



Special Issue
The Poetics of the Working Classes

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VOLUME 39

10

NUMBER 2

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SUMMER 2001

WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

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NEW ANTIPHONS REMIND US FROM TIME TO TIME THAT POETRY BEGAN and flourished in songs, ballads, hymns, dirges, outcries of protest, and prayers of thanks. It is my hope that this issue will deepen our understanding of poetry's demotic and artisanal origins, enlarge our sense of the lost variety of Victorian imaginative life, and realign slightly the borders of "the canon" (which still exists).

Toward this end, the issue's authors have considered many modes of poetic expression—in songs, epics, chants, broadsides, newspaper-poems and other verse forms in dialects or regional languages, and works sold by subscription or for charity by working-class authors as well as book-length collections taken on by publishers for sale to middle- and working-class audiences.

In *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), E. P. Thompson argued that such works expressed a historically evolving industrial class-consciousness. Assorted revisionists, however (Patrick Joyce, for example, in *Visions of the People*, 1991), have long since questioned whether such a consciousness could be identified in the ways and temporal sequences Thompson claimed, and focused on more diffuse and apolitical continua of attitudes and motivations.

For the purposes of this collection, a straightforward working characterization of "the British working-class" in the period under consideration might focus on the near-universal absence of formal education beyond the earliest grades before the Education Acts of 1870 and 1872. Poets who lacked such education, for example, or could not provide it for their children, were in all probability "working-class," and it is my personal critical judgment that they and their immediate political allies wrote poems in regional languages such as Scots, "Doric," Scots Gaelic, or Lancashire dialect as well as "standard English," of dramatic power, reflective complexity, and rare haunting beauty.

It is obvious that contemporary middle-class editors and patrons mediated much of the rhymed oral narration, humor, satire, individual inspiration, and collective protest in these works. Yet writers of middle-class origins occasionally faced distinctly "proletarian" ends, and the wider

boundaries between "working"-class and "middle"-class literature were comparably shifting and traversable. Literary "hacks" of working-class origins wrote a wide variety of original broadside "ballads," for example, but middle-class printers also pirated works by middle-class authors such as Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt," and poor, middle-class and rich folk alike read "folk-ballads" edited by aristocratic patrons such as Lady Caroline Nairne. "Improving" middle-class journal editors such as William and Mary Howitt and W. J. Fox printed many of the poems of working-class poets, but so also did working-class counterparts such as Thomas Cooper, John Bedford Leno, and (the only woman in this category) Eliza Cook. Upper-middle-class patrons and anthologizers such as George Gilfillan and D. E. Edwards edited hard-cover collections of working-class poetry, but so also did John Cassell, Ben Brierley, and other editors with keen memories of their working-class origins.

The poetry itself, in any case, included religious, anti-clerical, inspirational, instructive, humorous, meditative, reflective, and reflexive poetry in almost every register I mentioned above—"traditional" and narrative ballads, urban broadsides, regional satires, and political protests. Many working-class authors, influenced by the eighteenth-century pastoralism of Cowper, Ferguson, Gray, or Crabbe, appealed to specifically British traditions and antecedents in ballads and popular songs. Others—inspired in part by the reformist romanticism of Burns, Byron, Shelley, and the early Wordsworth—were also ardent egalitarians and heartfelt opponents of the rampant empire's more martial ambitions.

The reformist and egalitarian impulses that assimilated these traditions also estranged nineteenth-century working-class poetry later on from some of the paradigms that guided twentieth-century academic taste—*l'art pour l'art*, symbolism, imagism, modernism, "new criticism," structuralism, deconstruction, "post-modernism," and the like. Ironically, some of these critical and metacritical divergences also made the recovery and interpretation of popular poets' models and exemplars more "historicist" and less "popular," less current and more "academic."

