

Class and Victorian Poetics

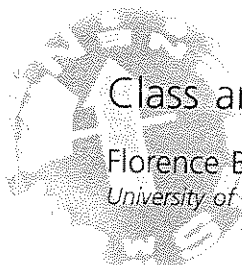
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Abstract

In this essay, I consider three aspects of recent studies of working-class poetry: the tasks and rewards of its recovery, the complexities of critical attempts to interpret “non-canonical” verse, and wider insights which have emerged from efforts to integrate such attempts into more traditional studies of nineteenth-century literature. Recovery has been necessary because most working-class poets could only hope to publish their work in broadside or periodical form, and few of their works have been reprinted. Accidents of preservation have further foreshortened our understanding of the range of working-class poetry, which extended from Thomas Cooper’s dignified epic verse to Isobel Chisholm’s gypsy “curses” and Mary McPherson’s Gaelic incantations. Interpretative studies of the range just mentioned have benefited from willingness to consider unfamiliar rhetorical models; search out historical antecedents of “simple” appeals to direct emotion; and admit that there might be more to poetry than has been dreamt of in our received interpretations and well-worn critical commonplaces. Finally, integration of an appreciation of working-class poetry into studies of Victorian literature reveals that much of the history of mid-century poetry – reflected through lenses of “class” – may be read as an attempt to barricade middle-class canons of taste against the inroads of working-class artistry. More critical studies of that artistry might therefore help dismantle these barricades, and restore to *all* the period’s poets a measure of the respect and attention they deserve. They might also help answer some intriguing generic as well as historical questions. Among these are: Why were poetry and personal memoirs the period’s principal working-class genres? And why did the role of working-class poetry seem to recede as the century waned, even as universal working-class literacy advanced?

It would be hard to argue that any aspect of Victorian life more rigidly constrained the ranges of possibilities open to an individual than social and economic class. As anthologies of Victorian poetry demonstrate by default, it governed access to education and hope of publication, as well as the styles and sentiments authors could “naturally” employ in their literary work.

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middle-class academic *milieux*, and in part because they were too unreceptive to “grand” narratives to absorb much critical ink. “Class analyses” of literature have also suffered from the fact that notions such as “working-class” (as opposed to “poor”), remain problematic, despite decades of inconclusive historical debate.

Most tellingly, perhaps, many critics have been ambivalent about the extent to which “literature” as an imaginative construct is or should be independent of the social origins of those who created it. And studies of working-class poetry – tenuously poised between social history and “cultural studies,” popular practices and “elitist” canonical norms – have provided a natural lightning rod for this ambivalence.

It has often been assumed, for example, that subtle allusions and metrical refinements thought to characterize respected genres of Victorian poetry bore little kinship with the forms of song, verse, and recitation indited by the seventy-five to ninety percent of Victorians who were not middle- or upper-class. Since most working-class Britons who managed to publish anything seem to have drafted verse and memoirs rather than fiction, such assumptions have created their own barriers to serious study and recognition of the Victorian working-class writings we have so far discovered.

Even pioneering critics of the seventies and eighties such as Martha Vicinus and Brian Maidment, who sought to categorize and comment on aspects of working-class poetry, found their work consigned to the precincts of literary *history* and social *observation*.² And critics who followed the example of Raymond Williams and others often found themselves reproached with excessive as well as politically motivated attention to a subclass of marginally “literary” works.

More recently, however, the force of such elision and disparagement has begun to ebb. Attention to “cultural studies” as well as rhetorical and “semiotic” paradigms for the study of literature and willingness to consider wider ranges of culturally disparate sources gradually began to efface some of the electrified fences that separated genres, periods, and scholarly specialties. One natural consequence of this general opening of borders has been a rise in efforts to uncover and interpret “working-class poetics.”

As with other emergent fields of study, such efforts remain uncertain about their interrelations with historical analysis, media studies, and wider examinations of popular culture. What will sustain them, I believe, is the surprisingly wide and heterogeneous range of nineteenth-century working-class poetry – its dialects, registers, verse-forms, and other evocations of the individual lives and collective *Lebensformen* in the writings of poor nineteenth-century Britons – and the need for synthesis and interpretation such heterogeneity provides [see the appendix of selected working-class poems below].

In this essay I will focus on three principal rubrics: the tasks (and rewards) of *recovery*; the complexities that arise from attempts to *interpret* “non-canonical” verse; and the sorts of insights that emerge from efforts to

integrate the study of working-class poetry into more general examinations of nineteenth-century literature. Each project offers prospects for new discoveries as well as potential pitfalls.

Recovery

It is revealing that only meager selections of Chartist poetry appear in the anthologies we have, though Chartist writings comprised the most widely known forms of working-class verse. Few students of nineteenth-century poetry have read Thomas Cooper's ten-part *Purgatory of Suicides* (1845), for example, in which a speaker imprisoned (like Cooper) for his Chartist convictions envisions a counterfactual future in which "the [m]any [would] cease their slavery to a few," and denounces "peace-robed" patterers who subvert religion to bestow blessings on judicial murder:

II

... curse upon thee, priest! – is it well done,
That thou, a peace-robed herald pattering prayers,
Dost head the death march?...

