

Key Words

A JOURNAL OF CULTURAL MATERIALISM

8
(2010)

edited by
Catherine Clay
Simon Dentith
Kristin Ewins
Ben Harker
Claire Jowitt
Angela Kershaw
Dave Laing
Stan Smith
Vicki Whittaker

ve been all too easy for her to speak as
ature' here. But instead she becomes
Rather than continue the expressive
slip away, and as she does so she
ersal. The 'quiv'ring lip' is no longer
comes the crucial boundary between
ession occurs, where the thought has
out the nature of 'coherent' meaning
nd coherence can be reconciled in
ns in the sightless air' are not just a
position as a labouring-class woman
of her philosophical curiosity. There
ich she is struggling to express, but
he is pushing the idea further than
tion between emotion and speech,
ce, and how the receptive audience
themselves choose. The 'atoms' may
y wasted but also potentially satiric
precariously into a few thoughtful
h the feeling heart' was clearly the
earsley's intelligence, her awareness
r to the less obvious phrase, 'feeling
een *feeling* and *mind* that has set her
ought from line to line, at the risk
in order to track the idea. There is
niss if we limit Yearsley to voicing a
ing questions about how sensibility

1. *A Milkwoman of Bristol* (London: T. Yearsley: *Selected Poems*, ed. Tim Burke

Not So Lowly Bards: Working-Class Women Poets and Middle-Class Expectations

Florence Boos

There are several reasons for the neglect of working-class Victorian women's poetry. One – the most salient, perhaps – is that working-class literature has traditionally been identified with Chartist and dialect poetry.¹ Another surely lies in the biased historical record: verses which working- and middle-class editors dismissed as insignificant are unlikely to emerge unscathed a century and a half later. A third, however, may be found in the heterogeneity of what little has survived, which ranged from the verses by scarcely literate authors to sophisticated works by women deeply influenced and informed by prior literary traditions. Working-class women were strongly imprinted by their regions, occupations and degrees of access to education, perhaps to an even greater degree than more conventionally educated poets, so that it is difficult to frame valid general interpretations of their poetry.

Mindful of these personal and regional qualities, I have tried to reconstruct in some detail the concrete historical and biographical contexts of the seventeen authors I introduced in *Women Poets of Victorian Britain: An Anthology*.² In the present essay I will give greater attention to contrasts and divergences between working-class women and their middle- and upper-class counterparts – in subject-matter primarily, but also in nuances of tone, emphasis, language and generic choice.

More precisely, I will focus on

- 1 contemporary representations of violence against women and portrayals of sexuality and 'fallen' women;
- 2 preferences for ballads and songs over more 'formal' genres such as blank verse and the dramatic monologue; and
- 3 direct autobiographical expressions and appeals to regional and 'people's history'.

A preoccupation with domestic violence was evident in the works of writers from several regions, and almost all working-class women writers shunned poetic homages to the 'field of honor'.³ A disproportionate number of the poets whose works have survived were Scottish,⁴ and several of them – inspired in part by ballad traditions, and encouraged by the universally admired work of Burns – wrote 'people's-historical' accounts of the 'Clearances' and other events which disrupted the lives of ordinary people.

All the working-class women poets I have found naturally sought to grace their work with metaphors and comparisons derived from their reading. But few of them had access to the classical education displayed by middle-class poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster, Emily Pfeiffer or Michael Field, and most evoked contemporary events and more direct personal experiences in their works.

Sexuality and Domestic Violence

Middle- and upper-class women wrote sympathetic portrayals of 'fallen' middle-class women who violated Victorian sexual norms, and focused on the shame, isolation and emotional betrayal they suffered, as well as the 'genteel' double standards they confronted in their everyday lives.⁵ Working-class women poets wrote more directly and forcefully about drunkenness, domestic abuse and sexual violence – rare subjects in the works of middle-class women poets with the exception of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'.⁶ They were also more likely to suggest that 'fallenness' was a matter of economic survival, and treat desertion, single motherhood and exchanges of sex for money as recurrent aspects of working-class life.

