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Some Rhetorical Strategies in Later Nineteenth-Century Laboring-Class Poetry

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In his pioneering presentation of Victorian self-taught poets and poetry, *The Poorhouse Fugitives* (1987), Brian Maidment organizes his material into three principal areas: "Chartists and Radicals," "The Parnassians," and "Lowly Bards and Homely Writers."¹ Editing my own volume of *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets 1860-1900* recently, I found these categories useful and accurate in describing much of what was written.² The most compelling poems for me, however, were those which, one way or another, breached the walls between them. Some of these import "Parnassian" and political writing into "homely" poems, or use dialect forms and local materials to comment on social and cultural issues. They tend to represent communities in serious rather than sentimentalized ways (though this division is by no means clear-cut, as we shall see). And they are often concerned with trying to transform the highly insecure literary position of being a laboring-class poet into a more sustainable means of self-expression and self-representation. By 1860 a tradition of laboring-class poetry was widespread and well established, if by no means secure for the poets involved. A database of laboring-class poets that I have been preparing with colleagues on the laboring-class poets project currently lists 1,420 such poets published in Britain and Ireland between 1700 and 1900, and well over half of these were writing in the second half of the nineteenth century.³ Clearly there were many hundreds of laboring-class poets seeking effective modes of writing and print outlets for poetry in this period. In this essay I shall examine a number of examples of their poetical output, and consider some of the literary strategies these poets adopted and critical issues these strategies raise.

In the scholarly "recovery" of hidden or lost traditions like laboring-class poetry, the issue of quality is not any the less important for having the potential to be

raised, as it were, in bad faith. However much one wishes to resist the familiarly sceptical terminology of “minor” or “second-rate” poets, the question “are they any good?” is still a trenchant one. One problem in trying to answer it is that within the literary hierarchies that are still widely accepted, whole generic areas of writing are regarded as being inherently inferior. I am thinking here for example about melodrama, the first of the literary strategies I want to consider in relation to later-nineteenth-century laboring-class poets. It is a primary example of a form that a number of laboring-class poets use, not just for its obviously popular, attention-grabbing entertainment value, but for its potential to convey the drama of social and individual crisis. The poet Fanny Forrester (1852-1889), for instance, became a regular contributor of melodramatic and sentimental poetry to one of the more successful regional publications that emerged in the period, *Ben Brierley’s Journal*, which was published and widely distributed in Manchester in the 1870s and 1880s.⁴

The daughter of Ellen Forrester (d. 1883), a poet and Fenian activist who had served time in prison and later emigrated to the United States, Fanny Forrester’s own response to the crisis engulfing nineteenth-century Ireland emerges in quite another way, through poems of exile and alienation such as the three-part sequence “Strangers in the City” which documents the arrival, homelessness and lack of resources, severe working and living conditions and consequent premature death of Mary, a “timid fawn” exiled from her native land along with her mother, following a brutal land eviction which has either claimed the lives of her father and sister or at least split the family. This is serious material, but because it is cast in terms of sentimental melodrama it may not evince a very serious response. The poem seems to the modern reader emotionally overlaid, as may be seen in this description of Mary at her factory work, from the second part of the poem “Toiling in the City:”

O’er her work, from morn till evening, bends her sweet and saintly face,
But her busy hands oft tremble, and the tears each other chase;
For she thinks of pleasant rambles through the quiet lonely glen,
And she wonders will she ever hear the birds’ sweet song again.⁵

The tears are frequent in this poem, as is the contrast between Mary’s “sweet and saintly” demeanour and the implicitly unsweet and unsaintly world she is cast into, between the factory full of noisy, dangerous, belt-driven machinery and the “quiet

glen” she remembers, and again between the factory’s noise and the “birds’ sweet song” of rural Ireland, which is cast as a lost Eden. The melodrama intensifies as Mary nears her death, and her death-bed scene itself is repeated in other Forrester poems, such as “In the Workhouse—A Deserter’s Story,” where a soldier, dying in the workhouse, like Mary in her garret pathetically clings to a final vision of remembered beauty:

Come nearer, nurse, come nearer, for my sight is growing dim:
Just hold my hand and sing to me some simple vesper hymn,
And I’ll watch your kind eyes glistening, and my spirit shall rejoice,
For I’ll fancy I am listening to my Margaretta’s voice;⁶

It is difficult to respond positively or seriously to such writing because one’s responses are conditioned by an aesthetic which is naturally weighted against displays of raw emotion or sentiment—with the melodramatic “Victorian death scene” a favorite example of such aesthetic taboo. But there is evidence that Forrester’s poetry was admired and taken seriously by her contemporary readers, including some rather touching evidence Professor Florence Boos has retrieved from the records of the Royal Literary Fund, to which Fanny Forrester’s mother Ellen made an application for support in 1872. Though primarily concerned with explaining the toils of encroaching poverty and disability, the veteran Fenian cannot resist giving vent to a burst of maternal pride in her daughter, who although she is “only nineteen years of age” has “written more than I have—and better too.”⁷ Ben Brierley, the editor who most consistently championed and published her (and was himself a significant laboring-class poet in the period) is similarly enthusiastic, writing of her with paternalistic pride, as one of his most popular and effective contributors.⁸

Nor is she the only laboring-class poet using the intensity of melodrama to comment on the emotional harshness of social deprivation and displacement in the period. The Bristol socialist, shoemaker and poet John Gregory (1831-1922), for instance, writes melodramatic poems about hardship with titles like “The Wail of Labour,” and “Horrible Frost,” the latter again concluding with that trademark death-scene:

O world, cruel world, ’tis a pity to be

A culprit depending for mercy on thee.
My doom is upon me, and this is the cost—
I shall die, I shall die in this horrible frost.

What careth the world for this treasure I hug?
'Tis only a skeleton wrapt in a rug,
With pulse beating low and a quiver of breath—
A little more starving and then 'twill be death.
Sweet Patty, my darling, thy smile was my bread,
Come kiss your poor mother. Dear God! She is dead.⁹

The founding text of the modern critical response to this kind of writing is perhaps Oscar Wilde's *bon mot* on the famous such scene in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*: "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing;" yet the powerful social protest evident in these melodramatic death scenes is undeniable. It may perhaps be that the sceptical response fails to read adequately the performative aspect of such scenes. Clearly a poem like "Horrible Frost" is meant for recitation or performance. Gregory in fact was famous for "performing" poems and publicly singing. "Give me my zither," he reportedly said at the age of eighty-one, "and I will sing sixty songs from memory with anybody."¹⁰ Sally Mullen notes that the records of the Bristol Socialist Society "illustrate that recitations, music and poetry—particularly that of John Gregory—made the meetings 'whole.'"¹¹ It seems to me probable that these melodramatic poems would have a very different effect, and perhaps a more positive one, as recited or performed pieces, from their effect as readable texts in a book of poems. Of course nineteenth-century *stage* melodrama, to which such performances are akin, has itself had a disparaged critical reputation, though this has recently been challenged by David Worrall.¹²

It is important to stress the performativity of many laboring-class poems of the period, not just to try and find a fresh perspective on the seeming excesses of Victorian melodramatic poetry, but also because so many of the laboring-class poets in the period found outlets in performance. The most notorious is William McGonagall (c. 1825-1902), who is still, today, by far the best-selling laboring-class poet from the period. McGonagall is often given the catchpenny billing of "the world's worst poet," but in his time was best known for dramatically reciting extracts

both from Shakespeare and from his own verse. Again, there is evidence that his stage performances were immensely effective, and that his poetry, rather than being simply monumentally bad, conforms to a type of studiedly loquacious and inflated rhetoric whose roots lie in the narrative balladry of his father's Irish oral culture; that it is *supposed* to be excessive and bombastic. Untangling this is made more complicated, however, by the poet's own collusion in the tradition of mocking McGonagall. He often appears to be winking at the laughing reader, as he adds layers of bathos and hammy melodrama to both his verses and his public image. Further layers of interpretative complexity are added by the continuing comic reappropriation of McGonagall, most recently via the character of the shapeshifting "Professor McGonagall" in the Harry Potter books and films.¹³