VIII

... peace, ye preach
To slaves: Christ's precepts are for them! Your drame
Hath thus its parts, – and ye are prompt for each!
Dark ambidexters in the guilty game
Of human subjugation! – how to tame
Man's spirit ye, and only ye, have skill:
Kings need your help to hold their thrones, – while claim
Of sanctity enables ye, at will,
To wield o'er prostrate Reason subtler empire still! (Bk. VI)

Since no major Chartist works have been reprinted in our century, most critical assessments to date have also drawn on a limited evidentiary base, much of it scattered in working-class periodicals. By contrast, in his recent article as well as his forthcoming study of Chartist poetry (*Songs of the Low: Chartist Poetry and the Canon*), Michael Sanders has examined the works of scores of Chartist poets in *The Northern Star* in the context of the editors' personal preferences and their responses to political events of the 1830s through the early 1850s.³ Laurel Brake, Isobel Armstrong, Mark Turner, and others have also begun to prepare a digitally accessible Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition (NCSE), which will include in its coverage the *Englishwoman's Journal* as well as *The Northern Star*.

John Goodridge has also prepared a three-volume collection of "Nineteenth-Century Labouring Class Poets," whose twelve hundred pages are scheduled to offer biographically introduced selections from the works of more than a hundred rural as well as urban working-class poets from many regions,⁴ and a partial list of authors whose works are excerpted in the second volume alone – Henry Brown, Maria Colling, Mary Hutton,

John Jones, John Wright, Charles Crocker, John Younger, Thomas Watson, Thomas Miller, John Critchley Prince, Robert Nicoll, Robert Story, Samuel Bamford, Thomas Wilson, Robert Peddie, William Thom, George Richardson, Thomas Cooper, Gerald Massey, Elijah Ridings, Ernest Jones, as well as anonymous authors of songs, broadsides, and popular verses and songs – includes many which scholars in the field may not recognize. The eclectic scope of Goodridge's compilation should provide a test for assorted sweeping generalizations about working-class literature of the period as well as its "quality," and answer a number of intriguing questions about the range and volume of working-class poetry published at mid-century.

A "bow-shot through the eaves," in my opinion, is provided by James Hepburn's *A Book of Scattered Leaves: Poetry of Poverty in Broadside Ballads of Nineteenth-Century England*, printed at a small American press.⁵ This offers excerpts from several thousand such ballads, as well as assessments of their reception, thematic patterns, and circumstances of their publication. Hepburn's conclusion is that many balladeers who wrote for working-class audiences lived in the liminal margins between poverty and lower middle-class "success," and fell from time to time into the grimmer circumstances of those whose sentiments they sought to convey.

In recent years Susan Alves, Valentina Bold, Gustav Klaus, Solveig Robinson, Judith Rosen, Susan Zlotnick, and others have also published pioneering articles and short monographs devoted to the work of Victorian women poets.⁶ I have written articles on the Scottish poets Ellen Johnston, Janet Hamilton, Jessie Russell, Elizabeth Campbell, Jane Stevenson, Mary MacPherson, and Marion Bernstein, as well as their English sisters "Marie" and Fanny Forrester, and an overview of aspects of Victorian working-class women's poetry I find significant appears in Christine Krueger's *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*.⁷ Working-class women's poetry has been brushed aside as apolitical and sentimental versification, but concrete grounding in oral traditions conferred timeliness and immediacy on their work, and graced their depictions of "unimportant" people's lives with flashes of intensity, scepticism, and mordant populist humor [see Appendix, Johnston and Hamilton].

Students of Victorian dramatic monologues, for example, might have something to say about the baffled rage of Ellen Johnston's young mother whose husband returns empty-handed in "The Last Sark" (1859):

Gude guide me, are you hame again, an' ha'e ye got nae wark,
 We've naething noo tae put awa' unless yer auld blue sark;
 My head is rinnin' roon about far lichter than a flee –
 What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee! . . .

It is the puir man's hard-won toil that fills the rich man's purse;
 I'm sure his gouden coffers they are het wi' mony a curse;

Were it no for the working men what wad the rich men be?
 What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee.

Currently, I am also preparing an anthology of *Poetry by Victorian Working-Class Women* for Broadview Press, in which I will supplement poetic selections with memoirs and other writings (poignant failed petitions to the Royal Literary Fund by Ruth Wills and Ellen Forrester, for example, and excerpts from the autobiographies of Mary Smith and Ellen Johnston). My hope in this work will be to put to rest tacit but pervasive assumptions that few working-class women wrote non-trivial verse, and assess some of the more conspicuous constraints to which the literary ambitions and responses of poor nineteenth-century women were subject.

