is “won” presupposes the risk of being “owned,” of being assigned a place, of becoming fixed and named. Laura’s fate reflects, perhaps, Twain’s anxiety over being associated too closely, through a kind of typecasting, with the very rubes and confidence men he satirized. On the other hand, if Laura represents the possibility of becoming limited by celebrity, a possibility suggested by the encounter with the steamboat *Mark Twain* in *Life*, the steamboat episode in the later book also evokes the opposite problem—that of being unable to realize the value of literary labor, not because of the limits of its agency, but because of the dilution of its value by the fecundity of inscriptive production. In one case, the author and inscription are too closely and irrevocably tied; in the other, the restless motion of inscription, the logic of its political economy, obliterates its ties to authors. This second case is illustrated by “The Pilot’s Monopoly,” Chapter XV of *Life on the Mississippi*. Here, Twain explains how river pilots sought to ameliorate the rigors of their work by training “cubs,” or apprentices, to share the work of steering riverboats. This practice, in turn, led to a glut of
trained labor on the Mississippi: “[T]his growing swarm of new pilots presently began to undermine the wages [of pilots] in order to get berths. Too late—apparently—the knights of the tiller perceived their mistake” (129). The proliferation of noisy information—characterized by ominously catastrophic language like “swarm” and “undermine”—resembles the similar proliferation of facts about the Selby murder in *Age*, and the pilots’ difficulty in interpreting those facts repeats the problem of Laura’s jury. Moreover, the rhetoric of the pilots’ realizing their predicament “[t]oo late” suggests the atavism of the epistemological techniques of the “knights of the tiller,” undermining the sense of the pilots as privileged interpreters. The pilots disastrously misread the economic currents that both resemble and differ from the river currents.

Much as hard-won experience teaches the pilot how to read the river, however, this experience has a similar heuristic effect on the way they read their own economic circumstances. Twain recounts a scheme executed by the boatmen to found a trade union—a union that initially seems to fail until the end of the slow summer shipping season, when “business doubled and tripled, and an avalanche of Missouri, Illinois, and Upper Mississippi boats came pouring down to take a chance at the New Orleans trade,” and shipping companies are forced to hire affiliated pilots (130). “The laugh was beginning to turn the other way, now” (131), writes Twain, and although some shippers continue to use cheaper unorganized labor, the pilots’ “association” eventually enact “a rule that its members should never, under any circumstances whatever, give information about [the condition of the river] channel to any ‘outsider’” (131-132). The promulgation of this rule means that if the “association” cannot immediately monopolize labor, they can pool their resources in a way the unorganized pilots cannot: “The [affiliated] pilot who had formerly been obliged to put up with seeing a shoal
place once or probably twice a month, had a hundred sharp eyes to watch it for him now, and bushels of intelligent brains to tell him how to run it” (133). By reducing wages, ship owners used their better understanding of the shifting labor market to subordinate the pilots and their craft knowledge of the vicissitudes of the river and its channels. The pilots, in turn, turn the tables on their employers—who are taken off guard by the “avalanche” of traffic in the summer season—by developing an informational network—“a hundred sharp eyes” connected to “bushels of intelligent brains”—to distribute knowledge of the river, essentially socializing and industrializing their erstwhile purely local and personal knowledges. According to a standard reading of this passage, the pilots temporarily beat the owners at their own game, but at the cost of (again) undermining both the feudal structure and the corporeal immediacy of the pilot’s craft. According to Horwitz, “[s]ince it organized informal cooperation into an efficient network of communication, and thus streamlined communication between water and pilot, the Association insured individual control over property, thereby enabling Twain to imagine the pilot as an absolute monarch, or even a super-regal authority” (259). However, unlike the authority of the traditional, guild-like, and filiative piloting institution, writes Burde, “the power of the association is collective and economic rather than personal and moral”; moreover, the Association “depend[s] upon a power greater than theirs to defeat the boat owners—that of the insurance underwriters” (884). Consequently, “[w]ith individual talent having thus been replaced by economic institutions as the chief source of authority in piloting,” the celebrated independence of the pilot is itself defeated by a necessary collectivization of steamboat labor. Where Horwitz sees the matter of the Association as the location of an aporia in Twain’s rhetoric—ascribing independence promiscuously to techniques of collectivization—Burde sees the passage as expressing anxiety over the
confounding of “the power of intuitive knowledge and the corresponding sovereignty of the individual” (884).

Burde and Horwitz, then, have identified the fundamental ambiguity in this passage—Twain’s simultaneous praising of the Association as an instrument of independence and description of it as corrosive of the traditions that had hitherto maintained that independence—as either a personal ambiguity or a rhetorical inconsistency. In fact, however, whatever inadvertent contradictions we ascribe to Twain, Twain himself identifies the textual strategies of the Association as both technically and socially contradictory, and even implies that these contradictions were partially to blame for the making the “association and the noble science of piloting [. . .] things of the dead and pathetic past” (137). Burde and Horwitz both overlook the fact that the game of privileged information had two technical components: the ruled and columned “blanks” used to record pilots’ observation as formalized data, and the system of locked strongboxes, to which only Association members possessed keys, in which these forms were cached. The first element of the scheme, by inaugurating a “nowhere of paper,” deterritorializes the pilot’s interpretive work—first by splitting the place of interpretation between the busy pilot-house and the tranquil wharfboats where the strongboxes were kept, and secondly by breaking down the interpretation itself into the material production of quantitative data—inscriptions—and qualitative observations. The “‘report’ system” (134) thereby not only collectivizes “a hundred sharp eyes” and “bushels of intelligent brains,” but in practice trains eyes and brains to work in new ways, allowing brains to sort out the work of other brains and eyes and reinterpret the information anew. This element of the “‘report’ system” facilitates the technical mastery of piloting; the strongboxes, however, reterritorialize the data, limiting the number of eyes that can read the forms. The strongboxes perform the
same function as the “countersignature” on the railway pass: It makes infungible, scarce, and unique something that ought to be—and is, in its very materiality—fungible and iterable. The belief that this system of locked strongboxes would reterritorialize data as property by confining the iteration of inscriptions was, however, arguably the downfall of the system. For, although Twain writes that “when it came to forbidding information about the river,” the strongbox system effectively excluded non-Association pilots (132), Twain surely knew very well that combined methods of mathematical formalization and mechanical inscription had been in use on the river for some time when he became an apprentice pilot in 1857. Louis C. Hunter points out, for example, that “[b]y 1850 the expanding telegraph network had joined the larger river cities in the West, and by making available up-to-the-hour information on the stage and condition of the river at the numerous steamboat centers it proved great value in the planning of trips” (246). Additionally, in conjunction with the telegraphs—which further deterritorialized inscription and made its dissemination at the speed of electric current possible—antebellum western newspapers published “reports on the stage of the river and related weather conditions with occasional reference to obstructions and channel conditions,” even further deterritorializing inscription by making it public and infinitely iterable. By 1871, reports Hunter, all pilots used the strongbox system, demonstrating the futility, in an era of industrialized inscriptive practices, of extracting value from information by locking it away.

The historical irony here is that the turn to textualization inaugurated by the pilot’s association anticipates the technical rationalization of river work lamented in the second part of *Life*. However, as Twain points out, the advent of war, the growth of railroads, and introduction of the towboat-barge combination—all events reflecting both the inexorable development of industrialized transport and the conquest of space by time by industrial
capital—together bring about the collapse of the Mississippi steamboat industry itself, and the pilot’s association along with it: “[A]nd behold, in the twinkling of an eye [ . . . ] the association and the noble science of piloting were things of the dead and pathetic past” (84).

The textualization of the pilot’s experience, the conversion of his knowledge of the river into traces operating in the symbolic, escapes the propertarian, reterritorializing techniques of the pilots; the boxes in which formalized inscriptions are contained become Pandora’s boxes when opened by capital. For, the same techniques by which the steamboat owners not only collectivized and industrialized their information about the river, but did so on a mass scale and thereby countered the Association’s monopoly on information, are those by which the railroads accomplished their unseating of the steamboat system. The railroad train, for example, because it is always in contact with its artificial right-of-way, formed what Wolfgang Schivelbusch has called a “machine ensemble” (24), a single continent-spanning apparatus incorporating interchangeable technical and technosocial elements; because of the railroad’s thoroughly technical nature, the telegraph could, in turn, be yoked to it not merely as a means of disseminating text, but, as Armand Mattelart points out, as means of technical control (51-52). As the telegraph intervenes directly in the control of the railway, greatly enhancing both speed, safety, and regularity of its operations, so text itself, in the form of timetables, rate schedules, and route maps, becomes an essential part of the total machine ensemble. In turn, as Janice A. Radway has written, the rail-dominated system of commodity production revolutionized the way texts themselves were disseminated. As material commodities began to “circulate more rapidly, so too did the increasing quantities of information necessary for the coordination of the previously distinct processes of manufacture and distribution” (131). Consequently, the production of this information became more industrialized itself:
By the early years of the nineteenth century, the pen had long been as a technology of information reproduction and distribution. [ . . . ] As new technologies made their way into manufacturing, however, they were also adapted to the processes of print production and thus to the task of information dissemination as well. [ . . . ] At that point the speed of information production, reproduction, and distribution was fully mediated by machine and thereby magnified substantially, dialectically enabling and fostering the market integration taking place elsewhere in the American economy.

The report system, then, participates in both the development of the steamboat system and its demise. Within the horizon of the steamboat system, it seems like a revolution in both the way the worker manages his own labor-power and the way capital organizes its division of labor; from the perspective of postbellum industrialized railroad spatiality, however, the report system seems trapped by the limits of its petit-bourgeois, merchant-capitalist reliance on individual possession and scarcity. Like the steamboat system itself, the report system fails to establish a permanent market advantage because it mixes progressive deterritorializing and archaic reterritorializing spatial strategies; the deterritorialization it inaugurates literally overflows the reterritorialization that it tries to impose. To this extent, then, the historical demise of the pilot’s power inverts the path of Laura Hawkins’s fall from influence and mastery. In the case of the pilots, capital’s power drives a continual process of deterritorialization—a process which, in turn, drives all reterritorializations in the direction of surplus-value extracted by capital itself, obliterating the propertarian claims of the pilots based on “feudal” craft-labor. This process means that, in the last instance, when the heroic or
“knightly” independent producer renounces humbug and fraud in favor of reason and productivity, he then must face the consequence of a rationalized division of inscriptive labor. The transportation worker loses his feudal privilege and takes up a kind of labor somewhere between that of an amanuensis (or scrivener) or advertising copywriter and the purely managerial labor of Lukac’s specialized virtuoso, of the editorial compiler and collator. *The Gilded Age*, however, insists upon the pitfalls of not entering into this system, of remaining trapped in the theatrical, specular, imaginary, fraudulent, and feudal spatiality of the antebellum period; for if the steamboaters face the choice of either a proletarianizing process of deskilling or, preferable but fraught with its own risks, a kind of virtual bourgeoisification as a competitor on the market for “immaterial labor,” those who resist this choice risk becoming no producers at all, of being turned into representations themselves. The choice, in either case, is to be subsumed by the restless movement of capital, to end up as a mere functionary in the technical service of that movement, or, worse still, as a mere function of that movement, a living stereotype, a figure of what has been left behind in the imaginary drama of capital’s progressive advance.

**The nigger roosting on the safety valve**

Scholars have observed that both the public imaginary and scientific practice in the nineteenth century struggled to make sense of steamboat explosions. Hunter writes that “[t]he steamboat gave the predominantly rural population of the western country its first experience not only with industrial machinery but with the hazards that have always accompanied the introduction of machinery” (271); moreover, “[t]he unexpected suddenness and devastating force of steamboat explosions held a morbid fascination for the public, attracting greater
attention and arousing more concern than other disasters on an equal and even larger scale” (282). In his extensive study of the antebellum rhetoric of exploding steamboats, R. John Brockmann suggests that in the years before the American Civil War “American were caught in a paradoxical feeling that steamboats were simultaneously one of the first technological breakthroughs of the 19th century [ . . . ]—yet they were also instruments of unprecedented destruction and death” (2-3). On one hand, according to Brockmann, people saw the steamboat much as Uncle Dan’l (and not only Uncle Dan’l) sees it in The Gilded Age—as both a promethean and all-but “almighty” machine and a metonymy for the beneficent and inexorable progress of machines in general. Simultaneously, they saw it much as Braham portrays it in his defense of Laura Hawkins in the same novel—as a site, symbol, and cause of upheaval, catastrophe, contingency, and trauma. However, Brockmann’s most intriguing thesis is that this very dichotomy in the public imaginary entered into the scientific and legislative discourses, and the associated inscriptive productions, that attempted to intervene in the problems of steam navigation in general and boiler explosions in particular. If journalistic, literary, and popular oral discourses sensationalized and sentimentalized both the technological power of the steamboat and the hazards of explosions, congressional inquiries were supposed to objectively investigate these matters, collect facts, and make rational conclusions. Brockmann argues however, that the haphazard and conflicting proliferation of interview transcripts, lab reports, and collations of historical data were quite quickly converted into a narrative which minimized the inherent technical shortcomings of the ships, and of high-pressure steam engines in particular, preserving the technical omnipotence of the steamship and placing blame on the recklessness and incompetence of ship crews. Brockmann’s reading suggests a vicious rhetorical circle in which the public’s exaggerated fears of steamboat
explosions prompted scientific and governmental intervention, which in the face of general ignorance of the fine details of the thermodynamic, metallurgical, and hydraulic principles involved in steam power, attributed boiler failures to a deficiency on the part of the crew; since legislation enacted on the basis of such narratives failed to address technical problems, it generally also failed to prevent explosions (which, however, were never as frequent as they were believed to be); this failure, in turn, enhanced the mystery of explosion and further exaggerated anxieties about them.

Brockmann does not argue that antebellum lawmakers and scientists were unaware of steamboats’ purely technical problems; instead he claims that they simply failed to understand these problems well enough to intervene in them, and in the absence of understanding, relied on a narrative that was understandable—one that placed blame on the poor work of the pilots and engineers. Brockmann points to Andrew Jackson’s contrast between the “great improvements which are everywhere being made in the machinery employed” in steam navigation and “the criminal negligence on the part of those by whom the vessels are navigated” (qtd. in Brockmann 44) in his 1833 State of the Union address to demonstrate how “the complexity of the problem” as presented in the original reports “was simplified and made a case of criminal negligence” (44-45). In Brockmann’s reading of the rhetoric of steamboat explosions, the purely scientific inscriptive project of collating data and disseminating measurements fails to produce meaning; on the other hand producing meaning means finding a villain, ascribing “negative” credit or debt, for a failure—even if this meaning is known very well to be almost useless in materially intervening into the problem. The scapegoating of steamboat workers by legislators, then, oddly repeats and inverts the way Twain treats steamboat labor in *The Gilded Age* and “Old Times on the Mississippi.” While
antebellum legislators took the view of Uncle Dan’l, reading the illegible complexity of the steamboat as sublime power and consequently seeing workers’ incompetence as a source of disorder, Twain sees the boats and their operations as sublimely disordered and intractable, thereby underscoring the heroic aspects of steamboat labor, which tamed the unruliness of the flawed and archaic apparatus.

Arguably, the second half of Life critiques this very process of displacing the ambiguity of the steamboat, and in particular the high-pressure steam engine, onto an oscillation between celebrating and condemning the steamboatmen. In the second half, the fate of the pilots is revealed as nothing more than the result of relentless and ineluctable historical and material forces, illegible and unpredictable but nonetheless deterministic. In other words, the demise of both the steamboat’s dominance and the romantic aura of piloting is effected by a process not unlike the operation of the steamboat itself—force driving inexorable forward motion, but also producing unpredictable and catastrophic change. Twain’s later perspective, then, adumbrates “naturalism’s” concern with implacable and mysterious forces, both social and natural, while attempting to model a kind of authorship that paradoxically escapes entrapment by these forces precisely by willingly and knowingly inserting itself into their operations. The contrast between specular antebellum theatricality and the disinterested formalized scientific inquiry that, instead of responding to the shock of steamboat disasters with sensational narration, merely coordinates and sorts traces, would seem to also parallel the distinction in Age between the sensational and theatric career of Laura Hawkins and the progressive and untraditional medical vocation of Ruth Bolton.

However, I want to argue that The Gilded Age fails to resolve this problem, that it is impossible to see either Ruth’s story or Laura’s story as an allegory of the kind of authorship
implicitly advocated in *Life on the Mississippi*. Moreover, this failure in *Age* spills over into *Life*, not in the least because the compulsive return to representing steamboat explosion also spills over from the earlier book into the later. In fact, when the lawyer Braham opens his defense of Laura, he rhetorically all but transforms her into a steamboat herself. First, Braham recalls to the jury the explosion that changed Laura’s life, separating her at childhood from her eastern parents and delivering her into the custody of the Hawkinses: “‘There [was] an explosion, one of those terrible catastrophes, which leave the imprint of an unsettled mind upon the survivors. Hundreds of mangled remains are sent into eternity. When the wreck is cleared away, this sweet little girl is found among the panic stricken survivors, in a scene of horror enough to turn the steadiest brain’” (391). In keeping with his usual confused and commingled rhetoric, Braham makes the spectacular imagery of the *Amaranth*’s explosion serve as both material catalyst and metaphor for Laura’s madness, supplying the jury with the details of how Laura’s life has been “‘the sport of fate and circumstances, hurried along through shifting storm and sun, bright with trusting innocence and anon black with heartless villainy, a career which moves on in love and desertion and anguish, always hovered over by the dark spectre of INSANITY’” (390-391). Braham, calling the shooting of Selby “one of those fearful accidents which are inscrutable to men and of which God alone knows the secret,” exculpates Laura according to two inconsistent principles. On one hand, Selby’s death is itself nothing more than a consequence of Laura’s accident; when Braham continues by arguing that “‘in this condition of affairs it needed but a spark—I do not say suggestion, I do not say hint—from this butterfly Brierly, this rejected rival, to cause the explosion’” (392), he turns Selby into the victim of a powder explosion that is the material consequence, however indirect, of a boiler accident. And yet, on the other hand this rhetoric also emphasizes the “villainy” of
Selby and the partial culpability of Brierly; in spite of the multiplication of material causes ("fate and circumstances"), Braham must nevertheless also introduce a multiplicity of moral justifications, rather plausibly calling the shooting "the just vengeance of Heaven" against Selby (392), but just as implausibly assigning blame to Brierly.

I want to emphasize that most of the satire here is directed to the theatricality of these moral arguments, to the way they are rhetorically mixed with the clinical question of Laura’s madness. Braham knows that despite the judge’s final instructions to the jury—that Laura is either guilty or innocent by reason of insanity—the jury will make its judgment based on its perception of her as villain or victim. Arguably, however, while Twain and Warner reject the sensationalism of the defense’s case, their story about Laura in fact embraces the imagery that renders her life as nothing more than a series of aftershocks of that steamboat explosion. Indeed, Laura herself, as the very corporealization of both deceptive, arresting humbug, and sublime motion, stands as an equivalent figure to the steamboat. From the very beginning, or at last since adolescence, Laura mixes and mingles the modes also combined in the steamboat. Her response to the rumors of her uncertain parentage consequent on the epistolary exchange between Major Lackland and Squire Hawkins is a combination of detective work—searching and sorting traces—and flights of "romantic" imagination. She uncovers the truth—or, importantly, only a partial truth—by "rummag[ing] long among boxes of musty papers relating to business matters of no interest to her" (74) and by "piec[ing] together" "[r]andom remarks here and there" (76); yet she also imagines herself "a heroine, now, with a mysterious father somewhere" (77). Twain explains the bifurcation of Laura’s subjectivity into, on one hand, relentless investigator and, on the other, sentimental heroine, by writing that Laura “had more than her rightful share of practical good sense, but still she was human; and to be human is to
have one’s little modicum of romance secreted away in one’s composition” (77). Humanity is here posed as the romantic flaw in a composition otherwise “practical”; Laura—human, all to human—is arguably much better off after her betrayal by Selby, when she takes on “a beauty in the knowledge of evil, a beauty that shines out in the face of a person whose inward life is transformed by some terrible experience,” when she takes on “a devil in her heart” (137). According to Twain’s formula, Selby’s betrayal inculcates a daemonic cynicism in Laura’s “heart”; but such cynicism is the foundation (until the reappearance of Selby) of her capacity to manipulate symbols, as opposed to merely being manipulated by narrations.

Susan K. Harris has argued that in ascribing such demonic characteristics to Laura, Twain and Warner “mandate that that Laura be interpreted as a fallen woman” (144). In fact, Harris argues that Twain employs four thematic modes in his portrayal of Laura: “as a figure of fallen innocence, as a victim, as a rebel, and as an alter-ego” (147). However, by making Laura’s project of self-making lead inexorably to her death, Harris writes, Twain “precluded self-creating female protagonists.” Moreover, “[i]f, Twain’s ideology implies, an ambitious female protagonist gets out of hand, kill her off” (150). Therefore, she concludes,

Beginning with a protagonist created as a type of fallen womanhood, in *The Gilded Age* Mark Twain proceeded to create a female outlaw who responded to male domination by herself assuming a male ethos. Within the male gestalt thus created, he relaxed his guard and let her become one of his literary alter-egos. He found, however, that in doing so he created a literary monster—a passionate dark woman who threatened to take over his text. [. . . ] But Twain never allows her to violate the male preserve. Rather, he uses his narrator’s omniscience to reverse the thrust of Laura’s development,
revoking her independence and re-invoking the innocence of her pre-pubertal days. (151)

Harris’s reading assigns to Twain the very imaginary intervention that I have already ascribed to the lawyer Braham—a character, as I have argued, who is himself ambiguously satirized for his dependence upon hackneyed and sentimental regional rhetoric in his defense of Laura. Arguably, the fallen woman and authorial ego Harris argues for are, if not one and the same, inextricably entwined; the struggle between being arrested in the social narrative imaginary and continuous circulation in a textualized world is, for Twain, the basic question of authorship. Harris is nevertheless quite correct to call Laura’s end a reversal of thrust, and an inevitable one, too, because once she is brought into the public eye by murdering Selby she is doomed to have her “thrust”—her being as a trickster, an interiorless void, an accident waiting to happen—deflected into the social imaginary, which is the precondition for either conviction or acquittal at the trail. But this interruption of thrust is brought about, even before Laura’s trial, by another contingent reterritorialization in the social imaginary—namely the national “reunion” which not only brings Selby to Washington, but which Selby is in the process of effecting by pursuing his cotton claims—which, as propertarian claims, seek to recuperate value which otherwise would have been liberated by the war. Selby’s very reappearance, then, signifies a dyad of liberation and recuperation that also marks both the possibilities and limits of Laura’s agency. Selby, after all, plies his claims on the grounds of being on one hand, as congressman’s wife Mrs. Schoonmaker says, not “‘unlike other people’” (272), but, on the other, of claiming a very peculiar kind of property, undergirded by a very peculiar institution, now outlawed everywhere, but formerly flourishing (but doomed) precisely because of its legality in one section of the US and illegality in another. Selby, in other words, depends on
reacquiring a portion of the value of his slaves’ labor because, the geographic upheaval of the Civil War having served the needs of capital, regional difference has become no longer an obstacle, but once again a part, of the operations of capital.

Laura’s spatial momentum evaporates because the same frontier which, in it closing, marked the end of the romance of the steamboat was also superceded by a new one in which North and South no longer competed for domination of western land, but cooperated in the industrial organization of western space. Selby, then, may be considered the last victim of the explosion of the *Amaranth*, a mangled body sent into eternity; Laura, on the other hand, is an early victim of the recrudescence by which old hierarchies have begun to reestablish themselves, *mutatis mutandis*, by the early 1870s. Selby’s appearance in Washington marks a historical moment when the possibilities of eternal remaking opened up by the Civil War begin to close down again, the moment at which emancipation begins to give way to national assent to Jim Crow, at which capital investment as a corrosive to the rule of southern Bourbons begins to give way to an alliance with New South boosters, at which progressive antiracism begins to give way to imperialist adventure abroad. Laura’s life, the very trajectory of her subjectivity, traces a pattern of that could be called one of desouthernization followed by resouthernization. When her regional identity, along with her family connection, is erased in the *Amaranth* explosion, Laura becomes the *vogelfrei* subject, the subject sent into eternity, both free to remake herself and free to be remade by others; adoption by the Hawkins family, as Braham’s rhetoric emphasizes, southerners her and places her in jeopardy of becoming a representation herself, while her (first) betrayal by Selby sets free the “demon” of placelessness again—a demon whose operations are signaled by the end of Laura’s manipulation by texts and the beginning of her manipulation of them. Finally, falling under
Selby’s spell in Washington again southernizes Laura, and this southernization is marked by her resorting to gunplay—a cultural practice, in the form of the duel, condemned in *Life on the Mississippi* in the same passage that critiques the railroad pass (299-300).

The language of both motionlessness and death dominates the representation of Laura after the murder. Laura “[makes] no resistance” (331) after shooting Selby; she afterward sits “shivering on her cot-bed in the darkness of a damp cell in the Tombs” (334); she enters the courtroom on the day of her trial “dressed in simple black” (382); and—after a brief promise of a “rapturous intoxication” on the lecture stage in the midst of “homelessness” (428-429)—she dies of heart failure, frozen and “framed” by the moonlight (431-432). If Harris sees Laura’s pathetic ruin and death registering Twain’s refusal to allow Laura fully to rehearse Huckleberry Finn’s “flight from entrapment and echoes” (145), then, the process of resouthernization, as both literal entrapment and spatial arrestment by and within the imaginary register, anticipates what happens to Jim in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Locked in Silas Phelp’s shed—which is marked, like a tomb, with a skull and crossbones—after escaping slavery, only to find that the currents of escape have taken him further south, Jim has been the object of so many southernizing narrations of both the propertarian and “feudal” kinds that, in the end, he has been captured, as it were, by moonshine; and it is not difficult to imagine him in his moonlit stillness, framed by the shadow of the shed’s “square window-hole” (*Adventures* 293). Both Laura and Jim have stories told about them, and both of them wind up in locked boxes; their problem is that they cannot get out, while the pilot’s sovereignty in “The Pilot’s Monopoly” is destroyed because the technical information he kept in his strongbox cannot be kept in.
Hence, beyond suggesting how the satire of race discourse in *Huckleberry Finn* parallels the treatment of gender discourse in *The Gilded Age*, this resemblance also points to a link between the rhetoric of race that appears only on the margins of both *The Gilded Age* and *Life on the Mississippi* and the figure of the steamboat that haunts both texts. The exploding steamboat, as narration or reflexive allusion to narration, reappears compulsively in *The Gilded Age* and *Life on the Mississippi*; but enslaved African workers rarely appear anywhere in either book, and when they do it is often in relation to steamboats. In *The Gilded Age*, after we have seen Uncle Dan’l not only worshipping the glory of the steamboat but tutoring his young white charges in this fetishism, we discover that his and his wife’s fate is to “pass from the auction-block into the hands of a negro trader and depart for the remote South to be seen no more by the family” (54). He who lives in the shadow of the technical almighty is doomed to die by it also; Uncle Dan’l’s fate merely anticipates the less brutal and more ambiguous, but equally irrevocable, resouthernization of Washington Hawkins and Beriah Sellars in the novel’s denouement. Uncle Dan’l may have been betrayed by his “white family,” but his fate is roughly the same of the rest of the Hawkinses; their failures all spring from a religious awe for the steamboat—an awe conditioned by the viewpoint of petit-bourgeois merchant capital which sees value as a consequence of arbitrage, and hence of the inherent value of locations. Uncle Dan’l and his wife wind up, like Jim, Laura, and the Hawkinses, boxed in, motionless, ineluctably tied to places.

I have already argued that the passage from *The Gilded Age* to *Life on the Mississippi*, and in the passage from “A Daring Deed” to “Racing Days,” Twain’s view of the steamboat moves from the theological fetishism of Uncle Dan’l (which really both mirrors and works to reproduce the fetishism of his white owners, as well as the young Clemens in “A Boy’s
Ambition”) in the opening chapters of Age, to the petit-bourgeois romanticization of the pilot’s skill in “A Daring Deed,” to the sublime spectacle of theatricality itself being sacrificed for speed in “Racing Days.” The second appearance of African-Americans in The Gilded Age, I argue, anticipates this very development; for if black men and women characters are mostly invisible and silent in the earlier book, black workers nevertheless figure prominently in one of its most sublime passages, and in circumstances that will be repeated in the later book. The explosion of the Amaranth which orphans Laura Hawkins occurs during its desperate race with the Boreas, and the passage rehearses the sublime yet comic representation of the steamboat race in “Racing Days”:

Soon the [Boreas] was plunging and quivering and screaming more madly than ever. But the Amaranth’s head was almost abreast the Boreas’s stern:

“How’s your steam, now, Harry?”

“Hundred and eighty-two, sir!”

“Break up the casks of bacon in the forrard hold! Pile it in! Levy on that turpentine in the fantail—drench every stick of wood with it!”

The boat was a moving earthquake by this time:

“How is she now?”

“A hundred and ninety-six and still a-swelling!—Water below the middle gauge-cocks!—carrying every pound she can stand!—nigger roosting on the safety-valve!”

“Good! How’s your draft?”
“Bully! Every time a nigger heaves a stick of wood into the furnace he goes out the chimney with it!” (33-34)

The black steamboat workers, to be sure, are portrayed with a degree of racist grotesquerie; but the humor of the image of the “nigger roosting on the safety-valve” reverses the specific way racism is used in the Uncle Dan’l passage. Uncle Dan’l, after all, misrecognizes the steamboat as “de Almighty”; conversely, there really is something Promethean about these men laboring with fire, turning it into speed, becoming themselves fire, and connecting their bodies to the material apparatus of the engine and thereby becoming the steamboat. The image of the enslaved black laborer augmenting the action of the safety valve works as both a grotesque racist image—a black body used a weight, as property, by the reckless white steamboatmen—and as a corrosive to racism, since the only advantage in racing for using a black laborer instead of a weight is that the weight on the safety-valve is literally a “dead” weight, incapable of self-adjustment, and hence unable to respond to fine and potentially catastrophic changes in the performance of the engine.

The black laborer’s enchainment with the steamboat machinery, at once abject and deliriously technophilic, registers the double ambivalence inherent in the steamboat as a historically-situated artifact. The steamboat itself is an agent of both slavery and individual mobility, making the enslaved worker’s technosocial situation curiously confused and commingled. As Thomas C. Buchanan writes, steamboats “carried the tentacles of slavery and racism, but they also carried liberating ideas and pathways to freedom” (5). Yet, as Buchanan also points out,

Steamboats were products of the industrial revolution, yet the organization of their work crews owed much to the basic divisions of labor that were
inherited from Atlantic maritime culture. Maritime capitalists had long ago decided that the mass movement of materials demanded rigid discipline and hierarchical management. Thus the disparity in power between the mostly native white officers and [. . .] cabin crews reproduced enduring conflicts. But while steamboats at once looked backward to the age of sail, they also reflected contemporary trends in the organization of labor. For many Americans, in a world where plantations were thriving and the factory system was starting to take root, steamboats were a visible expression of the increasing divisions between rich and poor. The small-scale farmer who floated his crop to market on a flatboat, the craftsman who produced goods for his neighbors, and the slave who labored shoulder to shoulder were all being transformed by the capitalist ethos that defined the era. (79)

The steamboat, that is, materially manifests the co-existence of the mercantile and the industrial. For enslaved black steamboat workers, however, this liminality of the steamboat represented not only a mixed state between mercantile bondage and capitalist freedom, but also the paradoxes of “freedom” itself under capitalism. In turn, Twain’s image of an enslaved black man perched on the safely apparatus of the steamship boiler represents, like Charles Francis Adams’s “negro” fireman on the Best Friend, the underdeveloped and hybrid character of antebellum technoculture; arguably, though, it also evokes the way postbellum Americans retroactively imagined the process of their own immersion in machine space. In the Neider-edited Autobiography, Twain refers to his former mentor as “my owner, Mr. Bixby” (128), humorously to be sure, but thereby identifying the position he had formerly called princely with that of enslaved African labor. Nor is it clear that Twain—who knew very well that black
men and women were, in practical terms, could as easily be enslaved in 1883 as 1858—thought of himself as liberated in 1858. In his notoriously brief and perfunctory transitional chapter sandwiched between the original *Atlantic Monthly* writings and “I Return to My Muttons,” Twain writes that after he became a pilot,

[t]ime drifted smoothly and prosperously on, and I supposed—and hoped—that I was going to follow the river the rest of my days, and die at the wheel when my mission was ended. But by and by the war came, commerce was suspended, my occupation was gone.