McGonagall seems to have trodden his own inimitable furrow. Perhaps the most predictably successful performance poets in the late Victorian laboring-class tradition, though, were those who were able to tap into existing popular traditions of performance and singing, traditions which offered potentially large and enthusiastic audiences. The Newcastle-poet Joe Wilson (1841-1872), for instance, emerged from and made a distinguished contribution to a thriving Tyneside tradition of amateur singing, music and stage entertainment. There was a common tradition in the north-east of public house singing sessions, known as "free and easies," and Saturday evening concerts in the "Lecture Room," known as "People's Concerts." Joe Wilson, like his younger contemporary, the pitman-poet Tommy Armstrong (1848-1920), and many other laboring-class Geordie poets, gave a "Teun" or an "Air" to most of his poems, so that they could be sung in places of entertainment. This tied laboring-class poetry to a vital strand of popular musical and theatrical entertainment, and Joe Wilson's poem "Wor Tyneside Tallint Gyen!" ("our Tyneside talent gone") names some of the regionally famous entertainers who had contributed to this tradition. Most were of humble origin, as Wilson was. Wilson himself was greatly valued for his "sweet tenor voice" and delighted in singing. A founder member of the "Working Man's Club," he was a key figure in establishing popular concerts in the club as an alternative to "free and easies." (Among other roles, Wilson was a propagandist for teetotalism, as many of his poems and songs attest.) These activities in turn led Wilson to professional entertainment. As his biographer says, although George "Geordie" Ridley, the famous Tyneside songwriter-entertainer, had died two months earlier, the charismatic Ned Corvan and the great songwriter J. P. Robson were still at

the height of their powers when Wilson took to the stage. Having moved from an early sentimental style to a strong “local” kind of writing, he was able to match and even eclipse the burlesque, broadly humorous styles of Corvan and Robson with a new kind of material, subtler in its humour and more closely observed and naturalistic. In this respect his writing has some parallels with Manchester poets like Samuel Laycock (see below), who built his poems on familiar, identifiable details of speech and behavior with which his readers and audiences could empathize.

Wilson was able to create memorable and socially descriptive “characters” like the handsome but unreliable “Gallowgate Lad” (the subject of a sequence of poems, given from the point of view of his long-suffering girlfriend), or the hapless “Geordy” who, while his wife goes shopping, is left inexpertly holding the baby (and actually manages to drop it, at one point). He mixes soothing talk and sing-song with anxious wishes for the mother’s return:

Then Geordy held the bairn,
 But sair agyen his will,
The poor bit thing wes gud,
 But Geordy had ne skill,
He haddint its muther’s ways,
 He sat both stiff an’ num,—
Before five minutes wes past,
 He wished its muther wad cum!
His wife had scarcely gyen,
 The bairn begun te squall,
Wi’ hikin’t up an’ doon,
 He’d let the poor thing fall,
It waddent haud its tung,
 Tho sum aud teun he’d hum,—
“Jack an’ Jill went up a hill,”
 Aw wish yor muther wad cum!¹⁴

The spectacle of the traditionally macho Geordie male failing in the simplest parental task offers the reader (and, primarily, the audience) a humorous and (crucially)

recognizable take on gender relations, spelled out in the poem's full title: "Aw Wish Yor Muther Wad Cum; Or, Wor Geordy's Notions aboot Men Nursin Bairns." In at least one poem, "The Draper's Appeal," Wilson uses interpolated prose speech to tie the song to a recognizable, humorous reality. He is especially observant of details of domestic life and conversation, as well as describing social events and encounters. Despite the fact that his verses are primarily honed for performative entertainment (and the rhythm and sound of his lines show what a fine performer he must have been), Wilson is also sharply political in some of his poetry, eloquently speaking up for the dispossessed in a poem like "Charity," or for the "Nine Hours Movement" strikers in "The Strike!"¹⁵

It is notable that the strongly distinctive "Geordie" dialect he employs in a poem like "Aw Wish Your Muther Wad Cum" is something he elects to switch on or off in his poetry, depending on what it is attempting. Wilson's poem on the Hartley mining catastrophe, for example, is written in an austere "standard" English, perhaps to reflect the sombre formality of mourning:

By the watch-fire's glow, 'mid the falling snow,
There reigns a death-like gloom,
Whilst prayers are murmured for those below
Immur'd in a living tomb.