Hayden Ward, the editor of *Victorian Poetry*, also permitted me to edit and assemble an extensive collection of essays for a special issue of the journal devoted to "The Poetics of the Working Classes," which included sections on women poets, Chartist poetry and "Language, Criminality and Gender."⁸ In addition to Mike Sanders' aforementioned study of the shifting aesthetic and political registers of Chartist poetry, the collection includes Ellen O'Brien's examination of the ambiguous tonalities of populist resentment in execution ballads, Stephanie Kuduk's comparison of *Purgatory of Suicides* with the defiant speech which led to Cooper's imprisonment, Kelly Mays's study of Chartist poets' views of race, "wage slavery," and black chattel slavery, and Larry McCauley's examination of the interrelations between dialect poetry, regional solidarity, and claims for a national working-class identity.⁹ The special issue also includes references to a supplementary website of recordings of Scottish and English working-class poems, read by Clare Hodgkinson and members of the Edwin Waugh Society.

The work of recovery and exposure to view has also been aided by recent studies of historical and biographical aspects of working-class culture, among them Owen Ashton and Stephen Robert's *Victorian Working-Class Writer*, which examines the lives and publication-histories of eight working-class men, based in part on dismal files found in the aforementioned Royal Literary Fund, and Jonathan Rose's monumental *Intellectual Life of the Working-Classes*, in which he studies "mass culture," mutual improvement societies, and the Worker Education Association.¹⁰ Rose tempers apparent distaste for the work of feminists and scholars of post-colonialism with respect for self-taught readers' achievements, and skeptical insights into prior interpreters' failures to consider the concrete experiences of working-class memoirists. Patrick Joyce's somewhat ambivalent attempts to eulogize working-class literary texts but deny the significance of class in *Visions of the People* and *Democratic Subjects* have included reflections on aspects of working-class experience, and an assortment of regional publications, such as the *Journal of the Monklands Heritage Society*, have applied specialized forms of "local knowledge" to the concerns and interests of individual working-class poets.¹¹

Interpretation

In her magisterial study of *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, Isobel Armstrong devotes much of her chapter on “The Radical in Crisis: Clough,” to *The Bothie* (Clough’s 1848 poem about a university-educated “radical” Englishman who emigrates to a life of earnest shared labor with his wife in New Zealand), and compares this narrative with the work of Chartist poets of the era such Ernest Jones, J. B. Leno, W. J. Linton, and Gerald Massey.¹² Of Chartist poetry at its height in the late 1840s, Armstrong writes that: “[f]or a brief period Chartist writers evolved a genuinely public rhetoric of collective action and affirmation and a genuinely social rhetoric of community which derived from their own traditions” (p. 193) and “invoked a definition of manhood to enforce optimistic solidarity” (p. 192). She observes, however, a permanent inflection of such hopes in later years, after Chartist agitation was effectively crushed. Of Ernest Jones’s *Battle-Day and Other Poems* (1855), she remarks, for example, that “what is brilliant . . . is [Jones’s] capacity to show how revolutionary energy can be deflected into war abroad, and how that war itself is conducted by an impotent ruling class” (p. 198).

In *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition*, Anne Janowitz examines the interrelations between communitarian values, democratic political engagement, and nineteenth-century romantic ideals,¹³ in an effort to “recover the [poetic] tradition of what both Shelley and William Morris called ‘hope,’ the dialectic of romanticism in its most liberating form” (p. 8). She may also have been the first critic to assert that working-class poets such as Allen Davenport, Thomas Cooper, and W. J. Linton formed one of the century’s “great traditions,” and find complementarities between their writings and those of middle-class radicals and socialists such as Ernest Jones and William Morris. Though the aim of Janowitz’s analyses of the commonalities of working-class and protest poetry of different periods was to define a radical–populist poetic vision, her templates help clarify the works of a wider range of poets than the relatively small group she considers.

This “wider range” obviously included women, and Susan Zlotnick’s *Women Writing and the Industrial Revolution* was probably the first work in hardcover to consider the poetry of “Marie,” Ellen Johnston, Fanny Forrester or other working-class women poets at any length.¹⁴ Of the latter, for example, she observed that “Forrester undermines the domestic ideal from within, [but] Ellen Johnston attacks it from without, through a daring and perhaps reckless frontal assault . . . and lets some light shine into the unexplored and unexplored corners of the domestic ideal” (p. 216). Most of the writers Zlotnick discusses were novelists, but her examinations of factory paternalism and mid-century “domestic nostalgia” accurately characterize a shifting reformist and pre-feminist early-Victorian milieu which constrained as well as encouraged the efforts of working-class women poets.

Integration

By “integration,” I mean programmatic inclusion of working-class poetry in general literary–historical studies of the period – not in segregated “rooms of their own,” or in appended chapters on “working-class poets,” but as class-inflected parts of a larger argument. Armstrong’s, Janowitz’s and Zlotnick’s works were “integrative” in this sense, and a somewhat ambivalent gesture in this direction appeared in Patrick Joyce’s aforementioned *Democratic Subjects*, in which he conjecturally reconstructed the inner lives of the working-class poet Edwin Waugh and the middle-class radical politician John Bright.

