Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets

1830-1860

Edited by
Kaye Kossick

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NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH LABOURING-CLASS POETS 1800–1900

VOLUME II

1830–1860

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INTRODUCTION

After labouring-class poetry had come of age in the closing years of the eighteenth century, the 1830s saw a significant number of proletarian poets begin to exercise their adult prerogative of being as generically mobile, as disparate and, in many cases, as socially revisionist as their canonical counterparts. The term 'proletarian', whether it is applied to social relations or to literary production, does not do justice to 'the range of experience involved, or to the great array of skills and statuses so clearly evident in what, in the singular, is clearly a tenuous "working class"'.[1] The poems included in this volume therefore represent a thematic and tonal spectrum sufficiently diverse to embrace the parodic whimsy of John Jones's 'My Nose' and the high seriousness of Thomas Cooper's *Purgatory of Suicides*. Nevertheless even humorists like John Jones disclose a strong moral sensibility that connects with the dominant theme of the revolutionary decades between 1830 and 1860 – the desire for *reform*, whether of the individual through ethical and intellectual 'self-improvement', or of the nation itself through political agitation. Scorning the vogue for medievalism that extended from the publication of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shallot' in 1832, to his vastly popular Arthuriad, *Idylls of the King* in 1859, Elizabeth Barrett Browning urged the nation's poets to address the exigencies and passion of the present, turning firmly away from the dreaming past, to face the 'live, throbbing, age, / That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires'.[2] Cheated and maddened by circumstances in ways that Barrett Browning had never experienced, such advice was barely needed by the more explicitly political writers in this volume, notably Gerald Massey, Samuel Bamford, Janet Hamilton, William Thom, Robert Peddie, John Critchley Prince and George Richardson, who were compelled to hope that their words could change both the state of things present and the shape of things to come.

Out of the generic multiplicity in the labouring-class authors between 1830 and 1860, emerge three major, though by no means mutually exclusive, strands of poetry, usefully identified by Brian Maidment as Chartist and radical verse, homely, vernacular or dialect verse, and Parnassian writing in emulation of canonical models.[3] For E. P. Thompson, the idea of 'slavish imitation' is doubly anathematized by its assumptions of class and aesthetic

superiority; accordingly he deplores the efforts of artisans who sought to imitate 'alien' forms of writing, such as the Shelleyan self-figuring of the Halifax carpet-factory worker, William Heaton (q.v.).[4] Yet lack of absolute originality must be weighed against the necessity of engaging with literary discourse 'at the highest possible level', of having a voice 'on equal terms with all others, in the cultural and philosophical debates of the time'.[5] Gerard Manley Hopkins might declare that the 'effect of studying masterpieces was to make him admire and do otherwise', but such hauteur was essentially a bourgeois prerogative. Thomas Cooper's prison epic, *The Purgatory of Suicides*, composed in Spenserian stanzas and inspired by Dante and Milton, represents emulation at its most heroic, both in the magnitude of its aesthetic ambition and in the cultural circumstances of its production. Almost a century and a half later, Tony Harrison attests to the continuing and profound importance of possessing linguistic territory, by declaring squatters' rights over the ivory towers of literary culture: 'So right, yer buggers then!, we'll occupy your lousy leasehold poetry'.[6] Cooper's elocutionary self-polishing would no doubt disbar Harrison's bold demotic, but their formative experiences of marginalization and subsequent determination to surmount it are more than comparable.

Of the poets here who assert the right to roam discursive fields that hitherto had been fenced off and enclosed by the literary hegemony, Henry Brown offers the most direct challenge to Edmund Burke's 'supercilious and insolent' pronouncement that learning would merely be trodden into the ground by a 'swinish multitude'.[7] In *Sunday: A Poem, in Three Cantos,* Brown's working men are exemplars of innate nobility and reflective mental power, creatures endowed with soul and meditative mind, whose aspiration is towards the evolved intellectual complexity described by Whitman — of being 'large', of *containing* 'multitudes':[8]

> Oh! it is fair, the early sunlit sky,
> And glorious the birds' light morning themes;
> And soul-reviving 'tis to wander nigh
> Fresh meadow, fragrant trees, and clear cool streams:
> But o'er me now a fairer pleasure gleams,
> And leads along my soul with holiest thrill
> To note the untaught lab'rer, as he dreams
> In sauntering meditation, lone and still,
> Loosed from his daily toil, upon his own free will.
>
> Look well upon him as he strolls alone,
> And scrutinize his heaven-built form erect,
> And say, in what part of his shape or tone

Thou canst the worthless or the swine detect.
And seest thou in that brow of God's, defect?
Or fault within its eyes' resplendent light?
Or in those looks, with mind immortal deck'd,
Canst thou discover aught, marring the right
Among the sons of men to share their honours bright?[9]

In his essay 'What is Poetry?', John Stuart Mill claims that poetry is the 'natural fruit of solitude and meditation'.[10] In these elegant stanzas, Brown teaches that the 'untaught' artisan's potential for intellectual growth is God-given and infinite, but he also makes it clear that such fruits cannot grow unless the mind is 'loosed' from economic thraldom. The warping effects of social deprivation are manifested in Brown's cultural counter-vision, *The Mechanic's Saturday Night,* where he illustrates that even the most sublime human potential may be degraded into brutishness by the misery of relentless servitude; creating a debased sub-culture of 'dingy, droughty souls', drowning in 'gin and beer'.

Gerald Massey, a singularly powerful voice in radical literature despite later lapses into right-wing jingoism, offers a similar collocation of vegetative 'naturalism' and environmental pragmatism in his affirmation that 'in spite of all things, there will be Poetry in the midst of poverty. It will continually be springing, in its own natural way, in the most bleak and barren bye-ways of the world'. But 'above all', he insists, 'poverty is a *cold* place to write Poetry in. It is not attractive to poetical influences. The Muses do not like entertainment which is not fit for man or beast'. The one baleful fixity in Massey's 'poisoned' childhood had been 'fear of want', and he proceeds to warn that the 'greatest original Genius can only develope itself according to the circumstances which environ it. It needs food to nourish it, and time and opportunity to unfold it. If it lack these, it must remain dwarfed and stunted, and perhaps wither and die'.[11]

William Christmas has noted that Addison's influential essay on the concept of 'natural genius' subtly privileges the more 'radical' utterance that is untrained and unconstrained by the 'rules' of art, a notion epitomized in the Latin proverb used as John Clare's epitaph, *Poeta nascitur non fit* (poets are born not made).[12] As the agrarian economy diminished in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the so-called 'peasant poet' was superseded by his lean urbanized *doppelgänger*, the 'self-made' poet. Addison's fetish of passive naturalism had been displaced by an Emersonian creed of strenuous self-making and intellectual agency. The political dimension that inevitably attaches to the acquisition of knowledge is emphasized by Samuel Smiles, the most famed exponent of 'self-improvement'.[13] In a biographical sketch of Gerald Massey, Smiles praises Massey for having 'triumphed' over adverse

circumstances, and argues for the primal role of literature in the exaltation of the individual and his (rarely her) social order:

> When the self-risen and self-educated man speaks and writes now-a-days, it is of the subjects near his heart. Literature is not a mere epicurism with men who have suffered and grown wise, but a real, earnest, passionate, vehement, living thing – a power to move others, a means to elevate themselves, and to emancipate their order. This is a marked peculiarity of our times; knowledge is now more than ever regarded as a power to elevate, not merely individuals but classes. Hence, the most intelligent working-men at this day are intensely political: we merely state this as a *fact* not to be disputed.[14]