With a tearless eye, and despairing sigh,
Too sad, too griev'd to weep,
The watcher's wild and heart-rending cry
Is heard on the cold pit-heap.¹⁶

On Thursday 16 January 1862 the massive engine used to pump water out of the Hartley New Pit had collapsed into the mine shaft, the sole entrance to the mine, leaving over two hundred miners trapped inside with all fresh air blocked. Many worked heroically to try and free the miners, but when the pit was finally reached the following Wednesday, all had perished, probably from the effects of noxious gases. The men and boys were found lying in rows as if asleep; sons were found resting their heads on their fathers' shoulders, and one man was found with his arms around his brother's neck. Wilson's meticulous, spare poetical response to this tragedy usefully

reminds us, I think, that varied dialects and linguistic registers, like the emotionalism of melodramatic poetry, can be a literary choice rather than a default position.

There is a great deal of poetry in regional dialects of English in the period, and I have represented it strongly in my anthology because it has been, I think, under-represented and ghettoized in the study of poetry, and also because it seems to have offered particular freedoms to the laboring-class poets, both in representing a community and set of cultural experiences and to raise wider issues. John Bedford Leno (1826-1894), shoemaker and Chartist poet, wrote in many different styles and genres including strongly Burns-influenced popular song which earned him the soubriquet of “the Burns of Labour.” The late collection *Kimburton: A Story of Village Life* (1875-76), uses a variety of styles including pastoral, monologue, dialogue, comedy and sentiment, and moving between dialect and standard English. These poems both celebrate the rural Uxbridge of the poet’s youth, and offer a radical critique of rural society, a political edge which keeps the pastoral elements from forming a purely idealizing view of the rural world. For example “A Horrible Crime” looks at issues of ownership and “poaching” from the perspective of a landowner’s lackey, one “Jenkins who worked for Lord John.” His monologue is a gossiping account of the catching of a notorious illegal fisherman. We hear the lackey’s indignantly scandalized pleasure in seeing the man caught, but he also gives us the poacher’s own feisty response on the ordering of things:

He sed as how rivers an’ fishes
Was made for the good of us all;
An’ as takin’ a fish from a river
Warn’t collerin’ one from a stall.
Then he sed as he meant to have justice,
An’ didn’t care for measter a bit,
Nor yet for the magistrates either
Who’re called on the bench for to sit.

He said as a fish arn’t a owner,
No more nor a rook nor a crow,
That some one much bigger an’ better
Fust taught them ’ere waters to flow.

Well, I dun no who's bigger nor measter,
Nor one who be better than he;
I have ten bob a week for my sarvice,
An' so had my dad afore me.

Egad! things be comin' to summat
When paupers think God thinks o' they;
An' gemmen who've ruled here for ages
Be challenged like measter to-day.
He's the cheek of old Holliver Crumble
Who smothered a king on his throne;
That villain, too, went out a fishin'
In waters that wasn't his own.¹⁷

Jenkins gets the last word here, but of course the poet is simply using the classic satirical technique of giving him enough rope to hang himself with. His amoral ignorance of any “bigger an’ better” power than the “measter,” and his comically malapropized account of Oliver Cromwell’s name and career, make a purposely mischievous contrast with the clear defiance and eloquent moral argument of the captured poacher. Leno “toured” these poems, performing them to paying audiences, and one wonders how much their success depended on the comic and sentimental stereotypes of rural life (and rural talk) that he undoubtedly indulges in, and how strongly their political edge was appreciated. Certainly they offer evidence of the sort of crossover that can exist between political and “homely” styles in laboring-class poetry.