Fanny Forrester (1852–89), for example, a Salford factory worker, expressed explicit sympathy with streetwalkers, whom she considered victims of the immiseration of the rural poor, and her middle-class editor Ben Brierley felt called upon to defend her 'respectability' as follows: 'Miss Forrester is neither vulgar nor unladylike ... [It is wrong to assume that] because a poor girl works at a mill she must, of necessity, be deficient in those qualities that are supposed to adorn her wealthier sisters.'⁷

The 'factory girl' Ellen Johnston was a rare working-class woman writer who expressed poetic desire in erotic rather than sentimental terms, and who may have been the only Victorian poet who acknowledged her motherhood of an illegitimate child. In the first edition of her *Autobiography, Poems and Songs*, she addressed 'A Mother's Love' to the child she 'first did behold in sorrow and sin / Thou sweet offspring of false love – my Mary Achin' – and remarked in the volume's introduction that she

could no longer conceal what the world falsely calls a woman's shame ...
I never loved life more dearly and longed for the hour when I would have
something to love me.⁸

Johnston's daughter Mary (Achinvole) Johnston survived to offer a home to Johnston in her final illness, but the forthright remarks just quoted disappeared

in the volume's second edition.⁹ Johnston was also rare in her willingness to write first-person expressions of erotic love, as when she confessed to the unidentified subject of 'The Happy Man':

'Tis not alone by light of day that I do think of thee,
For in the lonely midnight hour still thou art there with me!
And the dreams of sweet delusion that wander through my brain –
They waken me to madness that words can never name.¹⁰

Janet Hamilton (1795–1873), married at 13 and the mother of seven surviving children, devoted several poems to the subject of desertion. The most striking may have been 'A Ballad o' Mary Muiren', in which she described the desertion and death of the daughter of 'a friend'. Her lifelong friend and patron Alexander Wallace later reported that Hamilton's family was deeply moved when her daughter 'Mirren' (Marion), who lived with her mother and cared for her in her final illness, read aloud from one of Hamilton's other expressions of poetic sympathy for a deserted woman.¹¹

Working-class women poets' representations of violence also differed from those of their working-class male counterparts in their focus on domestic rather than political conflicts. Chartists and other working-class male poets of the period often denounced acts of economic violence as marks of capitalist greed, and condoned political violence as acts of retaliation and/or class resistance. W.J. Linton's 1851 'Revenge', for example, portrayed the murder of a callous landlord, and Gerald Massey's 'A Red Republican Lyric' and 'Son of the Red Republican' enjoined the murder of tyrants, as did passages from Thomas Cooper's 'The Purgatory of Suicides' and Ernest Jones's 'The Song of the Low' ('The thrust of a poor man's arm will go / Through the heart of the proudest king!').¹²

Working-class women, by contrast – with the rare exception of Ruth Wills in 'Zenobia', a poem in which a black slave kills her cruel mistress – tended to represent instances of violence as brutal but commonplace acts of everyday cruelty – men against wives, parents against children, and children against aged parents. And in their temperance verse – a now disregarded poetic subgenre at which almost every working-class woman poet tried her hand – they associated such everyday violence with drunken rage.

In 'The Drunkard's Inhumanity' in *Homely Rhymes from the Banks of the Jed* (1887), for example, Agnes Mabon, an invalided factory worker, confronted readers with a wife's body 'rendered ... [o]ne dark discoloured mass of aching flesh' and focused on '... [the] pang that rends the bleeding heart. / The disappointed love, the shame, the grief ...'.¹³

Janet Hamilton associated alcoholism with domestic violence, and may have been best known to her contemporaries as a 'temperance poet'. In 'Oor Location', for example, her bitterly sardonic description of changes her village had suffered during her lifetime, she took the time to rage evenhandedly against poverty and rotgut:

An' noo I'm fairly set a-gaun,
On baith the whisky-shop and pawn;
I'll speak my min' – and what for 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-hoose and the pawn [...]¹⁴

In 'The Contrast', a man

... waits for [his wife's] returning,
Wrath and hate within him burning [...]
Blows and shrieks and curses mingle –
Words of passion, fierce and wild.¹⁵

In her essay 'Intemperance vs. the Moral Law', Hamilton described in direct, personal terms an alcoholic son who had threatened to kill his parents if they denied him what he wanted.

We have known, ay, and seen – alas! that we should say so; it was not a solitary instance – a grey-haired mother, on her own hearth, shrinking from the presence of her own son, who, with murderous threats, uplifted hand, and eyes flaming with patricidal fires, was demanding from her the means to procure further indulgence in his depraved and brutal tastes. We have seen a father, day after day, forgetting to eat his bread, and nightly steeping his couch with tears, for the dishonour and apparent perdition of his son¹⁶

In another passage, she recalled:

A youth of seventeen [who] became a confirmed drunkard ... He is now nearly fifty years of age... He has ... during all this time ... gone half-naked and almost wholly barefoot ... But it is not the appearance of the outward man, however shocking – it is the sad condition of the wretch's mind that we deplore. It is so utterly devoid of all feeling that he daily extorts his

food from the hands of his aged and invalid parents, who have nothing to spare ... but they have to choose between giving way to his demands, or, by refusing them, be overwhelmed by a torrent of outrageous threats and shocking blasphemies.¹⁷

It is possible that these impassioned memories were autobiographical; Hamilton's oldest son, a 30-year-old shoemaker in the 1841 census, would have been 51 or 52 when her essay appeared in 1863.¹⁸