Other, more historically complex forms of alienation from the demotic roots of "serious" poetry might be reflected in the fact that it became progressively harder to identify a distinct body of working-class poetry as the nineteenth century waned. Such forms of gradual etiolation and diminution may have reflected early stages of the cooptation of "mass" culture into other channels (music-hall performances, fiction, and eventually films), but this co-optation might itself be seen as one of the more ironic consequences of the gradual broadening of educational and literary opportunities.

Mindful in any case of the screens and divides of time and cultural

evolution, readers of nineteenth-century working-class poetry might also keep in mind that the extant works we have may themselves represent a very limited and somewhat biased sample. The British class system was brutally effective, and the testimonies of almost all published working-class poets to the difficulties they encountered strongly suggest that it interdicted "Parnassian" as well as non-"Parnassian" efforts of many more unschooled manual laborers. Middle-class editors' moods and choices were constrained not only by personal beliefs about "appropriate" subjects for "humble" authors, but by more arbitrary preferences of middle-class journal and book purchasers, and other market-driven constraints. Strong evidence suggests, for example, that many editors and anthologists selected women poets' blandest effusions, and repressed unseemly expressions of "strong" thought.

Given the force of all this, we should perhaps be grateful in the end for the preservation of the fragile working-class poetic corpus we do have, for it remains a testimony to the dedication and (basically) good offices of William and Mary Howitt, John Cassell, Alexander Campbell, George Gilfillan, W. J. Linton, Ernest Jones, Eliza Cook, Ben Brierley, and other committed working- and middle-class editors, who printed and edited works other editors never deigned to look at or consider. Behind or at the side of every poor poet whose work has survived stood at least one more or less sympathetic patron or editor—a genuine blessing, occasionally mixed, but one which only a few aspiring poor writers could ever hope to have.

In my view, such considerations only underscore once again the extent to which nineteenth-century working-class poetry blended protest, reformist politics, self-assertion, and moral reflection in complex and deeply interesting ways. These poets' choices of subject and modes of expression could sometimes be assimilated to generalized appeals to traditional faith, or to autodidactic variants of a classical "polite" education (as in Thomas Cooper's *The Purgatory of Suicides*). But the imaginative possibilities they sought remained radically opposed to most "elite" traditions, and their oral, musical, and affective roots neither needed nor would have been likely to bear an extensive admixture of artistic framing, textual ambiguity, and high-cultural allusions.

Prior Critical Studies

The earliest general twentieth-century collection of working-class texts (including selections from radical periodicals) appeared in Y. V. Kovalev's *An Anthology of Chartist Writing* (Moscow, 1956), and an English translation of Kovalev's Russian introduction appeared in *Victorian Studies* in 1958. Later compendia included Louis James's *English Popular Literature*

1819-51 (1976) and Brian Hollingworth's *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect Poetry of the Industrial Revolution* (1977), and many of Kovalev's selections reappeared in Peter Scheckner's *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry: Poetry of the British Working Class, 1830s-1850s* (1989). More extensive samples of Scottish working-class poetry can also be found in Tom Leonard's *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (1990) and Catherine Kerrigan's *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (1991).

In the first modern critical overview of the subject, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature* (1974), Martha Vicinus introduced most of the issues that have preoccupied later critics, and included chapters on street ballads and broadsides, literature of the coal-miners' unions, Chartist poetry, self-educated poets, dialect literature of the industrial north, and music-hall literature.

Phyllis Mary Ashraft later provided another pioneering study of this alternative canon in the first volume (on poetry) of her *Introduction to Working-Class Literature in Great Britain* (1978), and Brian Maidment synthesized its Victorian cross-section in *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (1987), a critical anthology arranged with careful headnotes under the rubrics, "Chartists and Radicals," "The Parnassians," and "Lowly Bards and Homely Rhymes."