Along similar lines, other critics have tried to adapt notions such as “sensation” and “the gothic” – more commonly applied to fiction or prose – to examinations of Victorian poetry, and such schematic reconfigurations may encourage reexamination of “canonical” poets alongside their lower-class counterparts. Armstrong, for example, has done this in her assessment of Clough’s “radicalism,” and Janowitz in her juxtaposition of Wordsworth and Allen Davenport. Without elision of differences in sensibility conditioned by class-barriers, one could readily find other resonances between working-class poets’ treatments of death, labor, songs, confessions, religion, sexuality, heroism, and women’s roles and parallel motifs of Tennyson, the Brownings, William Morris, Augusta Webster, and Christina Rossetti.

One instance of the ways in which attention to class-nuances may modulate our views of the aesthetic landscape can be found in evolving views of the “spasmodic controversy,” the vituperative mid-century debates during the 1850s over the alleged merits or demerits of the works of the “Spasmodic Poets,” a topic taken up after many years of neglect in Richard Cronin’s “The Spasmodics” and Charles La Porte and Jason Rudy’s special issue of *Victorian Poetry*.¹⁵

This controversy has traditionally been interpreted almost entirely as a quarrel about “taste” and poetic form or manner – classical vs. modern, dramatic vs. “subjective,” “active” vs. “suffering,” strongly-plotted vs. highly figurative, restrained vs. declamatory. At the origins of this debate, however – a dispute which eventually involved W. E. Aytoun, George Gilfillan, Arthur Clough, Matthew Arnold, George Henry Lewes, and other contemporary figures – lay a strong vein of class-hostility, and its consequences severely straitened working-class poets’ already limited access to publication and middle-class readership.

The “spasmodic” poets – Alexander Smith, Sydney Dobell, Gerald Massey, and Ebenezer Jones, among others – came of poetic age in a period of reaction which followed the failure of European revolutions, the rejection of the People’s Charter and the imprisonment of many of the movement’s leaders. Smith was a heroically self-educated pattern-tracer, Massey a former silk-factory worker and straw-plaiter as well as author of revolutionary verses, and Dobell the son of fanatically sectarian wine merchants. Only Massey was an avowed “revolutionary,” but most of the others shared some

version of his anti-establishmentarian political views, and their intensely figurative language and preoccupation with inner psychological states expressed a common critical interest in the social problems and movements of their time. In *The Roman*, for example, Dobell celebrated a revolutionary priest's martyrdom for the cause of Italian independence.

Their critical but sympathetic defender was George Gilfillan, a dissenting Scottish clergyman of radical principles, whose grim memories of an impoverished youth and breadth of sympathies spurred his efforts to encourage the poetic ventures of these and other "democratic subjects." In his *Third Gallery of Literary Portraits*, he reviewed favorably the work of Smith, Massey, Dobell, and T. Stanyan Bigg under the rubric "A Cluster of New Poets," and aroused therewith the virulent animus of William Edmonstoune Aytoun, a reactionary poet, parodist, and Edinburgh professor who had earlier locked horns with Gilfillan in a sectarian religious controversy (Gilfillan had published a tribute to the murdered Scottish Covenanters and Aytoun a poetic eulogy of the nobleman who killed them).

In a *Blackwood's* mock-review of the "spasmodic" poem *Firmilian*, allegedly composed by the fictional "T. Percy Jones," Aytoun attacked Jones's alleged "nonsense verses" as characteristic of the work of "spasmodic poets," and composed his own *Firmilian* as fit object for his contempt. In this recapitulation of *Faust* as a sanguinary farce, Aytoun alluded to thinly disguised stand-ins for Gilfillan as well as Dobell's poem *Balder*, and crudely parodied Smith as a costermonger named "Sancho" who sings of leeks, cows, and pigs, and hawks his vegetables as follows: "Set [my cauliflower] up at a distance of some ten yards, and I'll forfeit my ass if it does not look bigger than the Alcayde's wig" (*Blackwood*, 1849, p. 101).

Aytoun's parody reeked of class-bias, and "Sancho"'s eructations bore no resemblance whatsoever to Smith's idealistic and rather Keatsian blank verses, but Aytoun's reactionary assault provided a template for the "canonical" debate between Arnold and Clough over the value of "subjective" poetry. By the time the waters closed, Gilfillan's reputation had been besmirched and the hopes of the poets he had championed were effectively destroyed. The stain that spread from this culture war may also have persuaded less illiberal figures in the literary establishment such as Tennyson, Browning, and Morris to take greater care in the construction of troubled or agitated contemporary personae in their work.

Working-class authors and would-be authors had taken heart from the romantic reception of their aspirations, and reformers such as Gilfillan had fostered a growing interest in poetic forms of social criticism, eclectic variants of traditional genre-conventions and plots which explored the inner thoughts of troubled minds. After this controversy many writers tended to resort to "historical" codes and filters, and couch their views in elaborately structured historical epics such as *The Idylls of the King*, *The Ring and the Book*, and *The Earthly Paradise*, rather than as dramatic interpretations of contemporary social and personal conflicts. A collateral effect

of the “spasmodic” controversy was also to channel rebellious, experimental and/or psychologically innovative impulses into fiction, and limit poetry’s scope to plots and settings which required a greater measure of classical or historical erudition from their readers.