A deepening sense of national unrest after the death of the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, in 1828, and the looming possibility of a struggle between 'property' and 'population', were also facts not to be disputed or ignored.[15] The much vaunted Reform Bill of 1832 had actually done little to redeem the situation of the poor, as political representation and the power that it conferred began its inexorable slide into the hands and pockets of a burgeoning middle-class, while those without money or land perforce remained marginalized and mute. Disappointment and growing disaffection therefore urged a more determined response, and by the early 1830s the pervasive influence of Robert Owen's anti-capitalist schemes for 'co-operative' social advancement had contributed to a volatile *zeitgeist* in which the labouring-class and Chartist credo of 'Universal Secular Education' seemed to offer a way for wage-slaves to become free and enfranchised. Radical lecturers like Henry Vincent argued that 'the hoof of despotism could never trample down a nation of thoughtful and virtuous men';[16] but the 'torch of intellect' was viewed with deep hostility by Tories, like Lord Eldon, who feared that this would only incite the nation's underclass to violent revolution. Asa Briggs records that scores of pamphlets were written in warning against the epidemic of learning and 'the dangers of education "exalting" the poor "above their humble and laborious duties"'[17]. Quite reasonably, the poor longed to be so exalted, and they used an emergent, increasingly affordable print culture[18] to power their progress towards what Foucault has termed the 'apotheosis of the self'.[19] Louis James describes the passion for reading that gripped the labouring classes, and highlights the formative role of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in enabling and morally sanctioning the drive for self-education. Encouraged by Utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, the movement grew at an exponential rate after the formation of the first Mechanics' Institutes in 1823 and the subsequent proliferation of 'Athenaeums, Polytechnics, People's Instruction

Societies and similar institutions'.[20] In David Vincent's words, 'the sheer presence of the printed word had increased dramatically', and this apparently 'limitless expansion in the world of literature fired the ambition of working class readers. In this respect, if in no other, history appeared to be on their side'.[20]

The Lanarkshire poet Janet Hamilton never forgot her childhood joy at discovering a copy of Milton's poems on a neighbour's weaving-frame and later wrote urging labouring-class women to outstrip the intellectual endeavours of their middle-class sisters in the 'march of the mind'.[22] Hamilton's polemical essays nevertheless elevate moral training over mental acquirements. Without 'zealous culture of the heart', Hamilton argues that learning could become a sterile, socially divisive pursuit that might lead the 'proud sulky fellow' fresh from the Mechanics' Institute to treat his fellows and his family with 'insulting patronage'. Hamilton is courageous and unequivocal in her denunciations of industrial spoilage and social ills, but nevertheless conforms to the 'separate spheres' model of gender relations, when she argues that a woman's 'strength is not in the head – it is in the heart'.[23] Hamilton declared that a woman had no greater responsibility than teaching her children 'the habits of religion, prudence and industry', for by so doing she would gain 'dearer triumphs than ever were deserved by the most brilliant and successful female lecturer that ever mounted the platform or thrilled an audience with her eloquence'.[24]

To the Manchester dialect writer Edwin Waugh, ignorance seemed tantamount to sin, something to be rooted out and purged. Along with Richard Furness and John Younger (the 'Tweedside Gnostic'), Waugh is an archetype of the labouring-class 'Enlightenment', a man who believed that knowledge was the 'key to freedom' and the cultivation of the 'wastes of the human mind', the chief aim in life.[25] Waugh's dialect poem 'Eawr Folk' depicts a family group of self-educators and presents an affirmation of plebeian domestic harmony that may be construed as a 'strategy for cultural enfranchisement' because it does not 'imitate middle-class values', but rather claims to be 'the seat of those values'.[26] Waugh's demotic idylls are nevertheless even more conservative than those of Janet Hamilton in configuring a gendered hierarchy of masculine and feminine endeavour, in which males are immersed in the more abstract, cerebral realm of music, literature, engineering, astronomy, botany, mathematics and ancient history, while females attend to the domestic realities of sewing and childcare. Waugh's representation of labouring-class life is precise in its contemporary cultural referents (as, for example, when he refers to the popular hobby of growing 'polyants' [polyanthus]), but the myths of domestic community that he promulgates would persuade women of lesser steel than Hamilton that the march of the mind was essentially a masculine pursuit.

The actual reading matter of labouring-class households typically comprised core texts like the Bible, Shakespeare and John Bunyan, with the frequent addition of a more 'radical syllabus' formed by Burns, Milton, Defoe, Thomson, Shelley and Byron.[27] For major Chartist poets like Thomas Cooper and for other radical reformist writers the figures of Shelley, Wordsworth and Byron were crucial, not because Chartists were 'dupes of some hegemonic poetic institution … but because in the romantic poetic were to be found elements of both traditional culture, with its sense of the centrality of a common voice, along with the developmental, self-authorising, autonomous subject of liberalism'.[28] Nigel Cross maintains that if the 'life of Burns inspired the working-class poet, the poetry of Byron was no less influential', for in common with Burns, Byron 'belonged to Carlyle's Camp of the Unconverted and, neither a Tory nor a patron, he was believed by many radical working-class writers to embrace their cause'.[29] Not all were admirers, yet few could ignore such a charismatic presence, and the idea of liberal freedom was potent to all, for even when books could be found, time and opportunity to read them often could not.

John Critchley Prince was beaten by his father when found reading, but remained addicted to the written word, and in Byron he discovered the simulacrum of his own soul. Thomas Cooper experienced a similar shock of recognition: 'I knew nothing of their noble author's life or reputation; but they seemed to create almost a new sense within me. I wanted more poetry to read from that time; but could get hold of none that thrilled through my nature like Byron's. I had read the "Paradise Lost", but it was above my culture and learning, and it did not make me *feel*'.[30] Cooper, perhaps the most aspiring autodidact of all, undertook such fevered ingestion of learning while he worked as a shoemaker that he suffered mental breakdown. However, it was not until his experience of teaching Shakespeare to the unemployed men of Leicester, 'half-insane' with hunger, that he moved towards a Brechtian pragmatism ('food comes first, then morals') and his politics became truly radical. Byron's words 'I would not give my free thoughts for a throne!' blazon the autobiography of John Younger, who wrote in 'Byronic measure', and yet scorned to have an immoral 'hero' like Don Juan 'romanting' in his cantos. The Derbyshire poet Richard Furness, a determined and accomplished satirist who favoured Cervantes and Pope, was scornful of the grotesque blasphemies of the 'horrid crew' of 'gothic' writers, including Byron, and wanted to dispel 'dark' superstition from the Derbyshire community. John Younger launched splenetic attacks against canonical and labouring-class poets alike when he berated Walter Scott and James Hogg for spinning old 'dwarf and witch tales' full of antiquated superstition and 'glummery'. Yet there are others here, like Janet Hamilton and the radical

'weaver boy' Samuel Bamford, who were strongly exercised by contemporary social issues, yet still delighted in folk histories and cherished the remnants of the oral tradition.

Bamford's biography speaks thrillingly of the animistic world of his childhood, inhabited at every shadowy turn by 'Boggarts, fyerin (spirits), witches, fairees and clap-cans'.[31] Plunging into childhood tales of giants and giant-killers, witches, St. George and the Dragon, Tom Hickathrift, Robin Hood and Jack and the Beanstalk, Bamford 'implicitly believed them all' and 'innocently' (or so he claimed) maintained that they were no more improbable than the 'wonderous things' in scripture that 'it were a sin to disbelieve'.[32] Bamford's poem 'The Wild Rider' offers a fascinating cultural hybrid of local legend, mythicized historical characters, and lurid descriptions of 'Owd Mal o' Camburshire', a fantastical hag partly out of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* but also indebted to the sensational publications of Swindells, the printer, with their 'horrid and awful-looking woodcuts at the head'.[33] The picturesque rustic setting and narrative couplets of Thomas Lister's affectionate account of farm workers at the annual hirings fair also appear, as John Lucas has remarked of Robert Bloomfield, to open the door on a 'receding way of life'.[34] But like the works of Clare and Bloomfield they are prompted by more than nostalgia. Thomas Lister was also hurt into verse by 'the power of class, the process of separation',[35] when his family was broken apart by forced economic migration.