In the last quarter of the century – partly, perhaps, in the wake of a Parliamentary Report on wife-beating and wife-murder which appeared in 1875 – working-class women and middle-class reformers such as Frances Power Cobbe began to uncouple acts of domestic violence from the alleged excuse of drunken rage.¹⁹ In 'Women's Rights vs. Women's Wrongs', for example, one of the poems in her 1877 *The Blinkin' o' the Fire*, the former seamstress Jessie Russell (1850–1923) expressed solidarity with 'many a drudge to be found / In our city gentlemen's houses, in those kitchens underground', but offered her most heartfelt compassion for

... many a one [who] bears a greater wrong[,] who is called by the name
of wife,
While the dogs which follow her brutal lord lead not such a wretched life;
But a life for a life, and the murderer's hung, and we think not the law
inhuman,
Then why not the lash for the man who kicks or strikes a defenceless
woman?²⁰

Working-class women poets, in brief, confronted sexual violence more directly and more often than their middle-class sisters. Earlier in the Victorian period, they channelled their opposition quite naturally into denunciations of alcoholic violence.²¹ As the century waned, they and their middle-class allies shifted from a primary focus on alcoholism, and began to explore the underlying social and sexual psychology of a social order in which a man's wife and children were his 'possessions'. Along the way, their sublimated protests began to undercut Victorian truisms about the sanctity of family life, and exposed the complex wefts of violence and respectability that permeated its class hierarchies.

Poetic Forms and Craft

Another divide which separated working-class poets and memoirists from their more genteel sisters lay along different fault lines. Working-class women poets identified in different ways with the formal and generic traditions of their craft – in part, of course, because of their more limited access to formal education, but in part because they made much more direct and immediate use of the oral, regional and denominational ‘demotic’ traditions in which they were raised.

Consider, for example, the genre of the ‘dramatic monologue’. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and other middle-class writers²² employed it to evoke sympathy for outcasts whom ‘respectable’ readers might condemn out of hand – a rape victim about to be stoned to death for infanticide, for example. Working-class women poets needed no such shocks of recognition to identify with the ‘lower orders’ – in varying degrees they *were* the lower orders.

Ellen Johnston’s denunciation of the ‘funny world’ in ‘A Last Sark’, presented in the voice of a starving mother, may be the best-known miniature example of the genre:

... for it’s no divided fair,
And whiles I think some o’ the rich have got the puir folk’s share,
Tae see us starving here the nicht wi’ no ae bless’d bawbee –
What care some gentry if they’re weel though a’ the puir wad dee!²³

Less well-known monologues included Johnston’s ‘Come Awa’ Jamie’, in which a factory worker toils in inadequate light;²⁴ Fanny Forrester’s ‘The Bitter Task’, in which a jilted unwed mother confesses to her son that she must sew the bridal dress for his father’s wealthy new bride; Forrester’s ‘In the Workhouse – A Deserter’s Story’, in which a disgraced dying man decried a life of class-driven injustice;²⁵ and ‘The Prison Cell’, by Elizabeth Campbell (1804–1878), which explored the shame and abasement of a falsely accused man thrown into jail:

My head ached, I fainted and fell,
When they lock’d me up in a prison cell.

And perjurers swearing away my good name,
That shock pass’d away like a horrible dream.
And with it the lightness of my youthful mind,
And sad was the sorrow that brooded behind.²⁶

Working-class women – especially those fortunate enough to benefit from the worker’s education movement – also wrote from time to time in more

elaborate formal genres. In ‘Lament Written On the Death of the Rev. George Legge’, for example, Ruth Wills composed a formal ode after the manner of ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality.’²⁷ Mary Smith, an ardent campaigner for poor women’s education, wrote a 116-page Spenserian epic entitled ‘Progress’, possibly influenced by Thomas Cooper’s *Purgatory of Suicides*, in which she offered homage to ‘all that prospers peace and wakens thought’.

The men who’ve blest the ages, made them bright.
’Tis men that make earth’s history, men who speak
The everlasting truth that gives earth light.
Let but a man be born, upright, divine –
Poet, or saint, or seer – and straight shall shine
New light on all men; and that one man’s power
Shall thrill the world’s heart in its crowning hour.²⁸

Blank verse, that ubiquitous nineteenth-century form, was relatively rare in working-class women’s verse – a mark, perhaps, of the high regard in which rhyme was held in an oral and musical poetic culture. A rare exception was Agnes Mabon’s ‘The Drunkard’s Inhumanity’, an essay in verse whose speaker exclaims:

Oh! say, can one deserve the name of man
Who lifts his hand against his bosom’s mate? [...]
And listen to his plea, his base defence:
‘I was in drink’, he says, ‘she should have known
To hold her peace, and not arouse me then;
Nought irritates me like a woman’s tongue’ [...]²⁹

Other experimenters struck out in other directions. The ‘rustic maid’ Jane Stevenson (n.d., fl. 1870), who had no formal education, wrote a kind of free verse, which she ‘suppose[d]’ was ‘not prose, and I am not such a judge of poetry as to know whether it may be called poetry or not, or some kind of mixture of both’.