Some of the “spasmodist” ideals did find later vigorous poetic defenders – Morris among them – who strove to make their subjects more inclusive and their psychological analyses more introspective, and blurred generic boundaries and preoccupations with despair, marginality, and self-examination reemerged in *fin de siècle* and modernist poetry. But Aytoun’s assault and its tangled aftermath noticeably constrained the social and political range of much of late Victorian poetry, and blunted “Byronic” sympathies for overtly reformist themes and characters of modest means.

Indeed, much of the history of mid-century poetry may be read as a (successful) attempt to barricade middle-class canons of “taste” against the inroads of working-class artistry, and the resulting setback to democratic hopes essentially blocked the entrance of working-class poets into the public sphere. Despite the demonstrably high quality of the best Chartist poetry, no acknowledged “major” poet of the second half of the century came from working- or lower-middle-class origins.

Regional and religious hostilities also influenced the ways in which nineteenth-century “class” was construed. I have elaborated class-based aspects of the “spasmodic” controversy in part for the simple reason that I have studied them in some detail (29), but I also did so because I believe this example provides a clarifying filter for data which have chiefly been viewed in other contexts. These interrelations between regional, religious, and cultural patterns and cultural hierarchies only deepen the entanglement between social class and literary “tastes,” and render more acute the need to consider the pervasiveness of their effects, and analyze their abilities to mask and reassert themselves in indirect guises.

Conclusion

All critical and scholarly efforts at recovery, interpretation, and integration encounter their own *aporiai*, and the documents still uncovered in this distant generation may be lost forever. Such efforts, moreover, are inevitably selective – a euphemism for “inadequate” – and accidents of local and regional solidarity may recover certain texts and consign others to speculative oblivion. Well-intended rubrics also involve assimilations which may efface real differences – are there really similarities between the poetry of the erudite Midlands Chartist Thomas Cooper and the songs, chants, and blessings of Isobel Chisholm, a Highland gypsy who recorded her people’s traditional verse sayings?

More controversially, recuperation requires that scholars be willing to acknowledge the depth of reference and emotion in the apparent simplicities of working-class verse. Working-class peoples’ everyday speech and

writing may also be more difficult to parse than the “received” diction of educated speech, with the ironic consequence that it may be “easier” in some sense for present-day students to read Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” a Victorian poem with a classical setting quite remote from their education and experience, than to read Janet Hamilton’s mordant Coatbridge-Scots satire “Oor Location,” with its bitter denunciations of the squalid pubs on every block.

As for interpretation, there is the obvious danger that well-intended efforts at coherent analysis may oversimplify a subject shot through with contradictions and paradox. As befits a majoritarian literature of a people in the throes of brutal economic change, no single poetic form or manner was uniquely or “authentically” “working-class” – oral or written, “homey” or elevated, composed by educated artisans or by nearly illiterate authors, or to express protest, elegiac regret, or macabre humor. Faced with these complexities, it would seem best to acknowledge that only certain facets of working-class poetry may be relevant to any interpretive scheme, and to define these strands as precisely as the evidence will permit.

Integration seems to me to offer a number of good hopes. Straightforward inclusion of working-class poets’ work in the diapason of “literature” may dispel notions that only the verses of the most formally educated deserve remembrance and study, and restore to all poets of the period the nuanced forms of attention and respect they and their works may merit. Such forms of restoration may incur their own forms of “internal colonialism,” of course, in the sense that it will always be easier to judge working-class women (for example) by middle-class norms, and ignore the vastly different significance “ideals” such as paid work, childrearing, marriage, and religious solace would have had for women burdened by multiple childbirths and the deaths of many of the children they bore. Here, I believe, old-fashioned Marxism may have had it right: the social conditions in which most working-class poets lived were such fundamental parts of their identities that they tinged their most basic expressions of love and aspiration with references to work and social environments as they experienced them, and fostered very different notions of what “heroism” (for example) might mean.

Much of the preliminary work of recovery and initial interpretation still remains to be done. When I sent out a call for essays for *The Poetics of the Working Classes* volume, I hoped to receive articles which would close some of the many gaps in our knowledge, but the volume’s many excellent submissions, several of them cited above, left vast areas of ethnicity, regional identification, and sexuality largely unexplored. We cannot reasonably hope to clarify many of these questions until we have more information.

Is it true, for example, that working-class writers wrote poetry and memoirs almost exclusively, or did some also attempt fiction and drama in ways we have not discovered? What should one make of the significant overlap in working-class circles between song, recitation, and poetry? Why has so much more poetry apparently been preserved from some regions than from others, and what accounts for the disparities? How did the

strait gates of publication influence the quantity and variety of the work working-class poets produced?

How, moreover, should one interpret class-boundaries in the cases of Mary Smith, Eliza Cook, Ethel Carnie, and others who lived at different times on one or another side of the elusive divides between lower, lower-middle, and middle class? And how, finally – a question of great interest to me – were the experiences of working-class poets “gendered”? Which topics were or were not available to people of both sexes, and with what results? Were women poets really more “religious” or “didactic” than their male working-class counterparts and, if so, what might explain this pattern? Is it mere coincidence that so much working-class poetry recovered to date has a distinctly Protestant cast, despite the many poor Roman Catholics and Irish immigrants in Victorian Britain?