The writers in this volume were all subject to the 'extreme insecurity' that is the quintessential mark of the proletarian condition,[36] yet the lives of labouring-class women were made still more vulnerable by the double stigmata of poverty and gender. Mary Hutton's wistful professions of affection for the antiquated tales of faery and folktale from her Sheffield girlhood, are tonally similar to Thomas Hardy's elegy for the supernatural nimbus of the rural past, 'The Oxen'. But Hutton's sombre intimations of her present circumstances dispel all hope of recapturing lost enchantments, and ally her with the overwhelming anxiety expressed in Burns's poem, 'To a Mouse', where the speaker can only *'guess* an' *fear!'* at what the future holds.[37] Virginia Woolf famously identified a private income and inviolable private space ('a room of one's own') as absolute necessities for a woman writer, but even if Hutton, Pyper, Hamilton and Colling had been so gifted, they were still beset by the insidious promptings of internalized misogyny described by Janet Hamilton: 'That spirit of predominance and exclusiveness, which … has met us at every turn, has done its work; and as a natural consequence, we are lowered in our own estimation, so far as to acquiesce in our own inferiority'.[38]

Convivial writers' groups such as those enjoyed by John Critchley Prince (q.v.), Samuel Richardson (q.v.), Edwin Waugh (q.v.) and Thomas Miller

(q.v.), seem not to have existed for labouring-class women, nor were they very likely to receive support either from local 'gentlewomen' or their proletarian counterparts. The bleak biographical facts detailed in their headnotes reveal that Mary Hutton and Mary Colling were subjected to the 'daily envyings' that surrounded the life of an author, 'particularly [a] female one', and became deeply alienated by their putative 'elevation' as writers. The preponderance of labouring-class women suffering mental illness in the mid-nineteenth century was so great that after seeing the 'sad and touching spectacle' of the inmates of St. Luke's Hospital for the Insane in 1851, Dickens wrote that 'female servants are, as is well known, more frequently afflicted with lunacy than any other class of persons'.[39] Colling was committed to an asylum after her 'gentle' modesty gave way to excessive agitation and obscenity. Hutton is described (ominously in context) as exhibiting all the signs of a 'poetic temperament', and frequently expressed fears that her mind would give way. It is telling that Hutton's only diatribe against privilege (ironically against Letitia Elizabeth Landon, herself no stranger to suffering) is voiced in the preface to a volume sponsored by a local group of working men, *The Happy Isle*, 1836; elsewhere in her *Sheffield Manor* poems she doles out what Byron calls 'the soft milk of dedication', though a slight hit is scored when Hutton echoes Gray's *Elegy* in her meditation on the 'grave-bound' glories of the wealthy Shrewsbury family and their earthly estates:

> But levelling mortality
> Must strike the brave, the rich, and high;
> As well as those poor simple swains
> Who tend their sheep on yonder plains.[40]

The life history of 'Marie', a Chorley factory hand, whose work appeared only in periodicals and journals, is unknown beyond her writing, and it is possible, if unlikely, that 'she' was not female at all. In terms of semantic positioning, however, 'Marie's' enraptured but resolute invocations to the work ethic support the patriarchal status quo, and her emphasis on the early inculcation of 'good morals' derives from the mainstream repertoire of 'feminine' domestic virtues. Mary Pyper, the most formally religious of the writers represented here, actually *lived* the life described in Hood's ur-rhyme of home-worker exploitation, the 'Song of the Shirt', a poem to which Janet Hamilton and especially William Heaton show their indebtedness. Pyper speaks anecdotally of her experiences, yet is unwilling to commit them to the formal page, possibly for the reasons suggested by Gerald Massey – that muses, writers and readers are not best stimulated by the grinding dailiness of labour[41] – but perhaps also in submission to the cultural injunction that women should extend compassion and concern to all but themselves.

When compared with the energetic and public politics of Janet Hamilton, Pyper's devotional poems appear passive and self-effacing. But as Pamela Fox points out, while labouring-class women were 'hardly oblivious of their predicament *as* women, they also sought to convince themselves they *were* women by writing themselves into a middle-class script'.[42] The script for middle-class women poets, as William Rossetti defines it in his preface to the poems of Felicia Hemans, is one that exhibits the 'love of good and horror of evil which characterize a scrupulous female mind', and persistently coordinates the 'impulse of sentiment with the guiding powers of morals or religion'.[43] Though diverse in delivery, Pyper's genteel piety and Hamilton's moralistic blasts against sabbath-breaking and 'the demon drink' may each attest to the desirability of working within the confines of middle-class discourse, both religious and cultural. Evidence of the power of these scripts is offered by the Reverend Alexander Wallace in his memoir of Hamilton, the 'poetess of social progress': her 'Christian cheerfulness and patient submission in the midst of blindness, and other trials … are, after all, the true poetry of her life'.[44]

In 1836, Robert Southey expressed a similar emphasis on the primacy of submissiveness and the moral life, when he described the writing of poetry by labouring-class writers (in this instance, John Jones, 'an old servant' (q.v.)), almost as a therapeutic 'exercise of the mind', a rather passive adjunct to virtue, which 'instead of rendering the individual discontented with his station, had conduced greatly to his happiness, and if it had not made him a good man, had contributed to keep him so'.[45] Southey's sanguine assumption that poetry could not of itself generate discontent in the writer may have been correct, but the powerful effectiveness of poetry as a medium for articulating and disseminating radical thought was fully proven in the ensuing two decades when labouring-class poetry emerged as a powerful tool that threatened to dismantle the controlling structures that had kept the people 'low'.

Stedman Jones notes that in the growing class stratification after 1832, 'the self-identity of radicalism was not of any specific group, but of the "people" or the "nation" against the monopolizers of political representation and power *and hence* financial or economic power. It is in this sense that the growing political hostility between the middle and working classes after 1832 must be understood. In radical terms, in 1832, the "people" became the "working classes"'.[46] Their grievances were addressed in 'The People's Charter', which made fundamental demands for a complete revision of suffrage and voting rights, but was also suffused with hope that franchise reform would provide the necessary foundation for the making of a new world.

Thomas Carlyle referred to the 'living essence' of Chartism as 'bitter discontent grown fierce and mad',[47] and thought it improbable that the beauty of formal aesthetic utterance could ever hold a plea against the rage of such 'wild inarticulate souls'. But the Chartists were decidedly not the howling Yahoos that Carlyle implies, and regarded literature, and poetry in particular, as far more than simply a medium for the venting of radical grievance (though, indeed, it was so used and to great effect, particularly in the many Chartist journals and newspapers of the time). For many labouring-class writers the adoption of an 'elevated' poetic style constituted an assertion of intellectual parity with the possessors of power. They believed the words of Ebenezer Elliott, the Corn-Law Rhymer, when he said that poetry was 'impassioned truth, philosophy in its essence', and should be uttered in the 'shape that touches our condition most closely – the political'.[48]

Explaining the reasons for the emergence of Chartism in 1838, the *Northern Star* considered that:

> the attention of the labouring classes – the real 'people' – has been successively (and yet to a certain degree simultaneously) aroused by the injuries they have sustained by the … pressures of taxation; by the operation of the Corn Laws which made rents high and bread dear; by the iniquitous protection of the fundholders which made money dear and labour cheap; by the horrors of the factory system which immolates their progeny and coins the blood of their children into gold, for merciless grasping ruffians; and by the abominations of the poor law act which virtually and practically denies them the right to live. All these and one hundred minor grievances … have roused the feelings of the people and prompted the respective parties to seek a remedy for the smarting of their wounds. (*Northern Star,* 4 August 1838)[49]