I may be prejudic’d, this is my birthplace,
Spot where I have spent my life from earliest infancy;
Nurs’d up amongst the scenes I have describ’d,
And seldom mixing with mankind in mutual converse.
A wild and solitary thing have thus contract
A love for things inanimate [...] (‘Home’)³⁰

Elizabeth Campbell found a natural anapaestic cadence, accompanied by slant rhymes in which she expressed a universal ideal:

I weep for the coward, I weep for the brave,
I weep for the monarch, I weep for the slave,
I weep for all those that in battle are slain,
I've a tear and a prayer for the souls of all men. ("The Crimean War")³¹

Eliza Cook (1812–89), an accomplished metrist, used seven-beat lines to create a kind of vigorous poetic tracking shot:

I saw the foreign 'image-man' set down his laden stand;
I lingered there; and coveted the Beauty that I scanned:
The 'Dancing Girl', the 'Prancing Steed', the 'Gladiator' dying,
The bust of 'Milton' close beside where sinless 'Eve' was lying;
And how I gazed with rapture on the 'Bard of Avon's' face,
With young, impulsive worship of its majesty and grace. ("The Streets")³²

For Scottish poets, especially, the poetry of Robert Burns provided models in stanza form as well as content. Jeannie Paterson's 'To One Who Believes that Women are Soulless', for example, addresses 'Willie' in the metres of 'To a Mouse':

Feith, Willie lad ye gied it braid,
Richt oot ye spak' it, ay, ye said,
And this affirmed, that woman, made
Was wi' no soul;
That in the narrow grave when laid
That was the goal.³³

Ethel Carnie (1886–1962), finally, paid homage to Swinburne's ecstatic cadences in the hexameter couplets of 'Immortality':

The best thoughts we are thinking to-day shall be living and active and
strong,
When we sleep at the end of the fight, caring not for the war-whoop or
song,
And it matters far more than we know that we keep our hearts steadfast
and brave,
For the strength that they held shall walk forth when they mix with the
dust of the grave,

And immortal, and lovely, and young shall our dream live unclouded by
tears,

When we take the long rest that is sweet after toil in a hundred years.³⁴

Drawing on deep oral traditions, all the rural working-class women poets I have studied – as well as many of their urban sisters – composed poetic 'songs'. Ellen Johnston devoted a special section of her volume to such songs, suggesting airs for their accompaniment, and Marion Bernstein (1846–1906), a piano teacher, identified several of her poems as songs or hymns to be 'set to music'.³⁵ Eliza Cook (1812–89), Ruth Wills, Jeannie Paterson and Ethel Carnie wrote songs with specific suggestions for their accompaniment, and Carnie's 'Marching Tune' was given an original setting by the suffragist composer Ethel Smythe in 1913.

Working-class autobiographers recorded the powerful influence of songs they heard in childhood. Janet Hamilton, for example, once recalled that 'I was beginning to get rich [at age eight] in the Ballad treasures of my country ... and a pathetic "Aul Warl Ballant", would put the sweetie shop to a discount at any time when I was mistress of a bawbee'.³⁶ Traces of English oral and balladic traditions also lingered in the title of poems which were (presumably) not sung, such as Carnie's 'A Riding Song' and Cook's 'Song of the Red Man', and many working-class women poets wrote verse in ballad-stanza form, such as Elizabeth Campbell's 'The Graves of My Sons', Ruth Wills' 'Zenobia', and Ellen Johnston's 'Letter to Edith'.³⁷ But the period's most strikingly authentic as well as idiosyncratic oral work in ballad form was surely Mary MacPherson's (1821–98) 'Incitement of the Gaels', a chanted Gaelic epic in which rebellious Highland crofters routed government agents sent to evict them from their homes.³⁸

When the landlords gathered round
assembled in the county town,
'twill be recalled in every age,
the tricks they practiced to deceive us [...] (ll. 25–32)³⁹

A Working-Class Form: 'Ballads of Memorie'

Perhaps the most distinctive subgenre in the poetry of nineteenth-century working-class women was the 'ballad of memorie'. Such 'ballads' took several forms – personal reminiscences, 'people's histories' and 'return ballads', in which an older woman revisited her girlhood home and reflected on the upheavals she and others in her region had endured.