I had to seek another livelihood. So I became a silver miner in Nevada; next, a newspaper reporter; next, a gold miner in California; next, a reporter in San Francisco; next, a special correspondent in the Sandwich Islands; next, a roving correspondent in Europe and the East; next, an instructional torchbearer on the lecture platform; and, finally, I became a scribbler of books, and an immovable fixture among the other rocks of New England.

In so few words have I disposed of the twenty-one slow-drifting years that have come and gone since I last looked from the windows of a pilot-house. (166)

Here, Twain makes his lighting out for the territory in the years during and after the War seem rather like the aimless wanderings of Sellar’s Salt Lick spur, or perhaps a (terrestrial) steamboat set adrift and finally getting caught on the snags of the New England literary landscape. It’s as if, in becoming a satirist of men like Beriah Sellars, he became a bit like Sellars himself. The paratactic rhetoric, the lack of narratorial teleology, also evoke Braham’s portrayal of Laura Hawkins as “the sport of fate and circumstances.” Twain’s own account of
his development as a textual producer suggests that, like the enslaved worker on the safety valve of the steamboat boiler, he became a mere object of technosocial mobility in the very moment he became a mobile subject.
Chapter Two:

Quick Enough to Interpret the Cipher Message of the Eye: The Octopus and Railroad Perception

A vague, slow-moving whirl of things

Although the actual process of agricultural production is largely invisible in Frank Norris’s 1901 novel The Octopus, the narrator does, in a simultaneously restless and rhapsodic passage, give us a series of images of the plowing of the fields at the Quien Sabe Ranch:

The ploughs, thirty-five in number, each drawn by its team of ten, stretched in an interminable line, nearly a quarter mile in length […]. They were arranged, as it were, en échelon, not in file—not one directly behind the other, but each succeeding plough its own width farther in the field than the one in front of it. Each of these ploughs held five shears, so that when the entire company was in motion, one hundred and seventy-five furrows were made at the same instant. At a distance, he ploughs resembled a great column of field artillery. (128)

Here, despite the narrator’s later sexualized rhetoric which interprets the scene as one of “the vast primal passion, the two world-forces, the elemental Male and Female, locked in a colossal embrace” (131), the process of production appears as a military campaign, as mathematically-ordered and artificial technē putting only male (but desexualized) bodies into productive action, rather than as the elemental masculine meeting the chthonic feminine. The passage emphasizes the “taking” of the field—the conquest of space—less than the fecundation of the passive ground. In fact, the process of industrialized agriculture here seems much like the
expansion of railway transport to which it is contrasted throughout the novel: less an irruption of violent nature than the subsumption of nature by technics, less an act of co-creation with the environment than a vast and collective remaking of geographic space.

Moreover, the resemblance of the plowing operation to writing—a resemblance underscored later when the rancher Buck Annixter has an epiphany of the San Joaquin Valley landscape as a “gigantic scroll [unrolling] from edge to edge of the horizon” (368-369)—suggests that textual production itself must resemble mass industrial activity in order to make its mark, to intervene in either nature or history. If drawing furrows in the earth resembles both a sexual act and a textual act, the mental labor involved in operating a plow involves both an instinctive, almost unthinking, activity as well as a calculation and judgment. The former shepherd Vanamee, now working as a plowman for Annixter, “lapse[s] to a sort of pleasing numbness, in a sense, hypnotised by the weaving maze of things in which he found himself involved. […] But while one part of his brain, alert and watchful, took cognizance of these matters, all the greater part was lulled and stupefied with the long monotony of the affair” (129). It is the “stupefied” and daydreaming side of Vanamee’s mind, abstracted from the technical details of plowing, that gazes and speculates, that from the intermittent hilltops “overlook[s] a wider horizon” and sees elemental tumult and mythic violence (130). To the extent that Norris’s narrator focalizes on Vanamee here, then, his overwrought and rhapsodic language could just as well be that of Vanamee himself. In any case, both narrator and character take a perspective on the agricultural work of the San Joaquin Valley that erases details; this perspective tropes, interprets, and allegorizes—but while it takes in the whole of the valley, it remains a personal and isolated vision. Moreover, although it observes labor, it in itself gets no work done.
On the other hand, the narrator’s representation the actual labor of plowing registers the social and organized nature of the work, while also underscoring the physical dispersion of the task of plowing—not only among the workers, but among the instruments of work themselves. If the narrator begins by giving us a labor process that looks a lot like industrialized warfare, or the railroad system, or like writing itself writ large (and hence also like the process of mass inscription made possible by the web-fed offset press, the typewriter, the stock ticker, and the cash register), his rhetoric almost immediately swerves from metaphor into the complex proliferation of sensuous detail: “the click of buckles, the creak of straining leather, the subdued clash of machinery, the cracking of whips, the deep breathing of nearly four hundred horses, the abrupt commands and cries of the drivers, and, last of all, the prolonged soothing murmur of the thick brown earth turning steadily from the multitude of advancing shears” (128). The narrator’s version of the “weaving maze of things” in which Vanamee is directly enmeshed is both broader and less rhetorically mediated than Vanamee’s own vision of the social and natural world that appears when he crests the shallow hills of the San Joaquin wheatfields. Vanamee’s mode of knowing his environment is split between a poetic and elevated yet “stupefied” perspectival view and an “alert and watchful” dispersed, shifting, non-perspectival perception. To the extent that Vanamee is conscious at all, his consciousness seems to arise from the yoking-together of these modes, neither one of which itself seems fully to constitutes cognition. However, while Vanamee is certainly both working and daydreaming here, he is not, as it were, authoring a text; his labor, otherwise a seemingly instinctive activity, proceeds guided by the commands of his foremen, while his apocalyptic visions remain a kind of reading of the landscape that, without the intervention of Norris’s narrator, would never materially convert itself into writing.
Both Vanamee and Norris’s narrator, then, divide their attention between the detailed, the immediate, and the grossly material and the distant, the mediated, and the aesthetic. But while Vanamee’s divided attention participates in labor while not itself being authorship, the narrator oscillates between the two modes in order to establish his authority over the scene. The narrator follows the plowmen in their back-and-forth motion over the wheatfields while also following Vanamee’s gaze over the horizon—but also weaves his own path between these two frames of perception in a kind of textual montage. In this passage, and many other like it, the narrator accomplishes what many of the actors in *The Octopus* fail to do: he finds a way to avoid the trap of falling into an overly aestheticized and reductive view of the world while, at the same time, not getting mired in William James’s “great blooming, buzzing confusion,” the purely instinctive view of the untrained, unsocialized sensorium. Importantly, the narrator does not establish his perception on some immediate synthesis of these two extremes, but navigates a tortuous path between them; the space of the technical detail and the spiritual vision is mediated, that is, in a new space, a purely notional idea-, data-, or even cyber-space.

The problem of seeing, of how to organize sensuous data, is arguably the main problem in *The Octopus*. If Vanamee simultaneously employs two modes, distanced and enmeshed, and remains “stupefied,” the problem of finding a *via media* between them is what stops the poet Presley from writing a text that can represent what he encounters among the ranchers, workers, and capitalists of the Far West of the late nineteenth century. At the novel’s outset, we are told, the “material, sordid, deadly commonplace” conflict between the ranchers and the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad undermines and vitiates “the picture of that huge romantic West that [Presley] saw in his imagination” (12). “But, however he strove to shut his eyes or ears to it, the thing persisted and persisted. The romance seemed complete up to this point. There it
broke, there it failed, there it became realism, grim, unlovely, unyielding.” While Vanamee divides his consciousness and achieves a kind of productive unconsciousness, Presley remains over-conscious of the fact that the “sordid” details cannot be separated from his grand, aestheticized vision, and therefore is paralyzed as a textual producer.

Likewise, readers of *The Octopus* have often been baffled or dissatisfied by the way the novel itself reads the space of late nineteenth-century capital, by how it reconciles its rhetoric of detail and broad impression, of specific things and the world as a whole, of the serial and the synoptic. “When a novelist speaks largely of Truth in fiction,” writes Walter Fuller Taylor, “we may reasonably expect of him, at least, that he relate [...] facts to ideas that are significant in themselves, and that are sufficiently in agreement with one another to make up a coherent view of life. Now, it is in just this matter of philosophical consistency that Norris, in *The Octopus*, falls short” (299). Taylor’s main objection, though, is not so much to the novel’s “flurry of hectic action without meaning” (300) as to the ad hoc and unearned “large optimism of the concluding pages” (299). For Charles Child Walcutt, similarly, the need to make the story of the wheat growers literary, to make it dramatic, makes the novel overly rhetorical and bombastic, and this bombastic style ultimately undermines its panglossian optimism; the novel’s “incoherency” is directly tied to “a love of power and size which, an end itself, sweeps careful ratiocination aside” (151). Walcutt’s argument is that rhetoric gets the last word in *The Octopus*, leaving much of the novel’s represented world “unmastered”; the “chief weakness” of *The Octopus* “can be traced to a certain feebleness of intellectual grip, and this feebleness is reflected in the inadequacy of his grasp on the ideology—naturalism—through which he chose to work.” The “larger view” the novel urges, for Walcutt, never comes into view because Norris never learned to properly manage what Walcutt, like Martin, takes to be the function of
“naturalism” for understanding the world: an optic for reconciling largeness and smallness, for achieving a bird’s-eye view of turn-of-the-century capital in the US West that doesn’t ignore its technical, contradictory, complicated details.

Other readers, however, have questioned whether the novel’s various statements of grand philosophy, by its narrator or by its characters, really express its own point of view. Donald Pizer, for example, argues that most of the generalizations in the book stand for stages in Presley’s development, not final and authoritative statements of the book’s thematics. In Pizer’s view, the novel’s final statement of “cosmic” optimism in no way—for the novel or Presley—“solves” its ethical problems, and that this realization is the novel’s unifying epiphany. For Pizer, moral “freedom on the personal level [and] determinism on the ‘cosmic’[…] are not incompatible in Norris’s mind, and he would feel no need to resolve them (“Another Look” 223). Pizer argues, then, that the “small” world of individual responsibility and the “large” one of cosmic process are neither incompatible nor resolvable, and that this condition is the focus of the novel itself. Barbara Hochman also sees the novel’s thematic problems as resolved by the realization, and embrace, of the value of “the irrepressible flux of life itself” (Art 98). For Hochman, the “incoherence” of The Octopus is no stylistic or cognitive flaw, but a reflection of its real stance: that narrative (not propositional truth) is itself the authentic mode of philosophical insight. Moreover, Hochman sees Annixter, not Presley, as the “character who comes to recognize the inevitability of process, yet who nonetheless comes to affirm life and even to risk himself in human relationships” (Art 18). For both Pizer and Hochman, then, the story of individual development—indeed the very possibility of such a story—is itself the “larger view” that redeems the novel’s violence and injustice. In these reflexive readings, it’s not that all things always work together for good, but that recognizing
the chance of such a hopeful outcome is the first step toward making them happen. For them, the novel doesn’t “fail” by not reconciling its details with its optimistic grand narrative; it’s the inadequacy of grand narratives that ensures the possibility of any optimism at all.

Although I align myself with Pizer’s and Hochman’s emphasis on the novel’s treatment of flux, contingency, and multiplicity, their readings nevertheless, by excluding the historical specificity of the crises narrated in *The Octopus*, beg the very question at hand. If the “large view” the novel urges is not so much a cosmic optimism, but a kind of petit-bourgeois stoicism—a transcendence of the anxiety and stress of the world’s vicissitudes through taking an unflinching and honest view of those vicissitudes—what are we to make of Norris’s specific historical material? Do we read *The Octopus*, in the last instance, by bracketing the very concrete circumstances that produce the vicissitudes were are supposed to come to embrace? If so, why is this particular story at this particular time and place so apposite for these particular thematics? I argue that the problems that have vexed the novel’s readers concerning its “coherence” can be productively addressed by revisiting the questions of the railroad’s expansion at the turn of the century—especially in its historical roles as a material political intervention into history, as a concrete technical apparatus that reorganized and disciplined the way capitalist subjects read their worlds, and as a material product and signifier of the contradictions in early American capitalism. The railroad in *The Octopus*, that is, both metaphorizes and materially produces a crisis in seeing the world; yet it also often stands for a kind of seeing that Pizer and Hochman perceive as the solution to such crises. Moreover, the novel participates in a constellation of turn-of-the-century discourses that linked authorship, literacy, rail passengerhood, and railroad management practices in a web of mutually-reinforcing and multiply mediated techniques of knowing. In the context of these discourses,
*The Octopus* often implicitly calls for a kind of passengerial subjectivity, characterized by what I will call railroad perception, as the optimal subjective stance for reading—and acting within—its historical moment.

**Merely the part of an enormous whole**

More recent readings of *The Octopus* have insightfully focused on the historical determination of social and geographical space in turn-of-the-century California; but these readings have not particularly sought to tie their conclusions to the question of Norris’s putative philosophical “incoherence.” Moreover, these interpretations have primarily been interested in *The Octopus* as a document responding to the advent what is now called “globalization,” seeing in the novel an engagement with capital’s tendency to “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere” (*Manifesto* 17)\(^{14}\). My own concern, however, is less to demonstrate the ways the novel traces the geographic expansion of capital than to examine its treatment of the perception of spatiality under just these historical conditions. The scene of the Quien Sabe plowing, for example, is only one example of an enchaining of a “larger view” with the “grim, unlovely, unyielding” facts which seem both to constitute and to undermine the possibility of any larger view whatsoever. In contrast to the plowing scene, where production gets done, even if Vanamee’s conscious thought seems not to enter into it, the office in the Derrick ranch house is appears as a space of mental labor, of symbolic production:

> The office was the nerve-centre [sic] of the entire ten thousand acres of Los Muertos, but its appearance and furnishings were not in the least suggestive of a farm. It was divided at about its middle by a railing, painted
green and gold, and behind this railing were the high desks where the books were kept, the safe, the letter-press and letter-files, and Harran’s typewriting machine. A great map of Los Muertos with every water-course, depression, and elevation, together with indications of the varying depths of the clays and loams of the soil, accurately plotted, hung against the wall between the windows, while near at hand by the safe was the telephone.

But, no doubt, the most significant object in the office was the ticker. This was an innovation in the San Joaquin, an idea of shrewd, quick-witted young Annixter, which Harran and Magnus derrick had been quick to adopt, and after them Broderson and Osterman [...]. The offices of the ranches were thus connected by wire with San Francisco, and through that city with Minneapolis, Duluth, Chicago, New York, and at last, and most important of all, with Liverpool. Fluctuations in the price of the world’s crop during and after harvest thrilled straight to the office at Los Muertos, to that of the Quien Sabe, to Osterman’s, and to Broderson’s. During a flurry in the Chicago wheat pits in the August of that year, which had affected even the San Francisco market, Harran and Magnus had sat up nearly half of one night watching the strip of white tape jerking unsteadily from the reel. At such moments they no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely the part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effect of cause miles distant—a drought on the prairies of Dakota, a rain of the plains of India, a
frost on the Russian steppes, a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine. (53-54)

The trope of the “nerve center” was both widespread and multiply inflected in late nineteenth-century culture, and Norris’s use of it is notable not least because *The Octopus* participates in almost all of the facets of the era’s discourse of networks—physiological, technological, and supernatural. The Los Muertos office is called a nerve center not only because information flows into and out of the space through a diverse and heterogeneous array of channels—textual, pictographic, and audile; “natural” and technologically mediated; traditional and newfangled—but also because plans are made and commands are issued here. But calling the office a nerve center also obscures the fact that these two functions—technical and administrative—while of necessity yoked together in one space, do not coincide perfectly. The office’s conspicuous “wire railing, painted green and gold,” for example, divides the “high desks” from which the landowning capitalists issue their commands from the rest of the space; in a space into which material signifiers flow and are combined, interpreted, and transformed, the wire railings—painted the colors of money—perform no productive work. They are produced and they signify, but not only do they not model or represent any part of the work of growing wheat, they actually interrupt the otherwise “rationalized” way in which the office, as a nerve center, serves as part of the means of production. These railings, like the barbed-wire property dividers separating one ranch from another, only both signify and materially instantiate the role of the landowner as an expropriator of surplus value. Yet, these markers and apparatuses of hierarchy also, paradoxically, are what establishes the office as a nerve center, since, after all, a nerve center detached from the process of exploitation is, under capitalism, no center at all.
If the heterogeneity of the office’s technosocial apparatus seems to undermine its very purpose—to reconcile and put into productive enchainment the various flows of information which enter into it—the most rationalized and technically advanced machine in the office, the telegraph ticker, seems nevertheless to be also of little productive use. Norris’s narrator tells us that “[d]uring a flurry in the Chicago wheat pits in the August of that year […] Harran and Magnus had sat up nearly half of one night watching the strip of white tape jerking unsteadily from the reel” (54); he does not say what use, if any at all, the Derrieks put the stock-ticker data. Moreover, since we are specifically informed that Magnus and Harran anxiously watched the ticker during August, when their fields are already planted and the crops are ready to harvest, we must conclude that their anxiety is due to their very inability to intervene in the “fluctuations” in wheat prices. Stock tickers are far more useful as instruments in the allocation of capital, in speculation or so-called finance capital, than as tools in production, and they are almost useless in agricultural production. Unlike the pictographic information provided by the wall map—information which is nonetheless textualized, as in the case of the soil types and depths, where the necessary knowledge is unavailable to natural human vision, even “elevated” vision—the information flowing in from the ticker cannot be converted into outgoing instructions, at least not by Harran and Derrick, who clearly have no excess money capital to throw into speculation. If the railings demarcating different spaces in the Derrick office signify the direction of diverted flows of value from production, the information coming through the ticker can only signify whether value will, or will not, be diverted toward Los Muertos in the first place. As Henderson writes, “[T]he ticker signifies […] that capitalist space on this grand scale cannot be seen, it can only be represented. But such a representation is only possible if capital produces the mechanisms for its own representation. There will be
no successful representation from ‘above’ or ‘outside’—only a representation that is of the capitalist industrial juggernaut” (141). Henderson suggests here that *The Octopus* is well aware of the limits of any panoramic overarching “vision”—including the limits of the kind of any “larger” view putatively advocated by the novel itself. Moreover, not only does reading the chaotic, indeed somewhat mysterious, inscriptions on the ticker tape suggest to the Derricks a phantasy of the ranch as “part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round,” but this apocalyptic vision itself necessarily appears in the absence of the possibility of any material agency arising from those inscription. The ticker keeps Magnus and Harran awake half the night and hunts their imaginations precisely because it signifies their impotence in the face of market vicissitudes.

Finally, there is another channel through which information circulates around and through the Los Muertos nerve center: the “stone-paved hallway with a glass roof” (53) that both connects and separates the Derrick house proper from the office. This corridor, ambiguously enclosed and exposed itself, keeps the sordidness of business distinct from the *Gemütlichkeit* and dignity of the domestic space, while also serving a means for convenient and quick access to the machinery of administration. Of course, if the office’s function of bringing heterogeneous information flows together for a single purpose is countered by the fact that that purpose it itself riven between production *in sensu stricto* and exploitation, then the ranch house is also spatially divided between its role on one hand as the seat of preindustrial patriarchal power and, on the other, as the site in which use values are produced and consumed. In this case, the division is also gendered, since the house is also the center of Annie Derrick’s attempts to reproduce the coziness and gentility of both her eastern Ohio childhood and the “the State Normal School” at which she matriculated (58). Annie copes with
“the monotony of the ranch” by “retir[ing] within herself” and “surround[ing] herself with books” (60). Annie’s space, too, is textualized; the texts themselves surround her and the aestheticizing, nostalgic images of her favorite authors—Pater, Lamb, Ruskin—inhabit her imagination as much as the images of the Nebraska plains and the Argentine pampas inhabit Magnus’s and Harran’s. On the other hand, the house proper is also where the members of the growers’ committee, in an all-male all-night session, begin to plan their takeover of the California Railroad Commission. If Annie is lost in daydreams inspired by the “flaccid banalities” of British art-worshipping aesthetes, the wheat growers here surround themselves with the performative signifiers of their own gender and class position: “The whiskey bottle and the syphon of soda-water reappeared. The mean eased themselves in their places, pushing back from the table, lighting their cigars, talking of the beginning of the rains and the prospect of a rise in wheat” (103). When “at length, Magnus, who was at the head of the table, move[s] in his place, assuming a certain magisterial attitude” (103), we see the wheat growers enacting a kind of sacramental ritual that reassures them of the stability of traditional hierarchies based on age, wealth, and learning. Lyman’s betrayal, and later the chaotic disintegration of the ranchers’ mass meeting, demonstrate, nevertheless, precisely how ephemeral Magnus’s social position is.

The domestic space of the Derrick house, like the office, accumulates and circulates texts and signs, and whether they are echoes of other places (the Italy of Ruskin, the antebellum South of Calhoun) or ritual spatializations of ideological constructs (the all-male dining room with the posturing Magnus at the head of the table), they tend to obscure and mystify the work of writing. Yet, again, just as these two spaces are both separate and conjoined, the two functions of the office and the house—ideologizing and rationalizing—cannot be kept strictly
separate. On one hand, both Annie’s fetishes of culture and Magnus’s trappings of patriarchal largesse and hospitality are purchased by the flows of value that are simultaneously produced and siphoned off in the office; on the other, the structures of precapitalist modes of production reproduce themselves in the office in the excess signification of the gold-and-green railing that demarcates the ritual and theatrical “proper” space of Magnus and Harran as property owners. The Derrick ranch house is a space in which other spaces are represented, produced, imagined, and staged; simultaneously, its own material spatiality echoes the spatial histories that have produced it. However, most readers of the novel have overlooked the rather unsubtle way the house itself models a kind of late-nineteenth-century American national geography; the office, tenuously but irrevocably connected to the house proper, stands for both the unsentimental realism of western business while the living space “with its white picket fence, its few flower beds, and grove of eucalyptus trees” (7) literally contain the “East” as an awkward (and aging) marriage of South and North. The Yankee Annie, with her love of picturesque neatness and order, and the Carolinian Magnus, who (we are told twice) resembles “the later portraits of the Duke of Wellington”—that is, he looks like a likeness of an aristocrat—are so much associated with visuality and the order of visual differences and similarities, that it should come as no surprise that both the geography and the history of the United States are coded up in the spatial ordering of their living space. Moreover, although the Derricks and their house stand for an “East” that has invaded the west for the dual purposes of settlement and exploitation, the unseverable umbilicus to the office marks the ineluctable nearness of an alien and sublimely unsettling West, and hence the degree to which the West has colonized them, their hopes, their imaginations, their nightmares. It is worth mentioning here, on the other hand, that Annie and Magnus fall short of being the
“ideal” Yankee or Southerner of regional literature. As Ohioan and (North) Carolinian, they are neither New England Brahmin nor Virginia Cavalier, and Annie’s youthful poverty and Magnus’s early political defeats in the antebellum South mark both of them as veritable refugees from the economic contradictions of prewar capitalism. If the “West” is always an economic and political hinterland of a central “East,” then Annie and Magnus, who find themselves out of place in the West of the Gilded Age, have always been westerners of a sort. Therefore, if the formal design of the house reproduces Gilded Age geography, it also recapitulates and is materially informed by the fluidity and evanescence of that geography, including the contradictions of antebellum space that gave rise to the equally contradictory spatiality of the West.

**Blood on the tracks**

Clearly, my argument is at odds with Michael Davitt Bell’s contention that Norris’s representations of “habitations and their decoration […] are almost uniformly without either irony or point” (128). Indeed, it is precisely my point that Norris himself seems to go out of his way to make meaningful spaces that, ironically, his characters—and even his narrator—cannot always read clearly. But even this irony would be conventional and uninteresting were not these enigmatic and contradictory spaces themselves often either are dedicated to the production of spatial knowledges or presuppose a high degree of artificiality and intentionality, of “produced-ness,” of space itself. For example, the very beginning of Book II finds the treacherous Lyman Derrick in his San Francisco law office; and, while the Los Muertos office is a site of moribund and passive watching (at least as we see it in Book I), Lyman’s office “on the tenth floor of the *Exchange Building*, a beautiful, tower-like affair of white stone” (287) is
characterized by efficiency and quiet bustle: We first encounter Lyman “dictating letters to his typewriter”—in 1901, a name for both a machine and a worker who was intended to work efficiently as a machine— in a voice “regular, precise, businesslike,” the stenographer afterward departing and “closing the door behind her, softly discreetly.” Lyman’s office doubles the Los Muertos office—but with distinct differences. The spatial organization of the Los Muertos office tries (but fails) to keep the technical side of production separate from the social result of exploitation—separate, that is, from both property and propriety, from landownership as a precapitalist economic form and from Magnus’s “character” as performative role. Conversely, Lyman’s office metonymizes the rationalization of command itself. Although both spaces indulge in ostentation, Magnus’s ostentation—the water sprinkler, greyhounds, whisky and soda water, special chair for the cat Princess Nathalie, the house’s other gemütlich trappings—serves to mask the office’s roles as a space of production. On the other hand, Lyman’s office décor emphasizes the office’s function as both museum and administrative space—a space, that is, both from which geographic space is organized and within which the metonymic traces of the organized territory are contained. To this extent, Lyman’s office represents both a rival control center and a rival mode of representing space.

Pacing the office, Lyman sees neither the trappings of domesticity nor the signifiers of his own landownership, but a

Few choice engravings—portraits of Marshall, Taney, Field, and a coloured lithograph—excellently done—of the Grand Cañon [sic] of the Colorado—the deep-seated leather chairs, the large and crowded bookcase (topped with a bust of James Lick, and a huge greenish globe), the waste basket of woven coloured grass, made by Navajo Indians, the massive silver inkstand on the
desk, the elaborate filing cabinet, complete in every particular, and he 
shelves of tin boxes, padlocked, impressive, grave, bearing the names of 
clients, cases, and estates. (286)

While Magnus’s house tries to preserve the domesticity of an antebellum past, Lyman’s office 
Attempts to represent the fluidity of the present through metonymy. The décor, both the 
furnishings and bric-a-brac, of Lyman’s office is characterized by material heterogeneity; yet, 
the very arbitrariness of the items alludes to the imperial, omnivorous character of the railroad, 
both as capital and as technical system. But another ambiguity marks this collection of 
souvenirs; for neither the railroad as technē nor the railroad as capital needs souvenirs, since 
the railroad is interested in neither “authenticity” nor memory. As Susan Stewart has pointed 
out, souvenirs (properly speaking) both “authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience 
and […] discredit the present” (139). For Stewart, the antiquarian, or collector of souvenirs, 
seeks both to establish a tie to the past and to repress the very rupture that putatively gives 
value to the souvenir: “[T]he impulse of such souvenirs [as ‘old-fashioned’ artifacts] is to 
simultaneously transform nature into art as they mourn the loss of ‘pure nature’ at a point of 
origin” (143). As a collector of souvenirs, then, Lyman not only signals a spurious connection 
with the authenticity of both the natural and the historical, he also unintentionally signals a 
wish to remain connected to his father and his world of “great men” and heroic undertakings. 
On the other hand, these objects are all “souvenirs” of the railroad, of its economic operations, 
not of Lyman personally; they allude not to what was known directly and now only 
remembered, but to what has been subsumed by an objective and “alien” social process, a 
process in which Lyman merely plays the role of a bureaucrat. In the spatial context of, say, 
Magnus’s farmhouse, these objects may legitimately function as souvenirs, but in Lyman’s
office they become, in essence, a series of specimens in a railroad museum. Hence, both of these spaces contain the spaces controlled therein as representations. But while the arrangement Magnus’s office spatially figures the traditional and fixed relationship of proprietor and territory, Lyman’s office defies traditional spatial meanings; textual inscription, mathematization, and a kind of deterritorialized metonymy take the place of a hierarchical symbolic arrangement of space. What’s more, this very deterritorialization points to the way Lyman’s status and power, dependent as they are on the railroad’s restless conquest of more spaces, are both ephemeral and—to a great degree—spurious.

Yet, the office, as the place where both railway rates and land ownership are managed, doubly mediates between the spatiality of the railroad and the spatiality of the ranch. On one hand, landownership requires legal mediation—in the form of the assignment and recording of deeds—between the fixed physical character of land itself and its fungibility as an economic good. Such mediation allows land to be bought and sold and thereby integrated into the logic of capital. On the other hand, the judgments of the California Railroad Commission, of which Lyman is a member, mediate the function of the rail system as both “common carrier”—that is, as a joint project of the bourgeoisie as a class for the rationalization of production in general—and as a set of separate and competing productive capitals seeking to extract surplus value directly. In other words, the office is both a place in which land is converted into something like a commodity and one in which the driving-down of the turnover time of capitalist production is overseen and regulated. Moreover, the law is also supposed to intervene impartially between the claims of the ranchers and those of the railroad. The office makes itself a center of power at the expense of all preexisting fixed political spatialities, then, precisely by turning real space into representations of space. For example, among the
inscriptions crowding together in Lyman’s law office is the “commissioner’s official railway map of the State of California” showing “a vast, complicated network of red lines marked P. and S.W.R.R.” (288). As Leigh Ann Litwiller Berte has pointed out, this map both echoes the one in Magnus’s office and differs significantly from it, focusing on “two types of force—economic and political—that circulate at the state level,” instead of on local agronomic data and property boundaries; for Berte, “each [map] offers a contradictory reading of the same landscape, each one emphasizing another layer of ownership and control of the lands in question” (208). Yet these maps, as they move from smaller to larger spatial scales, also paradoxically ascend in both degree of abstraction and artifactuality. That is, unlike the representation of the complex and contingent mixing of soil types, the Railroad Commission map can represent the differences among railroad capitals with only four colors—red green, yellow, blue—because it stands for the railroads not as technical systems, but as capital. These two maps, then, not only represent two different views on the political spaces of California; they are also rival instruments for the control—and hence the production—of those very spaces. The maps in Lyman’s office materially participate, that is, in the political and technosocial subsumption of the processes represented in the map hanging in Magnus’s ranch office.

But if the map itself is simultaneously representation of, metonymic representative for, and element within the processes of economic production and reproduction, it also appears to Lyman as a kind of apocalyptic window onto the sublime shapelessness, the uncanny vitality of those same processes. Lyman imagines the map as

a veritable system of blood circulation, complicated, dividing, and reuniting, branching, splitting, extending, throwing off feelers, off-shoots,
tap roots, feeders—diminutive little blood suckers that shot out from the main jugular and went twisting up into some remote country, laying hold upon some forgotten village or town, involving it in one of a myriad of branching coils, one of a hundred tentacles, drawing it, as it were, toward that centre from which all this system sprang. (289)

Here, although San Francisco is itself the “centre from which all this system [springs],” Lyman imagines this “system” as something alien, monstrous, and excessive—that is, paradoxically, as “decentered.” Moreover, Lyman’s vision, like that of Magnus and Harran, is itself excessive. It interrupts the work of the railroad commissioner, and hence of the Commission; as an interpretive act it obstructs agency instead of converting itself into new writing. Even the narrator uses both spatializing metaphors and metaphors of corporeal sublimnity, but they are largely confused and clumsy metaphors. A circulatory system, after all, does not “throw off” feelers or tap roots, and certainly not tentacles. The narrator tells us that Lyman sees the rail network as a “huge, sprawling organism, with its ruddy arteries converging to a central point” (289), but arteries, strictly speaking, diverge from a central point, nourishing the extremities which are arguably parasitic on this center. And in any case, the jugular, which the narrator had originally called the central channel of this network, does carry blood toward the central coronary muscle, but away from the brain—the “nerve center”—which is the implicit analogy for Lyman’s office. In short, the very metaphors that mean to imagine the establishment of a totalitarian, vampiric center are nevertheless haunted by polycentricity; the evocation of the organic and hierarchic body nonetheless conjures the asignifying aspect of corporeality, the literal acephaly of much of the body’s processes. Moreover, by confusing the relations of priority and dependence of the railroad as property, the railroad as capital, and the railroad as
technosocial system, the rhetoric here undermines the sublimity of the vampire trope by recalling the ephemerality and vulnerability of parasitism itself.