Of these injuries, none had seemed more unnatural or grotesque to writers like Samuel Bamford, John Critchley Prince, Janet Hamilton, George Richardson, Gerald Massey, William Thom and James Macfarlan, than the factory system and the dehumanizing effects of mechanization: 'While the engine runs, the people must work – men, women and children are yoked together with iron and steam. The animal machine … is chained fast to the iron machine which knows no suffering and no weariness'.[50] James Macfarlan compels pity for the 'buried life' of the young in the perverse environment of the factory; Janet Hamilton grieves for infants killed by neglect or by design as brutalized parents sink into drunken squalor. William Thom knew at first hand the vice and corruption that infested the amoral confines of the factory bastille, and also describes the agony of loss when his own child died of want. Despite the extraordinary power of these accounts,

it is the 'factory child' of John Critchley Prince who most affectingly comes to symbolize all that is wrong. The 'shatter'd frame' of Prince's weeping little boy indicates his objectification as merely a constituent part of textile manufacture, but it also implicates a world fatally out of joint. The dying child is the machine-age counterpart of the 'hunger-bitten' peasant girl, the lowly 'child of toil', for whose sake Wordsworth's Republican companion, Michel Beaupuy, would gladly fight a revolution: ''Tis against *that* / That we are fighting'.[51] But Prince fears to do so, and it is in poems like this, in the most dramatic and meaningful utterance of labouring-class concerns, that the 'dialectical tension of power and powerlessness, hope and fatalism' is most manifest.[52] Prince concludes his narrative of child exploitation with an emotive appeal to public benevolence and an apostrophe to an interventionist God of 'justice'. Bamford's poem 'God Help the Poor' does likewise. William Thom's memoirs are balanced on the razor edge of contumacy ('the world does not at all times know how unsafely it sits'), but his 'Whisperings for the Unwashed' concludes with an invocation to *mental* fight and divine succour on behalf of the poor. The antiphonal response that these strategic deflections of political responsibility inevitably invite is one that Thomas Cooper 'reports' in his *Life*, but dare not utter in his poems: ''Talk no more about thy Goddle Mighty! … If there *was* one, He wouldn't let us suffer as we do'.[53]

Robert Peddie had literally been used as an 'animal machine' whilst imprisoned on charges of sedition, and he is the most outspoken of the writers in this volume, running closest of all to the point of outright insurrection. Peddie's prison rhymes, in *The Dungeon Harp*, present a remarkably sustained articulation of combative anti-authoritarian views, but the author clearly did not expect his poems to provide a source of income or even to function as a means of Romantic self-realization. Peddie was incarcerated to punish and prevent his political activities, as were Thomas Cooper and George Richardson, but he was relatively free of the need to please the creature defined in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* as *patron*: 'commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery'. In 1802, David Williams described 'feudal patrons' as 'the vampires of the age' who not only 'suck the blood, but the thoughts of the unguarded and unfortunate'.[54] The founding of the Literary Fund in 1792 had seemed to offer a more just alternative to this unhappy symbiosis of writer and patron, but as Tim Burke points out, the Fund soon 'had reverted to patronage in a dismayingly similar form'.[55] Subscribers had still to be wooed and gratified before books could be published.

Two of the best-selling writers in this volume, Edward Capern and Thomas Miller, responded to the delusive glamour of antiquity, the desire to recapture mythic realms and golden ages that sounded the great siren-song

of canonical Victorian poetry. The impetus to 'worship in the hall of ages' may have been spontaneous in origin, but the fierce grip of market forces was soon felt, and the experience of Miller, a basket-maker turned professional writer and therefore a 'slave to his publishers', is salutary. Initially exhibited in the 'literary rat-trap' of Lady Blessington's soirées, Miller, like Capern, was condemned to repeat the generic script that had first charmed his audience: 'to please [my patrons] and win their approval I wrote about the green country and the rural life of England which very few care for now', he wrote in 1869.[56] Despite their admiration for him, Byron had been notoriously cynical towards labouring-class 'versifiers', believing that the humiliation and inhibiting effects of patronage, combined with the writer's analgesic of 'strong waters', would ruin any who vainly tried to make their way in New Grub Street. Nigel Cross maintains that Byron's opinion was snobbish but 'shrewd', considering that William Thom, Thomas Miller, Thomas Cooper, John Critchley Prince and James Macfarlan all 'died on the edge of poverty after various encounters with patronage and with the bottle – to which they turned as a consequence of frustrated literary ambition'.[57] As Benjamin Zephaniah's wry caveat suggests, not very much has changed for the writer with the 'wrong' ethnic or class credentials in the gulf of years since Victoria's reign: 'Now you're an actor do not fault your benefactor, You can't diss your paymaster / And bite the hand that feeds you'.[58]

The works and writers in the present volume bear witness to the perceived power of self-education, though not to the realization of its promised end, nor to the completely *free* expression of political or personal thought. There can be few epochs in British history so pregnant with the potential for political transformation and the elevation of working men and women; but the force of this pressure may be in direct correlation to the extremity of social deprivation that so many suffered. From the life-histories and accounts of these authors it is clear that it was not bliss 'in that dawn to be alive', and few ultimately triumphed over difficulties or survived unbloodied by circumstance. Poems, as Virginia Woolf reminds us, are not 'spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in'.[59] After the devolvement of Chartism following the 'defeat' of 1848, Susan Zlotnick argues that there was a reactionary backlash, a movement of domestic retrenchment in labouring-class writing, that embraced the 'ideology of domesticity', and participated in an 'apotheosis of the home and family similar to that of the Victorian middle-classes'.[60] The outbreak of war in the Crimea triggered an explosion of imperialist fervour (supported by Capern and Massey, opposed by John Critchley Prince) which also diverted the nation's concern as the patriotic 'fusion of self and nation'

momentarily took precedence over fusion of self and class.[61] Amongst the poems given here are examples of 'muzzled' discourse, of conflicted responses to political aims and to the pressures exerted by conventional figurations of gender. Yet the millenarian utopianism of the early Chartist movement, and the extraordinary efflorescence of literature, poetry and song that it inspired, mobilized the 'traditions of English popular sovereignty and English poetics' and offered a 'cultural vehicle for self-identity' that has scarcely been equalled.[62] Out of poverty, the symbolic 'cold place' described by Gerald Massey, came voices that succeeded in investing political thought with the heat of lyrical passion. Out of literal confinement in the dank prison cells of Stafford and Beverley sprang works of visionary radicalism that compelled respect for their aesthetic form, and for their courage, even in those most hostile to their politics. In the central years of the nineteenth century labouring-class poets articulated an intellectual power and manifested a dignified resolve that, once demonstrated, could never again be entirely ignored or forgotten. In books and in the communion of literacy, writers like William Thom claimed to have glimpsed the only vision 'afforded to the poor' of a 'true, and natural, and rational existence'. Their hopes of a world rid of institutionalized inequality were not reified then, nor are they still. What they did achieve was to prove their right of entrance to culture's holy ground and by so doing to urge forward the democratization of the word: 'Church bells rang not for us. Poets were indeed our Priests'.[63]

NOTES

1. Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 3.
2. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), bk. 5, ll. 203–4.
3. Brian Maidment, *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987), pp. 14–15.
4. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 324.
5. Thompson, p. 15.
6. Tony Harrison, 'Them and [uz]', *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1987).
7. For earlier examples of anti-Burkean rhetoric, see Thomas Spence, *One Pennyworth of Pig's Meat; or Lessons for the Swinish Multitude* (Little-Turnstile, High Holborn: Hive of Liberty, 1793–95).
8. A reworking of Walt Whitman's words from 'Song of Myself' (1855), pt. 51.
9. Henry Brown, *Sunday*, stanzas xvi-xvii (q.v.).
10. John Stuart Mill, 'What is Poetry?', *Monthly Repository*, VII (1833), 60–70; quoted in Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 59.
11. Gerald Massey, Preface to *The Ballad of Babe Christabel and other Poems* (q.v.).
12. *Eighteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets*, vol. I, p. xix.