Leno’s dialect in these poems is an undistinctive southern English rural one, the ancestor of what is now sometimes disparagingly called “Mummerset,” the generic rural twang often used indiscriminately by actors in anything that is to any degree old and/or rural. Joe Wilson’s “Geordie” by contrast is very specific, and enables him to incorporate highly-charged language and speech in his songs and verses, for example in the following exchange between two quarrelling women, in Wilson’s poem “The Row Upon the Stairs:”

Says Mistress Todd—“Ye greet sk’yet gob

Ye'd bettor had yor jaw,
The varry shift upon yor back
Belangs the wife below!"
"Ye lazy wretch!"—shoots Mistress Bell,
"Its true, thor is ne doot,
Last neet ye fuddled wi' Bob the Snob,
The time yor man wes oot!"¹⁸

The insults are fearsome: Mistress Todd here calls Mistress Bell "skate-gob," i.e. "fish-mouth," and says she has stolen the very clothes on her back from another woman's washing line. Mistress Bell reciprocates by calling Mistress Todd a lazy wretch, and accusing her of carousing with Bob the shoemaker ("Snob") when her husband was out. But the disharmony is primarily a vehicle for an attentive recording of speech patterns, and a celebration of a vibrant dialect and its community.

The Lancashire poets of the period are similarly attentive to speech-patterns, dialect words and tones. Like Joe Wilson on Tyneside, some of these poets were tremendously successful in finding an audience or a readership by digging into the hoard of recognizable local subject-matter, character and language. Samuel Laycock (1826-1893) is a very good example, in that he emerged as a poet by writing about the great crisis that hit Lancashire's cotton industry, arising from the blockading of the southern ports in the American Civil War. The consequent "Cotton Famine" of the early 1860s drew worldwide attention to the plight of laid-off cotton workers, and Laycock became their bard. The twelve "Lyrics of the Cotton Famine" that made his name were published as broadsheets, sold a phenomenal 14,000 copies, and according to his early editor George Milner, "were learnt by heart and sung by lads and lasses in the streets of the town."¹⁹ Laycock, himself a laid-off cotton worker, had clearly found an effective way to communicate the community's crisis.²⁰ His style is "homely" and empathetic, written in what appears to be a faithful transcription of spoken dialect. The poems are largely based on the mutualist credo that we are all in this together, and if we help each other as best we can, we may manage to pull through. "Come, Dick, let's have howd o' thi hond," begins one poem, literally reaching out to take the hand of a fellow struggler, and going on to offer the loan of "owt" (anything) "i' mi heawse or mi purse."²¹ In "Welcome, Bonny Brid," a father prattles to his new-born baby, his cradle-talk a mixture of anxiety about the hard

times the child has unwittingly been born into, and paternal pleasure in the sense of hope that the new arrival represents.²² This kind of writing might perhaps be dismissed as a kind of unchallenging poetry of reassurance; on the other hand it offers itself as a blueprint for community survival, and its moralizing can be both strongly political and rhetorically sophisticated, even Parnassian. The later dialect poem “Starved to Death,” for example, opens with two verses that construct and then dramatically answer a rhetorical question:

Starved to death, did yo’ say? dear-a-me!
Why, bless us, wheerever i’ th’ world could it be?
Wur he somewheer i’ Greenland, wheer th’ north winds blow?
Or ramblin’ o’er th’ moors, an’ lost i’ th’ snow?
Or wur he away i’ some lonely place
Wheer th’ sun seldom shoines on a human face;
I’ some far-away desert ’at’s seldom trod,
Wheer th’ soil appears fresh fro’ th’ hands o’ God?

Nay, nay, he’re noan starved on a foreign strand,
But here, awhoam, i’ this Christian land,
Wheer th’ seawnd o’ th’ church-goin’ bell is heard,
An’ charity’s preached in the name of eawr Lord.
Wheer th’ priest an’ th’ Levite on luxuries dine,
An’ nobles an’ statesmen get fuddled wi’ wine;
It wur here, i’ owd England, this “Queen of the Isles,”
This garden o’ eawrs, on which Providence smiles.²³

This begins in a reassuringly conversational style, apparently in the middle of an exchange of bad news, but confidently builds into a biting authorial condemnation of the “Condition of England.” First comes the mock-innocent series of questions as to where the person died, the tone of assumption that it must be somewhere remote and truly bleak, and the reeling off names of possible bleak places on earth where one might expect a person to starve to death. Then comes the ironic response, again presented naturalistically and still using dialogue conventions: no, he didn’t die in a remote and extreme environment, but—shockingly—here in England. This enables