It is impossible to have both the world of fixed spatial meaning and that of the railroad; but this also means it is impossible to “have” the railroad at all. Lyman’s attempt to reproduce the “authentic” in his office fails because the signs of both his filial alignment and his rivalry with his father even more surely signify the omnivorous extent of the railroad system and the degree to which Lyman himself has already become as much the consumed as the consumer. The more the world is drawn into the rail network, the more human agency and intentionality are excluded from their central place in that network. But by no means is intentionality obliterated; rather, it is subsumed. We have already seen how some spaces—the pilot-house of the western steamboat, Harran and Magnus’s office at the Los Muertos ranch—are doubly “decentered” by technosocial forces. They first fail to become really central because of their technical limitations—limitations that render the centrality of such spaces specular, and not functional. Then, they become caught in an endless and often catastrophic struggle over control and power which dissolves all spatial relationships. In the antebellum world, no place can be central because so much escapes the rationalization of space; in the postbellum world, conversely, no place can remain central because nothing escapes the rationalization of space. In The Octopus, however, the rationalization of space does not so much supercede older codes of spatial meaning as retain them as fetishes. What Lyman glimpses in his apocalyptic vision is the conversion of fixed places into liquid assets for the rail network. But the very incoherence of that vision reveals not simply that Lyman is a hypocrite for his nostalgic despair over the work of the railroad, but that nostalgia itself is both product and factor of that
Lyman’s central place of authority has been produced by the same processes that threaten to undermine all central places.

Lyman sees the cultural life of Northern California’s geographic center as reflecting and reproducing the same flux which undoes the centrality of farms and small towns of the California backcountry. From his office vantage, he sees in San Francisco “a continuous interest in small things, a people ever willing to be amused at trifles, refusing to consider serious matters” (287). In perpetual motion but without direction, “the city swarm[s] tumultuous through its grooves” in a kind of polymorphous perversity of commerce, its “grooves” always folding it back on itself and frustrating the possibility of any escape beyond its own limits. Lyman’s disapproval echoes the industrialist Cedarquist’s opinion that fin-de-siècle San Francisco is “not a city” at all, but “a Midway Plaisance” (303). And, since Cedarquist’s contempt for the city’s (feminine-gendered) festivals and pageants seems to echo the narrator’s own condemnation of “the Fake, the eternal, irrepressible Sham” (314) as waste and decadence, it might seem reasonable to take these musings as a straightforward expression of the novel’s own stance. Yet in the very same chapter, Cedarquist himself argues that overproduction is inevitable, insisting that while “the great word of the nineteenth century has been Production,” the “great word of the twentieth century will be […] Markets” (305). Thus, while Cedarquist laments the decadence of mere consumption, along with its demand for works of art and other such feminized products, he nevertheless understands the limits of production considered as the mere intensification and rationalization of social labor. Neither moralistic disdain for waste nor practical preference for parsimony over excess, but anxiety over getting stuck in the same grooves, of spatial containment and the threat of catastrophe that accompanies it, motivates Cedarquist’s remarks. Moreover, as if to reinforce his point,
Cedarquist later points out that his shipping business will be funded by “the sale of the plant and scrap iron of the Atlas Works,” Cedarquist’s failed industrial venture (648). The transport infrastructure, in the form of its most “liquid” capital, is reborn from the ashes of spatially fixed capital, while in contrast, the aesthetes of San Francisco continue to reterritorialize—literally and vulgarly—surpluses, in the form of “a figure of California—heroic size—[made] of dried apricots.” Cedarquist, then, both reiterates and reframes the problem of Lyman’s apocalypse of the vampiric proliferation of railroad spatiality. Cedarquist’s conclusion seems to be that resisting the flux and catastrophe of capital is futile, a conclusion that, in turn, seems to sum up the novel’s “large view”; paradoxically, though, “taking a view,” even the large one that Lyman takes, seems everywhere in *The Octopus* to be aligned with stasis and, hence to vulnerability.

**Now they were to see the real thing**

Much of Book Two’s Chapter IV narrates a raid by the ruined former engineer and hop farmer Dyke on a Pacific and Southwestern passenger train; this is one of the few passages in *The Octopus* actually concerned with the railroad as technology and the only one which represents the actual experience of railway travel. To some degree, the train carriage that the newly-married Buck and Hilma Annixter ride upon mirrors the Los Muertos farmhouse’s odd and uneasy mixture of the domestic and the industrial-managerial. After Hilma sits “up in bed to say her prayers,” she “[goes] to sleep with the directness of a little child” (412) in her berth, in a scene which allows her to remain the “angel in the house” even when the “house” is a massive steam-powered industrial machine; meanwhile, Buck, like Magnus and Harran staying up half the night watching the stock ticker, “dozed and tossed and fretted for hours,
consulting his watch and time-table whenever there was a stop.” Likewise the Annixters’
company of fellow passengers—“a lady with three children, a group of school-teachers, a
couple of drummers, a stout gentleman with whiskers, and a well-dressed young man in a plaid
traveling cap”—bring into contact both the commercial and the familial, the foreign and the
local, the experienced and the callow.

The claustral, straitened space of the railway carriage makes even the kind of imperfect
spatial separations of Los Muertos house impossible, even if the passengers manage to persist
in performing their class and gender roles. Yet, even these performative differences begin to
break down when the train is attacked. Certainly, Norris writes that the group of
schoolteachers “huddled together like sheep, [and held] on to each other, looking to the men,
silently, for protection” (416); but nevertheless,

the lady with the children looked out from her berth, smiled reassuringly,

and said:

“I’m not a bit frightened. They won’t do anything to us if we keep
quiet. I’ve my watch and jewelry all ready for them in my little black bag,
see?”

If the women on Norris’s train begin to sort themselves according to their panicked or calm
reaction to the hold up, so do the “drummers” vociferously call down one of their colleagues
who, “flourishing a pocket revolver,” proposes to leave the railcar and confront the bandits:

[H]e was going out. he didn’t proposed to be buncoed without a fight. he
wasn’t any coward.
“Well, you don’t go, that’s all,” said his friend, angrily. “There’s women and children in this car. You aren’t going to draw the fire here.”

(417)

If at first, the rail carriage had seemed like a kind of middle-class tenement, in which late nineteenth-century subjects struggled to perform their identities within the confines of the rationalized and “efficient” railway technosocial system, it now seems like a pressure vessel in which those very roles are neither abolished nor reinforced, but reorganized and refined. Women are still silently dependent on men, and men must maintain their agency, but there is no room in the railcar for either simpering or bravado.

While theatricality recedes in the confines of the carriage, what emerges is close attention, the individual and collective transformation of sensory signals into a coherent narrative about the robbery. The train-robbery passage, in fact, focuses as much of its attention on the sensations of the robbery as the passengers do themselves. The narrator meticulously reports the “hideous ear-splitting rasp” produced by the trains airbrakes (414), the lull during which the “stillness of the night outside was so profound that the rain, dripping from the car roof upon the road-bed underneath” (414-415), the “four pistol shots” of the gun battle between Dyke and the trainmen (416), and the “sound of a heavy explosion” as Dyke dynamites the train’s cashbox (418). The train’s passengers, in turn, comment on each of these sounds, making guesses (as often wrong as right) about the events beyond the walls and windows of the carriage. This anxious speculation echoes the way Magnus and Harran wait by their stock ticker throughout the night during harvest season; the passengers, moreover, are as helpless to stop the robbery as the Derricks are to affect wheat prices. Indeed, the sense of impotence is even intensified after the robbery; as the train stands abandoned, “bereft of its
engine, a huge decapitated monster,” the passengers despair more than they had “when the actual danger threatened” (419). However, the point here is that in the moment of crisis what distinguishes the “shriek[ing] and cower[ing] schoolteachers and the nervous drummer from the young mother, the “well-dressed” doctor, and Annixter himself, is the fact that the latter interpret the sounds and sights of the robbery with a degree of reserve, as if they have already been prepared for it. When the passengers hear the sounds of the gun battle, the narrator tries to make sense of their anxiety, their state of watchfulness that is neither outright terror nor tranquility: “It had come to them at last, this, they had so often read about. Now they were to see the real thing, now they were to face actuality, face this danger of the night, leaping in from out the blackness of the roadside, masked, armed, ready to kill. They were facing it now. They were held up” (416). The passengers are almost all familiar with “this,” the train holdup, from the proliferation of robbery narratives in sensational journalism, popular drama, and the dime novel. Of the passengers who keep their heads, on the other hand, we know that for Annixter “there were only Dickens's works” (26) and that the well-dressed doctor reads Alphonse Daudet’s Tartarin de Tarascon on the train. The scene in the sleeper car, then, differs revealingly from that of the stock ticker; although both scenes are of anxious attention, here something close to a sense of ennui—literally, of annoyance—replaces the sublime terror of being swallowed up utterly by titanic forces. Moreover, textuality here—what the passengers have “so often read about”—has already rehearsed the scene for the passengers, instead of masking it, as Magnus’s Calhounian rhetoric or Annie’s aestheticist poetics provide an imaginary refuge from the world of shocks and collisions.

Several other differences between Buck-Hilma and Magnus-Annie, if not absolute, are equally illuminating. For example, if the former pair find themselves at home on the train in a
way that the latter cannot in the industrializing West, the Annixters also make their literal home in the thoroughly modern fashion—by spending a “most delicious week” scouring “the department stores of [San Francisco], the carpet stores, the furniture stores” (406), a process that Hilma explicitly calls “be[ing] serious and get[ting] to work.” The Annixters’ shopping spree is a kind of labor, a labor making use of the most advanced tools: As Buck sends telegraphs to Quien Sabe to have the ranch house made ready for the new consumer goods, Buck and Hilma begin dispatching the spoils back to the San Joaquin—via the Pacific and Southwestern. For, if the train cars are themselves outfitted with the trappings of the Victorian household—“their nickelled fittings, their plate glass, their upholstery, vestibules, and the like” (419)—they are also the conduits by which this kind of household can be materially propagated across the continent, and the railroad thus acts as an instrument for the industrialization of domesticity outside the space of the rail carriage. Such scenes register not so much the abolition of antebellum class and gender arrangements than the enchainment of these arrangements in industrialized space, an enchainment that nevertheless transforms these arrangements as if from within. In fact the same kind of luxury and abundance found in the Derrick house is found once again in the P&SW rail carriage and in the department stores of San Francisco; only the spatial relations, both imaginary and real, change. If by cordonning off the space of industrial production from the space of domesticity, the Derricks believe they can also hold capitalist subsumption with its contingencies and catastrophes at bay, the Annixters are happy merely to disavow the fact that they are themselves really subsumed, to play, as it were, with the conventions of “separate spheres” even though they know very well that their own mode of consumption both presupposes and furthers the historical torsioning of this separation. Buck and Hilma insist that “their new home should be entirely equipped by San
Francisco dealers,” not because these furnishings restage the illusion of the orderly eastern farmhouse, but precisely because they are acquired by the paradoxically ludic work of buying and bargaining. Their purchases can be “bought everywhere” yet are “wonder[s]”—and, indeed, perhaps, are wonders just because they can be bought everywhere, because they are infinitely fungible. Buck and Annie’s treatment of homemaking recalls, if half a century early, Jean Baudrillard’s distinction between “[t]he typical bourgeois interior” (13) and “the externalized atmosphere of modern ‘interiors’” (23). For Baudrillard, the use value of furnishings and décor in “modern” homemaking arises “neither in appropriation nor in intimacy but in information, in inventiveness, in control, in a continual openness to objective messages—in short, in the syntagmatic calculation which is […] the foundation of the discourse of the modern home-dweller.” The homemaker, that is, finds a degree of “transcendence,” not in inhabiting the relatively fixed symbolic space of the home, but in negotiating, arranging, and supervising the syntagms of things. Baudrillard writes, “The subject is himself the order he [sic] put into things, and this order excludes redundancy: man has simply to remove himself from the picture” (25); the homeowner “removes himself” as the rail dispatcher stands above and outside the operation of trains, as the manager in his glassed-in office inserts himself into the production process by removing himself from it. Here, in fact, is a kind of industrialized consumption, where calculation and productive enchainment take the place of sentimentality and “authenticity”—even if the goods themselves are little different from the ones that furnish the Derrick house.

The most striking difference between the stock ticker passage and that of the train robbery, however, is less one of real spaces than of the imagination of these spaces, of their outsides and insides. Magnus (prophetically, as it turns out) imagines himself facing not only
subsumption by capital, but even consumption by it, the state of being like his ranch, a “part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round” (54); the coming of universalized exchange—the advent of risks based not on the weather or social vicissitudes, but on the success or failure of millions of other enterprises—seems like a thing, something very like an octopus. Moreover, since the Derricks are already “feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant,” the vision of the approaching monster comes too late; they are already consumed, already assimilated. In contrast, the Annixters take for granted the state of being—literally—already inside capital, with the railroad as both its instrument and metonym. Telegraphing overseers, buying and bargaining, consulting watches and timetables—the Annixters at first seem to be cognitively and physically integrated parts and users of the railroad apparatus, as Buck makes clear to Hilma when she worries that the train will arrive in Bonneville in the early hours of the morning: “‘Never mind,’ [Buck] declared, ‘we’ll go home in Pullman’s, Hilma [sic]. […] No sir, it is Pullman’s or nothing. When it comes to buying furniture, I don’t shine, perhaps, but I know what’s due my wife’” (408). Buck’s boast shows he understands the new sexual division of labor in terms of the new spatial division of labor: department stores are for women to understand, railway carriages are for men. At the same time, since these two spaces are themselves parts of an integrated and rationalized spatiality, it also illustrates the degree to which gender roles themselves have been “rationalized.” Only when the passengers encounter the “interminable period of silence,” when the train is left “[h]elpless, bereft of its engine” (419), do they begin to feel the kind of “fear” and “terror” that Magnus and Harran had felt in their vigil around the ticker. What terrifies the Derricks is the phantasy of assimilation, of the collapse of their private space in the midst of, but outside, capital; conversely, what appears to the train passengers is a void beyond the
space of capital itself. While the image of a voracious, formless, limitless economic organism figures the triumph of the rationalizing tendency of capital over individuality and the entrepreneurial sprit—thereby registering the paradoxical fact that this tendency is itself founded on violence and “original accumulation”—the endless “night and rain” of the stranded passengers suggests that only nothingness lies beyond the space subsumed by this process. If the forces of capital seem inhuman to those trapped by them, what lies outside these processes is radically not-human, elemental, almost pre-organic.

If the railroad passage equates the space of the rail carriage with the historical forces pressuring the gendered “separate spheres” of the nineteenth century, while simultaneously representing it as machine that remakes gender as function instead of place, then, it also paints this rationalized space as nevertheless subject to violence, accidents, jolts, explosions, confusion, and rupture. Moreover, these traumas mark the limit of the passengers’ ability to make themselves at home in the cars; even Buck and Hilma find that there are shocks to the system for which they have not rehearsed. The railroad carriage, both in its claustral yet vitally heterogeneous spatiality, and in its vulnerability to traumatic irruptions, metonymizes the way the second half of *The Octopus* shifts to a great extent from the outdoor spaces of the San Joaquin Valley to the indoor spaces of San Francisco, from an agricultural scene of uncluttered vistas to urban (or railway) scenes dense with bodies, machines, and writing.

**The old instinct for the familiar levers**

When Magnus and Harran fearfully read the global roil of commodities in the sigils of their ticker tapes, when Lyman ruefully observes the excesses and inefficiencies of capital while also dimly perceiving the obsolescence of his own role as privileged interpreter of
capitalist spaces, when Annixter’s fellow passengers encounter the spatial void penetrated by railroads but beyond the signification of railroad maps and timetables, we ourselves encounter both the power and the limits of the elevated and panoramic—yet place-bound—mode of perception that the novel consistently links to landowning propertarian capital and its associated superstructural formations. Capitalism not only assigns landowning capitalists and their allies a place of power that is nonetheless always-already under threat, it also produces in them a mode of perceiving space that both blinds them to the nature of their vulnerability and renders that vulnerability sublimely yet spectrally ubiquitous.

Neither landowning nor industrial capital as such represents the novel’s only point of view, however. Much of the second half of the narrative focuses on the struggles of the erstwhile locomotive engineer Dyke, his attempt to establish himself as a hop farmer, and his subsequent economic collapse and failed armed conflict with the P. and S.W. Of all the novel’s characters who struggle against the railroad, Dyke seems the least attached to place and the most adaptable to change, and at first Dyke is marked by the absence of any tendency to apocalyptic visions or brooding fantasies about capitalist spatialities. On the other hand, this means that Dyke, compared to the novel’s other characters, is both generally unreflective and naively optimistic about the way those very spatialities work. With the exception of Cedarhurst, only Dyke consistently tries to prosper from the fluidity of capitalist spatiality instead of in spite of it. And in fact, he eventually fails not because overproduction drives down the price of his commodities, but because he fails to anticipate the rise in freight rates due to the underproduction of those very commodities; instead of being cheated by the railroad, Dyke cheats himself by setting his prices to cheaply in advance. Dyke, whose plan at first seems to take advantage of the same upheavals that threaten the wheat farmers, is in the
end undone not by the leviathan of globalizing production but by the speed at which the information of prices is propagated. His situation, then, inverts that of Magnus and Harran earlier in the novel: While the Derricks imagine themselves as helpless before the advance of a rationalized spatiality that threatens to obliterate the agricultural proprietor’s spatial autonomy, Dyke—whose thinking seems to have already adapted to industrialized space—finds himself on the other side of this advance, facing the condition of Vogelfreiheit that obtains everywhere within the space of capitalist subsumption. If much of the novel suggests the impossibility of hiding, of finding a refuge from spatial flux, Dyke’s story seems to imply that it is equally impossible to identify directly with the roil and shock of industrialized space.

As one of the novel’s few examples of a productive laborer, in fact, Dyke seems rather to overidentify with spatial fluidity. We first see him “leaning on his folded arms from the cab window of [his] freight engine” like some steam-era centaur, and the narrator describes him as “a heavy built, well-looking fellow […] with great shoulders and massive, hairy arms, and a tremendous, rumbling voice” (16-17). Dyke is both like and a part of the rail apparatus; he literally has no distance from it. Hence, when Dyke chances upon an idling locomotive as he flees from a pursuing posse, he treats the encounter as a kind of homecoming: “[H]is eye fell upon the detached locomotive that lay quietly steaming on the up line, and with a thrill of exultation, he remembered that he was an engineer born and bred” (474). We read, “His pistol was in his hand, as once more on foot, he sprang toward the lone engine [and he] swung himself up, dropping his pistol on the floor of the cab and reaching with the old instinct for the familiar levers” (474-475). The rhetoric of birth, breeding, and instinct, along with language suggesting self-coordinating corporeality—the eye, hand, foot, all work together without the mediation of mind or consciousness—contrasts sharply with the language of interiority and
imagination the novel associates with most of its other characters. And yet, this language itself only further identifies Dyke with the locomotive, itself troped as a titanic organism:

The engine moved, advanced [...] and gathering speed, rolled out on the track beyond. Smoke, black and boiling, shot skyward from the stack; not a joint that did not shudder with the mighty strain of steam; but the great iron brute [...] came to call, obedient and docile as soon as ever the great pulsing heart of it felt a master hand upon its levers. It gathered its speed, bracing its steel muscles, its thews of iron, and roared out upon the open track, filling the air with the rasp of its tempest-breath, blotting the sunshine with the belch of its hot, thick smoke. (475)

If the locomotive is an organism, then Dyke would seem to be the ghost in the machine, the mind within the body; but even here, Dyke is metonymically troped as body himself: a master hand. The implication is that Dyke is a thinking body, one born and bred to merge with the railroad system. Hence, the merging of Dyke and the locomotive becomes the perfect perceiving, thinking, speed-producing, space-annihilating assemblage.

Magnus and Annie Derrick’s house is designed to efface fluidity and ephemerality. Meanwhile, Lyman Derrick and Buck Annixter try to strike a compromise with spatial flux. Knowing very well that spaces can only be occupied ephemerally, their fetishistic practices nonetheless both participate in and seem to master spatial flux. Dyke, in contrast, is both physically and directly involved in the production of spatial change itself. He tries neither to isolate himself from railroad spatiality nor to recreate his “own” space within that spatiality; rather, he is already at home in that spatiality. In the locomotive cab, escaping from the railroad agents,
He was back in his old place again; once more he was the engineer; once more he felt the engines quiver under him; the familiar noises were in his ears; the familiar buffeting of the wind surged, roaring at his face; the familiar odours [sic] of hot steam and smoke reeked in his nostrils, and on either side of him, parallel panoramas, the two halves of the landscape sliced, as it were, in two by the clashing wheels of his engine, streamed by in green and brown blinds. (477)

Here, the chaotic and turbulent information of the senses is not only converted immediately into action, but this action is immediately of both body and machine. And when the posse tries to derail Dyke by opening a rail switch ahead of his locomotive, he “[sees] the trick” immediately—his engineer’s “instincts” unthinkingly interpreting the messages of the rail semaphore system—in stark contrast to his pursuers, who “[have] been clever enough, quick-witted enough, to open the switch, but had forgotten the automatic semaphores that worked simultaneously with the movement of the rails” (477). At first, Dyke eludes the posse precisely because their relation to the railroad is one of property and law, not production; consequently, they simply don’t have the instincts to catch him. On the other hand, the instinct for spatial fluidity is not itself enough to beat the railroad; Dyke is, of course, finally caught precisely because the railroad is not an infinite space in which his paradoxically finely-trained “instincts” can operate. Because the railroad is materially, and not simply formally, property, the railroad men can fence Dyke in: They control the telegraphs, which they use to signal ahead to the switchman to open the switch that cuts Dyke off, and they can enlist the power of the sheriff, who can himself commandeer a locomotive in the “‘Name of the State of California’” (476). Consequently, although capital both provides avenues of escape and hones
the “instincts” for rebellion, it also wields the political power of reterritorialization. Dyke’s story and Magnus Derrick’s story are not really schematic opposites, but the difference between them suggests that if a naïve attempt to evade or disavow spatial fluidity always leads to a trap, so does any naïve embrace or accommodation of it. Subjectivity characterized by a affinity, whether learned or “instinctive,” for technosocial change and physical motion, can be just as much a kind of false consciousness as a subjectivity marked by a sentimental or narcissistic attachment to place.

Dyke’s failed bid for independence from railroad control doubles the ranchers’ mass rabbit hunt on the eve of the fatal confrontation between them and the US marshal who has been sent to dispossess them. The panicked retreat of the swarm of rabbits before the organized (and mechanized) ranchers allegorizes the hapless resistance of all the residents of the San Joaquin:

Their antics were infinite. No two [rabbits] acted exactly precisely alike.

Some lay stubbornly close in a little depression between the two clods, till the horses’ hoofs were all but upon them, then sprang out from their hiding-place at the last second. Others ran forward but a few yards at a time, refusing to take flight, scenting a greater danger before them than behind. Still others, forced up at the last moment, doubled with lightning alacrity in their tracks, turning back to scuttle between the teams, taking desperate chances. (499)

The rabbits’ futile and “stubborn” stillness, their retreat into “hiding-places,” may be appropriate metaphors for the Derricks’ stance toward the conflict with the railroad; but once in flight, the rabbits seem to figure Dyke’s final attempt at escape from the railroad and its
agents. They appear as a mass of bodies that are themselves aggregates of ears and eyes, tails and legs. Here, the rabbits’ instinct for speed, their keen senses—along with their legendary fecundity—which make them an easy match for an individual hunter, are turned against them by the organized ranchers. Unthinking, the rabbits cannot see the “larger picture” of the hunt, and the spatial strategy of the ranchers overwhelms their natural affinity for speed and agility, forcing them to “[double] with lightning alacrity in their tracks, [turn] back to scuttle between the teams, [and take] desperate chances,” instinctive tactics that, again, echo those taken by Dyke as he runs from the law.

Both Dyke’s flight from the agents of the law and the scene of the rabbit hunt, then, also parallel the fate of Minna Hooven, who moves to San Francisco with her mother and little sister Hilda after her father is killed in the armed confrontation at the Los Muertos irrigation ditch. Turned out of their rooming house, Mrs. Hooven and the Hilda are endlessly harassed by policemen who demand that they keep moving (593). The pair, first out of paralyzing anxiety, then out of “lassitude,” resist the way the enforcers of the law constantly urge them forward, continually returning to the same street corner, then remaining for days in a public park; finally, Mrs. Hooven die of hunger. It is as if Mrs. Hooven cannot, lacks the “instinct,” to obey the policeman’s tautological demand—“Move along, or be arrested!” Minna, on the other hand, seems to fare much better than her mother and sister at first; she seeks refuge in flophouses and churches, but eventually she becomes quite adept at using the city’s network of ferries and streetcars in her search for work. Out of money and exhausted, however, she finds herself on the University of California campus, described by the narrator as “some sort of public enclosure” (586), where she is at last recruited by a pander.
While Mrs. Hooven and Hilda travel in tight circles, going no further than Nob Hill, Minna traverses much of San Francisco and Berkeley; yet Minna’s literal escape from reterritorialization is just as short-lived. The unctuous and ostentatious procuress who enlists Minna is not just Minna’s final spatial destination, but with her “certain droop of fatigue in her eyelids” and “indefinite self-confidence of manner,” she corporeals the same abject combination of theatricality and merely mechanical energy that also seems to be growing in Minna herself. And Minna, when Presley encounters her days later, seems—like the Magnus house or the interior of railway carriage in which Annixter rides—like a mere accretion of ornaments:

Meanwhile, Presley had been taking in with a quick eye the details of Minna’s silk dress, with its garniture of lace, its edging velvet, its silver belt-buckle, Her hair was arranged in a new way and on here head was a wide hat with a flare to one side, set off with a gilt buckle and a puff of bright blue plush. (588).

Her body virtually effaced and constrained by her own clothing, working in the interstices of capital, Minna is both parody and ultima ratio of what she sought to become in her search for a job. As she had sough refuge in the precapitalist world of personal service—a refuge the narrator explicitly characterizes as a “little niche” (584)—she has become spatially arrested; no longer at the advancing wave-front of capital, she has fallen, like flotsam caught in a steam’s backwater, into the lowest levels of the capitalist order.

Minna’s fate, like Dyke’s, suggests that capitalist spatiality eventually either destroys or assimilates everything in its path. However, the trajectories of these two characters also suggest that capitalist spatiality does not itself propagate merely spatially. That is, what these
stories reveal—and what the novel’s many fantasies of octopus-like invasion and enclosure cannot quite see—is that capital doesn’t merely control space; rather capital is also both a way of seeing space and an axiomatic by which all other ways of perceiving space are put to work for the propagation of capital. Characters like Minna and Dyke—and, in the end, Magnus, too—are assigned their places in the division of labor according to their own instinctive-yet-learned ways of seeing and knowing places. If it is meaningful to speak of the inherent tendency of capital to develop unevenly—and of this tendency’s essential function in capitalist accumulation—we can also see in The Octopus the narration of various trajectories founded on the uneven development of spatial consciousness as well. In The Octopus—as, in McTeague, McTeague’s atavistic precapitalist lust for gold determines his actions so much that he even bears it with him into the empty spaces of the alkali deserts—characters’ lives are determined by their underdeveloped and partial ways of knowing spaces. They are not just in space; they are always-already contained, as it were, by their space-suits, perceptional interfaces that both hinder and facilitate their emplacement in capitalist spatiality.

The cipher message of the eye

So far I have shown how The Octopus does not simply use the California land conflicts of the late nineteenth century in general, or the Mussel Slough riot particularly, as an occasion for some kind of broad naturalist parable; rather, the novel thinks specifically and purposefully about the railroad—as institution, as technical device, and as technosocial system—and its spatiality. In fact, the late nineteenth-century spaces captured Norris’s imagination in much of his writing outside The Octopus; often, indeed, the railroad figures in his critical writing as a simultaneously significant and ambiguous trope. In the collection of critical essays The
Responsibilities of the Novelist, for example, Norris writes: “If the novel were not something more than a simple diversion, a means of whiling away a dull evening, a long railway journey, it would not […] remain in favour [sic] another day” (5). Later, he again associates the ephemerality of the popular novel with the railroad, calling such books “a flippant paper-covered thing of swords and cloaks, to be carried on a railway journey and to be thrown out the window with the sucked oranges and peanut shells” (26). The novel, argues Norris, must be neither a “diversion” nor disposable; it must stand apart not only from the spiritual vacuity of popular entertainments, but it should shun the material excess of industrial production.

Norris’s metaphor evokes an image of rights-of-way strewn with used books, resembling the tracks littered with sheep carcasses and demolished steel plants in The Octopus, and suggests that popular texts are part of the intellectual waste-product of industrialized transport. Norris also links the worthlessness of popular literature to the spaces of industrial production themselves, writing that “the great presses of the country are for the most part merely sublimated sausage machines that go dashing along in a mess of paper and printer’s ink turning out the meat for the monster” (80). These words, published a mere three years before Charles Edwards Russell’s The Greatest Trust in the World (1905) and four years before Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (1906), not only trade on the public’s consciousness of the meatpacking industry’s adulterated and unwholesome products, but also implicitly resonate with Norris’s earlier dismissive railroad metonymy; for turn-of-the-century city planners, railways and slaughterhouses were alike places that were shunned, placed out of view, and hence hidden from public inspection\(^\text{19}\).

Elsewhere, however, Norris emphatically embraces the industrialization and industrialized proliferation of literature, often praising both the literal and figurative mobility
and spatial evanescence of industrial-age life: “Instead […] of deploring the vast circulation of mediocre novels, let us take the larger view and find in the fact not a weakness but a veritable strength. The more one reads—it is a curious consolatory—the more one is apt to discriminate” (82). More importantly, Norris repeatedly invokes the rigor and efficiency of industrial production as the model of what he calls the “training” of the literary producer: “Given the ordinarily intelligent ten-year-old and, all things being equal, you can make anything you like out of him—a minister of the gospel or a green-goods man, and electrical engineer or a poet, or […] a novelist” (98). Moreover, he writes, if “all this modern, all this gigantic perfected machinery—all this restless trend of a commercial civilization were set in motion in favor of the little aspirant for honours in artistic fields, who is to say […] he would not in the end be a successful artist, painter, poet musician, or novelist” (99). Here, the “restlessness” of capital, its “motion,” stands not only for the productive power of capital, but for its capacity to produce the authentically new, even in the midst of repetition and fraud. But without such intensive, industrialized, technical formation, the aspiring writer will inevitably be a product of the restlessness and fluidity of capitalism—but a shoddy one: “Other men’s books take the place of imagination for the young man; creation for him is satisfied by dramas, horse races, and amusements. The newspapers are his observation and oh, how he assumes to be above any pleasure in simple, vigorous life!” (100). The trick for Norris, it would seem, is to be fully of the restless world of railyards and meatpacking plants without becoming subsumed—or consumed—by it. For, in pairing the rhetoric of “other men’s” writing “taking the place” of the potential writer’s productive powers with the failure of “vigor,” he equates immobiliation with cuckoldry. The fixed place of the mere spectator—especially that of
such traditional spaces of spectatorship as the racetrack or theater—here represents a place of vulnerability.