13 J. F. C. Harrison writes that Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859) grew 'out of a series of talks which he gave to a little mutual improvement society in Leeds in 1845'. Smiles's homiletics on the development of the key values of 'thrift', 'character' and 'duty' were disseminated world-wide, though he claimed his ideas were already extant. Such periodicals as the *Penny Magazine* and *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* had from 1832 'printed many "instructive" and "improving" articles … and from then on the scope was widened to include success in business and the pursuits of common life. Beginning in 1848–52 … the literature of success became a spate in the late fifties and sixties', 'The Victorian Gospel of Success', *Victorian Studies,* no. 1 (December 1957), 155–64, 157–7.

14 'A Biographic Sketch. From an article written by Dr. S. Smiles, in "Eliza Cook's Journal", 1851', in Gerald Massey, *The Ballad of Babe Christabel with other Lyrical Poems* (fifth edition, revised and enlarged, London: David Bogue, 1855), p. 226.

15 Asa Briggs, p. 203. *England in the Age of Improvement 1783–1867 (London: The Folio Society, 2000), p. 206.*

16 Quoted in David Jones, *Chartism and the Chartists* (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 40.

17 Briggs, p. 203.

18 Webb concluded that by the 1840s 'between two-thirds and three-quarters of the working class could read'. See R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790–1840,* cited in Harold Perkin, *The Structured Crowd: Essays in English Social History* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 50.

19 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London, 1987), p. 264.

20 Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man 1830–50: A Study of the Literature produced for the Working Classes in early Victorian Urban England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 4. The fictional experiences of Thomas Hardy's self-taught protagonist in *Jude the Obscure,* and his endlessly unrealized vision of becoming a scholar at 'Christminster' dramatize the cultural fact that class differentials would continue to exert exclusive power, even after the General Education act of 1870.

21 David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London: Europa, 1981), p. 116.

22 Janet Hamilton, 'Address to Working-Women', *Poems, Essays, and Sketches* (Glasgow: J. Maclehose, 1880), p. 394.

23 Hamilton, 'Social Science Essay on Self-Education', *Poems, Essays, and Sketches* (Glasgow: J. Maclehose, 1880), p. 379.

24 Hamilton, *Poems, Essays, and Sketches* (Glasgow: J. Maclehose, 1880), p. 380.

25 Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 41, 48.

26 Larry McCauley, '"Eawr Folk": Language, Class, and Identity in Victorian Dialect Poetry', *Victorian Poetry,* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 299.

27 Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth-Century Grub Street* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 129.

28 Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 30.

29 Cross, p. 129.

30 Thomas Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1872), p. 35. Quoted in Cross, p. 129.

31 Samuel Bamford, *Early Days,* p. 34.

[32] Bamford, pp. 90–1.

[33] Bamford, p. 90.

[34] John Lucas, 'Bloomfield and Clare', in *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition*, ed. John Goodridge (Helpston: The John Clare Society and the Margaret Grainger Memorial Trust, 1994), p. 65.

[35] Lucas, p. 66.

[36] Joyce (1994), p. 31.

[37] Robert Burns, 'To a Mouse' (1786, Kilmarnock edition).

[38] Hamilton, 'Address to Working-Women', *Poems, Essays, and Sketches* (Glasgow: J. Maclehose, 1880), p. 393.

[39] Elaine Showalter, 'Victorian Women and Insanity', in *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era*, ed. Andrew Scull (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 13.

[40] Mary Hutton, 'The Prospect from Sheffield Manor Hill' (q.v.).

[41] It is interesting, however, that the chaos caused by a woman's failure to perform her daily domestic 'duties' provides ample comic pathos for Edwin Waugh in 'Dinner Time' (q.v.).

[42] Pamela Fox, *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel, 1890–1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 103.

[43] *The Poetical Works of Felicia Hemans* (London, 1873), p. xxvii; quoted in Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 320.

[44] Hamilton, *Poems, Essays, and Sketches* (1880), p. 39.

[45] Robert Southey, *The Lives and Works of Uneducated Poets, To Which are Added, Attempts in Verse, by John Jones, An Old Servant* (London: John Murray, 1831), p. 12.

[46] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 104.

[47] Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism* (1831), chapter 1, quoted in Stedman Jones, p. 90.

[48] *The Poetical Works of Ebenezer Elliott* (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1840), p. 100. I am much indebted to Scott McEathron for tracing the source of this popular but elusive quotation.

[49] Quoted in Stedman Jones, p. 104.

[50] J. P. Kay, *Moral and Physical Condition of the Operatives employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (1832), p. 4, quoted in Briggs, p. 55.

[51] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, IX, ll. 510–24.

[52] Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 228.

[53] *The Life of Thomas Cooper* (q.v.).

[54] From David Williams, *The Claims of Literature* (1802), quoted in *Eighteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets*, vol. III., p. xiii.

[55] *Eighteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets*, vol. III., p. xiv.

[56] *Eighteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets*, vol. III., p. xiv.

[57] Cross, p. 140.

[58] From *Too Black, Too Strong* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2001).

[59] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Grafton Books, 1987), p. 41.

[60] Susan Zlotnick, '"A Thousand Times I'd be a Factory Girl": Dialect, Domesticity, and Working-Class Women's Poetry', *Victorian Studies*, no. 35 (1991), 7–27; p. 9.

[61] Armstrong, p. 229.

[62] Janowitz, p. 138.

[63] William Thom, *Rhymes and Recollections of a Hand-Loom Weaver* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1880), pp. 7–8.

CHRONOLOGY, 1830–60

1830 George IV dies and is succeeded by William IV. The Manchester and Liverpool Railway opens. Revolution in Russian-occupied Poland. Charles Lyell publishes *The Principles of Geology.* The increasing adoption of Roberts's power loom enables a massive increase in speed of textile manufacture and places the future of the handloom weaver in serious jeopardy.

1832 Introduced by Whig politician, Lord John Russell, the First Reform Bill sweeps away 'rotten boroughs' and significantly extends the voting rights of middle-class males.
Death of Walter Scott, Goethe and Jeremy Bentham.

1833 First British Factory Act. Slavery is abolished throughout the British Empire. Robert Owen, pioneer of English socialism and the co-operative movement, founds the Grand Consolidated National Trades Union.

1834 Poor Law Amendment Act passed by Parliament under the Whig government of Earl Grey. The chief architect of this deeply controversial piece of legislation, Edwin Chadwick, Secretary to the Poor Law Commission, declares his objective of making Workhouses as 'like prisons as possible'. Six Dorset farmworkers, known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs, are sentenced to be transported to Australia for joining a labourers' union. Pardoned in 1836, they become iconic figures of labouring-class solidarity.

1835 Word 'Socialism' first used. John Clare, *The Rural Muse.*

1837 William IV dies without a legitimate heir and Victoria becomes Queen at eighteen. The People's Charter presents a manifesto for reform. Feargus O'Connor launches the *Northern Star.*

1838 The People's Charter is published in London. Its six main demands are for equal electoral districts, abolition of the property qualifications for MPs, payment of MPs, universal manhood suffrage, annual parliaments and vote by secret ballot.

1839 A Chartist petition bearing 1,280,000 signatures is presented to Parliament and rejected by an overwhelming majority. Chartist riots in Birmingham and Newport. Foundation of Anti-Corn Law League.

1840 Victoria marries Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Last convicts deported from Britain to New South Wales. Chartist agitators are put on trial.

1841 General election won by Sir Robert Peel and the Tories.

1842 Chartists present their second national petition against a background of strikes and skirmishes, including the Plug Riots, so-named when rioters sabotaged mill machinery by removing plugs from boilers.