More recent monographs and shorter studies of particular categories of working-class and popular poetry have included (in chronological order): Patrick Joyce's historical survey of popular art, broadside ballads, dialect literature, and popular theater in *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (1991); Ulrike Schwab's study of *The Poetry of the Chartist Movement* (1993); Joyce's brief intellectual-historical accounts of Edwin Waugh and the middle-class radical political leader John Bright, in *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (1994); Susan Zlotnick's consideration of the work of "Marie," Ellen Johnston, and Fanny Forrester in *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution* (1998); Anne Janowitz's interpretation of the radical poetry of Allen Davenport, W. J. Linton, Ernest Jones, and William Morris as contributions to a tradition of the "communitarian lyric," in *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (1998); Timothy Randall's essay on "Chartist Poetry and Song" in *The Chartist Legacy*, edited by Owen Ashton, Robert Fyson, and Stephen Roberts (1999); and James Hepburn's examination of broadsides in *A Book of Scattered Leaves: Poetry of Poverty in Broadside Ballads of Nineteenth-Century England* (vol. 1, 2000).

The Present Volume

I have arranged the essays in this special issue in three broad categories, beginning with "The Poetics of Chartism." In "Poetic Agency: Metonymy and Metaphor in Chartist Poetry, 1838-1852," the collection's opening essay, Mike Sanders traces the joint evolution of Chartist poetry and political aims, and identifies a gradual evolution in Chartist poets' implicit definitions of "the people." Early Chartist poets invoked revolutionary agency in metonymic images of natural and ineluctable force, but their successors after 1842 evoked more complex and problematic archetypes of human interrelations, and late Chartist writers focused retrospectively and elegiacally on the fragility and contingency of enlightened political activity. In Sanders' words, Ernest Jones's "The Song of the Low" "rendered a poetically and politically convincing class-based analysis at a time when there was no longer a mass movement capable of making those words flesh."

In "Slaves in Heaven, Laborers in Hell: Chartist Poets' Ambivalent Identification with the (Black) Slave," Kelly Mays observes that poetic references to slavery often served to evoke sympathy for the "wage-slavery" of British factory workers, contrasts such rhetoric with Ernest Jones's later appeals for support of black emancipation in the face of losses from Civil War embargoes, and concludes that the "complexities of the languages of Chartism [manifested] ways in which the triumph . . . of more internationalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist views was . . . an 'achievement' rather than the necessary logic of either working-class experience or Chartist language."

In "Sedition, Chartism and Epic Poetry in Thomas Cooper's *The Purgatory of Suicides*," Stephanie Kuduk observes that *The Purgatory's* opening passages versified the oration for which Cooper was tried and imprisoned in 1843, and interprets the work as a defiant apologia which set out Cooper's dream vision of a new republican democracy, pondered ways and means in which "the Many [might] cease their slavery to the Few," and recast epic conventions through dialogues, conversations, exordia, and dream-visions, to make Chartism "the central story of the nation."

Ernest Jones's *The New World* (1851), reprinted as *The Revolt of Hindostan or the New World* in the year of the Mutiny (1857), compares British colonial massacres with the ravages of famine in Ireland, celebrates women's political equality as a necessary attribute of "the new world," and interprets anti-European uprisings as signs of international proletarian revolution. In "In luring Hindostan': Chartism and Empire in Ernest Jones's *The New World, A Democratic Poem*," Ronald Paul contrasts Jones's post-1848 internationalism with more equivocal responses to British im-

perialism by Karl Marx and others, and interprets Jones's prison epic as one of the finest contemporary celebrations of internationalism and the revolt of subjugated non-white peoples, as well as a work that has been unfairly omitted from the Saidian pantheon of nineteenth-century attacks on European imperial ambitions.

In "The 'Homely Muse' in her Diurnal Setting: The Periodical Poetry of 'Marie,' Janet Hamilton, and Fanny Forrester," one of the collection's three essays devoted to "Women and Working-Class Poetics," I examine some of the ways in which decisions by reformist journal editors catalysed or repressed three women's efforts to develop their distinctive poetic voices and public identities, then draw on these accounts to assess some of the reasons why the periodical window of poetic expression contracted as the century waned.