On the other hand, if the rhetorical mileage Norris gets from denouncing the literally trashy books ejected from trains by bored and restless passengers seems to clash with his claim that literary “truth” must be “as practical as a cable car” (*Responsibilities* 38), Norris’s metaphors are arguably neither as ambivalent nor as incoherent as they at first appear. The only excess of capitalism to which Norris really objects, seemingly, is the excessive tendency to disavow its own excessiveness. Hence, not the litter-strewn right-of-way, but the passenger’s sentimental obliviousness to it—and the texts’ complicity with that obliviousness—is what Norris condemns. “For the Million,” writes Norris, “Life is a contracted affair, is bounded by the walls of the narrow channel of affairs in which their feet are set. They have no horizon. They look today […] to the writer of fiction to give them an idea of life beyond their limits” (7). However, if this rhetoric of the bounds, walls, and limits surrounding the literary consumer suggests that authors should always provide a kind of panoramic, totalizing, view of the world, Norris also condemns “Realism” for its overly distancing stance: “For [realism], Beauty is not even skin deep, but only a geometrical plane, without dimensions and depth, a mere outside” (*Responsibilities* 164). And Norris’s solution to the presentation of “mere outsides” in fiction? “Romance.” “Romance,” he writes, should be “upstairs with you, prying, peeping, peering into the closets of the bedroom, into the nursery, into the sitting room; yes, and into that little iron box screwed to the lower shelf of the closet in the library; and into the compartments and pigeonholes of the *secretaire* in the study” (166). The literary detective work of “Romance” is always probing the very spaces that Norris condemns as bounded—and then moving on. Hence, Norris’s answer to the limited lives of
“the Million” is not a literature that represents spatial vastnesses, but a literature that organizes and represents the hitherto claustal, circumscribed, and hidden—on a heroic scale. Norris calls not for vistas, not for the painterly “geometrical plane,” but for sequences or constellation of well-chosen details. As he writes elsewhere, “There is no such thing as imagination. What we elect to call imagination is mere combination of things not heretofore combined” (“Selection” 125-126).

Some scholars have consequently seen in Norris’s critical works a technophilic conception of authorship that anticipates the industrial modernism of, for example, Ezra Pound, Marcel Duchamp, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and William Carlos Williams. For example, Paul Young has suggested that the recent invention of the cinematographic apparatus profoundly informed Norris’s “notion of the forms and roles the traditional arts must take in the new century” (646). For Young, Norris’s ideal author does not create spectacles like a scenographer, but “collect[s], frame[s], and juxtapose[s] frozen fragments of real events” like a filmmaker (651). Arguably, however, the railway’s domination of the fin-de-siècle’s spatiality leaves its traces even more indelibly in The Octopus than does the cinema. After all, as Jonas Larsen has pointed out, trains are themselves “vision machines” (5). Like cinema, argues Larson, the “travel glance” of the rail passenger reinforces “modern ideas about the subordination of nature as landscape, the privileging of a seeing over the other senses, and not least the power of the observer over the perceived” (89). Wolfgang Schivelbusch maintains that travel educated the senses in what he calls “panoramic perception,” a kind of reduction of the distant landscape to a quasi-cinematic image, which “in contrast to traditional perception, no longer belonged to the space of the perceived objects: the traveler saw the objects, landscapes, etc. through the apparatus which moved him [sic] through the world” (64;
emphasis in original). Similarly, Michel de Certeau writes that on the train,

The windowpane is what allows us to see, and the rail, what allows us to move through. These are two complementary modes of separation. The first creates the spectator’s distance: You shall not touch; the more you see, the less you hold—a dispossession of the hand in favor of a greater trajectory for the eye. The second inscribes, indefinitely, the injunction to pass on; [...]—an imperative of separation which obliges one to pay for an abstract ocular domination of space be leaving behind any proper place, by losing one’s footing. (112; emphasis in original).

But if de Certeau’s “greater trajectory for the eye” seems to echo Norris’s call for an authorship that goes beyond the “limits” of turn-of-the-century reader, the “spectator’s distance” of rail passengerhood would also seem to correspond to the overly distanced view of realism, and the way in which de Certeau says the passenger “is pigeonholed, numbered, and regulated in the grid of the railway car” (111) further evokes the kind of enervated, produced rather than productive, imagination at the mercy of “[o]ther men’s books.” Hence, if nineteenth-century rail passengerhood provides an ambivalent figure for Norris’s ideal, it seems to be because passengerhood was itself ambivalent—as de Certeau writes, “at once incarcerational and navigational” (113).

However, the ambivalences of rail practices have their own history. Rail-travel narratives of the late nineteenth century do not give a consistent or transparent picture of passengers “organized by the gridwork of technocratic discipline” (de Certeau 113), nor did such passengers always successfully use trains as “vision machines.” For, while Michel Foucault has convincingly argued that the nascent proletariat resisted the integration of their bodies into
the discipline of machine systems, the writings of genteel Gilded Age authors—both American and European—suggest that the nineteenth-century middle class resisted railroad spatiality precisely because they saw it as indisciplined, chaotic, and disorderly. For example, both native critics and British travel writers complained bitterly of what they saw as the mixing of classes in the cars. Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1867, the poet Bayard Taylor lamented the way that “the refined and the brutal, the clean and the filthy, the invalid and the swearing, tobacco-squirting rowdy, are packed together” in American railway carriages (479); three years later, a pseudonymous “Cosmopolitan” called the American railway car a “wandering caravanseraï, in which eighty or a hundred persons of all classes and colors and ages are assembled together (200). The “mixing” of the genders—or, more accurately, the failure to segregate the genders in the expected way—also caused consternation. In 1884, British traveler Emily Faithfull complained of being “packed up this promiscuous fashion” in the berths of a Pullman sleeper, writing that “the idea of a stranger occupying the berth above you, enclosed within the shelter of your own curtains, is distasteful to most people” (46). Despite recognizing the *de facto* grading of passengers in standard coach carriages, Pullman sleepers, and “immigrant” cars, genteel Gilded-Age passengers saw the subdivision and parceling-out of spaces on trains as crude and haphazard. It is as if, for these observers, a spatial order driven by the technical needs of the railroad rather than the social need of the middle class was no order at all. In essence, what troubled them was not the rigor of “the principle of elementary location or partitioning” (Foucault 143), but the lack thereof.

When travelers objected to the social promiscuity of the cars, they usually blamed the undisguisedly industrial nature of the railcar space for failing to register genteel codes of class
and corporeal propriety. Like many writers, for example, British visitor William Saunders complained of the dearth of space for the individual traveler’s body:

> On measuring the seats in several of the American railways, I found that the space allowed for two passengers varied from two feet nine inches square to three feet square. [...] If both passengers are of moderate size they will find it a very tight fit to squeeze themselves into the space. If their legs are of the usual length it will be very difficult to know how to dispose of them. At every movement their limbs come in contact with sharp angles of iron or wood; even the armrests are made of polished iron with sharp corners. The tops of the seats do not reach above the middle of the back, and thus it is impossible to rest the head or the shoulders. (121)

“In the event of an accident,” writes Saunders in language evoking the “disassembly lines” of the Chicago packinghouses, “the sharp angles and ornaments, with the movable seats, are exactly adapted to cut the passengers into mincemeat” (122). Yet Saunders sees himself as the hog here, not the hog speculator. The impingement of machine-nature on genteel bodies is more likely to be troped as violence and disarray than as an excess of regularity. Taylor writes of the “underdeveloped” character of the rail system as an example of the American preference for “the mere skeleton, or rudimentary outline, of a system, barely sufficient, in some respects, to be distinguished from no system at all” (478), while “A Cosmopolitan” complains that “travelling means in America rushing from one place to another, and next to rushing, pushing” (196). After purchasing his ticket, the traveler in America makes his way through an almost furious crowd, into another shed, still dirtier and meaner than the first, where he is literally pelted with huge iron-
bound trunks; they pass between his legs threatening to upset him; they knock against his arms and his sides, they are lifted over his head and endanger his life. Then they are thrown pell-mell on a platform, and in the midst of this infernal din, bewildered and confused, he is rudely summoned by an Irishman on the other side: Now then, your ticket! (196)

Such language evokes democratic turmoil, not technocratic control, and what impressed travelers in the decades after the Civil War was not the simultaneous movement of hundreds of bodies across geographical space, but the anarchy of railway spaces themselves.

This anarchy, moreover, was also often figured as illegibility or a dearth of signification. Not only was the sensorium assaulted by the machine nature of the train, but authors struggled to translate the resulting “bewildered and confused” state into writing. “A Cosmopolitan” writes in prose continually interrupted by the fragmentary voices of others, yet he insists—at least three times—that the train and the station is marked by a lack of “information”; likewise, he tropes the train space as both obscure and labyrinthine, treating both the station and the carriage as “incarcerational” indeed but registering none of the reflective, rationalizing aspect of rail travel that de Certeau calls “navigational.” The rail passenger in the Pullman sleeper walks down [...] into utter darkness, from which [a conductor’s] voice proceeds, and finds a man, lantern in hand, selling tickets for berths and staterooms. He obtains a ticket, but not the information where to find his berth, and at hap-hazard mounts a platform leading to a peculiar-looking car. It is locked. He starts to try the other end, and after having waded through a long mud-puddle, which he could not see in the deep night which reigns in this part of the building, he finds a colored servant who tells him
to walk in. Here also utter darkness! [...] But before he has become well at home in the berths, [...] he is once more imperatively ordered to show his ticket, a lantern is thrust in his eye and a second guard—perhaps a detective?—inspects his as if he were a criminal. (197)

“A Cosmopolitan” in essence reads the spaces of the railway as literally unreadable, as a material assembly that obstructs his vision while allowing the railway officials to read him incorrectly. Another pseudonymous writer, “A Universal Railer,” jocularly emphasizes the coincidence of a material proliferation of signifiers with a deficiency of signification—that is, “meaning”—in the spaces surrounding the rail line itself:

By an avalanche-like rather than a glacial movement, I transported myself to the window—a seat which I detest, because it betrays to the scientific eye delicious geological sensations defiled by foulest advertisements, badly spelt, as a general rule, and always irregularly stratified—a dike of Phalon running into a layer of warped Helmbold, or a conglomerate of Wintersmith, dipping violently down upon a bed of disintegrated New-York Smeakly as if to give evidence of volcanic action, when we know that there is no such thing a catastrophe in Nature, but the all things, even advertisements, evolute [...] by slow and uniform degrees. (633)

Here, “A Universal Railer” continues the rhetoric of both the subterranean and the catastrophic, further contributing to the Gilded Age discourse that linked illegibility and material disorder to punishment and claustraction. While it is tempting to see these criticisms of the heterogeneity of railway space as echoes of Mark Twain’s similar depictions of both the steamboat and the railway, Twain’s complaint is precisely that such spaces were too
overwritten by nostalgic, sentimental, or superstitious ideologies. Twain feared an uncanny recrudescence of the kind of spatiality he associated with the Old South in the new America, while these genteel passengers worried about the abolition of any knowable spatial order at all. Like the Derricks père et fils, these travelers saw themselves as being consumed—swallowed and digested—by railway space. For them, railways were indeed spreading and subsuming space like an octopus, but this very trope emerges out of the simultaneous feeling of spatial enclosure and interpretive bafflement. An octopus, after all, is not merely a figure for omnipresence, but one for shapelessness, the disorderly, the chthonic, and the asignifying. 

All the more significant, then, is the marked difference between these accounts and some of the narratives of rail travel written around the time of the publication of The Octopus. I have already discussed the rise of “fictions of passengerhood” in the late nineteenth century. Arguably, however, around 1900, these fictions themselves undergo a thematic shift from focusing on passengerhood as a sociocultural technique for reconciling middle-class Gemütlichkeit with technical competence, to the pleasures of technical mastery itself. Norris’s novel about the spaces of the railroads, then, registers a historical moment in which trains and stations became more transparent, more legible, to middle-class passengers. French writer Paul Bourget, who was hardly without his own genteel and elitist prejudices, praised, rather than deplored, the “singular bent toward complexity” he discovered in the cars. He was particularly impressed with the very accoutrements that William Saunders had seen as a wilderness of savage blades:

Everything is fitted, planned, compressed, so as to get the greatest number of adjustable articles into the smallest possible space. The arm-chair in which you are seated turns upon a pivot, and may be tipped to any angle
that pleases you. If you want your window open, a negro brings a metal
screen which he slips into grooves cunningly devised between the ledge of
the window and the raised sash. If you desire to take luncheon, play cards,
or write he places before you a table which rests upon the floor by a single
movable foot, the other end being fitted into the side of the car. Boys are
constantly passing, offering newspapers and books. I distinguish among
them Alphonse Daudet’s Sappho, with a second title added, Or, Lured by a
Bad Woman’s Fatal Beauty! (40)

Bourget’s praise of the railcar’s “planned” and “cunning” spatial organization, of the way the
carriage is designed to please the passenger and to satisfy his desires, contrasts sharply with
earlier accounts. Even more telling, perhaps, is his approbation of another common sight on
American trains of the period—the mobile bookseller. While earlier writers had singled this
institution out for special mockery, Bourget notes with approval the availability of a text by
Alphonse Daudet—the very same author that Norris’s self-possessed young doctor reads in
The Octopus. Similarly, the Briton James Fullarton Muirhead marveled at the convenience of
“the drawing-room, the dining-room, the smoking-room, and the library” on a New York-to-
Chicago train (223). He also observed, “Card-tables and a selection of daily papers minister to
the traveller’s amusement, while bulletin boards give the latest Stock Exchange quotations and
the reports of the Government Weather Bureau. Those who desire it may enjoy a bath en route,
or avail themselves of the services of a lady’s maid, a barber, a stenographer, and a type-
writer.” Muirhead not only seems to have succeeded at reading the spaces of the railway, but
he found railway spaces appropriate for both reading and writing. For Muirhead and other like
him, not just textuality, but meaning, flows transparently and unobstructed through these
spaces. Moreover, both writers emphasized the absence of any violent motion on the train, Bourget extolling the “wisdom” of placing the carriage itself on “small six-wheeled trucks” (41), and Muirhead explicitly claiming that thanks to the steadiness of the railbed and the carriage, “letter-writing need not be a lost art on a railway journey” (224). Perhaps the ultimate expression of the idea of the rail carriage as a space not only of social comfort, but of cognitive lucidity, was brief article in the February 1893 edition of Manufacturer and Builder that described a new typewriter that could be used “on the lap, on the desk, on the train—in short, anywhere” (34; fig. 3). These scenes of textual production and consumption emphasize how passengers who were accustomed to office spaces around 1900 began to see—and delight in—rail carriages as artifacts enmeshed in both mobile networks and networks of inscriptive circulation.

Very likely, some of these changes were merely due to a real improvement in the technical efficiency and convenience of nineteenth-century American railroads. But, as I have already noted, turn-of-the-century passengers often praised exactly those elements of train spaces that earlier writers deplored. Perhaps most significantly, in contrast to those Victorian passengers who complained about the social “promiscuity” of the rail carriage, later passengers saw the social heterogeneity of the cars as compatible with, and even salutary to, middle-class selfhood. Muirhead, for example, lauded the “opportunity to move about in the train,” which was impossible in the British first-class carriage: “[A] conversation with Daisy Miller in the American parlour car is rendered doubly delightful by the consciousness that you may at any moment transfer yourself and your bons mots to Lydia Blood at the other end of the car, or retire with Gilead P. Beck to the snug little smoking-room” (224). In S. Weir
Mitchell’s novel *Dr. North and His Friends*, the eponymous narrator Dr. Owen North—a stand-in for Mitchell himself—says,

[A] comfortable railway journey is always agreeable to me. Nowhere do I think as fluently and with more sure result than in a swift train. Here I feel secure from invasion. I am guarded by the immense average of silent reserve attained by the American. If, however, I no longer crave solitary thought, and desire to talk, in the smoking-car I am reasonably sure to find those who will cordially respond. I drop into a seat near some selected man, and in ten minutes he is telling me his life-story. To converse about what a man knows best is a certain way to please the man, and to learn what he knows and what you may not. I regret that I have kept no record of the many biographies frankly given me in the long hours of travel. (138)

Mitchell glories here in the very anonymity that had troubled earlier riders. In contrast to the passengerial gregariousness emphasized in, for example, Howells’s *Their Wedding Journey*, he even sees the “silent reserve” of his fellow passengers—the kind of reserve that earlier writers would have attributed to bafflement or timidity in the face of the ubiquitous violence of the railway space—as particularly conducive to “fluent” thought. Like Muirhead, Mitchell, associates railway spaces and their social impersonality with corporeal freedom and mental security. Apparently, then, the “navigational” side of passengerhood prevailed over the “incarcerational” for writers like Bourget, Muirhead, and Mitchell. For them, railway carriages and stations were libratory spaces, spaces to navigate freely, spaces to enjoy.

Gilded-Age rail passengerhood was often, to use Norris’s own term, a contracted affair, but some passengers of the Progressive Era seemed to take the kind of larger, yet closely-
attentive, view of their environment that Norris advocates in both his critical writing and The Octopus. Although Larson has contrasted train travel with automobile travel, writing that “the train traveller [. . .] is fully subjugated by the train’s visual spectacle, as s/he has no power to control, regulate, or frame the flow of landscape images that pass through his/her eyes” (90-91), it seems clear that by the 1890s, at least some passengers did not see themselves as “subjugated” by the space of the rail carriage. Trains and their spaces, that is, did not automatically or transparently produce spatial knowledge; passengers had to be acclimated to such spaces in order for them to use the railroad as a “vision machine.” Arguably, however, the larger view of later passengers was itself mediated, a result of the way trains and their spaces were coming to be represented by the end of the 1800s. For example, beginning in 1888, Scribner’s Magazine published a series of articles on American railroads; these were not traveler’s accounts, but expository essays that promised to give readers an insider’s view of the history and technical operations of the railroad23. Of these articles, perhaps the most remarkable is “Railway Management” by former Confederate general and rail executive Edward Porter Alexander. Aside from its detailed discussion of block switching, bridge gangs, and waybills, “Railway Management” is particularly noteworthy because of its copious illustrations, including a reproduction of a “diagram, or graphic representation” used by railroad superintendents of transportation in the preparation of train schedules (31; fig. 4), renderings of both the interior and exterior of the “very expensive and complicated apparatus” of signaling and switch towers, and an engraving of the office of a typical train dispatcher, the official in charge of the actual real-time operation of trains, including the management of “extra and delayed trains by direct telegraphic order” (34)24. This last illustration displays the dispatcher surrounded by a panoply of clocks, gauges, bulletins, windows, and telegraph
instruments; the scene emphasizes both the spatial interconnectedness of the rail office space and the proliferation of textuality within (fig. 5). Like the Derrick office at Los Muertos, this is a “nerve center”; unlike the Los Muertos office, however, this space seems to be a space of unimpeded agency in which the dispatcher moves freely and competently. The dispatcher—his legs splayed so he can more easily pivot in his chair, his hands busy with two separate tasks, his eyes wide open—seem less a body caught in the grasp of an octopus than an octopus himself. Likewise, the juxtaposition of this image with the bird’s-eye views of the railyards and the representations of the “expensive and complex apparatus” of the interlocking switching systems work to reproduce in the reader the central and omniscient spatial situation of the dispatcher, yielding a “larger view”—not an unmediated one to be sure, but indeed larger by virtue of its very mediation.

Such images invited readers to imagine themselves in the place of the railway manager, and indeed to reduplicate this act of spatial reimagining so as to produce a paradoxically disembodied, but not unmediated, mental representation of the railroad. A few month earlier, *Scribner’s* had published “Railway Passenger Travel” by former Pullman Palace Car Company executive (and, ironically, former Union general) Horace Porter. This article included a number of engravings illustrating the interiors of passenger carriages, including an image of middle-class passengers sedately socializing and reading in a Pullman “parlor car.” The subsequent publication of “Railway Management,” with its illustrations, retroactively reveals the railcar interior itself to be “merely the part of an enormous whole.” Yet, instead of making the spaces of the railroad seem obscure, cryptic, or unknowable, this series of images makes the railroad seem precisely legible; it produces a “larger view” that is not simply a more capacious image, but something that seems like a map or diagram—or, even, a montage. It not
only provides a view of the railroad, then, but argues for a way of looking at it. *Scribner’s* readers seeing passengers reading in a Pullman parlor car not only get an ironizing view of themselves, they can imagine themselves taking this ironizing view as passengers. These articles—and especially their illustrations—unequivocally suggest the material imbrication and formal equivalence of reading, rail passengerhood, and rail management; hence, they not only allow potential passengers to read the spaces of the railroad, they also make a kind of omnivorous consumerist (if still middle-class) reading a model for navigating railway spaces.

Despite the similarity between these texts and Norris’s own journalistic writing, Norris would have seen even these representations of the railroad as too genteel and antiseptic, as too merely celebratory of technology, as too unwilling to look closely at “the squalor of a dive, or the awful degradation of a disorderly house” (*Responsibilities* 167). Moreover, even if writers like Bourget, Muirheard, and Mitchell no longer suffered from the same kind of untrained sensorium that constrained earlier passengers, their more developed techniques of seeing railroad spaces were arguably blind to the very grotequeries and violences of the railroad that earlier writer were blinded by. Yet Norris himself seemed to think of authorship as something not unlike railroad management. Discussing the difference between the mere “novelist of composition” and the authentic “storyteller,” Norris writes that “every healthy-minded child […] is a story-teller” (*Responsibilities* 30). Moreover, writes Norris,

> As soon as he begins to talk he tells stories. Witness the holocausts and carnage of the leaden platoons of the nursery table, the cataclysm of the Grand Trans-Continental Playroom and Front-Hall Railroad system. This, though, is not real story-telling. The toys practically tell the story for him and are no stimulant to the imagination. However, the child goes beyond the
toys. He dramatizes every object of his surroundings. The books of the library shelves are files of soldiers, the rugs are the isles of the seaway of the floor, the easy chair is the comfortable old gentleman holding out his arms, the sofa a private brig or a Baldwin locomotive, and the child creates of his surroundings an entire and complex work of fiction of which he is at one and the same time hero, author, and public. (30)

The trope of railway management here is vexingly ambiguous. Norris insists the storytelling child must go “beyond” his toy trains to remain a storyteller; but in drawing “every object of his surroundings” into his “complex and entire world of fictions,” the child reproduces the material logic of capital—especially of railroad capital—in his own domestic space. Norris here implies that the bare technical fact of the toy train is limiting, but the way of seeing fostered by playing with toy trains is liberating. For the true adult storyteller, argues Norris, the playroom of the old days simply widens its walls till it includes the street outside, and the street beyond and other streets, the whole city, the whole world, and the story-teller discovers a new set of toys to play with, and new objects of measureless excitement to dramatize about, and in exactly, exactly the same spirit in which he trundled his tin train through the halls and shouted boarding orders from the sofa he moves now through the world’s playroom “making up stories”; only now his heroes and his public are outside himself and he alone may play the author. (31-32)

Here, once again—going “beyond.” And, even more, encompassing “the whole world”—and yet doing so in “exactly the same spirit” in which the nascent storyteller imagined himself as, at once, railroad magnate, railroad engineer, and railroad conductor. The railroad keeps
coming back as a defining trope, no matter how far the storyteller goes “beyond.” The railroad is the veritable trope for self-transcendence itself.

Hence, if the rail passenger must imagine himself in the place of the rail manager to master the constraining violence of the railroad space, the rail manager must become more like the newly-empowered rail passenger to avoid becoming trapped by his own imagined place of power. That is, he must keep moving, must keep going “beyond.” Indeed, “going beyond” is precisely what distinguishes the fate of Norris’s focalizer Presley from that of his putative villain S. Behrman. Behrman, after all, ends up as both agent and victim of motion. In the penultimate chapter of *The Octopus*, he deterritorializes the wheat twice—first by separating its production from the propertarian claims of the dispossessed ranchers and then by joining it more closely to the assemblages of harvesters, silos, trains, and ships that keep the wheat constantly moving. Yet, the more the grain moves, the more Norris uses the language of both stasis and looking to describe Berhman. We see Behrman crossing the fields of Los Muertos in his buggy, “searching the horizon for the feather of smoke that would mark the location of the steam harvester” (614). “However,” writes Norris, “he saw nothing.”:

> At length, S. Behrman halted his buggy and brought out his field glasses from beneath his seat. He stood up in his place and, adjusting the lenses, swept the prospect to the south and west. It was the same as though the sea of land were, in reality, the ocean, and he, lost in an open boat, were scanning the waste through his glasses, looking for the smoke of a steamer, hull down, below the horizon.

The language of surveillance is here tied directly to that of halting, of lostness, of standing “in place.” Like the young train tycoon who doesn’t keep moving, Behrman risks being mastered
by what he is the master of. For good measure, Norris makes his point once more: for
Behrman, “[t]he end, at length, had come; he had entered into his reward and saw himself at
last installed in the place he had so long, so silently coveted; saw himself chief of a
 principality, the Master of the Wheat” (615). Like the Derricks before him, the minute
Behrman sees himself “installed in place” is the minute he begins to suffer from the fixity of
placed-ness. Hence, it’s not surprising that when Berman dies, looking without understanding
should lead directly to being entrapped in the midst of tumult and flux. He “[stands] watching”
above the grain hold of the Swanhilda as it is filled with wheat, “his ears deafened with the
roar of the hard grains” (641). Already, as it were, arrested by the white noise of capital that
signifies nothing to him, Behrman “[peers] down into the hold”: “It was dark. He could see
nothing; but all about and over the hatch he air was full of a fine, impalpable dust that blined
the eyes and choked the throat and the nostrils” (641-642). Mesmerized, Behrman tumbles into
the hold and the grain pours in, immobilizing him. He suffocates in the swelling volume of
wheat, and Master of the Grain is installed in his final place by the grain itself.

When we last see Presley, he is floating along with the wheat, not immured within it. He
is aboard the same ship—the Swanhilda—in which Behrman is entombed. Like the scene of
Behrman entranced by the spectacle of the oceans of wheat, this is also a scene of looking;
from the quarterdeck, the highest deck on the ship, Presley “looked long and earnestly at the
faint line of mountains that showed vague and bluish above the waste of tumbling water”
(649). In his reverie, Presley ruefully recalls the events of the novel; in fact, having gone
beyond the physical site of the novel’s whirl of events, he himself performs the origin of the
novel as a story, as a narration. Indeed, he models Norris’s own conception of how novelists
ought to work, laying out the events in his memory and selecting the most vivid and
representative images; the narrator gives us this act of memory as a montage, one beginning with an “opening shot” that mirrors the map of the San Joaquin that Norris himself puts on the novel’s flyleaf:

He saw it all—the great sweep of the country opening to the view from the summit of the hills at the head waters of Broderson’s Creek; the barn dance at Annixter’s, the harness room with its jam of furious men; the quiet garden of the Mission; Dyke’s house, his flight upon the engine, his brave flight in the chaparral; Lyman Derrick at bay in the dining-room at the ranch house; the rabbit drive; the fight at the irrigating ditch, the shouting mob in the Bonneville Opera House. (650)

What distinguishes Presley’s act of looking from that of Behrman, then, is precisely the difference between looking as mastery and looking as specular mystification. Behrman’s stare, both at Los Muertos and on the Swanhilda is simultaneously anxious and inert. It’s the look of someone who is beginning—to late!—to realize he has left himself out of his own picture. In contrast, Presely is both literally and cognitively in motion. Of course, Presley’s famous epiphany—the apotheosis of the wheat—is precisely the unearned “larger view” that the novel’s detractors have cited as its chief problem. Perhaps, however, we should take an even larger view of this very insight. Perhaps we should see the novel’s real celebration of “life” not in the strained rhetoric of Presley’s internal monologue, but in the way this insight helps Presley give birth to the narration of the wheat. Presley’s experience—his concrete knowledge of space as mediated by the railroad—is what has given birth to the insight in the first place.

Behind the conflict between the railroad and the ranchers lies the vitalism of “the wheat”; but, behind this view of things is a way of seeing things conditioned by constant motion.
Attention, however mobile

Readers have not failed to notice that from the very earliest passages, Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* presents a world of gazing, fascination, comparison, envy, and speculation. The novel begins with the itinerant Griffith family of missionaries wandering the streets of Kansas City attracting the idle stares of passersby; at the same time, Clyde Griffiths imagines himself being seen by these gawkers and quails at their contempt for him. Readers have also observed the way an instinct for specular conformity, “the old mass yearning for likeness in all things” (4), drives both Clyde’s embarrassment and the crowd’s scorn; Clyde sees the strangeness and inexplicableness of his family’s ostentatious piety through the eyes of strangers, he resents it only because he thinks nobody else finds it familiar. As Clyde resents being part of the spectacle of his family, the spectators themselves cannot help but observing Clyde’s “uneasy and self-conscious expression.” One of the crowd, an “idler and loafer of about forty” observes, “‘That oldest by don’t want to be here. He feels outa place, I can see that.’” (7). Hence, Clyde feels unlike “other people” because he imagines them imagining him as different, while the spectators themselves are perversely drawn to the signs of Clyde’s awkwardness, which only intensify their own feelings of disdain and aversion.

All of this looking, however, is as inconclusive as it is compulsive. The onlookers may be right to perceive Clyde’s embarrassment, but almost everyone in this vignette is, in one way or another, “outa place”; Dreiser’s city nomads, that is, constantly compare themselves to each other under circumstances that frustrate certain knowledge about “place”—both social and
geographic. When the bystanders’ glance fastens on the Griffiths, they pause only “for a moment to eye them askance”; meanwhile, “this hesitancy, construed by [Asa Griffiths] apparently to constitute attention, however mobile” provokes Asa to begin “addressing them as though they were specifically here to hear him” (2). Yet, as Mr. Griffiths misrecognizes his own ephemeral position—one produced by mobile attention on mobile object—as central and fixed, the narrator calls the crowd itself a “vagrom and unstable street throng, [. . .] forever shifting and changing” (5); and Asa can “only surmise” the origins and destinations of “the handsome automobiles that sped by, [and] the loitering pedestrians” that engulf the family like a tide. Likewise, the family has wandered from city to city—“Grand Rapids, Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, lastly Kansas City” (8)—their path describing a convoluted and arbitrary curve on the map of the United States, in sharp contrast to Carrie Meeber’s direct progression from hinterland to metropolis in *Sister Carrie*. Although this rhetoric of restless, chaotic motion has attracted less attention than the language of desire, the novel shares with *The Octopus* (along with *Sister Carrie* itself and both *The Gilded Age* and *Life on the Mississippi*, at times) a sense of the opacity of space and the idea of landscape and the built environment as a hieroglyphic. However, as we have seen, these earlier texts both advocate and offer themselves as models of a kind of mobile knowing; their manifold ambivalences notwithstanding, both Twain and Norris (and an earlier Dreiser) see writing—specifically mass-distributed texts—as a means of achieving a kind of immanent transcendence, a mediated-immediate relation with capitalist spatiality. *An American Tragedy*, on the other hand, seems to foreclose this possibility; nothing in the 1925 novel suggests a way of knowing space that will acclimatize middle-class subjects to the shock of motion and the ephemerality of place. For, while Twain and Norris implicitly oppose mobile techniques of knowing to
epistemologies that privilege social and geographic place, *An American Tragedy* presents these ways of knowledge as interleaved and dependent upon each other. Looking and comparing seem to provoke wandering; in turn, constant motion drives the epistemological uncertainty that gives rise to the desire to imitate. In *An American Tragedy*, knowing how to stay in motion is not a way to avoid getting stuck in one place; in fact, in accordance with the novel’s title, mobility is often merely a mechanism by which characters arrive at their preordained destinies.