1845 The Irish potato famine begins causing massive mortality and a vast exodus of Irish emigrants seeking work in England and America. Engels publishes *The Condition of the Working Class in England.*

1846 The repeal of the Corn Laws prompts the resignation of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel.

1847 Ten Hours Factory Bill reduces the hours worked by juveniles and women workers.

1848 In 'The year of Revolutions', Louis Philippe abdicates and the French Revolution is proclaimed. Nationalist risings occur in Bohemia and Hungary. Rising in Vienna, accession of Francis Joseph. Massive Chartist rally on Kennington Common; a final Chartist petition, said to bear nearly six million signatures, is rejected by Parliament. Marx and Engels publish the *Communist Manifesto.* Californian 'gold rush' begins.

1850 Tennyson, *In Memoriam*; Wordsworth, *The Prelude.* First publication of Julian Harney's *Red Republican.*

1851 Queen Victoria opens the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in London's Hyde Park. Over six million visitors view thousands of exhibits at this showcase of the British Empire.

1853 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House.* The Russian navy of Tsar Nicholas I devastates the Turks at the Battle of Sinope in the Black Sea. Supported by Austria, Britain joins with France in declaring war against Russia in March 1854. The ensuing campaign on the Crimean peninsula, 'the Russian War', is dominated by attempts to capture the mighty Russian fortress at Sebastopol. On 11 September, 1854,

after a prolonged siege by allied French, British and Sardinian forces, the fall of Sebastopol ensures Russia's defeat.

1854 Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House.*

1855 Mrs Gaskell, *North and South.*

1857–8 The Indian Mutiny. Beginning with the mutiny of Indian sepoys, employed by the East India Company, then the dominant imperialist power in the sub-continent, there followed fourteen months of violent unrest amongst Indian soldiers and civilians. Aided by loyal Sikhs, the British army crushed the rebellion and Indian administration passed from the discredited East India Company to the crown in 1858. Last national Chartist Convention; formation of the Political Reform League.

1859 Movement for the unification of Italy begins. Charles Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species.*

1860 Guiseppe Garibaldi and his volunteers ('the Thousand') land in Sicily, defeating the Bourbon army in the name of Victor Emmanuel.

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

The poets in this volume are those whose first relevant publication appeared, or is known to have been written in the period 1830–60, with the exception of Samuel Bamford, whose unusually extended writing career began in 1817 and continued for nearly fifty years. The authors are presented largely according to the publication date of the first poem or prose extract included. With regard to the grouping of an individual writer's work, however, there are some instances where the interests of thematic and contextual coherence have been given precedence over the requirement for strict chronological order. For example, Thomas Cooper's autobiography of 1872 sheds useful retrospective light on the political context of his poems and is therefore presented first. Ben Brierley's work is represented in *Nineteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets,* volume III, but his poem, 'Go tak' the ragged Childer an' flit', is included here as a direct satirical response to Edwin Waugh's 'Come Whoam to thy Childer an' Me'.

As far as can be ascertained, there are no surviving manuscripts for any of the poets in this volume. In the majority of cases the copy text used is the first extant edition; all deviations from this practice are detailed in the endnotes. Modern typographic conventions have been adopted; otherwise, the texts have been reproduced as closely to the original as possible with spelling unmodernized. Obvious typographical and compositor's errors have been silently corrected. Archaic terms and dialect words are glossed in the notes.

A database of bibliographic and textual information about labouring-class poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may be found online at:

<http://human.ntu.ac.uk/research/labouringclasswriters/elsie1.htm>

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HENRY BROWN (*fl.* 1830–35)

Little is known of Henry Brown, other than that he styled himself 'A mechanic', lived in London, humbly dedicated his polemical satire, *The Mechanic's Saturday Night* (1830) to the Tory leader of the opposition, and provoked what is surely one of the most cursory and dismissive reviews ever printed in the *Athenæum*: 'a coarse, clever trifle, descriptive of the jovial sins incident to meetings for the purpose of beer and gin drinking. It is dedicated to Sir R. Peel, and no more need be said about it'. Brown himself spoke of the work as a 'trifle', admitted faults in its Spenserian stanzaics and strove to excise spurious levity and slipshod prosody from *Sunday* (1835), his more ambitious work of cultural critique. In addition to vignettes of urban life and character, *Sunday* discourses on agnosticism, venality amongst the clergy, the humiliations of public charity and the palpable wrongness of social inequity. W. J. Fox claims that Brown differs from Ebenezer Elliot, the other 'great poet of his class', in 'not being a denunciator; but writing of evil, bitter and grinding though it be, "more in sorrow than in anger"' (Fox, p. 623). Brown's pen is nevertheless barbed, for as Isobel Armstrong points out, the poem may begin 'with the seemingly innocuous assertion that the poor and rich alike can enjoy the physical, natural world, but the words "Breakfast" and "sup" disclose the contradictions of such assumptions. The rich can digest the scene aesthetically, the poor may as well live on thin air' (Armstrong, p. 131). A deeper, more politicized irony is apparent in the contrast between Brown's Hogarthian *pictura ut poesis* of the labouring classes as a beer-swilling swinish multitude in his satire on drink, and his defence of the innate dignity of working people in *Sunday*. Brown declared that mechanization had degraded every working man to a 'state of complete slavery', yet he believed passionately in a future when 'an educated and a moral people' would rise to their 'proper station in society', insisting on a 'fair share of that wealth, the production of which wasted the blood, the bones, and the spirits of their parents, and sent them in degradation to the workhouse, and in sorrow to the grave' (author's note). The drink-sodden mechanics of *Saturday Night* are bound to the beaten track of 'unenlightened' servitude inveighed against by John Critchley Prince in 'An Appeal on Behalf of the Uneducated' (q.v.). But Brown's Sabbath-day venturers seem imbued with the elevating

power of 'converse with all nobler things'. As we see in the extracts given here, Brown's figuring of human potential is on a Blakean scale—from brutalized, brutish oblivion to the 'heaven-built form' of the meditative sublime.

FURTHER READING

Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (Routledge, London: 1993)

W. J. Fox, review of *Sunday: A Poem*, *The Monthly Repository*, n.s. IX (1835), 623–6.

From *The Mechanic's Saturday Night* (1830)

So that his *skin of Gin and Beer is full*,
The sage John Bull surrenders at discretion,
His purse, his soul, his sense, and e'en his nonsense,
To gratify like a huge *fish* this one sense.
Byron.

RIGHT Honourable Ruler of rich Albion's land,
A swarthy artisan approaches you,
Accept the offering from his dirty hand,
This paper blotted with a verse or two;
The 'mighty mad' shall not assail your breast, 5
No killing tale of love shall urge the tear,
The passions of thy soul shall lie at rest,
While vulgar strains like these shall fill thine ear,
The praise of *Booth's fine Gin*, the power of *Barclay's Beer.*

Ye ladies nine, I dare not ask your aid, 10
Nor will I coax ye from your mount of bliss,
Familiars I can boast with sleight array'd,
Sufficient to sustain a song like this;
The man that in the moon's allow'd to hide
The rising sun, and angels on the wing 15
Shall inspiration give, while side by side
Adam and Eve shall their assistance bring,
The cock and bottle too shall cheer me while I sing.

Hark! Hark! the vivifying hour of six,
Its notes of respite peals to all around, 20
Saws, hammers, axes, in the racks they fix,
And the rough owners hail with joy the sound;
Tir'd Vulcan now from his bright anvil creeps,
The smoke from roaring chimnies cease to curl,
The din of smithies 'neath the magic sleeps, 25
And pond'rous engines cease their mighty whirl,
And motionless now lie the thousand limbs of toil.