Some of the reminiscence ballads recorded epiphanic experiences, such as Jane Stevenson's encounter with a soothsaying stranger in 'The Prophetess, Or Seer of Visions', whose sense of awe or benediction lingered as a kind of spiritual presence which conferred the poet's authority to speak.

This is no fiction that I tell,
Were all her prophecies but half as true
As is this tale I've told to you,
Then we had need to be upon our guard,
If the sad stroke of this calamity
We possibly may blunt or ward [...]
Ah Scotland! It were well for thee
If a false prophetess this woman be [...]
But great disasters soon enough may come,
Without a prophetess foretelling them.⁴⁰

Ballads of 'people's history' also expressed a preference for 'truth' and 'truth-telling' over fiction and a deeply felt need to commemorate those 'forgot by e'en tradition's garrulous tongue', as Mary Smith put it.⁴¹ Aged storytellers had special authority in this genre, and Janet Hamilton was one of its most active practitioners.⁴² In 'Grannie's Crack about the Famine in Auld Scotlan' in 1739–40', for example, she expressed a deeply held conviction that striking phenomena or events 'must' have a deeper moral or meaning, if only we are deft enough to interpret them – a poetic variant, perhaps, of the religious typology so cherished by her Dissenting ancestors.

In her 'Crack', a grandfather, angry that his grandchildren have spilled and wasted their food, is mollified when his tactful spouse tells the children a story of elemental faith and stoic desperation in the famine of 1739–40. In that year without harvest, parents had invented games for their children to find bits of vegetables in the dirt, stripped bark off the first shoots of spring trees for food, and watched their friends, neighbours and children die.

'An' mony a puir auld man an' wife
That winter dee't wi' want an' cauld,
They couldna beg, an' sae their need
To neebors puir was never tauld.

'Our Scottish puir had aye some pride –
An honest, decent pride, I ween;
Sair want an' sufferin' they thol't
Ere they wad let their need be seen.

'Ae day, I slipp'd my parritch cog [porridge bowl]
Aneath my jupe, an' ran wi' speed
To Robin Steel's, for sair I fear'd
That they had neither meal nor bread.

'The mither took it in her haun
An' liftit up to Heaven her e'e,
An' thankit God for what was gi'en
Ere she wad let the bairnies pree.

'That mither – ay, an' mony mair
That thro' the fiery trials pass'd –
Like silver seven times purified,
Cam' oot the furnace pure at last.⁴³

Hamilton lived and died within a twenty-mile radius of her home, so it was understandable that long journeys to the other country of the past stirred especially deep emotions when the physical sites she remembered no longer existed.

'Ballads of Return', in which a woman reflected in middle or old age on the upheavals she and others in her region had endured, included Elizabeth Campbell's 'A Summer Night', and 'A Cot By the Moor – A Visit to the Home of my Childhood'; Jane Stevenson's 'Song: The Homes of My Fathers', accompanied by a brief prose account of her foot-journey home and search for her eight brothers and sisters; and Hamilton's 'Feast of the Mutches', in which she attended a public banquet for old women in Glasgow, and reflected on the fates of her childhood friends.

In 'A Wheen Aul' Memories', for example, Hamilton recounted her travels on foot to several once-familiar nearby villages and marked the devastation the smelters had visited on the homes of the literate handloom weavers she remembered from her childhood:

Noo, mark ye, the ashes, the dross, an' the slag
Wad ye think it was they put the win' i' the bag
O' the big millionaires; that 'mang danners an' cinnners,
The Co. should ha'e gather't sic millions o' shiners? (ll. 129–32)⁴⁴

In Mary MacPherson's 'Farewell to the New Christmas', the speaker returned from smoke-choked industrial Glasgow to her beloved native Skye, and was shocked at the island's desolation, 'Where once the honest people lived, only

the great sheep and their lambs' (sheep had once again 'devour[ed] men', as More put it three centuries earlier⁴⁵).

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.

MacPherson's strength deserted her when she came to a stark allegorical sign of this desolation – the ruined family well, painstakingly dug and named by her long-dead father – and she fainted. Fortunately, the well's waters still flowed, and as she drank from them she felt once again her gift's restorative powers ('Tears ebbed away as I began / to sing the melodies I knew'). When members of her community sought to console her with holiday feasting and games, her hopes surged anew:

When the crowd assembled then,
that's when a fine din began, [...]
the smiling woman of the house,
came in to serve a dram around [...]

I heard a voice behind me say,
as one just risen from the grave –
'Is not Laclan 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.⁴⁶ (ll. 89–90, 99–100, 105–111)

Personal and communal history fused in this poem, and one imaged the other. The spell in which her 'senses ebbed' offered a bridge from despair to renewal, and its images of redemptive memory new hope that her people's troubles would be mediated, if not healed.