In "Of 'Haymakers' and 'City Artisans': The Chartist Poetics of Eliza Cook's *Songs of Labor*," Solveig Robinson examines the poetry of Eliza Cook, and finds in her respect for popular art forms and celebration of the dignity of labor a "radical vision of a fundamentally more democratic England," a view which exemplified Chartist ideals of land redistribution, and called for clear recognition of workers as the creators of social wealth "to a greater extent than [did] the works of the male poets traditionally associated with the movement."

In "Class and Poetic Communities in the Works of Ellen Johnston, 'The Factory Girl,'" Judith Rosen reconsiders an intense young writer whose skillful uses of dialect, recitations at factory outings, and adaptations of song traditions strongly attracted the working-class audience of Alexander Campbell's *Penny Post*, and interprets the loyalty of Johnston's audience as a sign that her readers found in her a worthy bardic representative of her class, and "a melodramatic heroine whose trials and tribulations echo[ed] their own dreams and frustrations in grander form."

In "'Eawr Folk': Language, Class, and English Identity in Victorian Dialect Poetry," the first of three essays in the section subtitled "Language, Criminality, and Gender," Larry McCauley interprets Samuel Laycock's "Homely Advice for the Unemployed" and other dialect works as "attempts to construct a distinct working-class voice—a voice from which the working community [could] draw strength in time of hardship," and argues that such works' "strategy for cultural enfranchisement" offers strong evidence for J. W. Hales's contemporary remark that alternative dialects were "as good . . . as that language to which we now arrogate the name of English."

In "Ebenezer Elliott and the Reconstruction of Working-Class Masculinity," Alexis Easley interprets the "Corn-Law Rhymers'" praise for "the kind of 'culture' necessary for male laborers to achieve responsible

citizenship" as a celebration of paternal domestic hegemony, thinly disguised as "literary renovation of the working-class home," and finds concomitant tensions between Elliott's "liberatory or hegemonic" sentiments and his cooptation by middle-class readers, who saw in his work a model of a gradualist path to "responsible" industrial reform.

In "Every man who is hanged leaves a poem": Criminal Poets in Victorian Street Ballads," the volume's final essay, Ellen O'Brien distances herself from earlier commentators' focus on such ballads' moralistic and punitive qualities, and interprets these "lamentation ballads" as forms of resistance to conventional notions of criminality and the state, in which "voices rising out of the scaffold audience but taking on the voice of the scaffold actor" cast doubt on the authority of public executions and the legal system in general.

Conclusion

The ballads, broadsides, dialect-cadences, and personal lyrics of Victorian "people's poetry" deserve study, preservation, and republication before their sources in manuscripts, ephemera, periodicals, and sole extant copies are lost, for the insights they offer into the nineteenth-century imagination are as lyrical, sonorous, trenchant, and reflective in their ways as middle-class meditations in formal meters are in theirs.

These authors' ardent attempts to express Morrisian ideals of "fellowship" also make it unreasonable to separate "political" from "non-political" nuances in their works. For some of them articulated ideals of solidarity in language more intense than any sociological analysis will ever reproduce, and those ideals inflected their most deeply ingrained conceptions of pathos, morality, and transcendence itself.

I wish to express my warm thanks to the readers for this collection: Jeffrey Cox, Brian Hollingworth, Linda Hughes, Anne Janowitz, Teresa Mangum, Martha Vicinus and Susan Zlotnick.

Scottish Working-Class and Lancashire Dialect Poetry Web page

<http://vp.engl.wvu.edu/working.html>

To complement this issue, we present regional speakers rendering working-class poems in their original inflections. Clare Hodgkinson of Saltcoats, Scotland, reads five "Doric" poems by the Scottish poets Janet Hamilton and Ellen Johnston. The second set of poems, arranged and recorded by Brian Hollingworth, is presented by members of the Edwin Waugh Society, who read eight Lancashire poems and comment on their own backgrounds and reasons for interest in dialect verse.