**Don’t say sit down to me**

In *An American Tragedy*, mastery of mobile practices is always incomplete, always partial; it is more a consequence of being caught in a web of deterministic forces than a way to escape them. For example, nothing could be farther from the Derrick’s ultimately fatal (if ambivalent) attachment to domestic sedentarity than the way Clyde’s friends and coworkers from the Davidson-Green Hotel relate to domesticity. As they gather at Thomas Ratterer’s apartment none of them can imagine staying home to socialize; places for them are nothing more than nodes in an endless circulation of bodies and things. Nobody stays; everyone continually arrives and departs. Yet, there is something compulsive—even compulsory—about this hectic motion; Clyde’s friends see staying in motion both as a pleasure and, perversely, as a duty. Mrs. Ratterer—like mothers in general in the novel, perhaps standing both for corporeality and an older and more sedentary ethic—says that her daughter needs “‘more rest’” because she risks being unable to “‘keep her place or stand it if she don’t get more sleep’” (72). Mrs. Ratterer sees labor as a “place” and labor-power as reproduced by inaction, by respite from movement. To this, Ratterer himself responds that his mother “‘can’t expect a
fellow in [his] line of work to get in early always,”” to which Hortense Briggs adds that she would “‘die if [she] had to stay in one night’” (72). For these young people, not only is motion—not rest—health itself, but the mandate for motion as recreation is aligned with work, not contrasted with it. Although Ratterer has just insisted that he is “‘on his feet all day an’ [he likes] to sit down once in a while’” (71), he also says that his “line of work” demands that he stay in physical circulation. Since Ratterer’s “line of work” is to facilitate consumption, it only makes sense that his own consumption of pleasure should take on the moral character of work; yet, staying in motion in *An American Tragedy* is neither unequivocally imposed from the outside—never simply a matter of capital or political power intervening in an extant sedentary order—nor merely a matter of mastering mobile techniques, and thereby mastering capitalist spatiality from the inside.

Responding to an invitation to tarry at the Ratterers’ apartment, Clyde’s friend Greta Miller retorts, “‘Oh, don’t say sit down to me,’”

[…] “with all the dates we got ahead of us this week. Oh, gee!” her eyes and eyebrows went up and she clasped her hands dramatically before her. “it’s just terrible, all the dancin’ we gotta do yet, this winter, don’t we, Hortense? Thursday night and Friday night and Saturday and Sunday nights,” she counted on her fingers most archly. “Oh, gee! It’s terrible, really” (71)

The injunction to dance is binding on everyone, and because he has never danced, Clyde once again feels out of place among these young people who have no use for staying in place. It’s not enough to want to dance; Clyde must also know how to dance: “To think that [Hortense Briggs], to whom of all those here he was most drawn, could dismiss him and his dreams and
desires thus easily, and all because he couldn’t dance” (74). “Why hadn’t he gone to a dancing school before this,” he asks himself. Apparently, then, the desire to consume is not enough to compete in this world, and dancing, like “going out” itself, is not only a matter of the right tastes, but the right techniques—not just knowing, but knowing how. Like Twain and Norris, Dreiser depicts here the technicization, as it were, of consumption; yet Twain and Norris, as we have seen, and however ambivalently, see this kind of Taylorized knowing, as a real advance over the way the superstition or spectacle of place that had limited rationality and productivity in antebellum America. Characters like Henry Brierly in *The Gilded Age* or the millionaire Cedarquist in *The Octopus* (and even Ames in *Sister Carrie*) stand for an expectation of the mastering of spatiality even in the face of being mastered by it; *An American Tragedy*, on the other hand, is far less certain of the opposition between these two possibilities.

It’s never clear in *An American Tragedy* that the advance of capitalist spatiality is itself a knowable or consistent process. Geography is involved in moil and unrest; spaces change unpredictably—not just from the point of view of the characters, but from that of the novel itself. As in Twain and Norris, characters must learn to read the built environment anew in order to survive; not only can they not rely on traditional or received models of social relations (the family, lords and masters, the fixed relation of city and country), but they must learn the hard and impersonal laws of capitalist development that continually restructure real space. But the built environment in *An American Tragedy* itself seems to obey the caprices of desire as much as unvarying capitalist rationality. For example, when Clyde first encounters the fashionable, if provincial, Davidson-Green Hotel in Kansas City, he admires its “main entrance [. . .] a splendiferous combination of a glass and iron awning, coupled with a marble
corridor lined with palms” and the “taxis and automobiles [ . . . ] always in waiting” (26). Later, he surveys with exhilaration “the moving panorama of the main lobby—the character of the clerks behind the main desk—room clerk, key clerk, mail clerk, cashier and assistant cashier. And the various stands about the place—flower stand, news stand, cigar stand, telegraph office, taxicab office, and all manned by individuals who seemed to be curiously filled with the atmosphere of the place” (43). Clyde’s excitement over the energetic and multifarious work going on in the lobby immediately gets mixed up with envious thoughts about the allure and luxury of the hotel guests: “The wraps, furs, and other belongings in which they appeared, or which were often carried by these other boys and himself across the great lobby and into the cars or the dining-room or the several elevators. [ . . . ] Such grandeur. This, then, most certainly was what it was to be rich, to have consequence in the world—to have money” (43). Here, Clyde’s direct consciousness is of the “atmosphere” of glamor and “consequence” flowing from the rich guests themselves, adhering like imputed grace to the hotel and its workers. He sees, and even participates in, the unrest of mobility, but is less consciously concerned with its material processes than the spectacle of plenitude they produce. Yet, unlike the backcountry rubes of Life on the Mississippi who mistake the theatrical aspects of the steamboat for technical power, wrongly seeing the production of spectacle as a spectacle of production, Clyde beholds a world in which spectacle is the main mode of visibility for technical power. Twain’s Missouri hicks see the steamboat as more powerful and revolutionary than it really is; Clyde, on the other hand, like most of the guests and workers at the Davidson-Green, participates in a revolution of mobility without consciously knowing it as a technosocial process.
The hotel, like the Derrick ranch house or the antebellum steamboat, is an odd assemblage of combinations and couplings, assimilates within its industrialized and literally Fordist milieu both spatial and historical signifiers of premodernity. Its preposterous lines of palm trees at once standing for either tropical alterity or preindustrial colonial grandeur. Surrounded by mechanized mobility, they register the fact that by the early twentieth century, the tropical refuges of the world had themselves already been fully subsumed into industrial production and the world market. They celebrate the fluidity of space while, like the Derrick’s ranch house, disavowing it. Hence, Clyde understandably struggles to make sense the “splendiferous” spectacle of the lobby, even as he is dazzled by it. Is it a materialization of the representative power of capital, or a vestigial pocket of resistance against the “vulgarity” of mass production? Is its semiotic heterogeneity a manifestation of the multiplicity of social needs under capitalism, or as a clumsy hodgepodge resulting accidentally from the uneven development of that economy? In the Davidson-Green, ornament, ostentation, and theatricality are not opposed to sociotechnical rationality; on the contrary, the libidinal force of the former seems to drive the materiality of the latter, while the latter finds the outlet for its material surpluses in the former. In this narrative partially imagined during Dreiser’s time in Hollywood, the Davidson-Green’s glamour seems conflated of the exotic Orient and its undisguised technological simulation; it is both the kind of fantasy space outside of capital represented in such cinematic productions as *Intolerance* (1916; dir. D.W. Griffith), *Cleopatra* (1917; dir. J. Gordon Edwards), and *The Sheik* (1921; dir. George Melford) and a double of the ephemeral spaces of film itself, such as the film set and the motion picture theater.

On the other hand, some spaces seem to diminish in glamor by dint of the very same processes of omnivorous capital; neighborhoods decay and disappear from the maps of
fashionableness, and rationalization works to advance semiotic impoverishment and barrenness. For example, Clyde follows his mother “along Spuce Street” to his sister’s secret apartment on “Baudry, which was really just a continuation of Spruce, but not so ugly” (92). The houses here “were quite old—quondam residences of an earlier day, but now turned into boarding and rooming houses.” The withdrawal of libidinal attachment here allows the purely utilitarian subdivision of space to advance, making the neighborhood a place for disgraced girls to be warehoused. Yet, the original decline of the district is unexplained, perhaps inexplicable. Space itself seems as fickle as Esta’s erstwhile lover; the development of space, that is, follows the unwavering demands of the economy, but what law drives the economy itself? Likewise, the Griffithses “combination home and mission” is situated among a confusing jumble of streets, “north of Independence Boulevard and west of Troost Avenue, the exact street or place being called Bickel, a very short thoroughfare opening off Missouri Avenue, a somewhat more lengthy but no less nondescript highway,” contained by the urban grid but also somehow lost within it, as if the grid itself breeds undefined and disorderly spaces within itself (9). Likewise, “[T]he entire neighborhood in which it stood was very faintly and yet not agreeably redolent of a commercial life which had long since moved farther south, if not west.” Here, not only does the novel ambivalently evoke “commercial life” as something both vital (hence, desirable) and pathological (because capricious and unknowable), but the narratorial voice itself seems uncertain of these special vicissitudes. Its conditional language —“street or place,” “faintly […] redolent,” “farther south, if not west”—goes athwart its attempts to place the house precisely, as if all this motion can only be evoked, not thoroughly known, through novelistic language. In particular, the diminished atmosphere of commercial activity, the sense of a territory marked by motion but drained of actual vitality,
paradoxically suggests that where capital space appears in itself, unadorned by the lure of bustle and unrest, it does not simply decline or decay, but perseveres in an indefinite, undead condition. This is not simply the contest between vitality and degeneracy, between capitalist efficiency and precapitalist ineptitude, that we have seen before; this is a space in which discontinuity and the aleatory are internal to capitalist space itself. If earlier texts had tried to inculcate in their readers a kind of Turnerian and Taylorist telos of spatial development—and to demonstrate the dangers of failing to learn this way of thinking space—An American Tragedy often seems to eschew any possibility of knowing the overarching rules of capitalist spatiality.

This problem structures much of what happens in the novel. Wishful thinking and gullibility mix indistinguishably with hard-nosed realism and rational calculation not because of any recrudescence or atavism of the former, but because the two are inherently intercalated with each other in practice. Moreover, this intercalation is transsubjective and technosocial, not merely “psychological”; it is bound up with the built environment, not just the behavior of “individual” men and women. For instance, the novel dwells so much on Hortense Briggs’s scheme to persuade Clyde to buy her a fur coat, in part, because the episode prefigures Clyde’s own elaborate plot to murder Roberta Alden; but this prolonged episode also demonstrates how capitalist spatiality both elicits and hinders desire, how it produces subjectivity as well as how subjects cannily use it for realizing aspirations. Hortense, Dreiser’s narrator tells us, is both calculating and dissolute, yet is “by no means always willing to divorce he self-advantages from her pleasure. On the contrary, she was often troubled by a desire to like those whom she sought to use, and per contra, not to obligate herself to those she could not like” (101). Yet, in the coat episode, this mixture of “pleasure” and “use” describes not only
Hortense’s behavior, but the very materiality of shopping, seduction, and urban mobility. The events begin with Hortense, herself a retail worker in a department store, “walking along Baltimore Street near its junction with Fifteenth—the smartest portion of the shopping section of the city” during her lunch break, sees “in the window of one of the smaller and less exclusive fur stores of the city, a fur jacket of beaver that to her, viewed from the eye-point of her own particular build, coloring and temperament, was exactly what she needed to strengthen mightily her very limited personal wardrobe.” Here, Hortense sees the coat that’s just right for her, one “fashioned in such an individual way as to cause her to imagine that, once invested with it, her own physical charm would register more than it ever had.”

And yet, the narrator’s language—and Hortense own—registers little of the “individual” characteristics of the coat, and the specifics of Hortense’s “build, coloring and temperament” are likewise vague. Rather than the coat eliciting Hortense’s desire, desire seems itself no more than an epiphenomenon of the spatial concatenation—carefully planned yet contingent, directly materialized in the built environment yet ephemeral—of street, shop window, spectators, coat and customer. Hortense addresses the coat as if it were a child or a small animal—“Oh, isn’t that just too sweet for words? And the very kind of coat I’ve been thinking of since I don’t know when. Oh, you pity sing!”—yet her apostrophe is less a reification of the coat than a theatrical gesture toward other shoppers: She gushes “affectedly, thinking all at once as much of her own pose before the window and its effect on the passers-by as of the coat before her.” What this scene reveals, then, is the real nature of consumer desire: It’s less that she’s fooled by the coat, or even by the lecherous and unscrupulous salesman Rubenstein, than she’s fooled by the nature of desire itself. She treats desire as an irresistible force, when, here, it is a structural effect of the materiality of the retail space itself.
Hortense wants the coat less than she wants to be seen wanting the coat; indeed, to be seen wanting the coat is more important than actually wearing the coat because this performance—even more than ownership—signifies Hortense’s successful response to the ways in which she is interpellated by the city street.

Yet, if Hortense’s desire is a product, literally, of her environment—if it is, to use Jacques Lacan’s term, *extimate*, not “intimate”—we cannot by any means read Hortense as merely naïve or deluded. Indeed, she is “cunning” in her dealings with both Rubenstein and Clyde, whom she persuades to buy her the coat (115). In haggling with Rubenstein, Hortense points out that she knows other stores where she can buy similar coats, to which Rubenstein responds that “this is a special coat. It’s copied from one of the smartest coats that was in New York last summer before the season opened. It has class. You won’t find no coat like this coat” (104). Walter Benn Michaels has identified the crucial problem here: “The coat is ‘special’ both because it’s unique (there is none like it in Kansas City) and because it’s not unique (there is one at least one just like it in New York)” (71). Michaels correctly points out that emulation of middle-class consumer tastes means, perversely enough, emulating a taste for the special, the different, the “unique.” But this kind of paradoxical specialness is as much a problem for the seller as for the buyer: How can the merchant produce the experience of “uniqueness” for someone who isn’t unique at all, who is merely a passerby like any other? Rachel Bowlby has pointed out that early twentieth-century merchants carefully considered the question of the busy passerby, who “unlike the flâneur, may well have a set destination—going to or from work, for instance” (58) and “who must be stopped in her tracks, brought to a standstill” (57). For Bowlby, the shop window is a technology; compounded of other technical innovations such as larger and more transparent plate glass and electrical or gas lighting, the window was
an apparatus that both arrested and presupposed motion. As with the cinema, with the shop window “the attraction of movement is [. . . ] an established psychological fact” (60). And, like cinematic or railroad spaces, store windows produce a new kind of seeing; they mold and manipulate the seer while training her in new modes of agency. They use us and we use them. Moreover, although Bowlby is primarily concerned with the historical distinction between the luxury department store of the nineteenth century and the utilitarian supermarket of the twentieth, she sees a continuum between these two, between the space of shopping as leisure and shopping as a chore. For example, Bowlby cites French writer Paul Morand’s ambivalent reaction to New York’s Division Street at night, a scene he found both phantasmagorical and jarring with its harsh electric lighting and lack of clear traditional class markers. Although the department store will later be “romanticized in the slow-motion time of a shopping that is no more, as opposed to a [late twentieth-century] supermarket world that is brash, impersonal, routine” (13), Bowlby argues that Morand’s impressions reveal a department-store space that, like late nineteenth-century railroad stations and carriages in the writing of genteel authors, already “lacks all recognizable order, [and abolishes] ancient class differences with a luxury that is incongruously ‘instant’” (12). For Morand, writes Bowlby, luxury in this landscape paradoxically “takes no time and is not connected to a past or a future.” Yet Hortense, while taken in by Rubenstein’s cant, is nevertheless at home in precisely the same kind of landscape that Morand found so alienating.

As Hortense tries to convince to Clyde to buy the coat for her, she faces a double challenge of repeating the way coat itself solicits her desire. She must make herself available to Clyde, but she must also convince him that he is in store for something “special”—that is, her own sexual surrender. Nevertheless, “although she never would have never admitted it to
sex with Hortense is already “the privilege of two others” (106) The apparent smirking irony of Dreiser’s narrator—“the privilege of two others”—perhaps seems like the kind of moralizing Dreiser would have normally condemned; yet it is less Hortense’s sexual liberty than the economy with which she manages it that the narrator targets here. If it seems like a privilege to sleep with Hortense, she works hard to make it seem that way. “[I]n the face of her desire for the coat, [Clyde’s] stature and interest for her were beginning to increase” as the value of her chastity begins to decrease; yet if she simply proposes to exchange sexual favors for the coat, those very sexual favors will seem less valuable. This problem requires Hortense to engage in an elaborate scheme to engineer an encounter among Clyde, the shop window, and herself:

Hortense . . . was now thinking how unfortunate that a whole twenty-four hours must intervene before she could bring him to view the coat with her—and so have an opportunity to begin her machinations. At the same time she pretended that the proposed meeting for the next night was a very difficult thing to bring about—more difficult than he could possibly appreciate. She even pretended to be uncertain as to whether she wanted to do it. (109)

As the coat is “special” because it is set aside in the window, Hortense’s company is all the more desirable because both Clyde and Hortense must overcome all kinds of difficult (if spurious) obstacles to meet. And, “the next evening . . . in the glow of the overhanging arc-lights showering their glistening radiance like rain, she appeared” (110). Like the coat’s appearance in the window, Hortense’s appearance is theater—but it is industrial theater lit by arc-lights in the midst of mechanized motion and commercial bustle, in which both Hortense
and Clyde are at once spectator and performer, and where nothing stays in one place, least of all the boundaries between stage and “house.” If Hortense is the master manipulator here, if she uses the very streets of Kansas City as a stage for hoodwinking Clyde, these very streets seem to be both the locus and limit of Hortense’s subjectivity. As she moves, so she it. On the other hand, if Clyde is Hortense’s dupe, it is precisely his apparent “upward mobility” than t makes him attractive to her, and her plan presupposes a certain degree of autonomous physical mobility on his part.

Hortense and Clyde are not merely rubes or backward-looking romantics who are overtaken and crushed by the galloping advance of capitalist spatiality, as are Magnus and Annie Derrick or the Hoovens in *The Octopus*; nor, however, are they simply serenely competent spatial managers like Cedarquist or Shelgrim (or, by the end of the novel, Presley himself). For characters in *An American Tragedy*, dreaminess, distraction, and lack of self-understanding can mesh seamlessly with spatial competence. At the same time, while much of Book One suggests that Jazz Age spatiality may itself be shaped by the moil of “irrational” desire, its conclusion implies that spatial heterogeneity and “uneven development” are both inevitable products of, and the ultimate limit of, mobile techniques. In the final chapters of the first Book, tellingly, both the culture and technics of the automobile make their appearance. Clyde’s friends are both intensely fascinated by the automobile and confident of their technical mastery of them; Willard Sparser, the chauffer’s son who has stolen a car in order to take a pleasure excursion, imagines himself “a master of car manipulation” on the drive to the Wigwam resort (124). Yet, while sparser closely watches the road in one way, Clyde himself, as narrative focalizer, seems to withdraw into an aestheticizing reverie that differently figures the roadscape:
Dark vignettes of wood went by to the right and left. Fields away, sentinel hills rose and fell like waves. A wide-armed scarecrow fluttering in the wind, its tall decayed, stood near at hand in one place. And from near it a flock of crows rose and winged direct toward a distant wood lightly penciled against a foreground of snow. (124)

If in Twain and Norris both technosocial competence and reflective thought can arise out of the experience of motion, and can in turn enhance agency, in Dreiser these two capacities are separated by a kind of psychic division of labor. As Clyde and his friends travel through rural Missouri, this division is a real separation between the way Sparser and Clyde experience the trip to the Wigwam. Sparser acts “with the air of one to whom such a magnificent car was a commonplace thing,” putting “one arm around Laura [Sipe] while he guided the car with the other” (124-125). Sparser is sure, that is, not only to competently manage the car, but to do so ostentatiously. On the other hand, Clyde “who for all his years in Kansas City had never ventured much beyond Kansas City” (124), and at this point in the novel relatively unsure of his own mastery of mobile techniques, remains “dubious about the wisdom of taking the car” and worries that he and his friends “might all be wrecked by such fast driving” (125). Clyde experiences speed anxiously, yet his feeling of helpless passivity also gives rise to an exhilarating sense of dislocation.

This distinction—which will become more important as Clyde begins to take on, without integrating, both kinds of mobile experience—appears earlier in Dreiser’s 1916 automobile travel narrative *A Hoosier Holiday*. Remarkably, this book describes the experience of auto travel in almost exactly the same words as *An American Tragedy*: Dreiser writes that his chauffeur, called “Speed” in the memoir, drives at “breakneck” speed; and, like Sparser,
Speed’s consciousness is completely occupied by matters of motion. “Speed” had been part of the crew that established the route of the transcontinental Lincoln Highway, and presents Dreiser with “a large packet of photographs [. . .]—mementoes of that celebrated pioneer venture” (159). Dreiser, however, is astonished that Speed has taken no photographs of the “beautiful and striking things” along the route:

The views, if you will believe me, were all if mired cars an rutty roads and great valleys which might have been attractive or impressive if they had been properly photographed. The car was always in the foreground, spoiling everything. [“Speed”] had always selected dull scenes of cars in procession—the same cars in the same procession, only in different order, and never before any radically different scene. (160)

These photographs, writes Dreiser, reveal “exactly how Speed’s mind worked.” Interpreting the stance Speed takes toward his own photographic auto narrative, Dreiser writes, “the cars contained important men and women, or were supposed to, because the owners had money. Hence, the cars and their occupants were the great things about this trip, and wherever the cars were, there was the interest—never elsewhere.” If this attitude seems to anticipate in some ways Dreiser’s characterization of Clyde (and a fortiori Sparser), it implicitly, yet distinctly, contrasts with the way Dreiser paints his own experience of automobile motion:

So on and on, up hills and down dale, and now and then we seemed to be skirting the Susquehanna. At other times we seemed to be off in side hills where there were no towns of any size. A railroad train came into view and disappeared; a trolley track joined us and disappeared; a toll road made us pay fifteen cents—and disappeared. (72)
This more impressionistic rhetoric of things moving as the passenger himself remains still, and of uncertainty as to place and distance, presages the way the narrator of *An American Tragedy* focalizes Clyde’s impressions of “sentinel hills [rising] and [falling] like waves” and “distant wood[s] lightly penciled against a foreground of snow.” Hence, Clyde resembles Speed to the extent that he masters spatial techniques, and Dreiser himself to the degree that his failure to master such techniques renders him a passive observer of motion.

Yet, seen retrospectively from the rhetoric of *An American Tragedy*, it’s difficult to see the distinction between Dreiser and Speed merely as the difference between naïve mechanical competence and the authorial “larger view” Norris advocates by in *The Octopus*. For if Dreiser is the more aesthetically receptive here, he is also a technological naïf; and unlike Presley in *The Octopus*, who masters writing as he masters capitalist space—and who masters mobility as he becomes a writer—Dreiser explicitly presents his consciousness as lulled and distracted by automobile travel:

And [. . .] as we dashed along toward Warsaw [, Indiana,] under a starry sky, [. . .] I allowed myself to sink into the most commemorative state. When you forget the now and go back a number of years and change yourself into a boy and view old scenes and see old faces, what an unbelievably strange and inexplicable thing life becomes! We attempt solutions of this thing, but to me it is the most vacuous of all employments. I rather prefer to take it as a strange, unbelievable, impossible orchestral blending of sounds and scenes and moods and odors and sensations, which have no real meaning and yet which, tinkling and kaleidoscopic as they are, are important for that reason. I never ride this way at night, or when I am
tired by day or night, but that life becomes this uncanny blur of nothingness. (152-153).

Auto travel reduces Dreiser to a state “half awake and half in a dreamland of my own creating” (153), a dreamland in which the western New York of 1915 blends indistinguishably with the Indiana of his childhood. And yet Dreiser specifically denies, almost in the same breath, that the automobile (or railroad, x-ray, photography, or motion picture) is a kind of “vision machine”: “Mechanicalizing the world does not, cannot, it seems to me, add to the individual’s capacity for sensory response” (154). Yet even this certainty is rendered ambivalently, for Dreiser admits that, as he speeds along outside Buffalo, he has “grow[n] dim in [his] researches,” and that he is “not all-wise” and cannot clearly imagine the future capacities of the automobile. In short, Dreiser may write patronizingly about Speed and his naivety, but he presents his own experience of passengerhood very differently from the kind of synoptic mode of seeing that Presley learns form his experiences in railway space. For Dreiser, there is no contradiction between mobile mastery and limited subjectivity; yet, the experience of motion can be valuable to the degree that it disconnects subjectivity from the need for mastery. Motion produces a phantasmagorical experience not only for the untrained sensorium, but for the trained one as well—and this is, indeed, is both its chief virtue and its primary danger.

The tendency of consciousness to split, to separate the tasks of seeing and doing—or, perhaps more precisely, to make synoptic vision passive while making active vision sequential and partial—resembles the description of Vanamee aboard his plough in The Octopus. Here, again, technosocial competence is opposed to a consciousness that takes in everything but is “lulled and stupefied” by a “strange, unbelievable, impossible orchestral blending of sounds and scenes and moods and odors and sensations.” In Norris, this separation characterizes the
way people know spaces under conditions of capitalist production; failure to see productively is to risk being reduced to a mere mechanical “part of an enormous [capitalist] whole.” Here, however, it is the process of consumption that, as it were, subsumes Clyde and his friends. Moreover, as I have argued, Norris makes the disciplining of consciousness (as opposed to the mere disciplining of the body) the prerequisite for success, and even for survival, under conditions of capitalist spatiality; in Norris, spatial consciousness remains unevenly developed, and the implicit function of the naturalist novel is to supplement the underdeveloped consciousness of its middle-class readers. In An American Tragedy, on the other hand, spatial consciousness and its associated techniques seem to run ahead of the built environment itself. Unlike Uncle Dan’l or Beriah Sellars in The Gilded Age, Clyde and the others do not read the restlessness of (“really-subsumed”) capitalist space in terms of an older mercantile (“formally-subsumed”) spatiality; unlike Annie Derrick or Minna Hooven in The Octopus, they do not yearn for this older spatiality or its promise of security and Gemütlichkeit. Yet, while these young people master mobile techniques, the rural space of the Wigwam remains as heterogeneous and technically intractable as Kansas City itself. We have already seen, for example, the way dancing is both a kind of theater and a kind of corporeal technology in earlier chapters. And at the Wigwam, where the daytrippers go to get away from the constraints of the city, pleasure is once again both mechanically mediated and dependent on public visibility. Upon arrival, the pleasure seekers begin at once to operate the machinery of recreation:

The car was parked, and they all trooped into the inn, and at once

Higby briskly went over and started the large, noisy, clattery, tinny

Nickelodeon with a nickel. And to rival him, and for a prank, Hegglund ran
to the Victrola which stood in the corner and put on a record of “The Grizzly Bear,” which he found lying there.

At the first sounds of this strain, which they all knew, Tina Kogle called: “Oh, let’s all dance to that, will you? Can’t you stop that other old thing?” she added.

“Sure, after it runs down,” explained Ratterer, laughingly. “The only way to stop that thing is to not feed it any nickels.”

By now a waiter coming in, Higby began to inquire what everybody wanted. And in the meantime, to show off her charms, Hortense had taken to the center of the floor and was attempting to imitate a grizzly bear waling on its hind legs, which she could do amusingly enough—quite gracefully. And Sparser, seeing her alone in the center of the floor was anxious to interest her now, followed her and tried to imitate her motions from behind.

At once grotesque and pathetically jejune, this scene once again contrasts the hotel staff’s technosocial cleverness with the tendency of the technosocial network to operate as if it had a will of its own. The phantasmagoria of both entertainment machines uncannily and noisily grinding out music while the vacationers caper bearishly not only parodies the way the Davidson-Green mixes restless motion with glamor, but again demonstrates the way the technosocial environment both shapes and obstructs practices of consuming luxury. Although they can integrate their bodies fully into the world of industrial space, and although their technical expertise assures them of the Victrola’s technical superiority over the Wurlitzer, Clyde and his friends can never perfectly master a technosocial order whose very materiality is
driven by the vicissitudes of marketing schemes, fashions, and the anarchy of competition. The “noisy, cluttery, tinny Nickelodeon” here, which the pleasure-seekers disparage in favor of the Victrola, not only serves as a figure for them (it keeps going until it runs down or it runs out of money), but the way the first machine continues mechanically, overrunning the operation of the second, and thereby proleptically tropes the novel’s subsequent collisions, shocks, and breakdowns.

The image of the player piano running on mindlessly until its motive power stops, all the while clattering alongside the spinning disc on the Victrola, suggests a world in which the normal operation of things is fraught with the possibility of catastrophe. Conversely, the scene at the frozen pond at the Wigwam implies that mobile technique in this world involves the capacity to recuperate the disorder and muddle, to re-entrain chaos into the production of enjoyment. The party rush “pell-mell” from the lodge to the lake, running “here and there, slipping and sliding—Higby, Lucille and Maida immediately falling down, but scrambling to their feel with bursts of laughter” (129). This rhetoric of moving “here and there,” along with that of the revelers acting “in spite of” themselves and doing what they “[can] not help” doing (130), evokes being out of control and the breakdown of mobility into mere motion. It suggests a reversion, as in Twain and Norris, to an older spatiality: On the icy pond, they are “more like young satyrs and nymphs of an older day” (129). Yet much of this disarray is deliberate and theatrical; the revelers play “crack the whip,” “running and doubling back and forth until all beyond Maida had fallen and let go” (130). And, as Hortense falls together with Sparsar on the ice, her

skirts, becoming awry in some way, moved up to above her knees. But

instead of showing any embarrassment, as Clyde thought and wished she
might, she sat there for a few moments without shame and even laughing heartily—and Spars with her and still holding her hand. And Laura Sipe, having fallen in such a way as to trip Higby, who had fallen across her, they also lay there laughing and yet in a most suggestive position, as Clyde thought. He noted, too, that Laura Sipe's skirts had been worked above her knees. And Spars, now sitting up, was pointing to her pretty legs and laughing loudly, showing most of his teeth. And all the others were emitting peals and squeals of laughter. (130)

This sexual display, as calculated as it is, elicits (apparently) spontaneous laughter. And this performance is so pleasurable that, the revelers, like a broken record, repeat it, this time merely rearranging their bodies—although Clyde, chagrined at Hortense’s indifferent treatment, “wanted to stop and quarrel with Spars. But so brisk and eager was Hegglund that they were off before he could even think of doing so” (131). Once again, the young people are “thrown down and spun around on the ice like curling irons” and Entangled with these others, Clyde and they spun across forty feet of smooth, green ice and piled against a snow bank. At the finish, as he found, Lucille Nickolas was lying across his knees face down in such a spanking position that he was compelled to laugh. And Maida Axelrod was on her back, next to Ratterer, her legs straight up in the air; on purpose he thought. [. . .] Hegglund, intensely susceptible to humor at all times, doubled to the knees, slapped his thighs and bawled. And Spars opened his big mouth and chortled and grimaced until he was scarlet. So infectious was the result
that for the time being Clyde forgot his jealousy. He too looked and laughed. But Clyde's mood had not changed really.

Here, it is the theatrical self that is all body, all internalized mobile technique. The rhetoric of “compulsion,” “susceptibility,” and “infection” mixes with what is done “on purpose.” All of these behaviors are done automatically, unthinkingly, like the operation of the player-piano or the Victrola; yet even the spills and crashes of bodies are performed with “purpose.” This, then, is a terrain in which the calculated and the finely-engineered do not always work as expected, where mastery is itself no safeguard against catastrophe; yet, it is also one in which the accidents and chaos may themselves be the most precise stagecraft.