And finally – of particular interest to the project of “integration” – how much was the phenomenon of working-class poetry as we have it a phenomenon of its time and place? Or does it have direct spiritual heirs in the present day, in places and languages of which we (or at least I) know little or nothing? The answers to such questions are blowin’ in the (scholarly) wind. . . .

Notes

¹ Most working-class authors had to accommodate the sensibilities of newspaper editors who tended to prefer tidy sentimental verse, and many drew inspiration from authors whose works were readily available to them in inexpensive (and treasured) editions, but out of fashion with middle-class reviewers. Many middle-class readers, for example, found passé Spenserian and Miltonic models – highly respected in working-class circles – for Thomas Cooper’s bitterly erudite *Purgatory of Suicides*. Other authors encountered other dilemmas: Janet Hamilton, a shoemaker’s wife, embroidress, and mother of ten, wrote well-reviewed English verses in modes which fell into disfavor a generation later, but English reviewers showed little interest in witty verse-satires she composed in swingeing Scots dialect.

² M. Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1974); B. Maidment, ed., *Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987).

³ M. Sanders, “Poetic Agency: Metonymy and Metaphor in Chartist Poetry, 1838–1852,” *Victorian Poetry* 39(2) (2001), pp. 111–135.

⁴ J. Goodridge, <http://www.pickeringchatto.com/labouringpoets19.htm>, “Labouring-Class Poets.”

⁵ J. Hepburn, *A Book of Scattered Leaves: Poetry of Poverty in Broadside Ballads of Nineteenth-Century England* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000), vol. 1.

⁶ S. Zlotnick, “Lowly Bards and Incomplete Lyres: Fanny Forrester and the Construction of a Working-Class Woman’s Poetic Identity,” *Victorian Poetry* 36(1) (1998), pp. 17–36; H. Gustav Klaus, *Ellen Johnston and Working-class Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (New York: Lang, 1997); S. Alves, “‘Whilst working at my frame’: The Poetic Production of Ethel Carnie,” *Victorian Poetry* 38(1) (2000), pp. 77–93; V. Bold, “Beyond ‘The Empire of the Gentle Heart’: Scottish Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century,” in *A History of Scottish Women’s Writing*, ed. D. Gifford and D. McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); J. Rosen, “Class and Poetic Communities: The Works of Ellen Johnston, ‘The Factory Girl,’” *Victorian Poetry* 39(2) (2001), pp. 207–227; S. C. Robinson, “Of ‘Haymakers’ and ‘City Artisans’: The Chartist Poetics of Eliza Cook’s *Songs of Labor*,” *Victorian Poetry* 39(2) (2001), pp. 229–253.

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Appendix

"Just Instinct and Brute Reason"

A Manchester Operative (*Howitt's Journal*, March 6, 1847)

Keen hawk, on that elm-bough gravely sitting,
Tearing that singing-bird with desperate skill,
Great Nature says that what thou dost is fitting –
Through instinct, and for hunger, thou dost kill.

Rend thou the yet warm flesh, 'tis thy vocation;
Mind thou has none – nor dost thou torture *mind*:
Nay thou, no doubt, art gentle in thy station,
And, when thou killest, art most promptly kind.

On other tribes the lightning of thy pinion
Flashing descends – nor always on the weak:
In other Hawks, the mates of thy dominion,
Thou dost not flesh thy talons and thy beak.

O, natural Hawk, our lords of wheels and spindles
Gorge as it grows the liver of their kind:

Once in their clutch, both mind and body dwindles –
 For Gain to Mercy is both deaf and blind.

O, instinct there is none – nor show of reason,
 But outrage gross on God and Nature's plan,
 With rarest gifts in blasphemy and treason,
 That Man, the souled, should piecemeal murder man.

“The Last Sark”

Ellen Johnston (1859)

Gude guide me, are you hame again, an' ha'e ye got nae wark,
 We've naething noo tae put awa' unless yer auld blue sark;
 My head is rinnin' roon about far lichtier than a flee –
 What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee!
 Our merchants an' mill masters they wad never want a meal,
 Though a' the banks in Scotland wad for a twelvemonth fail;
 For some o' them have far mair goud than ony ane can see –
 What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee!
 This is a funny warld, John, for it's no divided fair,
 And whiles I think some o' the rich have got the puir folk's share,
 Tae see us starging here the nicht wi' no ae bless'd bawbee –
 What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee!
 Oor hoose ance bean an' cosey, John; oor beds ance snug an warm
 Feels unco cauld an' dismal noo, an' empty as a barn;
 The weans sit greeting in oor face, and we ha'e noucht to gie –
 What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee!
 It is the puir man's hard-won toil that fills the rich man's purse;
 I'm sure his gouden coffers they are het wi' mony a curse;
 Were it no for the working men what wad the rich men be?
 What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee!
 My had is licht, my heart is weak, my een are growing blin';
 The bairn is faen' aff my knee—oh! John, catch haud o' him,
 You ken I hinna tasted meat for days far mair than three;
 Were it no for my helpless bairns I wadna care to dee. (1867)