The blunt mechanic at paytable stands,
While cautious scribes examine his rough score,
The cash he then receives with ready hands, 30
And eyes the slender total o'er and o'er;
Perhaps he has a thought aside to lay
A trifle, while affection softly leads,
His little lisping one a frock to buy,
Or other little matter that it needs, 35
But, ah! the thought soon dies, the little one still needs.

For see, he joins the alehouse party grim,
Then home and little ones soon disappear,
For what are home and little ones to him,
Whose soul's so often drench'd with gin and beer; 40
Soon, soon he gains the long'd—the lov'd retreat,
The ranks of lusty drunkards fast increase,
Half bashful and half bold he takes his seat,
And the first modest words are *pints a piece,*
But O! what floods shall pour e'er calls for *pints* shall cease. 45

[…]

More *beer,* tobacco, and long pipes are brought,
Spittoons and saw-dust form a carpet rare,
Youth and old age the conclave wild support,
Male, aye, and female, the rich pleasure share;
The frightful tap-fire throws its dreadful heat, 50
A filthy cloud from rank shag stifling rolls,
The uproarious raging whole is now compleat,
And rivals the dim cave where Pluto prowls,
So smoky, close, and cram'd with dingy droughty souls.

Now, order! order! fell disorder cries, 55
A roar of silence round the tap-room rings,

A sturdy cyclop in loud wrath replies,
Attention gemmen, while a gemman sings,
His look so dreadful gives such deep alarm,
All tremble into peace beneath his looks, 60
O'eraw'd, they lounge as speechless and as calm,
As white fac'd subjects 'neath the knife of Brooks,
Or gentle critics fixed upon their better's books.

Hush! hush! the singer his rough throttle clears,
The hoarse preliminary cough goes round, 65
His eyes the ceiling, they upon the ground
Gaze modestly, and backward throw their ears,
Then suddenly into full song he breaks,
But oh! a woful boggle soon he's in,
A shopmate on the suff'rer pity takes, 70
And he, and all, advise more *beer* and *gin,*
He fidgets, frets, then drinks, and all is right again.

Regenerated, then his voice he rais'd,
And sang of cordials and of rich compounds,
But chiefly thee, John Barleycorn, he prais'd, 75
While loud acclaim from every tongue resounds,
He sung too what the 'lower orders' owe
'To the collective wisdom' that ordain'd,
Delirium so sweet for vulgar woe,
Sweet *gin* and *beer*, the groupe by thee sustain'd 80
Then loudly yell'd approval and the pewter drain'd.

He sang too of the shining *two to one*,
That public safe and wardrobe of the poor,
Where laden with their rags poor wretches run,
For then compassion and relief is sure; 85
And how his own sweet charming wife arranges,
His own gay Sunday suit to grace the *shelf*,
And how her golden wedding ring she changes
For baser metal when she *mugs* herself:
Gratefully then he prais'd these means of raising pelf. 90

He sang too how in drink a Briton waxes,
More gentle, gen'rous, and more kind and brave,
He yields the best half of his pay in taxes,
And glories when he thinks himself no slave,
And how when drunk he gains the envied borders 95

Of sense and feeling, by sweet *lush* refin'd,
Then stoops good humour'd to the 'higher orders',
And creeps the earth in peace with all mankind,
Forgiving his worst foes, and to contumely blind.

Concluding now with primest melody, 100
He soften'd down his voice with science fine
Then twirl'd it sudden to its highest key,
And shook with extra flourish the last line;
Then bravo! bravo! sounded deep and long,
While some with glorious rage the tables beat, 105
Others with open mouth and bellows strong,
Keep up a dreadful din with throat and feet,
And a loud crash of glass render'd the din complete.

[…]

Oh London town, whose every alley throbs
With some dark doing or *delightful spree,* 110
Thy *Gin* and *Beer* and thy uproarious mobs,
Eclat and praise immortal bring to thee;
Oh glorious land of smirking mobs how blest,
Ye *useful classes*, happy must ye be,
For when by want, and woe, and ruin prest, 115
A glorious mob will fly to *stare* at ye,
Hail! land of smiling mobs girt by a frowning sea.

From *Sunday: A Poem, in Three Cantos* (1835)

CANTO I

I

OH! sweet the Sabbath morning breaks! Hail, holy day!
All hail! of every other day the fairest.
Come gentle Sabbath! welcome as bright May
After a dreary winter; day the dearest
To lab'ring toil-worn men. Sweet day! thou bearest, 5
Upon thy swift but holy wing, controul

To wild and earthy passion, and preparest
Sweet rest for body, and sweet peace for soul:
Therefore thou shouldst be hail'd; then hail thee for the whole!

II

How beautiful and fair yon eastern sky, 10
Skirted with variegated clouds, appears!
Nature her grandest robes of loveliest die,
To grace the rising sun, majestic wears.
No sounds unholy fall upon my ears;
Around, above, sweet placid stillness reigns. 15
The earth in innocence of early years
Seems dress'd, ere cries of woe and redden'd stains
Of guilt and human kind were found upon its plains.

III

The skylarks now their loved blue realms have found.
Hark! hark! the little things now pour their notes, 20
And soft enchanting music ripples round,
And 'mong the light thin waves of ether floats;
And well the music of their little throats
May please all ears, age, youth, and infancy;
For He who tuned so sweet the angels' lutes 25
Composed the lark's immortal melody,
That ne'er hath equall'd been, nor e'er shall equall'd be.

IV

Clearer and wider now the morning light
Spreads, glowing up from the horizon's rim,
And all the feather'd tribes, ere they take flight, 30
Join in the chorus of their morning hymn.
Oh! who would yield to Somnus, slothful, dim,
These glorious moments! Up! then, mortals, up!
Breakfast with Nature: flowing to the brim
With the first purple day-draught is her cup, 35
And from it poor and rich are welcome all to sup.

V

The mighty sun has risen! in a glare
Of light immortal, onward comes fair day.
The heavenly sunbeams, darting through the air,
O'er fields, and flowers, and trees, and streamlets play. 40

Oh! now step forth, ye wise ones, who ne'er pay
Glory to God on high, for night or noon,
Summer, or winter, or the vernal ray,
The fruits of autumn, or the flowers of June,
The zephyr's balmy breath, or light of stars and moon. 45

VI

Come, walk abroad with me, where berries red
And woodland blossoms their young graces show;
Or where the clear brooks, in their pebbled bed,
Through fields of cowslips and of daisies flow;
Or where the peerless, beauteous roses grow, 50
And gorgeous tulips and fair lilies spring;
Where summer fruits in sunny richness glow,
Upon their native branches, and where cling
The fruitful vines, and their large luscious clusters swing.

VII

Or, if thou wilt, the moments we'll beguile 55
On the high mountain, and the rocky waste
Shall be our theme; how the enormous pile
Came heap'd thus high above the howling blast.
And we will reason of the orbs, far cast
Abroad to roam the mighty realms of air; 60
And of the earth, its empires, kingdoms, past;
Its seas, its oceans, plains, and valleys fair,
And the warm deathless mass of life enkindled there.

VIII

And generous thought for thought we will exchange,
And the all-wondrous laws of things we'll scan, 65
That through all matter, motion, regions range,
And regulate bird, insect, beast, and man:
And (if thou canst) inform me how the plan
Of mundane and celestial government
Began with chance, and how each creature's span 70
Of ever-changing life by chance was lent;
And on thy story vast my soul shall wait intent.

IX

Perhaps thou'lt say, how thy great godhead, Chance,
Wrought in the moment of creation, when

He roused young life up from chaotic trance, 75
And fix'd its home in sea, in field, in glen,
Beneath the earth, in lofty tree, dark den,
In icy climate and 'neath burning sun,
In parchy desert, and in cold damp fen,
And taught it how to fly, crawl, leap, and run, 80
And left imperfect in the range of nature, none.