'A Farewell to the New Christmas' abounded, in fact, in concrete, evocative and politically resonant images – a well of healing; flowers of love; an altered

state (in which 'her senses ebbed'); a restorative epiphany (which 'brought her spirit to peace'); a strong cup of kindness, and a plangent and redemptive voice from the dead. Merging personal and communal history, it is a crofter's vision of Blake's 'Jerusalem', mediated by William Morris's 'spirit of the folk'.

Were there middle- and upper-class counterparts of such 'ballads of memorie'? Did works such as Morris's *A Dream of John Ball* or Robert Browning's 'The Ring and the Book', steeped in the lore of *The Old Yellow Book* and a sixteenth-century Roman murder trial, restore to our view 'rebel hedge priests' or more urbane Italianate counterparts of lives 'forgotten e'en by tradition's garrulous tongue'?

The answer, in most cases, was 'no'. In works such as Barrett Browning's 'Sonnets from the Portuguese', Rossetti's 'Monna Innominata', or Webster's 'Mother and Daughter', for example, the losses and recoveries evoked were primarily inward, and largely detached from any particular time or place. But there were, I believe, some partial exceptions. William Morris's empathetic historicism and Robert Browning's metaphor of the ring crafted by fire from alloy and gold – resistant unpoetic fact, refashioned by an artist's moral vision – offered 'canonical' (middle-class) responses to the antiphons of personal testimony and collective memory one can hear, from time to time, in the cadences of working-class women's 'ballads of memorie'.

Conclusion

Few working-class women aspired to the complex architectonics of longer 'Parnassian' poems such as *Aurora Leigh*, 'Monna Innominata', or Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper's long verse dramas, and circumstances of publication and limited audience would have precluded such ambitions in most cases if they had.

Mary Smith, for example, the author of *Progress*, an impressive verse-meditation on the long struggle for social justice, lacked access to sympathetic advice which might have helped her channel her work into less sternly didactic paths. Janet Hamilton also had the self-confidence and ability to create such works. But she was hampered by age – an avid reader and composer of verse in her head, she bore ten children before she learned to write in middle age; and by blindness – she dictated most of her verses and essays after her eyes had failed from a life of work at the loom. Ethel Carnie, finally, an early twentieth-century working-class poet whose nuanced poems convey radical views, later turned to prose fiction in search of a wider popular audience.⁴⁷

What working-class women *did* have was the individual *tessitura* of a collective autobiographical voice; the intensity and autonomy of their lyrical

gifts (often carefully nurtured in early childhood); and an ardent desire to add a corrective truth – a dissenting ‘memorie’ – to more familiar canonical representations of literary consciousness (which they often knew by heart). In their ‘ballads of memorie’, especially in Hamilton’s ‘A When Aul’ Memories’ and MacPherson’s ‘Farewell to the New Noel’ – one can, I believe, hear the haunting alto voice that arrested Gabriel Conroy as the snow fell softly in the dark throughout all Ireland on the gravestones of the dead – not the artfully crafted public sorrow of ‘In Memoriam’, but a different sort of homage to shared fellowship, solitary courage and the limitless ‘fields’ we will never know.

Notes

- 1 In *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1, 67, Mike Sanders identifies E.H., ‘a factory girl of Stalybridge’, and B.T. as women poets who contributed to the *Northern Star* in 1839 and 1838 respectively. For notions of working-class masculinity, see Alexis Easley, ‘Ebenezer Elliot and the Construction of Working Class Masculinity’, *Victorian Poetry* 39, no. 2 (2001), 303–18 (special issue on ‘The Poetics of the Working Classes’, ed. Florence Boos).
- 2 Florence Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain: An Anthology* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2008) includes short biographical notices of all the authors discussed here except Agnes Mabon, and a brief bibliography of 40 more working-class women poets who managed to publish their works in hard covers (350–51).
- 3 Ellen Johnston’s ‘Rifleman’s Melody’ (*The Autobiography, Poems and Songs of Ellen Johnston, the ‘Factory Girl’* [Glasgow: W. Love, 1867], 40–42) is an exception, but her ‘Song of War’, set to the tune ‘Jeanette and Jeanot’, asked ‘What is our House of Lords about – our men of Parliament? / They waste their time in passing bills small trifles to prevent; / Let them look at the starving poor – it would be better far / If they would pass a bill for peace, and end this fatal war ...’ (205–206).
- 4 The concentration of Scots among working-class women poets whose works have been preserved may have reflected rates of literacy as well as cultural respect for Scottish traditions of ‘peoples’ poetry’. In *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 10, David Vincent estimated female illiteracy in 1855 at 23 per cent in Scotland and 40 per cent in England. Jeannie Paterson (1871–?)’s *Short Threads from a Milliner’s Needle* (Glasgow: Carter & Pratt, 1894) contains a rare dramatic sketch by a working-class woman writer, ‘Hereford Castle; or the Rightful Heiress: A Drama’.
- 5 Consider, for example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, Augusta Webster’s ‘A Castaway’, Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’ and ‘The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children’, May Probyn’s ‘The Model’, and Alice Meynell’s ‘The Study’.
- 6 Another exception may be ‘One More Bruised Heart!’ by the anarchist poet Louisa Sarah Bevington, apparently a protest against child rape.
- 7 See for example ‘Magdalen – A Tale of Christmas Eve’, *Ben Brierley’s Journal*, December 1871; Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 240–41; *Ben Brierley’s Journal*, 1 August 1874.
- 8 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 217–18; Johnston, *Autobiography*, 11.