Likewise, the car crash that occurs on return from the Wigwam results from an event that for readers in the nineteen-twenties evocatively figured both the advent, and the uneven development, of rationalized space: a traffic jam. The accident that sends Clyde fleeing Kansas City results less from and ineptitude of Sparser’s than from the way the built environment stymies even them most elaborate and careful plans. First, there is “a long and unexpected and disturbing wait at a grade crossing where two freight trains met and passed” (137), then yet “another delay [. . .] owing to a grade crossing.” In the first decades of the twentieth century, the grade crossing, the intersection of the anarchically-sprawling auto infrastructure with the established rail network, was as much a headache to both drivers and planners as the material heterogeneity of the rail network was for administrators and passengers in the 1860s and 1870s, and here, the entrance of the train into the road network works as a nucleation point around which the entire system, competencies notwithstanding, grinds to a halt. Again, after striking and killing a little girl, although both Sparser and his stolen Packard are more than a
match for the police who pursue them, the city itself seems to conspire against the revelers; on
the outskirts of Kansas City, they come to a place where “the pavement suddenly ended,” and
because another cross street was visible a hundred feet or so further on, and
[Sparser] imagined that by turning into that he might find a paved
thoroughfare again, he sped on and then swung sharply to the left, only to
-crash roughly into a pile of paving stones left by a contractor who was
-preparing to pave the way. [. . .] And diagonally opposite to these,
-lengthwise of a prospective sidewalk, had been laid a pile of lumber for a
-house. (141)

The car “carom[s]” from paving stones to lumber pile, spilling the passengers in a catastrophe
that echoes both the meaningless lurching of the player piano and the ludic pratfalls of the
-frozen pond at the Wigwam. Indeed, like both the Davidson-Green and the Wigwam, the
-material infrastructure of Kansas City itself is historically and spatially hybrid: always
-expanding, modern enough for an extensive highway and rail system, yet with gaps and
-inconsistencies that inevitably steer the vacationers toward their accident. If the hotel
-employees and their friends fail at last to navigate spaces of capitalist modernity, if their
-“cognitive maps” fail them, it is therefore because they are trapped in a geographic space in
-which capitalism itself, like the street where they finally crash, is perpetually under
-(re)construction.

A basement world

Like the Dyke in The Octopus, Clyde at first escapes the pursuing agents of the State—
and, as with Dyke, this escape will prove to be temporary. But at the moment of Clyde’s
desperate flight, An American Tragedy shifts scenes as well, moving abruptly to Lycurgus,
New York, and the domestic space of Clyde’s wealthy cousins. Hence, instead of first seeing the Lycurgus Griffiths focalized through Clyde, in Book Two, we first see Clyde from their perspective. Immediately, we move from poverty to comfort, from apparent ineptitude to confidence and competence; we move—seemingly—from a landscape characterized by everything Clyde wants to escape to one of everything he craves. This shift of setting and focalization, however, partially confounds the narrator’s claims about Samuel Griffiths’ superior “shrewd[ness]” and “inciseive[ness]” in contrast with his brother and Clyde’s father Asa, since everything about this branch of the family evokes a similar sense of nervous motion and self-conscious anxiety as does the novel’s first section. Space here, among the rich, is just as much in ferment as in the busy commercial streets of Kansas City. The first chapter of Book Two narrates the Lycurgus Griffithses “by degrees [. . .] assembling for the family meal” (147). Here and throughout Book Two, the constituents of the Griffiths family are perpetually abroad, either for business reasons—in this case, Samuel has been in Chicago conferring with other businessmen over the threat of price-cutting by “upstart rivals in the west”—or, as Mrs. Griffiths laments, echoing the concerns of Mrs. Ratterer in the first section, “dancing, cabareting, automobiling to one city and another, without due social supervision” (149). And, as in Book Two, not only the social landscape, but the physical landscape along with it, is under constant metamorphosis. The Griffithses, for example, cannot simply resist the lure of social newcomers like the Finchleys and the Cranstons, the “‘fast set’ of local life” (149). For, these parvenus are not content merely to move into the area and to build new factories; once in place, they begin to undermine the importance of places in general, establishing new kinds of mobility based on private motor transportation and mass construction techniques. As the younger Griffiths daughter, Bella, says, “‘Just think [. . .],’”
“The Finchleys are going to give up their place out at Greenwood Lake this coming summer and go up to Twelfth Lake near Pine Point. They're going to build a new bungalow up there. And Sondra says that this time it's going to be right down at the water's edge—not away from it, as it is out here. And they're going to have a great big verandah with a hardwood floor. And a boathouse big enough for a thirty-foot electric launch that Mr. Finchley is going to buy for Stuart. [. . .] I wish you and Dad would make up your minds to build up there now sometime, Mamma. It looks to me now as though nearly everybody that's worth anything down here is moving up there.” (149-150)

If the Lycurgus Griffithses are those to whom Clyde looks up, whom he tries to emulate, Bella Griffiths tries to emulate those upon whom Mrs. Griffiths looks down, and for reasons not unlike those that drew Clyde to the Davidson-Green; that is, while the Kansas City hotel was glamorous for Clyde because it was like a “moving panorama,” the newcomers to Lycurgus are irresistible to Bella because they set the landscape into motion, literally remaking the social map. Even Gilbert, perhaps the most outwardly conservative of the Griffithses, criticizes the Cranstons for “‘spreading out faster than [he] would if [he] had their business,’” while inwardly admitting that they are “really more daring if not socially more avid of life” than the Griffithses (154).

The parallels between the discourse of the parvenu here and in, for example, a Gilded-Age text like The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885) are illuminating. First, in both fictions the wealthy almost instinctively use the rhetoric of spatial contamination to make sense of those immediately beneath them: Bromfield Corey contemns Lapham for “rival[ing] the hues of
nature in her wildest haunts with the tints of his mineral paint” (91), while Gilbert Griffiths worries about the Cranstons “spreading out faster” than they should. Likewise, it’s this very fact of “spreading out” that draws the younger generation of old money to the arrivistes. Tom Corey, who has been to Texas and seen the world beyond Beacon Hill, wants to market Lapham paint in Mexico and Chile, and eventually becomes the agent of Lapham’s erstwhile rivals and new partners in South America; Bella Griffiths is similarly entranced by the new summer homes and yachts of the Fichleys and Cranstons. Here, however, the parallels break down, not the least because the Griffithses can make only the most ambiguous claims to being genteel, Samuel Griffiths only “[h]aving arrived in Lycurgus about twenty-five years before with some capital and a determination to invest in a new collar enterprise which had been proposed to him” (155). As Clare Virginia Eby has pointed out, the Lycurgus Griffithses are themselves “imitators [. . .] who pass in the community for the real thing” (201). Indeed, Samuel Griffiths resembles Lapham the industrialist—who himself has a brother who is “a Baptist preacher in Kansas” (Lapham 8)—more than he does Corey, and Lapham is arguably a bit more economically established than Griffiths. More to the point, Lycurgus is not Boston and Wykeaggy Avenue is not Beacon Hill. In The Rise of Silas Lapham, Back Bay is the “new land” constructed as an alternative to the fashionable, but exclusive, Beacon Hill; in An American Tragedy, all of Lycurgus is “new land.” And, while Sister Carrie moves linearly from rural Wisconsin to Chicago to New York City, that is, from rural to urban and from periphery to center, the second and third Books of An American Tragedy center on what at the time was called a “garden city” or a “satellite city”—a made space imagined as a refuge from urban congestion. Dreiser himself reported glowingly on the “garden” industrial communities of Pullman in Chicago and South Park in Dayton, sometimes striking the kind of
pietistic, paternalist pose that he will later be famous for criticizing. Of Pullman, he writes: “Pullman is a perfectly equipped town of 12,000 inhabitants, built out from one harmonious whole, where all that is discordant or demoralizing is eliminated, and where all that inspires to self-respect, thrift and economy and to cleanliness of person and hought is generously provided” (“Pullman” 232)34. Lycurgus parodically echoes such communities as these, and seems to be based at least in part on the industrial suburb of Johnson City, which Dreiser encountered on his 1916 motor trip narrated in A Hoosier Holiday35. The Wykeagy Avenue neighborhood is almost certainly intended to evoke images of Wykagyl, New York, an upscale community within New Rochelle—in short, a suburb of a suburb—which was being newly developed in the 1920s and was then, as now, almost universally associated with its country club and golf. This, then, is a world in which the rich are just a nomadic as the poor, and in which a doubly-paradoxical retreat from “machine space” is fully mediated by mechanized transport and perpetually remakes the built landscape of the northeastern industrial core.

If the affluent in An American Tragedy can only preserve their social position by staying in (industrialized) motion, Clyde, in turn, learns to imitate the swells by constantly shifting his position within the industrial system of mobility. After fleeing from the automobile accident, Clyde drifts throughout the Midwest, “essaying one small job and another, in St. Louis, Peoria, Chicago, Milwaukee—dishwashing in a restaurant, soda-clerking in a small outlying drug-store, attempting to learn to be a shoe clerk, a grocer's clerk, and what not; and being discharged and laid off and quitting because he did not like it” (163), later securing a job as a delivery-wagon driver in Chicago. Interestingly enough, Clyde performs his duties faithfully and without complaint; only when he encounters his old friend Thomas Ratterer, who teases him over his unglamorous job, does he begin to doubt himself and his job. Ratterer induces
Clyde to take a position at the Union League, a men’s social club. Clyde’s yearning for the Union League job ironically leads him to give up a position directly involved in transportation to take one in which motion is more visible, in which he can see “the noiseless vigor and reserve that characterizes the ultra successful” (171), and in which he can be seen as a part of this purposeful commotion:

For to this club from day to day came or went such a company of seemingly mentally and socially worldly elect as he had never seen anywhere before, the self-integrated and self-centered from not only all of the states of his native land but from all countries and continents. American politicians from the north, south, east, west—the principal politicians and bosses, or alleged statesmen of their particular regions—surgeons, scientists, arrived physicians, generals, literary and social figures, not only from America but from the world over. (170-171)

These literal movers, coming and going, from all over the world, are a new model of mobility for Clyde; unlike the denizens of the Green-Davidson,

[they often ate alone, conferred in pairs and groups, noiselessly—read their papers or books, or went here and there in swiftly driven automobiles—but for the most part seemed to be unaware of, or at least unaffected by, that element of passion, which, to his immature mind up to this time, had seemed to propel and disarrange so many things in those lesser worlds with which up to now he had been identified. (171)

As he seeks to avoid “disarrangement” and haphazard “propulsion,” then, Clyde, “under the influence of this organization and various personalities who came [there],” is partially remade.
In the process of producing motion, he is trained in new mobile techniques, and he begins to imagine that the “one of these very remarkable men whom he saw entering or departing from here might take a fancy to him and offer him a connection with something important somewhere” (171-172) and that he may thereby move “into a world such as he had never known” (172).

And yet, for all of this Dreiser ensures that we see that the apparent difference between the task of delivery driver and bellhop is itself both “artificial” and artifactual, a product of the technosocial network of which the Union League is a part. As a wagon-driver, after all, Clyde merely carries out a function outside the club that, as a bellhop, he continues within. On one hand, Ratterer’s disdain for the delivery job is preposterous, since Ratterer himself is little more than a “liveried” version of Clyde; on the other, when the two encounter each other Clyde is delivering “a package of ties and handkerchiefs” to the Union League Club, literally working to produce the material differences between himself and those within. Clyde, then, is both producer and product of social differentiation; but the appearance of differentiation is itself part of the machinery of mobility. As on the streets of Kansas City, the system of class difference is neither a false appearance nor only a by-product of systems of mobility, but materially subsumed by and reciprocally entrained with them. Indeed, the delivery of the ties and handkerchiefs indirectly connects Clyde to his uncle through the web of textile and garment production, a technosocial network that also embraces both the shrinking room—a room in which “webs” of fabric are processed—and the stamping room at the Griffiths Collar and Shirt Company. Dreiser further reinforces this sense of horizontal contiguousness, as opposed to vertical differentiation, in his descriptions of both of these industrial spaces. We read of
row after row of porcelain tubs or troughs, lengthwise of the room, and end to end, which reached from one exterior wall to the other. [...] And nearby, north and south of these tubs, and paralleling them for the length of this room, all of a hundred and fifty feet in length, were enormous drying racks or moving skeleton platforms, boxed, top and bottom and sides, with hot steam pipes, between which on rolls, but festooned in such a fashion as to take advantage of these pipes, above, below and on either side, were more of these webs, but unwound and wet and draped as described, yet moving along slowly on these rolls from the east end of the room to the west. (187-188)

Although we might read this portrayal of the shrinking room as a perfect example of what H.L. Mencken called his tendency to “an endless piling up of minutiae, an almost ferocious tracking down of ions, electrons and molecules, an unshakable determination to tell it all” (83), this almost Kafkian or Borgesian description blurs the distinction between capitalist rationality and gothic, illegible chaos. More to the point, “[t]his movement [...] accompanied by an enormous rattle and clatter of ratchet arms which automatically shook and moved these lengths of cloth forward from east to west” (188) doubles Clyde’s own narrative, only reversing Clyde’s progress from west to east. This rhetoric literalizes the connections among techniques of mobility, the production of commodities, and the cultivation of what Gilbert Griffiths thinks of as “polish and manner” (333). Or rather, it collapses all of these into the same process of material circulation or pure “motion.”

However, moving up the workplace ladder in *An American Tragedy* seems to mean little more than being moved along a production line. As Michaels writes “[t]he rhythm of factory
life [. . .] produces Clydes as well as collars” (93). When Clyde is promoted to a managerial job in the stitching room, he is almost speechless over the apparent difference between the it and the shrinking room: “There were so very, very many women—hundreds of them—stretching far and away between white walls and white columns to the eastern end of the building. And tall windows that reached from floor to ceiling let in a veritable flood of light” (237). Later, he marvels at “[s]itting at an official desk in a corner commanding a charming river view,” receiving friendly visits from other managers, and “[looking] about him[self] from time to time [and] taking an interest in the factory as a whole” (240-241). Now, Clyde is not only in motion and producing motion, he is again seen to be in motion and sees others in motion, and he “[feels] at last [. . .] he was a figure of some importance” in the factory (240). Yet, the narrator supplies ample evidence that Clyde’s promotion to the fifth floor produces no “elevation” of Clyde’s consciousness, but only a further integration of his unconscious sensorium into the plant’s productive technosocial network. Even the language used to describe the stitching room, focalized through Clyde, is redolent of Clyde’s naïve and vulgarly theological worldview. The room is suffused with light and extends in endless whiteness toward “the east,” unlike the Piranesian labyrinths of the basement works; in contrast to the masculine underworld of the shrinking room, this space is marked by a surplus of femininity, and if “these girls were not all pretty” (237), he eventually encounters a Beatrice in the “more spiritual” (and virginal) Roberta Alden (247). Yet, if Clyde thinks he has exchanged Hell for Paradise, he is nevertheless guided through both spaces by the very same Virgil, the unctuous and self-effacing factotum Joshua Whiggam. Moreover, the elaborate network of “chutes” that terminate in the stitching room merely continues the path that begins with the machinery of the basement works. As in the shrinking room, where webs travel through a series of vertical
detours in an essentially horizontal process, Clyde’s own movement from basement to loft merely parallels the vertical detour of the collars. The narrator, withdrawing from Clyde as a focalizer, here only gives us more of the rhetoric of blind, mechanistic production that had characterized the shrinking room passages. Here, the women workers must “cope with a constant stream of unstitched collar bundles which fell through several chutes from the floor above” (236), while Clyde must ensure the “stamping process went uninterruptedly forward” and that the collars are then “duly [. . .] transmitted to the stitchers” (233). Although this step in the production process a textual one—the collars are stamped while Clyde records “the number of dozens stamped by each girl [. . .] in order that her pay should correspond with her services” (233)—as a supervisor working with tables, records, and inscriptions, Clyde is no less a producer of motion here than in the shrinking room. If he goes from physical labor to “brain labor,” and if his consciousness is even freer to wander as his body becomes even more accustomed to the routine of the factory, he finds nothing liberating in the fact that he has moved from directly manipulating the stuff of collars to indirectly manipulating it by managing textuality.

The stamping room, “merely railed off [. . .] by a low fence” (236), so apparently different from the shrinking room, in fact only differs from the rest of the factory in that it sorts collars rather than, strictly speaking, “making” them, and inscribes on them the markers of their different sizes. Significantly, this is also the place where they are marked with their brand name—“Griffiths”—which signifies both the owner of the commodity and their authenticity as a sign of “polish and manner.” The material work the stamping room performs on the collars turns them from useful things into fungible goods; it adds something intangible—“information”—to the collars as use values and, by doing so, converts them from
“mere” use values into elements of an unending stream of circulating commodities. Similarly, on one hand, Clyde is required to behave with an air of “finish” in the stamping room, where the finishing touches are performed on the garment that confers a similar sense of “finish” on the wearer. On the other, the finishing room is only one link in the process of commodity production, the collar is only a commodity, and Clyde is only a worker—albeit, one bearing the name “Griffiths.” This ambivalence toward Clyde’s ascent in the factory hierarchy once again cements the novel’s implication that the systems of status and fashion are not only simultaneously labyrinthine and mechanical like the operations of the Griffiths plant, but that they are directly enmeshed with the functioning of the latter. Likewise, when Dreiser writes that before his promotion, Clyde “drift[s] along in his basement world,” he alludes at once to a series of claustral proletarian spaces—the shrinking room of the factory, Mrs. Braley’s rooming house, the places where Clyde and his friend Dillard go for amusement—through which Clyde moves and which are apparently opposed to the open and sunlit spaces of the upper classes, and to the whole “world” of the novel as claustral and illegible, as determined by the operations of mysterious yet uncompromising technical networks and drift. Hence, as Clyde moves “upward,” as he begins to establish personal connections among the industrial bourgeoisies of Lycurgus, he also becomes connected to any number of impersonal technical networks—especially networks of transportation and communication. The more liberated from the world of basements he becomes, from his point of view, the more in fact he becomes a part of that very world.

As Michaels argues, in *An American Tragedy*, “the conditions of leisure turn out to be indistinguishable from the conditions of factory labor” (91); moreover, “the choice between drift and mastery, work and pleasure is compromised by the irreducible interdependence of the
terms between which one is supposed to be choosing” (93). This means, in turn, that the novel continually flattens the difference between the spaces of leisure and the spaces of production. But this flattening works both ways: “pleasure” both produces and presupposes newly-industrialized spaces, but the system of these spaces is never complete, never a totality. The system itself is capricious; it can’t be “gamed.” As I have already suggested, nowhere in *American Tragedy* is this more apparent than in its treatment in what we today call “automobility.” On one hand, the novel presents the automobile as the quintessential object of Clyde’s desire; his aspirations to join his cousins’ social set seem to emerge, along with his desire for Sondra Finchley, on the occasion of an “annual inter-city automobile floral parade and contest” where Clyde observes Sonda “breasting a white rose-surfaced stream and guiding her craft with a paddle covered with yellow daffodils—a floral representation of some Indian legend in connection with the Mohawk River” (242). Sondra, playing the part of a princess in an auto-mobile simulacrum of a canoe, both theatrical and technosocially adept, “recapture[s] Clyde’s fancy” because she seems the very embodiment of the kind of frictionless “drift” that Michaels correctly identifies as “a class pleasure” (93). On the other hand, the automobile is often both a metonymy and technical site for the limits of mobility. Inasmuch as the parade float, like Sellers’s false railroad map or Norris’s colossal map of California made of dried apricots, is yet another example of the spurious and spectacular representation of motion, it satirizes mobility as a reactionary fantasy of premodern simplicity and naturalness. It reveals that mobility only works because we believe it works. It unmask the automobile as wish-fulfillment as much as mobile technique—or, in short, as a fetish.

As Dreiser’s biographer Jerome Loving has suggested, Dreiser seems much of the time to implicitly oppose the automobile as a means of bourgeois mobility to the streetcar and railroad
as technologies of working-class mobility (301-302). I have already discussed some of
Dreiser’s ambivalences about the motorcar, but Dreiser’s writing about his own experiences as
a mobile subject predate *An American Tragedy* and even *A Hoosier Holiday*. In fact, Dreiser’s
career as a journalist and literary author is almost as closely tied to streetcars and railroads as
Twain’s is to the western steamboat; Dreiser’s first assignment at the *Toledo Blade* was to
report on a streetcar strike—a job he recounts in *Newspaper Days* and which inspired a scene
in *Sister Carrie*—and he famously based his “Trilogy of Desire” (*The Financier* [1912], *The
Titan* [1914], *The Stoic* [1947]) on the life of Charles Tyson Yerkes, the “traction king” of the
late nineteenth century. More remarkably, Dreiser (writing as “Herman D. White”) presented
himself as the streetcar passenger *par excellence* in “From New York to Boston by Trolley,”
an article he published in *Ainslee’s* magazine in 1899. In this essay, Dreiser narrates his
journey from New York to Boston, almost all by electric streetcar; he concludes that any
passenger following his example “will find it difficult to realize that he has come 241 miles by
this novel method. Progress has been so insensible, so much like a short car ride in your home
town, that all these pleasant miles have gone for nothing” (100). If the fantasy of “insensible
progress” seems to presage the ideals of both automobility and the kind of “drift” that
Michaels identifies as the privilege of the managerial classes, much of the essay nonetheless
suggests that the “progress” from New York to Boston has not been quite insensible. The
trolley route, for example is not perfectly continuous:

At new Rochelle, just two hours out from the Harlem River, comes the
first of several breaks which go to make the route imperfect. It extends from
New Rochelle to Stamford, seventeen miles away, and there is no way out
save by railroad. There are trolley lines, but they do not help us on our way
to Boston. Several are projected to connect these two important places, but they are dreams. It is said the great railroad which spans the distance has something to do with this condition. (91)

Writing that “[t]he lines of the various companies” do not quite “meet end to end and car to car,” Dreiser implies that what continuity there is unintentional, although the administrators may “dream” of patching the gaps therein. The streetcar system, first of all, achieves this imperfect unity without conscious plan; it appears as a “force born out of certain conditions,” like Shelgrim’s vision of the railroad. Moreover, consciously making a totality of this quasi-system may seem like a “dream,” but Dreiser suggests that the main barrier to the completion of the system is precisely the deliberate intervention of the long-distance railroads. Like Twain and Norris, the youthful Dreiser seeks here to turn railway logic against the railroads themselves, making them and their arbitrary power the enemy of mobility.

At the same time, Dreiser implicitly makes the narration of his own journey the supplement that retroactively confers unity on the not-yet-unified streetcar system. He writes that

At Framingham every one knows to Boston by trolley. [...] Back at Worcester very few people know that such a trip can be made. They know that trolley lines extend to South Framingham, but are not certain of the connections beyond. At other points along the route no one seemed to know that there was any other trolley connections anywhere save between their town and the nearest city. No end of interest could be exited by the simple explanation of that route. (99)
The system is nearly a completed circuit, although without any deliberate plan; in fact deliberate planning stands in the way of the system’s completion. Yet, those living along the route are mostly ignorant of the degree of completion already extant. Dreiser implies that he himself, by dint of having pioneered the journey, is qualified to make the “simple explanation[s]” that might liberate them—and implicitly, Dreiser’s own readers—from their limited view of the built environment. Hence the essay itself is at once an “explanation” of the route’s connectedness and Dreiser’s authorization of himself as a mobile practitioner and interpreter of spaces. Accordingly, the essay, so reminiscent of Norris’s articles in The Wave, presents the experience of the trip itself as a montage of images integrated by the author’s interpretive competence. In the New York suburbs, he tells us, “are gas and water, electric lights and trolley cars, and yet wide doors stand open to the summer breeze and flowers bloom at the door-steps. Hills and dales succeeded in picture after picture” (92). Riding the trolley is a cinematic experience, made so by the speed “which was not great enough to destroy [his impressions’] value, and yet sufficient enough to give pleasant change.” Yet if the streetcar itself is responsible for the kaleidoscopic variety of the images Dreiser sees on the journey, he nonetheless need to intervene at times to assure us that apparent disorder is, in fact, orderliness:

The one striking feature from Wallingford to Hartford is the seemingly hap-hazard distribution of manufactories. In the midst of the loveliest scenery the car will sheer away close upon some huge industry with buildings of red brick, its sheds and smokestacks set down close to a mill pond. It is not always plain to the eye that there is any connection between the manufactory and the railway, and yet a spur-track always leads out to
these industries. The entire region is a confused compound of shop and farm, with little groups of houses set down at random. (95)

The language here seems to blur the distinction between and “seeming” and real disarray. What is certain is that all points in space are connected to the railway, however things appear to the common passenger. In short, wherever disorder appears in the essay, Dreiser assures us he can discover and underlying orderliness, thanks to his mastery of mobile techniques. The essay is like a map of hidden connections—but is precisely not a map, but a narration that models a kind of spatial practice that both presupposes and supplements a map-reading competence.

Although Mimi Sheller and John Urry define “automobility” in strict opposition to the railroad’s “strict timetabling of mobility that accompanied railways in the mid-nineteenth century” (744), this essay presents streetcar passengerhood as an example of what they define as automobility: it employs rhetorics of both “autonomous humans and autonomous machines only able to roam in certain time-space scapes” (729), and emphasizes the sense of “seamless journeys from home-away-home” (745). Before we leap to the conclusion that, for Dreiser, the technical differences between rail and automobile travel makes all the difference between immobility and auto-mobility, then, we should note that his streetcar narrative already makes the trolley an instrument of auto-mobility in contrast to the “wearisome, flashy, dusty paths” of the long-distance steam railroad (“Trolley” 92). Yet, by the time he took his automobile trip in 1914, he seemingly had begun to identify the automobile as the proper technical form of autonomous mobility:

At best the railways have become huge, clumsy, unwieldy affairs little suited to the temperamental needs and moods of the average human being.
They are mass carriers, freight handlers, great hurry conveniences for overburdened commercial minds, but little more. After all, travel, however much it may be a matter of necessity, is in most instances, or should be, a matter of pleasure. If not, why go forth to roam the world so wide? Are not trees, flowers, attractive scenes, great mountains, interesting cities, and streets and terminals the objective? […] Should the discomforts become too great, as in the case of the majority of railroads, and any reasonable substitute offer itself, as the automobile, the old form of conveyance will assuredly have to give way. (92)

Already, Dreiser seems to have forgotten “all the pleasant miles” of his streetcar journey; now all rail transportation is a barrier to authentic mobility because of the fixed route the train is constrained to travel. The railroad “has no latitude, no elasticity” in contrast to the automobile. Yet, if Dreiser seems here to replace the streetcar with the automobile as a model of flexibility, efficiency, and autonomy, elsewhere, as I have pointed out, he treats the automobile infrastructure as an example of spatial fragmentation and chaos. For example, entering Pennsylvania from New York along the shore of Lake Erie, Dreiser and his companions encounter a portion of highway damaged by recent floods. Dreiser writes, “The road grew very bad. It was a dirt road, a kind of marshy, oily, mucky, looking thing, cut into deep ruts. After a short distance under darksome trees, it turned into a wide, marshy looking area with a number of railroad tracks crossing it from east to west and numerous freight trains and switch engines jangling to and fro in the dark” (187). This road appears to be marked as an approach to Erie, Pennsylvania, but the illuminated sigh the travelers see is in fact a marker for a General
Electric factory “stuck off on some windy beach or marsh, no doubt, miles from the city.” The road itself become a veritable barrier to mobility here:

And this road grew worse and worse. The car lurched so at times that I thought we might be thrown out. […] Finally, having gone a considerable distance on this course, we seemed to be mired. We would dash into a muddy slough and there the wheels would just spin without making any progress. The way out of this was to trample earth behind the wheels and then back up. I began to think we were good for a night in the open. Franklin and I walked back blocks and blocks to see whether by chance we hadn’t gotten on the wrong road. Having decided that we were doing as well as could be expected under the circumstances, we returned and sat in the car. After much time wasted we struck a better portion of the road, coming to where it turned at right angles over the maze of unguarded tracks which we had been paralleling all this while. It was a treacherous place, with neither gates nor watchmen but just a great welter of dark tracks with freight cars standing here and there, signal lights glimmering in the distance and engines and trains switching up and down.” (187-188)

This is an infernal space—a “maze” and “treacherous place, with neither gates nor watchmen.” Here, the automobile fails, but the railroad, like the steam monster in The Octopus, persists, its movements illegible and dangerous, its cyclopean railbeds inert and massive and its “signal lights glimmering in the distance and engines and trains switching up and down.” The individual, self-contained nature of the automobile, on the other hand, makes it particularly
vulnerable to incompletenesses and inconsistencies in its technosocial networks; greater apparent autonomy is, in fact, an index of greater interdependence and determinacy.

If *A Hoosier Holiday* supplants the streetcar with the automobile as the solution to the problem of “the fixed route,” it also suggests a much greater degree of skepticism about auto-
mobility than Dreiser’s streetcar essay. In “From New York to Boston by Trolley,” Dreiser writes himself as a standard Progressive-Era passenger-detective; he not only employs the techniques of the transportation engineer in navigating the streetcar system, he actually surpasses his model because he fills in the gaps therein. Conversely, in *A Hoosier Holiday*, he makes the task of navigating the technosocial spaces of capital a slapstick of wrong turns, mazes, mudbaths, and mirages. *A Hoosier Holiday* suggests that in the years after “From New York to Boston by Trolley,” Dreiser’s faith in mobility began to waver. On one hand, the wish for unimpeded motion begins to seem less and less like the rational passenger’s simple desire for greater technical mastery over space; on the other hand, the dream of a frictionless medium for motion, of a totalized and knowable technosocial network, begins to fade. These two ambivalences are linked: The irrationalities of striving for mobility end up materialized in the built environment, while this fractured and evanescent environment itself continually frustrates the practice of mobile techniques. Likewise, Clyde perpetually finds his mastery of mobile techniques to be inadequate to his social ambitions. He carries on his affair with Roberta with the silent collaboration of the streetcar ban train and networks. As they begin their trysts, Clyde, knowing Roberta doesn’t want to be observed, suggests they meet at “‘a little park—Mohawk—just west of Dreamland on the Mohawk Street line” (277-278).

Although Roberta demurs, eventually she herself becomes an expert in using trains and trolleys to evade notice; planning to take an excursion with Clyde under the pretext of visiting
her sister Grace, she adroitly imagines how the anonymity and geographic reach of the rail system can free them from the restrictive moralizing gaze of Roberta’s neighbors:

“[Y]ou have to go to Fonda first, then change cars there. But I could leave here any time on the trolley and there are only two trains a day from Fonda, one at two, and one at seven on Saturday. So I might leave here any time before two, you see, and then if I didn’t make the two o’clock train, it would be all right, wouldn’t it? I could go on the seven. And you could be over there, or meet me on the way, just so no one here saw us. Then I could go on and you could come back. I could arrange that with Agnes, I’m sure. I would have to write her.” (286)

The narration of the actual outing is even more meticulous in detailing the transfers and routes Clyde and Roberta take. Again, this elaboration may seem like no more than the kind of pedantry of language that Mencken decried, it also underscores the doubleness of Clyde’s and Robert’s mastery of mobile technique. On one hand the streetcar and railroad are libratory tools that, as with the Annixters in *The Octopus*, unfetter the couple not only from physical place, but also from the straits of sexual etiquette; on the other, their obligation to use such techniques registers how circumscribed their agency really is. This paradox is further emphasized by the narrator’s description of the amusement park the couple visits during their excursion. They come upon

a pleasure park called Starlight where, in addition to a few clap-trap pleasure concessions such as a ring of captive aeroplanes, a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round, an old mill and a dance floor, was a small lake with boats.