“Oor Location”

Janet Hamilton (1863)

A hunner funnels bleezin', reekin'
 Coal an' ironstane, charrin', smeekin';
 Navvies, miners, keepers, fillers,
 Puddlers, rollers, iron millers;
 Reestit, reekit, raggit laddies, 5 *smoked, rigged out, untidy*
 Firemen, enginemen, an' Paddies;
 Boatmen, banksmen, rough and rattlin';
 'Bout the wecht wi' colliers battlin', *weight*

Sweatin', swearin', fechtin', drinkin', Change-house bells an' grill-stoups clinkin', Police-ready men and willin' –	10	<i>drinking jugs</i>
Aye at han' when stoups are fillin', Clerks, an' counter-loupers plenty, Wi' trim moustache and whiskers dainty –		<i>shopkeepers</i>
Chaps that winna staun at trifles, Min' ye they can han'le rifles. 'Bout the wives in oor location, An' the lasses' botheration,	15	
Some are decent, some are dandies, An' a gey wheen drucken randies, Aye to neebors' hooses sailin', Greetin' bairns ahint them trailin', Gaun for nouthar bread nor butter, Just to drink an' rin the cutter.		<i>expletive</i>
Oh, the dreadfu' curse o' drinkin'! Men are ill, but tae my thinkin', Leukin' through the drucken fock, There's a Jenny for ilk Jock, Oh, the dool an' desolation, An' the havoc in the nation,	20	<i>wild when drunken loose women</i>
Wrocht by dirty, drucken wives! Oh, hoo mony bairnies' lives Lost ilk year through their neglec'! Like a millstane roun' the neck O' the strugglin', toilin' masses	25	<i>inhabitants</i>
Hing drucken wives and wanton lassies. To see sae mony unwed mithers Is sure a shame that taps a' ithers. An' noo I'm fairly set a-gaun, On baith the whisky-shop and pawn; I'll speak my min' – and whatfor no? Frae whence cums misery, want, an' wo, The ruin, crime, disgrace an' shame, That quenches a' the lights o' hame? Ye needna speer, the feck ot's drawn Out o' the change-house an' the pawn.	30	<i>dole</i>
Sin and death, as poets tell, On ilk side the doors o' hell Wait to haulr mortals in; Death gets a' that's catcht by sin: There are doors where death an' sin Draw their tens o' thoosan's in; Thick and thrang we see them gaun, First the dram-shop, then the pawn; Owre a' kin's o' ruination, Drink's the king in oor location.	35	<i>how many children's lives</i>
		<i>hang</i>
	40	
	45	<i>inquire, the majority</i>
	50	
	55	<i>liquor-shop</i>

“Farewell to the New Christmas”

Mary MacPherson

Farewell to the new Noël
brought goodwill to the quiet band,
who would not cower in the frost,
for all December season’s cold.

I left the lovely Isle of Skye,
more than two score years ago;
and now the custom’s altered there,
and sad for me to tell the tale.

Bowed with sadness many a Gael,
bred up in the Land of Mists,
smothers now in urban streets,
from city dust and reek of coal.

The miles are growing barren now,
of fertile earth that fosters crops,
where once brave warriors were bred,
who put their enemies to rout.

But change has come upon the clouds,
and on the hills and pasture-lands,
where once the honest people lived,
only the great sheep and their lambs.

When I arrived beside the place,
wherein my race was wont to rest,
the dogs were barking at my heels,
to give me a chill welcome there.

When I walked over to the knolls,
my grandsire’s dwelling lay in dust,
behind it grew the bracken clumps
where once in happiness I played.

When I came to the Tribute Well,
where I was wont to drink my fill,
the bottom’s filled with oyster shells,
and holds today a filthy scum.

I reached the well of Iain Bàn,
that my beloved father named,
the stones whereon he laid his hands,
are left a legacy to me.

I stood a while above it there,
the tears came raining from my eyes,
as I recalled the dear-loved folk
earthed now in their eternal sleep.

Then all my senses ebbed away,
death’s pallor came upon my cheek;

but there I cupped my hand and drank,
and felt my being made anew.

I reached the walls that once were full,
with gear and grain, and people there,
where often a kind welcome met,
the wanderer upon his way.

I wondered if I'd know the place,
where once my darling mother sat,
beside me at the table there,
and nurtured us with quiet pride.

But not a grace was being said,
in that home that was never cold,
to seek a blessing from above
upon the folk within its walls.

I was not long about the place
until the gossip went around –
“Mary's here, Fair Iain's daughter,
staying up there in the glen.”

Round my dearest people gathered,
made for me warm welcome then,
saying as they took my hand,
“Iain Ban's remembered well.”

Tears ebbed away as I began,
to sing the melodies I knew,
that bring my spirit to its peace –
for danger sometimes lies in grief.