- 9 Drawing on records made available by <http://scotlandsppeople.gov.uk>, Gustav Klaus has established that 16-year-old Mary Johnston married Robert Thomson in 1868, and the couple lived with Ellen Johnston at 65 Maitland Street, Glasgow, at the time of the April 1871 census. Klaus, ‘New Light on Ellen Johnston, the Factory Girl’, *Notes and Queries* no. 55 (2008), 430–33.
- 10 Johnston, *Autobiography*, 40.
- 11 The Old Monkland census for 1841 listed Marion Hamilton as a fifteen-year-old girl living with her parents and George Hamilton, her 2-year old son. She appeared in 1861 as Marion Mader, with her son George aged 21, still living with her parents, and in 1881 Marion is listed as Marion Hadyn. Yet the name on George’s tombstone is George Hamilton. Since Marion seems to have lived with her parents throughout her life and her son’s legal surname was Hamilton, one might surmise that her marital life may have been brief at best.
- 12 Peter Scheckner, *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry: Poetry of the British Working Class, 1830–1850* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989). In W.J. Linton’s ‘Revenge’, a heartless landlord is ambushed and murdered, but though many witness the crime, none betray the doer: ‘O Wrong! Thou hast a fearful brood: / What inquest can ye need, / Who know Revenge but reap’t the seed / Of blood’ (Brian Maidment, *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* ([Manchester: Carcanet, 1987]), 244). Gerald Massey’s ‘Song of the Red Republican’ exults in the hope of revolutionary vengeance: ‘Oh, but ’twill be a merry day, the world shall set apart, / When Strife’s last sword is broken in the last crown’d pauper’s heart! ... Ours is the mighty Future, and what marvel, brother men, / If the devoured of ages should turn devourers, then?’ (Maidment, *Poorhouse Fugitives*, 265–66). More subtly, Thomas Cooper’s ‘Purgatory of Suicides’ enjoins, ‘Slaves, toil no more! ... yea, to the core / Strike their pale craft with paler death!’ (Maidment, *Poorhouse Fugitives*, 137).
- 13 ‘The Drunkard’s Inhumanity’, *Homely Rhymes from the Banks of the Jed* (Paisley, 1887), 145–48.
- 14 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 71; Janet Hamilton, *Poems, Essays, and Sketches: Comprising the Principal Pieces from her Complete Works* (Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1880), 60.
- 15 Hamilton, *Poems, Essays and Sketches*, 341.
- 16 Hamilton, *Poems, Essays and Sketches*, 499–500.
- 17 Hamilton, *Poems, Essays and Sketches*, 483–84.
- 18 The 1841 census listed John and Janet Hamilton’s oldest son as Archibald Hamilton, age 30, a shoemaker then living at home.
- 19 See, for example, Frances Power Cobbe, ‘Wife-Torture in England’, in *Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors*, ed. Susan Hamilton (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004).
- 20 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 324; Jessie Russell, *The Blinkin’ O’ The Fire and Other Poems* (Glasgow: Cossar, Fotheringham and Co., 1877), 30. Since the publication of *Working-Class Women Poets* I have learned from Russell’s descendants that she and her family emigrated to Marton, New Zealand in 1885, where she became a Salvationist and supporter of women’s suffrage.
- 21 See the discussion in Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), ch. 6, ‘Punch and Judy: Holy Deadlock, Separation and Divorce’.
- 22 For example, Augusta Webster in ‘The Castaway’ and May Probyn in ‘The Model’.
- 23 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 208; Johnston, *Autobiography*, 100.
- 24 Other Johnston monologues included ‘Lines to the Memory of a Beloved Wife’, ‘The Lass O’ the Glen’, ‘Lines on the Death of a Child’, ‘The Absent Husband’, ‘The Ruined Heiress’, ‘Marriage Morning’, and ‘The Drygate Brae’. Johnston and Forrester seem to have been the working-class women poets who worked most frequently in this genre.