X

Fain would I hear thee converse of *thy* god,
The sightless Chance, how gloriously he laid
Nature's foundation with his sudden nod,
And all his creatures carefully array'd, 85
And variously and beautifully made
Their forms, their statures, tempers, and did bless,
And fasten each for ever in its grade,
Distinguish'd by its faculties, and dress,
Without the strength to rise, or weakness to be less. 90

XI

What! dost thou say yon blazing world of light,
In space all measureless upheld, and they,
The sweet fair stars, that glitter through the night,
Owe to thy godhead, Chance, their natal day?
And the mysterious comet, whose bright ray 95
Stretches through heaven, leaving mortal mind,
With all its boast of strength and searching ray,
Giddy with doubt and wonder, far behind;
Is this a chance-child too of thy great godhead, blind?

XII

And dost thou say the heedless Chance supplied 100
The insect's shape, the huge behemoth's stature!
The tiger's sharpen'd claw, the peacock's pride,
The lion's strength, the ladybird's weak nature,
The teeth of crocodile, each wondrous feature
Of ocean-monster, giant-made and small, 105
And all the mental powers that fill each creature,
From the low worms that in the dark earth crawl,
To man's light bounding mind, that strides and rules o'er all?

XIII

Enough! enough! the changing moon, that borrows
Her light serene; the raging storms, that lower; 110
The lovely growth and sweetness, joys and sorrows
Of all that breathe with life, or bloom with flower;
Dark winter's ice and snows, fair April's shower,
The sky's light ether, and earth's vapour dense,
All! all! proclaim one high designing Power, 115
And ev'ry spark of life, and soul, and sense,
All! all! deny thy god, with mighty eloquence.

XIV

Now higher yet the car of Sol hath mounted,
From mortals' eyes the powers of Somnus creep;
And the dim prince of night the hour hath counted, 120
Which bids him loose his bands of drowsy sleep.
Forth into light the early risers leap:
Rough working-men come strolling at their ease;
Their looks of calm and leisure show how deep
They sip the balm of Sunday morning's breeze, 125
And how their springing hearts its sunny moments please.

XV

Still apron'd, and all cleanly clad and shaven,
Some in small groups of twos and threes repair;
Others, still tinged with smithies, dark as raven,
Stroll forth to celebrate this morning fair. 130
And, oh, look well upon each face, and there
Behold how deep the power of Sabbath darts,
And sooths away the gloom of want and care,
And charms the six days' trouble from their hearts!
Such blessedness and peace the Sabbath morn imparts. 135

XVI

Oh! it is fair, the early sunlit sky,
And glorious the birds' light morning themes;
And soul-reviving 'tis to wander nigh
Fresh meadow, fragrant trees, and clear cool streams:
But o'er me now a fairer pleasure gleams, 140
And leads along my soul with holiest thrill
To note the untaught lab'rer, as he dreams

In sauntering meditation, lone and still,
Loosed from his daily toil, upon his own free will.

XVII

Look well upon him as he strolls alone, 145
And scrutinize his heaven-built form erect,
And say, in what part of his shape or tone
Thou canst the worthless or the swine detect.
And seest thou in that brow of God's, defect?
Or fault within its eyes' resplendent light? 150
Or in those looks, with mind immortal deck'd,
Canst thou discover aught, marring the right
Among the sons of men to share their honours bright?

XVIII

What! if his brow with dusky hue is tarnish'd,
That smithies dim and labour's calls impart? 155
What! though his tongue's unpolish'd and ungarnish'd
With the small tinkling of a hollow heart?
What! though his gait lacks the gay thin upstart?
What! though his form is bent, his garment coarse,
Uncut, uncoin'd in fashion's tawdry mart? 160
What! if he cannot boast 'connexion's' force,
Or trace his lineage up to some dark golden source?

XIX

Why is his brow with smoky dimness clouded?
Why is his tongue uncouth and barbarous?
Why is his humbled form in tatters shrouded? 165
And why his looks and manners abject thus?
Oh! ye, who mincing finery discuss,
And ye, who swell along in king-like state,
Lording it proudly over ours and us,
Perhaps ye'll tell the cause why rags await 170
The bending sons of toil, the makers of the great.

MARY MARIA COLLING (1805–53)

Mary Maria Colling, the daughter of a farm labourer, was born in Tavistock, Devon, and worked as a domestic servant for most of her life. After being 'sent to school to an old woman … to be kept out of the way', she was placed in a Free School at the age of ten to learn needlework. Colling's sewing skills were meagre, but she possessed an impressive spelling ability and a memory so retentive that she was able to 'mind' her poems, only writing them down when she was alone. Colling entered service as a housemaid at thirteen and was given a patch of ground to tend where she realized her deep delight in gardening. Though fearful of being thought 'mazed' (Devonshire dialect for 'mad'), she fancied that the flowers she nurtured could talk and was inspired by their secret confabulations to compose her poems.

In 1831, Colling's sole volume, *Fables and Other Pieces in Verse*, was published by subscription under the patronage of novelist Anna Eliza Bray, wife of the vicar of Tavistock. Although Bray averred that education beyond basic literacy was largely 'not to be desired for the lower orders', she had been struck by the decorous modesty of Colling's demeanour and 'the feeling modulation of her voice, "soft and low"' (*Fables*, p. 18). Following her success with Colling, Bray was furious to find herself inundated with manuscripts from 'hopeful authors [who] requested the same favour that had been bestowed on her [protégée]'. Annoyed 'in the extreme', she complained to Southey that she had tasted 'the bitters of patronizing and lifting uneducated poets' (Letter from Bray, 8 June, 1884).

Colling was equally disaffected with her 'elevated' condition as a published poet, and with far greater cause. She became the target of such intense resentment from local people that she would lie 'crying in her bed' at the thought of their attacks, and once 'whilst so ill' had 'made up her mind to die' (*Fables*, p. 43). Art enabled her to enact cathartic vengeance against 'such persons and their enmity' by transforming them into the toads and farmyard beasts of her fables (*Fables*, 61). Colling's favoured moralistic trope is thus one in which grace and genuine humility triumph over envious malice. One commentator regretted that her verse merely aped the artificial, sanitized discourse of her 'literary oracles', the Brays: 'her language [is] not of her own home, but of her friendly patrons' (Wright, p. 109). In the main this seems

justified criticism, yet the extraordinary metaphorical violence of one poem breaches the bounds of conformity enough to hint at Colling's suppressed potential. Covert rage assumes full gothic panoply in 'The Birth of Envy', an evocation of infernal chaos that belies the 'sad picture of one naturally so gentle' (Wright, p. 109). Given the prevailing insistence on Colling's modest stillness it may be significant that she manifested aspects of Tourette's Syndrome in her later years, becoming 'very restless' and 'swear[ing] a lot' (Wright, p. 109). Colling was deemed insane and confined in an asylum, from which she was eventually released, but her health was broken and she died soon after, at the age of forty eight.

FURTHER READING

Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy (eds), *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Batsford, 1990)

Anna Eliza Bray, *Traditions, Legends, Superstitions, and Sketches of Devonshire on the Borders of the Tamar and the Tavy, Illustrative of its Manners, Customs, History, Antiquities, Scenery, and Natural History, in a series of Letters to Robert Southey, Esq.*, 3 vols (London: John Murray, 1838)

W. H. Kearley Wright, *West-Country Poets: Their Lives and Works* (London: Elliot Stock, 1896).

From *Fables and other Pieces in Verse* (1831)

To Robert Southey, Esq. Poet Laureate, &c. &c.

On being told by Mrs. Bray, that he had most kindly noticed me and my little verses

As the flower that is bathed in the tears of the night,
Will breathe forth its fragrance, the boon to requite;
So, when kindness hath kindled delight in the heart,
To breathe forth its feelings is gratitude's part.