And I went down beside the field,
wherein I often wandered young,
or fished for troutlets with a line,
and they in shoals beneath the bank.

Down to the margin of the ford,
where in time past I'd often swim,
and pluck the orchis flowers, to me
a memory of my people's love.

I found no maiden or young wife
spinning thread for making tweed,
nor husband going with stick in hand,
to bring the waulking-women home.

When the lasses gathered round,
that's when the banter would begin,
a dish of sowens on the board,
the young blades in the other room.

Never was a cowhide stored,
upon the beams but hardened there,

until brought down at Hogmanay,
when noisy bairns would follow sure.

When the crowd assembled then,
that's when a fine din began,
with shouting 'Ne'erday, Ne'erday O'
till one would start upon a song.

Every man barefooted now,
a shinty stick held in his fist,
to batter at the mealy bag,
and bash the bannocks into crumbs.

When all the singers made an end,
the New-Year-candles set alight,
the smiling woman of the house,
came in to serve a dram around.

No little shallow tasteless tot
a sallow lad might get for verse
a bumper lipping to the brim,
that put a thunder in the head.

I heard a voice behind me say,
as one just risen from the grave –
"Is not Lachlan Og in Ord
as leader at his people's head?"

We would know again the fields,
the cornstacks standing in the yard,
if but the spirit of the folk
could rise again in hand and heart.
(trans. William Neill)

"Song"

W. J. Linton (*The English Republic* (1851), p. 188)

The leaves are still; not a breath is heard:
How bright the harvest day!
'Tis the tramp of a horse, the boughs are stirr'd,
The Agent comes this way.
Was it an old gun-muzzle peep'd
Beyond yon crimson leaf?
A shot! – and Murder's bloody sheaf
Is reaped.

Who sold the farm above his head?
Who drove the widow mad?
Who pull'd the dying from her bed?
Who robb'd the idiot lad?
Who sent the starv'd girl to the streets?
Who mocked grey Sorrow's smart?
Yes! listen in thy blood. His heart
Yet beats.

Not one has help for the dying man;
 Not one the murderer stays,
 Though all might see him where he ran,
 Not even the child betrays.
 O wrong! Thou hast a fearful brood:
 What inquest can ye need,
 Who know revenge but reap't the seed
 Of blood.

From *The Purgatory of Suicides*
 Thomas Cooper (1845)

VIII

It symbols meekness well, and peace, ye preach
 To slaves: Christ's precepts are for them! Your drame
 Hath thus its parts, – and ye are prompt for each!
 Dark ambidexters in the guilty game
 Of human subjugation! – how to tame
 Man's spirit ye, and only ye, have skill:
 Kings need your help to hold their thrones, – while claim
 Of sanctity enables ye, at will,
 To wield o'er prostrate Reason subtler empire still!

XXVII

Priest! I have felt by turns from earliest days,
 As well as calms, the tempest of the brain: –
 Fervid devotion, and the wild rapt blaze
 Of ecstasy in prayer; ascetic pain
 And fasting; midnight book-toil to obtain
 The key to facts – knowledge of tongues of old;
 Weighing of evidence – grave, – long, – again;
 With constant watchings how Man doth unfold
 What is the impress true he bears from Nature's mould; . . .

XXXII

I say not that there is no God: but that
I know not. Dost *thou* know, or dost thou guess? –
 Why should I ask thee, priest? Darkness hath sat
 With Light on Nature, – Woe with Happiness, –
 Since human worms crawled from their languageless
 Imperfect embryos, and by signs essayed
 To picture their first thoughts. 'Tis but excess
 Of folly to attempt the great charade
 To solve; and yet the irking wish must be obeyed! –

XXXIV

Desire to know must still within us burn –
 Though its quick fire our fragile clay consume:
 For who would crawl in brutal unconcern
 Along his fated pathway to the tomb, –
 Nor ever ask if thought-flame shall relume

This clay, or it shall sleep a dull, dark, cold,
Eternal sleep? . . .

CXXI

Long, dreary, miserable years have fled, –
Since the foul compact first was ratified,
By Priestcraft placing on throned Kingship's head,
With hands in reeking blood of victim dyed,
The gaud of gold, – the sign of kingly pride, –
Long, dreary, suffering, weeping, wailing years: –
Oft have the bruised and trampled sufferers tried
To rise; – but the Priest's curse woke inward fears,
And they bowed down again unto their toil with tears!

CXXIX

. . . The strains of truth
And loving earnestness, full souls have poured
Forth to your thought, shall work within ye ruth
For human woe; – and, soon, resolve matured
Shall be within ye to make firm accord
With Mercy's gentle champions: – for, it hath
Been here proclaimed, that some have long explored
The way to end Man's misery, strife, and wrath,
And bring in Peace . . .

CXXX

. . . He said; – and, while
He stretched aloft his hand, – from motley pile
And throne, great souls arose, and instant raised
A hand aloft – each with a godlike smile! –
And light empyreal from each Essence blazed,
Until I woke, – with the bright vision soul-bedazed!
(Book VI)