It was after its fashion an idyllic spot with a little band-stand out on an
island near the center of the lake and on the shore a grave and captive bear in a cage. (287)

The language here emphasizes the combining of motion and immobility, pleasure and captivity, even accelerating this rhetoric as Clyde and Roberta together ride the carousel:

Round and round they spun on the noisy, grinding machine, surveying now a few idle pleasure seekers who were in boats upon the lake, now some who were flying round in the gaudy green and white captive aeroplanes or turning upward and then down in the suspended cages of the Ferris wheel. (288)

On one hand, constant motion is implicitly compared to sexual indulgence, to bliss, to freedom: “[S]ince the merry-go-round was in full blast, nothing would do but that Roberta should ride with him. And in the gayest of moods, they climbed on, and he placed her on a zebra, and then stood close in order that he might keep his arm about her, and both try to catch the brass ring.” On the other, the machinery here merely moves in tight circles, and inasmuch as some of these machines double in miniature the transportation systems of the productive world beyond—planes and boats—it reveals that this isolated and “idyllic spot” is little more than a training ground for mobility itself; yet, the mode of its material entrainment with the rest of the mobile world is to be a simulation of mobility that disciplines and teaches constraint. If you want ride along, you must be content with going in circles. So it is with the park’s screened-in dance pavilion: To participate in “color and the music and the motions of the dancers gliding rhythmically here and there,” you must be willing (and able) to wait at the turnstile and buy a ticket—“ten cents per dance per couple” (289).
Mobility, then, only comes with social and even physical isolation. Clyde and Roberta continue their trysts as Roberta secures new lodgings in a house with a separate entrance that “permit[s] ingress and egress without contact with any other portion of the house” (295). We learn that Roberta—still unwilling to sleep with Clyde—nevertheless chooses this apartment specifically for “its geometric position in relation to the rest of the house,” for its seclusion and anonymity (297). Meanwhile, although the couple continue to frequent “such spots as could be conveniently reached by interurban lines” (296), these “out-of-door resorts which [. . .] had provided diversion, and that at a fairly safe distance from Lycurgus” have begun to close for the winter. Hence, “while [Roberta’s] movements were unrestrained, there was no place to go” unless Clyde is allowed visit Roberta in her new flat (297-298). If Clyde’s promotion to the stamping room had meant moving from mere motion to public visibility, and consequently had seemed like the acquisition of authentic social mobility, he now learns just how constraining visibility can be. Not only can no degree of technosocial competence bridge the gap between social strata, but, for Clyde, practicing mobility in public can even be a barrier to social advancement. The network of private rooms, amusement resorts, and railroads that had hitherto seemed a terrain of liberation now seems like the risk-laden landscape Dreiser had encountered in eastern Pennsylvania; the lines of escape from his erstwhile “basement world” now appear as elements of that very world. Consequently, Clyde’s affections shift from Roberta to Sondra Finchley in part because Sondra—as metonymized by her automobile—represents a larger, freer field for mobility; yet she also stands for the possibility of liberation from mobility itself. That is, for Clyde, Sondra represents a kind of permanency and comforting domesticity:
Just to think the Wimblinger Finchley Electric Sweeper Company was one of the largest manufacturing concerns here. Its tall walls and stacks made a part of the striking sky line across the Mohawk. And the Finchley residence in Wykeagay Avenue, near that of the Griffiths, was one of the most impressive among that distinguished row of houses which had come with the latest and most discriminating architectural taste here—Italian Renaissance—cream hued marble and Dutchess County sandstone combined. And the Finchleys were among the most discussed of families here. (319)

Here, monumentality and conspicuousness mark status—“status” in its full etymological connection to “stasis.” Yet there is no contradiction here to the original sense that Clyde is drawn to Sondra as mobility corporealized, as he sees her “guiding her craft with a paddle covered with yellow daffodils—a floral representation of some Indian legend in connection with the Mohawk River.” For this very image evacuates mobility of technique, naturalizes it, indeed makes it as natural as place itself. For Clyde as he is in Kansas City or with Roberta, the important thing is to know how to stay in motion; but, oddly enough, as the shortcomings of technosocial mobility become clearer to Clyde, social mobility becomes a matter of being “impressive” and “distinguished,” which means having a place, possessing a distinction. The automobile marks the place where mobility in the strict technical sense and social climbing begin to part ways, even as they continue to seem to travel together. The ideology of automobility notwithstanding, the motor car seems to do little to enhance actual spatial autonomy while introducing a dimension of ownership. Automobility is a theatrical excess
beyond auto-mobility; it is a conspicuous mobility that, by its very emphasis on spectacle, renders mobility as such abject and déclassé.

At first, it had seemed to Clyde that being in motion required the supplement of being seen; now, as the affair with Sondra progresses, it appears that being seen is the thing itself. But this also implies a passage from activity to passivity, from competence to merely occupying a place. Hence, as Michaels implies, Sondra—the one who possesses an automobile—wants to possess Clyde more than Clyde wants to possess Sondra. What Clyde wants, in fact, is to be seen to be possessed by Sondra. As Michaels writes:

> Clyde’s near identity to Gilbert helps constitute (especially for Sondra) a kind of slippery class erotics: Clyde’s resemblance to Gilbert identifies him as one of Sondra’s own class [. . .]; at the same time, however, Sondra is attracted to Clyde because he is a lower-class Gilbert [. . .]. Clyde is thus simultaneously above and below Sondra, attractive as the embodiment of an almost utopian class fluidity—utopian not in imagining that class lines can be crossed (the history of the Griffithses and the Finchleys testifies they can) but in imagining the possibility of belonging to more than one—or rather, the possibility of a single person (Clyde, and through him, Sondra herself) embodying the moment of crossing. (88; emphasis in original)

Being possessed by Sondra would make Clyde the “embodiment” of what the Fichleys represent to Mrs. Griffiths: the “fast set.” But Clyde, looking up from below, sees being in this “set” rather like Mrs. Griffiths does from her (putatively) superior position, as a matter of being rather than doing, of status rather than praxis. Wanting to achieve a subjectivity beyond (technosocial) mobility, that is, he begins to desire to be an object. Part of her attraction to
him, accordingly, is her infantilizing baby-talk; and, although (as Michaels points out) both Clyde and Sondra use baby-talk with each other, Sondra’s is more strongly characterized by a kind of objectifying imperiousness. She writes in a letter to Clyde:

You must hurry and come up, dear. It’s too nice for words. Green roads to gallop through, and swimming and dancing at the Casino every afternoon at four. Just back from a wonderful gallop on Dickey and going again after luncheon to mail these letters. Bertine says she’ll write you a letter to-day or tomorrow good for any week-end or any old time, so when Sonda says come, you come, you hear, else Sonda whip hard. You baddie, good boy.

(450)

Like “Dicky,” Clyde must respond when called—must gallop, swim, and dance on command—and he does respond “eagerly” to Sondra’s letter (451). It seems as if the solution to the shortcomings of mobile techniques is to be commanded, to be made an instrument of someone else’s mobility. From Clyde’s perspective, courting Sondra—or, rather, being courted by Sondra—is a way of squaring the circle of mobility, a way of being in motion but beyond the need for mobile techniques. It is a means both to achieve perpetual motion and to find a place in the social order. The text, however, gives us many reasons to question this stance. Even as he tries to find a place beyond mere technosocial mobility, Clyde keeps running into the need for mobile techniques, and, hence, their limits. In fact, much of the narrative leading up to Roberta’s murder interweaves scenes of Clyde’s apparent mastery of space and those of the way spaces seem uncannily and perpetually to steer him toward the events at Big Bittern Lake. Roberta chances to see Clyde “pausing in front of the post office” (442) and talking to Arabella Stark, who in her “large and impressive-looking car” is
“affectedly posed at the wheel, not only for the benefit of Clyde but the public in general” (442-443). Clyde’s apparent accession to a world beyond mobility—the automobile is window-dressing, “impressive” precisely because it is posed, staged, immobile—not only makes him more visible to Roberta, but makes his public visibility visible to her; yet, on this public street where thousands pass anonymously, Clyde himself doesn’t see himself being seen by Roberta. Clyde fails to see here that having traded in the need to be anonymous for the pleasure of being on display makes him vulnerable to Roberta and her own mobile techniques. Likewise, when Clyde, Sondra, and their friends take a weekend drive to a lake resort, they are “compelled to detour east in the direction of Roberta’s home” (443). If the post office vignette proleptically hints at the role letters and letter-carriers will play in Clyde’s conviction for murder, the detour passage echoes all the novel’s earlier detours—especially the ones in Kansas City that led to the accident that sent Clyde fleeing. Moreover, Dreiser’s meticulous rendering of the cartographic details of the detour echo his same obsessive attention to detail in the factory passages: “[C]oming finally to a north and south road which ran directly from Trippettsville past the Alden farm, they turned north into that. And a few minutes later, came directly to the corner adjoining the Alden farm, where an east and west road led to Biltz.” This rhetoric reinforces both the sense of the domination of space by built systems and the haphazard state of those systems; Clyde’s chance encounter with Roberta’s father brings the “specter of Roberta and all that she represented” back into his hitherto blissful consciousness just as the highway detour, interrupting the traveler’s otherwise unimpeded progress to Arrow Lake, raises the specter of the shortcomings of automobility (444). And, although the narrator says that these incidents, for both Roberta and Clyde, underscore the difference between Roberta’s world and Sondra’s, for us they only show how inextricable these two “worlds” are.
Precisely because Sondra’s world must continually extend itself into Roberta’s, Roberta’s can always interrupt and perturb Sondra’s.

There is nothing in *An American Tragedy*, in other words, outside Clyde’s basement world. The delusional appearance of an outside is, in fact, both structural element and structural effect of the topography of this basement world. There are no pathways in this world without detours, obstructions, breakdowns, and blind alleys; likewise, as in the space of the factory—and for workers (and even capitalists) as for products—there are no detours that do not lead inevitably through the faulty, yet nonetheless automatic, sorting processes of capital. Contingency and determinacy, so bound up in the work of other writers with reified “forces” like heredity and libido, are here indistinguishable from the very rationalized built environment that had hitherto seemed like a cure for the weaknesses of the flesh or the inheritances of history. "‘The important thing,’” says the factotum Whiggam, ‘‘is to see that there is no mistake as to the number [. . .] of collars that come down here and are stamped, and also that there’s no delay in stamping them and getting them out to the stitchers’” (237). But when Roberta discovers “that a bundle of collars which she had already stamped as sixteens were not of that size but smaller” (275-276), there is no way to trace the source of the error, no way to know whether to blame Roberta’s own fecklessness or some glitch in the system of chutes and conveyors that have transported the collars to the stamping room. To follow the path perfectly can be—must be—to err. The collars can always be sent back, of course; the important thing is that they find their way to the market.

**Sorting contests**

Dreiser’s narrator tells us that while Clyde wishes that the detour of Roberta’s pregnancy could be overcome so he can resume the path of marriage to Sondra, Roberta’s murder is
actually planned by his “efrit,” a voice “from the depths of some lower or higher world never before guessed or plumbed by him” (482). This “diabolical” voice, however, does not speak like the inner, the yearning and daydreaming, Clyde. On the contrary, this manifestation of a “leering and diabolic wish or wisdom concealed in his own nature” (483) seems to speak as the very persona of mobility itself. The efrit knows nothing of ethics, but everything about routes, networks, locations, distances, and vehicles. The efrit first appears in the context of Clyde’s discovery, as he mails a letter to Sondra, of a newspaper item about an accidental drowning, and reemerges as Clyde speaks to Roberta over the telephone; the efrit manifests itself, then, seemingly out of the mass communication network itself:

As Clyde stood at the telephone in a small outlying drug store and talked—the lonely proprietor buried in a silly romance among his pots and phials at the back—it seemed as though the Giant Efrit that had previously materialized in the silent halls of his brain, was once more here at his elbow—that he himself, cold and numb and fearsome, was being talked through—not actually talking himself.

Go to the lake which you visited with Sondra!

Get travel folders of the region there from either the Lycurgus House here or the depot.

Go to the south end of it and from there walk south, afterwards.

Pick a boat that will upset easily—one with a round bottom, such as those you have seen here at Crum Lake and up there.
Buy a new and different hat and leave that on the water—one that cannot be traced to you. You might even tear the lining out of it so that it cannot be traced.

Pack all of your things in your trunk here, but leave it, so that swiftly, in the event that anything goes wrong, you can return here and get it and depart.

And take only such things with you as will make it seem as though you were going for an outing to Twelfth Lake—not away, so that should you be sought at Twelfth Lake, it will look as though you had gone only there, not elsewhere. (491)

The efrit that had seemed like something interior to Clyde nonetheless speaks as something exterior—“through” him—just as Clyde himself speaks through the telephone, as if Clyde is nothing more than the prosthesis of his own efrit. Moreover, this voice that is at once everywhere and nowhere is an expert in traveling light and anonymously; in its spatial competences, it is a veritable travel agent and train conductor. The efrit instructs Clyde in making use of textuality for mastering the spaces of the upstate lakes—“Get travel folders”—and in effacing the textual traces that might lead pursuers to him—“Buy a new and different hat.” In short, although Dreiser’s narrator calls the efrit’s plans “the most bizarre and haphazard of schemes” (482), schemes of the kind imagined by “a small and routed army in full flight before a major one,” the voice that plans Roberta’s murder never seems (to Clyde) like that of pathological mania or delusion, but like his own managerial voice—that is, like the reasonable yet stern voice of a Gilbert Griffiths or a Joshua Whiggam. Indeed, it often seems as if the built environment itself speaks through the efrit and plans and carries out Roberta’s
murder in collaboration with Clyde. As Clyde waits for the westbound train at Fonda, the narratorial focalization splits—Dreiser using here two typefaces—between Clyde’s scheming and confident consciousness and his doubting and anxious self. Here, the exteriority of the efrit seems clear: the efrit is pure agency, outward-directed thought, more like a competent general than a routed army, while the other Clyde oscillates between halfhearted rebellion and aestheticizing passivity. It is almost as if “Clyde” is now the masochistic instrument of the dominant efrit. In fact, this other Clyde—perhaps the “authentic” one—seems much like Dreiser’s presentation of himself on the trip to Indiana: dreamy, impressionable, unfocused.

“What ‘Clyde’ represents, then,” write Lee Clark Mitchell, “is a locus of reflexes and desires, [that reveal] how little responsibility he bears. Indeed, when desire for Roberta’s demise grows so strong as to threaten his moral reflexes, it can only find expression as a voice that speaks through him” (55). Arguably, however, “morality” resides in the desiring Clyde, the Clyde who wants a place beyond mobility; the efrit that speaks through Clyde is, in turn, “reflex,” or learned technique. In short, the problem of The Octopus seems to have reemerged here; Clyde’s spatial consciousness is doubly decentered. Part of him is pure technique, a cogitating node in a technosocial network and nothing more; another part of him is all daydream and vision, with neither volition nor intellect.

Yet An American Tragedy suggests that this condition is not an undeveloped kind of mobility, but, on the contrary, a result of the contradictions in mobility itself. In fact, the conundrum of the novel is that the development of the technosocially-competent self, the self of technique, the cynical yet rational self, enervates and excludes the ethical or reflective self; yet, it is the reflective self that suffers the social abjection and sense of placelessness for which mobile techniques offer themselves as a remedy. In the end, any sense of desire as a trait of an
authentic and interior self, even of desire for “success,” is an obstacle to “success” itself. Accordingly, Clyde’s residual and feeble resistance to the mandate of the efrit, as much as the emergence of the efrit itself, leads to Clyde’s eventual failure. Clyde seemingly fails, that is, because his sentimental and passive (and even religious) self continually undermines his resolute managerial self. Where, then, in *An American Tragedy* do we find a counterexample, a subjectivity that do seem to have some unobstructed access to technosocial competence?

Mitchell has pointed out how both Gilbert Griffiths and Roberta Alden act as specular doubles for Clyde; but while Mitchell argues that Roberta “embodies a part of [Clyde] rejected and cast out” (44), his formerly “rejected” self, she also ultimately displays a kind of ruthlessness that Clyde himself can never muster. Clyde’s ambiguous decision to murder Roberta comes finally only after Roberta threatens to blackmail him, to reveal their affair to Lycurgus and thereby spoil his game of class masquerade. In threatening Clyde, Roberta seems to give up on romantic daydreaming and instead begins to manipulate Clyde, like the efrit itself, according to her own technosocial competences. At this point, Roberta in fact resembles Clyde’s other double—Gilbert—more than Clyde himself. Gilbert is first described as “smaller and a little older and certainly much colder than [Clyde]—such a youth, in short, as Clyde would have liked to imagine himself to be—trained in an executive sense, apparently authoritative and efficient” (183). Gilbert further reveals his difference from Clyde when he describes Clyde to his sister Myra: “‘He’s like all those young fellows who work for hotels. He thinks clothes are the whole thing, I guess. He had on a light brown suit and a brown tie and a hat to match and brown shoes. His tie was too bright and he had on one of those bright pink striped shirts like they used to wear three or four years ago. Besides his clothes aren’t cut right’” (194-195). Gilbert knows very well that codes of fashion are mere arbitrary and even ephemeral sign
systems, that they’re not “the whole thing”; nevertheless, he knows those codes—what’s “right,” what’s “too bright,” what’s “three or four years” out of date—much better that Clyde does—or, rather, he knows them differently. Gilbert, then, even more than Roberta, exhibit a cynical distance from social codes, less a hysteric self-theatricalization than a calculated manipulation of performative signs: fashionable Gilbert, victimized Roberta.

However, no character in An American Tragedy acts his part as well as District Attorney Orville Mason. When Mason promises to bring Roberta’s killer to justice in “his very best oratorical mood,” his “thrilled audience” is stirred to action by his “dramatic stand, his very picturesque and even heroic appearance” (542-543). Arguably, the proliferation of theatrical metaphors here, if anything, implies the very same sort of interiority that, in Clyde, results in a failure of agency. After all, if there is a role, must there not also be an actor? However, while Mason is far from a brilliant criminologist—his “profiling” of Clyde could not be more inaccurate—he does efficiently marshal and exploit the material and institutional resources at hand, including “word of mouth, telephone, telegraph,” and the press (525). While Clyde wants to emulate the role of a social actor—to act as an actor—he knows that role from the position of a spectator, from one who yearns to be on stage; Mason, however—who has achieved the rank of District Attorney by exploiting symbolic competence as a “local news-gatherer,” first in Bridgeburg, then in Utica, and by his “shrewd and ambitious willingness to do as he was instructed” (527)—sees the drama of social difference from backstage, as it were, having served the functions of stage manager, stage technician, and director. Moreover, Mason’s “facial handicap,” his misshapen nose, both permanently marks his physical difference and makes him all the more conscious of the arbitrariness of the “youthful sorting contests” at which he failed. For Mason, therefore, the misrecognition that Clyde experiences
in the lobby of the Davidson-Green is impossible; Mason thrills an audience of political spectators while never allowing any specular, narcissistic illusions to interfere with his purely institutional role; more precisely, Mason directly integrates performative competence into his practice. It might be said that for Clyde, “shrewdness” remains the handmaiden of desire—shrewdness, such as it is, making its appearance as the efrit, something both alien and doubtful—while for Mason, the reverse obtains. For Clyde, pragmatic, methodical, “cynical” ways of knowing work fitfully and imperfectly only to further the dreams of social emulation; for Mason, conversely, the accurate performance of ambition, moral righteousness, and sympathy is itself produced by a pure operation of institutional, technosocial competence.

When Mason makes his speech to Titus Alden about bringing the killer to justice, it’s the sincerity of the “outburst of emotion” (453) that seems to come from nowhere, and which breaks through his normally calm and practical way of speaking. If amoral, managerial, calculation appears as an alien voice to Clyde, irruptions of oratorical and theatrical performativity, pure corporeal practice, are Mason’s own efrit.

In other words, Mason becomes both a competent detective and Clyde’s nemesis merely by “mindlessly” pretending to be so. Indeed, we first encounter Mason not as a figure, but as another node in a network of telegraphs, trains, telephones, and automobiles. We find him not in person, but by name, as the machinery—both figurative and literal—of the police begins to respond to news of Roberta’s murder. Coroner Fred Heit, his thoughts of the bounties of a mail-order retail catalogue “interrupted by the whirr of a telephone bell” (518), relays the news to his secretary Earl Newcomb; as Heit and Newcomb prepare to take a train to Big Bittern Lake, who in turn relays it to Zillac Saunders:
[B]eing struck by the preoccupation and haste of Mr. Newcomb, usually so much more deliberate, she now called: “Hello, Earl. What’s the rush? Where you going so fast?”

“Double drowning up at Big Bittern, we hear. Maybe something worse. Mr. Heit’s going up and I’m going along. We have to make that 3:10.”

“Who said so? Is it anyone from here?”

“Don’t know yet, but don’t think so. There was a letter in the girl’s pocket addressed to some one in Biltz, Mimico County, a Mrs. Alden. I’ll tell you when we get back or I’ll telephone you.”

“My goodness, if it’s a crime, Mr. Mason’ll be interested, won’t he?”

“Sure, I’ll telephone him, or Mr. Heit will. If you see Bud Parker or Karel Badnell, tell ’em I had to go out of town, and call up my mother for me, will you, Zillah, and tell her, too. I’m afraid I won’t have time.”

“Sure I will, Earl.”

“Thanks.” (519-520)

The language here, both offhand and telegraphic, underscores the automaticity of the apparatus that has begun to seek out Roberta’s murderer, while ironizing the sense of the characters’ excitement. This is, once again, both theater and the merest mechanical labor, the two aspects fused together as closely as in the Griffiths collar works. And once again, the meticulousness of Dreiser’s narration emphasizes the way a perpetual motion of bodies, machines, and texts works inevitably toward Clyde’s arrest and eventual conviction.
Clyde and Mason, then, represent two different sides of failed, faulty, or spurious subjectivity. For both, “subjectivity” is nothing more than an effect of institutional apparatuses. But Clyde always seems to be subject to institutional machinery, while Mason is the seemingly ubiquitous and omnipotent subject of the police machine. At the risk of stretching an analogy too far, this difference resembles the difference between the “large, noisy, clattery, tinny” player-piano at the Wigwam, both crudely mimetic and technically poorly-integrated, and the Victrola, whose representational apparatus is simultaneously more technically efficient, more convincing, more versatile, and more institutionally decentered, since both its production and its operation relies on more “deterritorialized” and materially distributed knowledges and practices. Mason is so effective precisely because of his epistemological distance from the roles he plays. Yet this “distance” could not be farther from Norris’s (misnamed) “larger view”—the view of the spectator who has mastered mobile technique as “mediated immediacy.” For, in Norris’s ideal of the naturalist author, at least as represented by Presley in *The Octopus*, mastering both mobility and mediation allows the subject to act as if he stands outside the moil of capitalist spatiality; for Mason, however, the appearance of “standing above” everything is itself—precisely—an appearance. Neither Norris nor Dreiser admit the possibility of genuinely transcendental techniques for knowing the spaces of capital; Dreiser, moreover, rejects even the quasi-transcendence of the skilled detective-navigator; Mason, unlike Phillip Sterling in *The Gilded Age* or Presely in *The Octopus*—develops mobility only at the expense of submerging his own autonomous subjectivity and agency. This is why Mason does such a competent job catching Clyde, and it is also why he gets Clyde convicted, even though the version of Roberta’s murder he presents to the jury is no more “true” than that of the defense team. Mason methodically but
mechanically marshals all the material traces of Clyde’s journey, first from Lycurgus to Big Bittern Lake, and then to Bear Lake. He does not simply narratively re-present the crime; his very method reproduces its planning. In his opening arguments, he begins with Roberta’s letters—recovered from the hiding places of Clyde’s flat, and then “produced a map of the Adirondacks”

which he had had made for the purpose, and on which in red ink were traced the movements of Clyde up to and after her death—up to the time of his arrest at Big Bear. Also, in doing this, he paused to tell the jury of Clyde’s well-conceived plan of hiding his identity, the various false registrations, the two hats. Here also he explained that on the train between Fonda and Utica, as again between Utica and Grass Lake, he had not ridden in the same car with Roberta. (670)

Inviting the jury to imagine the path Clyde has taken through upstate New York, Mason leaves them no alternative to the route marked out in red ink; he makes their spatial imaginations double his, just as his has doubled Clyde’s. And it is maps once again when Mason confronts Clyde with the travel folders he used in planning the trip through the Adirondacks. First, Mason tricks Clyde into revealing that he has lied about the provenance of these brochures, all of which have “a Lycurgus House stamp on the cover” (728). The Lycurgus House stamp, recalling both the material form and social function of the stamp on the collars produced Griffiths, and in red ink like Mason’s map, remind us of the ways texts move through space yet always point back to their origins. Yet, this is only enough to show that Clyde is lying about the folders; he must still prove Clyde’s intent to murder Roberta—which he does by using the maps on the flyers themselves:
And here [Mason] returned the identical stamped folder [. . ] In the center was a map showing the Indian Chain together with Twelfth, Big Bittern, and Grass Lakes, as well as many others, and at the bottom of this map a road plainly indicated as leading from Grass Lake and Gun Lodge south past the southern end of Big Bittern to Three Mile Bay. Now seeing this after so long a time again, he suddenly decided that it must be his knowledge of this road that Mason was seeking to establish, and a little quivery and creepy now, he replied: “Yes, it may be the one. It looks like it. I guess it is, maybe.”

“Don’t you know that it is?” insisted Mason, darkly and dourly. “Can’t you tell from reading that item there whether it is or not?”

“Well, it looks like it,” replied Clyde, evasively after examining the item which had inclined him toward Grass Lake in the first place. “I suppose maybe it is.”

“You suppose! You suppose! Getting a little more cautious now that we’re getting down to something practical. Well, just look at that map there again and tell me what you see. Tell me if you don’t see a road marked as leading south from Grass Lake.”

“Yes,” replied Clyde, a little sullenly and bitterly after a time, so flayed and bruised was he by this man who was so determined to harry him to his grave. He fingered the map and pretended to look as directed, but was seeing only all that he had seen long before there in Lycurgus, so shortly
before he departed for Fonda to meet Roberta. And now here it was being used against him.

“And where does it run, please? Do you mind telling the jury where it runs—from where to where?”

And Clyde, nervous and fearful and physically very much reduced, now replied: “Well, it runs from Grass Lake to Three Mile Bay.”

“And to what or near what other places in between?” continued Mason, looking over his shoulder.

“Gun Lodge. That’s all.”

“What about Big Bittern? Doesn’t it run near that when it gets to the south of it?”

“Yes, sir, it does here.”

Here, Mason does not seek to establish what Clyde did, but what he thought; he does not evoke Clyde’s corporeal movement through physical space, but his cognitive movement through a textualized space. He produces a narrative, not of what happened the day of the murder, but of what happened days before, showing that the actual crime perfectly followed Clyde’s original plan. Mason here harks back to his opening arguments:

“He is a bearded man. He has had more social and educational advantages than any one of you in the jury box. He has traveled. In hotels and clubs and the society with which he was so intimately connected in Lycurgus, he has been in contact with decent, respectable, and even able and distinguished people. Why, as a matter of fact, at the time of his arrest two months ago, he was part of as smart a society and summer resort group as this region
boasts. Remember that! His mind is a mature, not, an immature one. It is fully developed and balanced perfectly.” (675)

Mason’s version of Clyde is a portrait of an accomplished and competent manager, an intellectual laborer. In short, Mason tries to paint Clyde as not only mobile, but a mobile subject, and hence culpable.

Yet, although this strategy gets Clyde convicted, the novel implies that it actually proves nothing. The novel consistently hints that such a reading of Clyde’s actions overlooks the “other” Clyde, the Clyde who really is a “moral coward.” In fact, this misreading in implicit not only in Mason’s method of argument, but also in the institutional network that materially informs it. The mapping of traces can never establish intent; rather, once it has proven mobile subjectivity, it can only deduce that Clyde is indeed a “murderer of the coldest and blackest type” (773). Likewise, Orville Mason can only imagine himself as the righteous avenger of Roberta Alden because he himself is nothing at all other than a mobile subject. That is, if Clyde had imagined “success” as some place beyond mobility, as a home, Mason actually “succeeds” because he is nothing more than his own efrit, which in turn means that he is nothing more than mobility. Perversely enough, he appears to Clyde as a potent persecutory figure only to the degree than he has made himself and instrument of technosocial networks. Hence, Mason and Clyde confront each other in a closed spatiality that precludes any kind of epistemological transcendence—even the kind paradoxical transcendence through an “immanent” technosocial spatial competence advocated by Twain or Norris. But what makes this closed world different from that of earlier “naturalist” fictions? In such a closed world, why exactly does Clyde get the electric chair while *Sister Carrie*’s Carrie Meeber manages to take the New York stage by storm? The question becomes more knotty when we consider that
Carrie’s story and Clyde’s story really don’t diverge significantly until each falls permanently into the orbit of the of an institutional machinery—the judicial system on one hand, the culture industry on the other. Both these institutions operate according to the same epistemological presuppositions; in both worlds, exacting technical methods are marshaled to produce representations, narrations, information. More importantly, the two institutions into which these characters fall are largely opposed to each other according to the way they convert the world into knowledge. In the legal system, with its claims to uncovering the truth, contingency works to generate crises in which the possibly innocent may be found “officially” guilty; the police and courts can no more permit the accused to remain in a state of indeterminacy than Clyde himself can remain trapped between the humdrum sphere of technical labor and that of his glamorous friends. Clyde’s sense that the world is structured by likenesses, castes, different kinds—and not by flux and mechanism—is doubled by the way the putatively impersonal logic of the police and courts assigns accused criminals to their proper social “place.” Conversely, in show business the proliferation of contingency is actually cultivated as a pathway to novelty, which is paradoxically enough the closest thing to sure path to market success. Carrie’s gaffes, produced in the context of the industry of spectacle, make her a “personality.” An explosion of epistemological chaos under the increasing complexification of technosocial spaces is both the condition of Carrie’s success and the reason Clyde is found “guilty.” The tragedy of An American Tragedy is that a world in which Carrie can succeed spectacularly is necessarily one in which Clyde can be executed for (at best) questionable reasons. Success, that is, is never merely a matter of mastery or its lack, but of the aleatoric materiality of machine space itself.
My emphasis on theater, amusement, and spectacle as technique leads me to suggest that Clyde’s most significant double is in fact Carrie Meeber. Carrie, like Clyde, follows a path from city to city, form identity to identity, but unlike Clyde, Carrie’s entering into the theater professionalizes this absence of rooted connection to her work, of a “personal and heartfelt” epistemological stance. Professional acting, that is, subjects lack of inwardness itself to a technical discipline; the theater, like the police for Mason, becomes a disciplinary mechanism for the dissatisfied yet vogelfrei Carrie. Under the real subsumption of production to capital, the condition of being vogelfrei, of being deterritorialized, is itself directly yoked to production—unlike the condition of formal subsumption, under which the vogelfrei former peasant is reterritorialized within the factory walls, while outside the factory, feudal conditions are modified only by the introduction of the money wage. While Clyde’s fate is to succumb to the vicissitudes of these two moments of modernity, Carrie, as it were, learns to survive the churning, grinding, “sorting game” of this historical collision by making mutability and “cynicism” the (absent) core of her subjectivity.

“It is curious to note how quickly a profession absorbs one” announces the narrator of Sister Carrie as Carrie begins her stage career: “The showy world in which her interests lay completely absorbed her” (442). The ambiguity of the word “absorb,” along with the paradox of a “showy world” foreground the hybridity of theater as an industry; is Carrie simply naïvely fascinated by the spectacle of theater, or, as she is described, “cleverly” playing a part in a spectacle-producing apparatus? Does she always remain a spectator or does she become an authentic producer? Furthermore, is this spectacle only show and ornament, something apart from the world, or an intrinsic part of the real world, both subsuming and subsumed by technosocial networks, both mechanical and part of a larger machine? Carrie’s first real
success has its origins in a scene that reveals both the purely pragmatic and materially socialized condition of theatrical production—that is, the extent to which is both like (fully modern, fully imbricated with market forces) and unlike (characterized only by “mental” labor, without the taint of the exploitation of “brute” labor) industrial production. Chagrinned by her casting as “a silent little Quakeress,” Carrie, “does not know” that “there was the least show of wrinkles between her eyes, and her mouth was puckered in sullenness” (446). The frown, the pucker—like Mason’s “facial handicap”—is strictly a failure as mimesis, but as a “quaint and droll” novelty, it is immediately a kind of “semiotic excess.” A contingent material flaw in itself, her grimace becomes productive; it advances the commercial value of the theatrical production by producing a performative difference that, in turn, produces a proliferation of interpretive textuality in the entertainment press. Carrie may scowl sullenly, but it takes the combined work of an author, a manager, a stage-manager, (along with, presumably, any number of carpenters, grips, and stagehands) and a company of correspondents to actually manufacture “‘Carrie’s frown’” (448).