- 25 Johnston, *Autobiography*, 100 and 127; Forrester, in *Ben Brierley's Journal*, April 1873, 181, and November 1872, 121.
- 26 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 127; Elizabeth Campbell, *Poems*, 3rd series (Arbroath: Kennedy and Buncle, 1865), 28.
- 27 Milton and Wordsworth's odes also seem to have influenced other elegies, such as Jeannie Paterson's 'In Memoriam: Councillor John Breeze'.
- 28 Ruth Wills, *Lays of Lowly Life*, 2nd ed. (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1861), 92–96; Mary Smith, *Progress and Other Poems* (London and Carlisle, 1873), 61, I, V, iii.
- 29 Agnes Mabon, *Homely Rhymes from the Banks of the River Jed* (Paisley, 1887), 145–46; see also Ethel Carnie's 'A Vision', *Voices of Womanhood* (London: Headley Brothers, n. d. [1911]).
- 30 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 149; n.a. [Jane Stevenson], *Homely Musings of a Rustic Maiden* (Kilmarnock, 1870), 30.
- 31 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 128; Elizabeth Campbell, *Poems*, fourth series (Arbroath, 1867), 24.
- 32 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 284; Eliza Cook, *Poetical Works* (London, 1870), 973. Seven-beat lines were also favoured by Ruth Wills and Jeannie Paterson.
- 33 Paterson, *Short Threads*, 139.
- 34 Ethel Carnie, *Songs of a Factory Girl* (London: Headley Brothers, n.d. [1911]), 46–47.
- 35 Marion Bernstein, *Mirren's Musings, A Collection of Songs and Poems* (Glasgow: MacGeachy, 1876). 'Soaring Upwards to the Light' is glossed as 'Song, set to Music', and 'Move On!' and 'The Music of the Streets' are subtitled 'Song for Music'.
- 36 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 90; Hamilton, 'Preface', *Poems, Essays and Sketches*. Indirectly, Hamilton's remark also rendered homage to balladic traditions mediated by Robert Fergusson, Allan Ramsay, Walter Scott, Robert Burns and James Hogg.
- 37 Others, such as 'Mary Lee: A Ballad' (Campbell) and 'The Ballad of the Monkland Cottar' (Hamilton) were specifically crafted as extended third-person narratives.
- 38 The only scholarly discussion I have found of MacPherson's Gaelic poetry is Donald Eachann Meek's 'Gaelic Poets of the Land Agitation', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 49 (1977): 309–76. Meek asserts that 'the peaks and troughs of her own emotions are all too clearly reflected in the uneven texture of her verse', but adds that '[h]er verse therefore contains an emotional drive unmatched in contemporary songs' (314).
- 39 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 178–81; *The Poetry of Scotland: Gaelic, Scots, and English*, ed. Roderick Watson, trans. William Neill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 495.
- 40 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 155–56; Jane Stevenson, *Homely Musings*, 109–10. A quasi-'Presbyterian' variant of this chiliastic warning may be found in 'Grannie's Dream', by Hamilton, *Poems, Essays and Sketches*, in which
- A muckle haun, nocht but a haun,
Was lyin' on the floor outspread;
A haun as big as ony ten,
The colour o't a bluidy red [...]
A soun' mair loud than thunner far,
Rang through the air aroun', abroad;
An' when it ceas'ed, an awfu' voice
Bade me prepare to meet my God. (ll. 39–44, 49–52)
- 41 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 311; Smith, *Progress and Other Poems*, 72: I, V, xxxi.

- 42 Hamilton's commemorations of Scottish Covenanter resistance included 'Bothwell Brig' 'The Ballad of the Monkland Cottar', 'Gran'faither at Cam'slang', 'Some Incidents in the Latter Days of John Whitelaw', 'The Ballad of the New Monkland Martyr' and 'A Real Incident of the Persecuting Times in Scotland', and her homages to her 'Grannie' – the family storyteller – include 'Grannie's Dream: A True Incident', 'Grannie Visited at Blackhill, Shotts, July, 1805', and 'Grannie's Tale: A Ballad O'Memorie'.
- 43 Hamilton, *Poems, Essays, and Sketches*, 283–84.
- 44 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 68; Hamilton, *Poems, Essays, and Sketches*, 169.
- 45 Thomas More, *Utopia* (New York: Norton, 1975), 14: 'Your sheep ... used to be so meek and eat so little. Now they are becoming so greedy and wild that they devour men themselves, as I hear.'
- 46 Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, 183–84; *The Poetry of Scotland*, 495.
- 47 For a defence of this view, see Robert Smalley, 'The Life and Work of Ethel Carnie Holdsworth, With Particular Reference to the Period 1907 to 1931', PhD diss., 2 vols, University of Central Lancashire, 2006.