Although Carrie’s break comes from an accidental divergence from strict performative discipline, her success, like Mason’s, is largely owing to a willingness to do as she is instructed. Clyde Griffiths must simply emulate a single role—that of the traditional, even “quaint,” personal servant—and emulative prowess, along with a kind of masculine, atavistic, socialization, provides the extent of his work discipline; Carrie’s job, conversely, is emulation itself—and it requires “drilling,” even for ersatz soldiers like Carrie’s friend. The world of theatrical production in *Sister Carrie*, with its “brutal roughness” (390), its “constant urging, coupled with irascibility and energy” (391) is one in which an atmosphere of glamour like that of the Davidson-Green is produced with the Promethean vigor and lockstep organization of
Samuel Griffith’s factory. It’s not altogether inappropriate, then, their differences notwithstanding, that glamorous Carrie should be attracted to the briskly intellectual Bob Ames. Perhaps it’s that Ames is “‘connected with an electrical company’” (330), and since electricity keeps the lights shining on Carrie, the presses disseminating information about Carrie, the streetcars bringing spectators to see Carrie—so is Carrie. Of course, to be connected to an electrical company is to be implicitly, uncannily, technological; fittingly, Ames “really had a very bright mind, which was finding its chief development in electrical knowledge” (335). Yet, “[h]is sympathies for other forms of information, however, and for types of people, were quick and warm.” If Ames’s asceticism and mild moralism, along with his knack for collecting information, suggest an earlier version of Mason, he is nevertheless a warmer and quicker Mason—more a technocrat than a detective, but also a humanist. On the other hand, Mason and Ames have learned to play the sorting contests of capital by roughly the same method: by being connected to the power.

In *An American Tragedy*, Mason combines, much more cynically, Ames’s technocratic pragmatism and Carrie’s protean performativity; yet the later novel is much more ambivalent than *Sister Carrie*. If Mason survives the sorting game of capital, it is at the expense of own “inner” self—and consequently, of Clyde, whose conviction and execution result on the spectacle of that same sorting game. Mason, in the end, seems moreover hardly less pathetic than Clyde himself. *Sister Carrie* at least ambiguously seems to celebrate the encounter of Ames and Carrie, their (possible) mutual ethical growth, an advance signaling, less moralistically, a new and stronger (and more historically progressive) technical alliance between cultural and industrial production. On the other hand, Mason’s enhanced image as an effective lawman seems even more spurious than that of Carrie as a Broadway sensation. If
technosocial prowess and social striving reinforce each other in Mason’s case, it seems likely that two illusory effects simply reinforce each other’s inauthenticity; Mason’s crusading “oratory” would seem foolish if his subordinates (including the nonhuman agents of communication apparatuses) didn’t work so efficiently; but could these adjuncts and lieutenants know how to operate so “well” if Mason’s oratory hadn’t already told them how to know what their eventual goals are supposed to be? If the sorting game in *Sister Carrie* leads to a kind of productive enrichment and development of social needs, it leads only to institutional perpetuation in *An American Tragedy*. In *An American Tragedy* sorting contests are both ludic and severe. But they are also productive, and what they produce is spaces, spatial knowledges, and, consequently, the producers themselves.
Illustrations

[Diagram of a mechanical system with annotations and labels]

1,242,672.

Inventor: W. Saunders

Inventor: Oct. 8, 1903

2 Sheets - Sheet 3
figure 2
The New "World" Typewriter.

There is a wide field of usefulness for a type-writing machine that can be sold at a price that will place it within the reach of every one who has correspondence to conduct. The high-priced standard machines fulfill an extremely valuable purpose, and have practically revolutionized the methods of conducting the clerical portion of the business of today; but beyond the office and the counting-house there is the great multitude of professional men and women, teachers, students, and others, who would find both relief and pleasure in the use of a practical instrument of this kind, provided always that it possessed the two indispensable qualifications of cheapness and serviceability.

We exhibit in the accompanying picture views of a typewriting machine known as the "World" typewriter, manufactured by the Typewriter Improvement Company, of Boston, Mass., which appears to fulfill both of these requirements satisfactorily. It is exceedingly simple in construction being composed of less than forty parts, and although light and portable, is nevertheless substantially built, with the view of insuring durability in service. It prints directly from the type without the intervention of an inking ribbon, which is a decided advantage, both in securing cleanliness in use and cheapness in printing. It can be used to write on any width within the measure of the carriage, can be adjusted to follow the lines of ruled paper, and can be used to address envelopes, postal cards, tags, etc. The construction is such that it is impossible for the type to get out of alignment. It is perfect, and may readily be used on the lap, on the desk, on the train—in short, anywhere. Finally, its simplicity mustered, so that after a month or two of practice any one of ordinary intelligence, by application, can acquire a speed of forty words per minute, or about twice the number a rapid penman will write with the pen.

The instrument is shown in perspective in our Fig. 1. Its general construction, in respect of the frame, the traversing carriage, the paper-holder, etc., resembles that of other machines well known to our readers. The types are arranged upon the under side of a semi-circular disk, appearing in the picture as a series of black circles. To select the appropriate letter or figure, there is an indicator, which is moved by a finger of the right hand; on the face of another semi-circular disk, prominently shown at the front of the cut, the characters are printed. When the proper character is selected by the indicator, the uppermost bend of the normal bar is depressed by the left hand, by which the projecting end of a lever, previously guided to the place by the motion of the indicator, is caused to press the appropriate character against the paper. Thus, it will be noticed, both hands are used in printing, one to select the desired character and the other to print it. Spacing is done by depressing another lever, seen projecting on the left of the picture.

The mechanism employed for traversing the carriage, indicating the end of the line, adjusting and feeding the paper, etc., are simple and not liable to derangement.

The instrument appears, from its construction and mode of operation, to justify the claims of its manufacturers that it fully meets the requirements for a cheap, practical and durable typewriter. Our other illustrations need no special explanation beyond a mere reference. Fig. 2 shows the appearance of the machine with its case closed and open, ready for use. It may be well to state here that the machine is only 12 inches long, 6 inches wide, and 4 inches high, and weighs about 20 pounds, from which a fair idea may be had of its compactness and portability. Figs. 3 and 4 are self-explanatory.

The office of the Typewriter Improvement Co. is at 4 Post Office Square, Boston, Mass.

A Bohemian Lightning Rod.

The lightning rod of Divix was constructed as follows: A pointed, slender iron bar formed the main part of the machine. Fastened to it were two crossbars, thus making four arms, across each of which, in turn, a short bar was laid. And each of these extensions so effected here a box fitted with shavings of iron, into which twenty-seven brass needles were stuck, making three hundred and twenty-four needles in all. The main bar was supported by a wooden column sufficiently high (18 feet at first, afterward 120 feet) to secure protection for the building and its immediate surroundings. Several iron chains connected the main bar with the earth. The effect of the machine was to divide the lightning into as many sparks as there were needles (three hundred and twenty-four), and thus to lessen its force. It might, therefore, more properly be called a lightning divisor. Scarcely had the rod been erected when a storm came rolling on from the north. Thunder roared loud, earth shook, and occasionally white shafts of lightning were seen darting from the clouds and flying toward the conductor. In a few minutes a white cloud enveloped the machine, and the storm soon passed away without doing any damage. For two years Divix continued experimenting with his lightning rod, the results were published by Dr.
figure 5
Notes

1 Ginetter Verstraete has written of the way “[t]he rhetorical topoi [. . .] that the railroad mobilized [. . .] were meant to create a recognizable place that certain Americans could inhabit, a face they could identify with, a position they could take up in the midst of uncertainty and uprootedness” (150). Such rhetoric both “about literally moving all people in different ways,” displacing some and enriching others, while “figuratively emplacing a specific citizenry—white, male, and heterosexual.” Versraete writes here about the rhetoric surrounding the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. What Adams’s rhetoric demonstrates is the way the railroad and its associated rhetorics, having displaced racial and gender “others,” has one last frontier to “emplace”: that of while heterosexual men themselves. For Adams, stubborn attachments to place, and even to the rights of individualistic entrepreneurial capital itself, are now to be subjected to the technical logic of the rail network. For a further discussion of the “cult of the network,” see Mattelart, pp. 85-111.

2 JoAnne Yates has insightfully and thoroughly examined such new textual practices in Control trough Communications, especially in pp. 65-100. She specifically argues that many of the new “genres or generic forms of modern internal [business] communication” (65) originated in military practice and, among commercial enterprises, were first adopted by railroads, owing to “geographic dispersion and unique safety problems” (68). Yates sees this as not only writing in the service of “scientific management,” but as revolution in the scientific management of writing itself; “the letterlike report of the nineteenth century,” she writes, “had given way to newer forms and styles reflecting the need to transfer information as efficiently as possible” (92).

3 See Harvey’s discussion of the urban reformers and the social problem of “impos[ing] coherence on the spatial system as a whole” in Consciousness and the Urban Experience, pp. 10-16.

4 Carl Smith discusses the rhetoric of The Plan of Chicago on pp. 86-110. See also Churchill and Danzer.

6 For all his insistence on the difference between his own fiction and that of the earlier American realists—and specifically of William Dean Howells—Norris nevertheless explored many of the same American scenes, with much the same satiric tone, that Howells and Twain had. For example, in a November 1897 issue of The Wave, Norris published a farcical railroad drama titled “The Isabella Regina.” With its gentle lampooning of a honeymooning pair of rail travelers and its derision of the institution of the railroad pass, “The Isabella Regina” could easily have been written by Howells or Twain ten or twenty years earlier.

7 In this study, I specifically focus on those parts of The Gilded Age written by Twain. I take as my guide Leisy’s “Mark Twain’s Part in The Gilded Age.” Although Leisy points out that “the strands of Warner and Mark Twain in this novel were more closely interwoven” than had earlier been supposed in Albert Bigelow Paine’s biography of Twain, his own analysis nevertheless affirms that most of the novel’s treatment of railroads and print technology is attributable to Twain.

8 This shift parallels the shift in film history between what Martin Loiperdinger calls “the founding myth of cinema’s birth” (90)—the famous (urban) legend of the Parisian audience’s terrified reaction to the Lumière Brothers’ L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de la Ciotat—and the portrayal of industrial production in Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times. In the first case, the response of the audience is satirized as a naïve misrecognition of modernity as the arrival of something both foreign and monstrous. In the second case, the film narrative emphasizes the predicament of the producers themselves, shifting the story form one of spectators fooled by an apparatus, to one of incoherent apparatuses kept in motion by the heroic efforts of those trapped within.

9 The relevant texts here are Hunter, pp. 384-389 and 488-519 and Kane, pp. 12-17. In comparison to railway operators, steamship owners had little direct control over the technical operation or technosocial organization of their capital. Moreover, steamboat owners operated their capital “with little funding from the government when compared with canals or railroads” (Kane 15), which meant
that the initial state-assisted capital accumulation of the railroad system—in stark contrast to the
“limited relief” and “[p]iecemeal measures of improvement” afforded the steamboats (Hunter 181;
emphasis added)—put the boats at a competitive disadvantage even when they were, strictly speaking,
more economically productive.

10 Marx uses this word most frequently in Part Eight of Capital, Vol. I. See especially pp. 873-904. Ben Fowkes usually translates this German word as “free and rightless.”

11 See Capital, Vol. III, pp. 728-748, for Marx’s discussion of the close relationship of “usurer’s”
and merchant capital to both slavery and the underdevelopment of technology. See also Genovese, The
Political Economy of Slavery, especially pp. 15-26 and 54-61.

12 My (perhaps somewhat imprecise) use of this term is borrowed From Deleuze and Guatarri, See
especially their full discussion on pp. 153-300 of Anti-Oedipus.

13 Gitelman defines inscription as mechanically-mediated reading and writing; inscriptive
apparatuses include typewriters and various processes for reproducing images such as halftoning and
xerography, but also mechanical and electromechanical devices like the phonograph. She writes,

Telephones reproduce speech at a distance, but photographs both reproduce and
conserve, able to reproduce again and again “at any future time,” because of the
delicate spirals inscribed in the surface of records. The same parameters of economy
and durability that characterize “storing up” sound for later mechanical reproduction
helped animate such contemporary phenomena as the tensile bureaucracy of
managerial capital, the ideal of objectivity in the professions and media, and the
success of new popular culture forms. Economy and durability informed new models
of inscriptive duplication, such as the office mimeograph, which allowed bureaucrats
to have their copy and send one too. Likewise, economy and durability characterized
considerations of photography and then motion pictures, which stored up sights and
movements. Incidents as fleeting as the pulsations of the heart and activities as evanescent as the private use of electrical current were captured, registered, metered, and read in new mechanical ways. (3)

As Gitelman points out, “[t]he study of inscriptions shows the realm of writing and reading, of symbolic action and experience, in its proximity to objects and machines” (10). This study seeks to extend Gitelman’s arguments by showing, not just how inscription connects language machines to rhetorics and ideologies, but how these machines are, in turn, entrained in a larger network of transportational machines—a network the experience of which informed subjectivity and sociality during the years 1869-1929. Also relevant to my argument is Hankins and Silverman’s discussion of the origins of automatic recording devices in *Instruments and the Imagination*. Hankins and Silverman point out that mechanical inscriptive technology finds its first significant technical advance with the birth of Watt’s steam engine and one of its most widespread practical applications in the anthropometric techniques of Étienne-Jules Marey. Hence, inscription begins with the simultaneous need to control both machines and bodies; see pp. 113-147. Also see Yates, pp. 21-64.

14 George L. Henderson devotes a meticulously researched and deftly argued chapter of his *California and the Fictions of Capital* to *The Octopus* and its treatment of the problems of representing space. Other important readings of *The Octopus* in light of the geographic expansion of capital include Castronovo’s “Geo-Aesthetics: Fascism, Globalism, and Frank Norris,” Hsu’s “Literature and Regional Production,” and Berte’s “Mapping *The Octopus*: Frank Norris’ Naturalist Geography.”

15 A concise and thoughtful discussion of the metaphor of technosocial networks as nervous systems can be found in Otis’s “The Metaphoric Circuit.” Mattelart also discusses the paradoxes and vicissitudes of this conceit in *The Invention of Communication*, especially pp. 85-111 and pp. 163-223. For a discussion of the trope in a British context, see Morus.
In general, neither electromechanical telegraphy nor its immediately derivative technologies proved to be useful in managing the direct production process—with the exception of their use in the railroads themselves. They were not practical for what we would now call “synchronous” communications and there was little integration of small-scale networks with long-distance systems. They were more hierarchical and local than networked. See Alex Prada, “Socio-Technical Agency in Financial Markets: The Case of the Stock Ticker” for a discussion of the limits and slow development of the stock ticker. Also see Tarr, Finholt, Goodman, “The City and the Telegraph: Urban Telecommunications in the Pre-Telephone Era.”

Karen Hatunnen has traced the evolution of the domestic living space as the gradual and indirect disappearance of the strict separation of the public and private in American houses:

The nineteenth-century parlor had encouraged a clear distinction between the private self, demanding perfect moral restraint by those who sat erect upon its horsehair sofas and exchanged the ritual gestures of the formal call, yet permitting genteel guests to retreat to the sitting room or other private rooms of the house to seek freedom from self-restraint. But the living room collapsed the distinction between the public and the private self by dragging the private self out on center stage, exposing it to any and all visitors, and insisting that it be open, warm, and charming. (“Parlor” 187-188)

Similarly, Schivelbusch has discussed the Victorian drawing room as a “refuge” from the technosocial networks of the late twentieth century. According to Schivelbusch, even when gas, electricity, and telephones were accepted in bourgeois households, they were considered both too “mechanical” and too “public” for the parlors of the middle classes. See Disenchanted Night, pp. 155-188. Both discussions suggest that the “overstuffed” and cluttered décor of the late Victorian parlor was a kind of “vanishing mediator” that both disguised and facilitated the emergence of the more technicized, streamlined living spaces of the twentieth century.
259


19 See Cronon, pp. 207-213, for a discussion of the codevelopment of Chicago as a railway terminal and the remaking of the spaces of meat processing. Cronon points out that the common technical demands of meat slaughtering and rail transportation mandated “a single unified stockyard that would concentrate the city’s livestock business at one location” (210). This vast stockyard, although reproducing the economic centrality of Chicago, was itself doubly liminal. First, like Schivelbusch’s urban railyards, it was an “alien appendage” that was “stigmatized as being industrial and proletarian” (Schivelbusch 171-172); but also, the economic management of the yard called for separate bourgeois spaces within the space of the stockyard. One of these spaces was the Hough House hotel, with its own “parlour, barbershop, and billiard room” (Cronon 211); another was the Exchange Building, with its “polished wood surfaces and plush upholstery,” that “seemed somehow at a distance from the animals in whose flesh it dealt, as if to deny the bloody consequences of the transactions that went on within it” (212). Hence, the placement of the stockyard at the margin of town facilitated a disavowal of Chicago’s larger technosocial processes, while the Hough House and the Exchange Building were spaces for both the control of such processes and for the disavowal of their “bloody” and violently catastrophe-ridden nature.

20 Cecilia Tichi convincingly places Norris in the company of Williams and Pound in *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America*. Tichi writes that in Norris (and in Dreiser and London), “the mix of American flora and fauna with pistons, gears, and engines indicates that the perceptual boundary between what is considered to be natural, and what technological, is disappearing” (34). Tichi thus includes Norris in her constellation of cultural producers for whom “[k]nowledge of the workings of nature is […] knowledge of machines” (40). Indeed, Norris often flaunted his “knowledge of machines” in such journalistic writings as “On a Battleship” (1896),
“Moving a Fifty-Ton Gun” (1896), and “The Postal Telegraph” (1897). More to the point, Norris frequently equated the journalistic work of going “behind the scenes” with explaining the “machinery” of cultural and political institutions—for example, in the essays “Waiting for Their Cue” (1896) and “The ‘Upper Office’ at Work” (1897). Norris’s ubiquitous use of the rhetoric of machinery suggests he saw not just the novelist’s, but also the journalist’s, job as the task of “reverse engineering” complex and sublime technological and social processes for his readers.

21 See especially *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 135-169.

22 See MacDougall’s “The Wire Devils” for a discussion of metaphors of tentacles, webs, spiders, and octopuses in the early years of the twentieth century. Octopuses and spiders leant their traditional associations of unknowability and disorderliness to many discussions of capitalist monopolies in the years around 1900, and these discourses often mixed grossly visceral language with moralistic and religious rhetoric. In 1911, for example, T.M. Sample, in a book nostalgically dedicated “TO THE HOMES OF AMERICA” and containing a chapter on “the Waning of Conjugal Affection,” proclaimed that the “cancerous parasitical growths on the body politic must be cut out, the bloodsucking tentacles of corporations must be amputated, and the places where they grew cauterized to prevent their reappearance” (86). In 1908, alongside an illustration of the dragon “MONOPOLY” rising from the Pacific and swallowing North America, William Shuler Harris wrote, “[W]hile [the public] slept, the octopus-like arms of [the] Standard Oil Company were quietly reaching over the whole industrial life of the country. Many an individual and many a small company went down to ruin before the ever slimy crawl of this monster of Monopoly” (127). Moreover, “the serpent of Monopoly is more slippery than an eel, and it usually manages, by one twist or another, to escape the grasp of the law” (128). This anti-monopoly language, with its emphasis on contamination, seduction, defilement, anthropophagy, corporeal disintegration, and emasculation, was often far from “progressive,” and frequently overlapped with the rhetorics of racism, nativism, anti-Semitism, and heteronormativity.
Significantly, these articles appeared almost exactly contemporarily with Jacob Riis’s original 1889 article “How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements.” The coincidence of the rail articles with Riis’s essay is significant if for no other reason than their shared preoccupation with industrial spatiality. If, as Stephanie Foote has suggested, *How the Other Half Lives* is “a primer for the authority to move between and within sections of the city” (132), what are we to make of these remarkably similar representations of spaces coded as middle-class? Arguably, such articles were the introjective counterparts to Riis’s projections of spatial disorder onto the racially other. The evidence of earlier genteel writing about the railroad notwithstanding, the *Scribner’s* articles seem to model for middle-class readers “how their own ‘half’ lived.”

See Cresswell, especially pp. 57-121, for a comparison of the way graphic representations were used in both Taylorizing the workplace and organizing transportation networks, particularly the rail system.

Clare Virginia Eby has perspicaciously treated narcissism and mirroring in *An American Tragedy* in “The Psychology of Desire.” But these ideas are also central to Lee Clark Mitchell’s “‘And Then Rose for the First Time: Repetition and Doubling in *An American Tragedy,*” as well as Philip Fisher’s “Looking Around to See Who I Am: Dreiser’s Territory of the Self.”

Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Žižek, Todd McGowan has discussed the importance of “commanded enjoyment” in *Sister Carrie;* see pp. 28-36.

Cresswell (pp. 123-145) has shown how professional dance instructors of the 1920s developed a discourse of “correct movement” in which the language of Taylorism combined with that of racism. While teaching dancers how “properly” to perform steps originating in the American South and Latin America, they also aggressively sought to purge such dances of “degenerate” and “freakish” elements considered both racially impure and déclassé.
Schivelbusch argues that the design and construction of railroad terminals followed a similar principle of heterogeneity: “One part of it, the neoclassical stone building, belonged to the city; the other part of it, the steel and glass construct, was a pure function of the railroad’s ‘industrial’ side” (Railway 174). However, Schivelbusch’s main point is that this “disguis[ing of] the industrial aspect of things by ornamentation” (175) itself serves the utilitarian purpose of helping passengers cognitively orient themselves in the passage from rail car to city street—that is, that this “ornamentation” is itself ambiguously “industrial.” Moreover, Schivelbusch points out neoclassical ornament soon gave way to self-conscious and unconcealed utilitarianism in design. Hence, ornamental illusion played both a spatial and historical mediating role.

Compare Clyde’s reaction to the Davidson-Green to Dreiser’s own first reaction to the world of the Hollywood film studio: “We [Dreiser and Helen Pages Richardson] go to a little place opposite Metro Studio in Romaine Street for breakfast. [. . .] We watch actors & actresses arriving in cars for work. I get a sense of great animal activity & joy in life in those whom we see here.” (Diaries 310).

See also Zukin, especially pp. 825-828 and Braverman, especially pp. 248-258.

Along similar lines, Gail McDonald points out that in Gilded Age department stores “[t]he ‘business’ of the business was kept out of sight, normally on the uppermost floor; thus, the notion of a contract to exchange money for good, was, as it were, euphemized” (234). On the other hand, William Cronon has shown that by peeling away the walls of the building and revealing the productive activity of “the uppermost floors,” the cover illustration of 1900 Montgomery Ward & Co. catalog explicitly presents the store as “a swarm of anonymous insects performing their intricate labors according to the mysterious dictates of a mysterious collective intelligence” (337). Similarly, a 1897 issue of Scribner’s, complete with “ILLUSTRATIONS DRAWN ENTIRELY FROM ACTUAL SCENES” (135), calls the contemporaneous large hotel a “many cog-wheeled machine,” explicitly compares its operation to “the running of a railroad, or an express company” and describes the chief task of a hotel manager as
“securing capable and efficient men for the carrying out of ideas he knows are practicable, and which he feels mathematically certain would bring success if he could only divide his personality into a score of parts, and station one at the head of each branch of the business organism” (143). Likewise, a 1911 book published by the Wanamaker Stores in Philadelphia simultaneously evoked familial Gemütlichkeit and mechanical motion; along with providing a “bird’s eye view” of the Wanamaker department store—built in an abandoned railroad terminal and called the “Wanamaker Grand Depot” for many years (see fig. 6)—the Golden Book of the Wanamaker Stores explained:

In keeping with the form of the store was the form of the business, as explained to the store family the day before the opening, when Mr. Wanamaker compared it to an immense wheel, each employe [sic] a spoke in the wheel.

He said he would be the motive power to keep it in motion, and if each spoke would remain in its place and do its duty, he promised that the motive power would never fall behind, but keep going ahead revolving this wheel and making it the largest and best of its kind in the world. (53)

Neither the authors of the The Golden Book nor Wanamaker himself seem to find any contradiction in calling his workforce a “family” and comparing it to a perpetually rotating wheel. Nor does the explicit comparison of the store to a depot or the implicit one to a roundhouse—like an office, a kind of “nerve-center” for the railroad—seem to diminish the giant mart’s aura of elegance and luxury. Prefiguring much of the language of The Plan of Chicago, The Golden Book constantly identifies the store as a means of transportation, rather than as a “place”—even going so far as to invoke the language of Taylorist efficiency: “Carrying [. . .] merchandise direct from the hands of the maker to the home of the consumer without intermediate waste, it is fair to say this business, by removing obstructions in the channel, has made navigable the shortest route between the Port of Supply and the Port of Demand” (2). Like Cronon, Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw have specifically periodized the final decades of
the nineteenth and the first fourteen years of the twentieth century as an era, located between the ornament of the early Victorian period and the streamlining of the Modernist epoch, in which the bare matter of technosocial networks was deliberately celebrated. They write,

The urban became saturated with pipelines, cables, tubes and ducts of various sizes and colours; things that celebrated the mythic images of early modernity, encapsulating and literally carrying the idea of progress into the urban domain. Their material existence provided the confirmation and lived experience that the road to a better society was under construction and paved with networks. (129)

As with railroad terminals, then, by the late nineteenth century, the technosocial apparatus that had hitherto been effaced in public spaces had started to become a central image of the department store.

32 Like steamboat explosions in the early nineteenth century and the discomfort of rail travel in the middle of the nineteenth century, the problem of the grade crossing persistently occupied engineers, town planners, and popular writers during the early twentieth century. Like these earlier discourses, the discourse of the grade crossing alternatively and indiscriminately blamed the problem of accidents and congestion at rail level crossings on the practices of drivers, on one hand, and the planning of rail and road systems, on the other. And, as in these earlier cases, the solution to such problems often sought retroactively to “rationally” entrain practices and apparatuses that, in themselves, had hitherto seemed the very model of efficiency and order. For an extending discussion of the specific problems of the grade crossing, see Stilgoe, pp. 163-188. The inherent physical difficulties of making automobile technosociality a controllable totality have also been discussed from an engineering and mathematical standpoint by Nagatani, and from a sociological perspective by Beckmann.

33 The terms “garden city” and “satellite city” were often used to mean “suburb.” Yet, although Lycurgus in An American Tragedy is not what we would now call a “suburb,” all of these terms were contested and ambiguous in the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1912, Frederic C. Howe
identified “three types of garden cities”: “the self contained industrial community,” “the garden suburb,” and “the factory village built about a manufacturing plant by some large employer” (2). Howe’s examples are all English, but the first definition seems roughly to fit Dreiser’s portrayal of Lycurgus, while the second and third could be compared, respectively, to the “streetcar suburb” of Oak Park, Illinois, and Ford’s settlement at Highland Park. To make matters more confusing, in 1922 Lewis Mumford condemned “Suburbia” as a condition in which the “quality of life for the great mass of people who live within the political boundaries of the metropolis itself is inferior to that which a city with an adequate equipment and a thorough realization of the creative needs of the community is capable of producing” (15). He continues, “In this sense the ‘suburb’ called Brookline is a genuine city while the greater part of the ‘city of Boston’ is a suburb. [In Boston] we have scarcely begun to make an adequate distribution of libraries, meeting places, parks, gymasia, and similar equipment, without which life in the city tends to be carried on at a low level of routine—physically as well as mentally.” In this usage, suburban Brookline is more a “satellite city” than a “suburb.” Similarly, ten years earlier, Howe wrote,

The main difference between the ordinary city and the garden city is this: the former is left to the unrestrained license of speculators, builders, owners, to a constant conflict of public and private interests; the latter treats the community as a unit, with rights superior to those of any of its individual members. One is a city of unrelated and for the most part uncontrolled private property rights; the other is a community intelligently planned and harmoniously adjusted, with the emphasis always on the rights to the community rather than on the rights of the individual property owner.

Hence, the garden city was seen not just as a refuge from congestion, but from precisely the condition we would now call “sprawl,” or what Mumford calls “metropolitanism” (16); in turn, communities like Brookline or Evanston, Illinois, which we would now think of as quintessentially suburban, were often
thought of as self-contained, rationally-planned, communities. See also Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience*, pp. 48-56.

34 See “The Town of Pullman” and “It Pays to Treat Workers Generously.”

35 See pp. 107-110.

36 For a lucid discussion of the importance of being seen in *An American Tragedy*, see Karaganis, especially pp. 155-166.

37 In “The ‘System’ of Automobility,” John Urry writes, “Auto’ mobility [. . .] involves autonomous humans combined with machines with capacity for autonomous movement along paths, lanes, streets and routeways of one society after another. what is key is not the ‘car’ as such but the system of these fluid interconnections” (26). Speaking directly to my concerns her, he succinctly adds: “Automobility is thus a system that coerces people into an intense flexibility. [. . .] The car is the literal ‘iron cage’ of modernity, motorized, moving and domestic” (28).

38 Even so, in his Hollywood diaries, Dreiser seems to have resumed his love affair with the streetcar, carefully—almost obsessively—detailing the various trolley routes he uses in exploring southern California. These diaries do give us even further insight into Dreiser’s ambivalence about mobility; when his lover Helen Richardson faints at a hotel, Dreiser is repeatedly frustrated as he tries to procure a doctor: “We try for a doctor—none to be had on Sunday. All motoring here. I then call a taxi & take [Richardson] home—fare $2.50 for a ten minute run!” (American Diaries 311). Blaming car culture for a shortage of available doctors, Dreiser the next day writes of the “women playing tennis [and t]heir affected voices,” the “many high priced cars,” and the “beautiful houses” of Beverly Hills, abruptly adding that “[Richardson] is too beautiful not to have a car & I resent our poverty” (312). Tellingly, this event interrupts a hitherto unbroken chain of anecdotes about—almost exclusively about—traveling and sex. While Dreiser’s journals, as I have suggested, meticulously detail Dreiser’s use of various modes of transport, this near-pedantry about streetcars and subways is particularly
pronounced in the Hollywood diaries, which alternately narrate Dreiser’s and Richardson’s tourist excursions around Los Angeles and their subsequent sexual encounters. Dreiser both explicitly and implicitly associates Richardson and her sexual vitality with technologies of mobility. On the way to California they “quarrel over past loves—the boys & men she has flirted with on trains to everywhere” (286); later, writes Dreiser, “I had a dream last night that I got off a train & that it started without me but I ran after it & with difficulty made it. Helen & I indulge in a delightful round, as usual. She has the most teasing methods” (290). Dreiser seems constantly to link sexual bliss to mobility, and to associate sexual frustration with frustrated mobility. Yet, at the same time, his “resentment” over not having a car has less to do with mobility than with possession; the automobile that Richardson is “too beautiful not to have” seems less a means for staying motion than a sign of social status.

39 In *Amusing the Million*, especially pp. 72-82 Kasson is especially insightful and lucid in his discussion of the origins and technosocial function of the mechanical thrill ride. Also important is Brown’s discussion in *The Material Unconscious*, especially pp. 27-69.

40 Dreiser explicitly associates his father’s religious temperament with technosocial incompetence and “moral coward[ace]”—the same term Clyde’s lawyers use in their defense arguments—in *A Hoosier Holiday* (387).
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