Laycock, in the voice of the interlocutor, to make a withering assessment of his country's economic ordering, neatly weaving in scriptural references to priestly and political corruption, and even sarcastically echoing Shakespeare's famously stirring lines about England from *Richard II*.²⁴ He has thus prepared us well for the pay-off, the speech of moral and political indignation that follows:

It wur here 'at he deed, i' th' lond ov his birth;
I'th' wealthiest city on God's fair earth,
Starved to death within seet an' seawnd
O'th' merchant princes 'at prosper areawnd!
Ah, starved to death in a Christian land.
Eh, dear! This is hard to understand,
Yo'r brother an' mine lyin' stiff an' cowl,
In a city o' splendour, a mart o' gowd.²⁵

What is perhaps remarkable here is how confidently Laycock can make this political speech, easily importing Biblical and Shakespearean intertexts, juggling antithetical images (wealth and poverty, life and death) and ironic details of disinheritance and injustice (a "brother" deprived of any "Christian" care), all without ever disturbing the surface of his "homely" dialect poetry. Somehow this writing has managed to incorporate successfully all three of our strands: homely, political and Parnassian poetry. No doubt influenced by the verbal skills of such key nineteenth-century oral forms as political speechmaking and the sermon, as well as by reading poetry and listening to characteristic patterns of common speech, Laycock at his best is able to transform himself into a highly effective poetical community counsellor-*cum*-spokesman.

Of course not all laboring-class poets were as able to find such rewarding ways of developing styles and seeking outlets, and it would be appropriate to conclude this brief survey of styles and techniques by looking at some of those poets who operated less confidently, or took harder routes than those followed by Forrester, Laycock, Wilson *et al*. In some ways time has been relatively kind to the poets who worked in oral and song traditions, in that their songs are still valued and known in the local communities, at least by folksong enthusiasts. Joe Wilson's songs are still sung on Tyneside, as are Samuel Laycock's verses in Lancashire. Things have been

much tougher on those poets who most strongly embraced Maidment's "Parnassian" tradition. Perhaps the best known of these is Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903), who emerged from almost unbelievably harsh conditions: his father shot dead by strikebreaking constables; the family forced to survive sometimes on nettle soup; the boy sent down the pit to work sixteen-hour shifts at the age of seven; no schooling at all. He was taught to read and write by older miners and lent a copy of *Paradise Lost* by an uncle when he was fifteen. He would become one of the most formidably ambitious of the laboring-class poets.²⁶ But whilst Skipsey has had some presence in anthologies and discussions of Victorian poetry, it has not been for the philosophically ambitious and difficult poetry he worked most seriously on, but for short domestic poems like "Mother Wept" and "Get Up:"

"Get up," the caller calls, "Get up!"

And in the dead of night,
To win the bairns their bite and sup,
I rise a weary wight.

My flannel dudden donn'd, thrice o'er
My birds are kissed, and then,
I with a whistle shut the door,
I may not ope again.²⁷

A similar situation exists for the Scottish railway-poet Alexander Anderson (1845-1909), another formidably learned self-taught man. As with Skipsey's, his poetry was shaped by an ambitious literary classicism, and a striving to move, both physically and mentally, beyond the harshly demanding working environment of heavy physical labor—which both poets nevertheless write about perceptively. Anderson has suffered for his literariness, despite later success and acceptance in his lifetime. He indeed seems to have been well aware that high art was not what was expected of him. In a "Retrospective Ode," he describes a childhood of not quite fitting in, before interrupting himself to address the reader:

But I'm forgetting all this while
My readers—that's if I have any—

Would rather wish to joke and smile,
 Than sigh with me a rhyming zany.
I bow in deference to this taste
 A short, stiff bow—a little awkward—
And turn to finish out in haste
 This rhyme, begot by looking backward.

Turning back from this studiously awkward acknowledgement of his cultural misfitting, he describes a youth spent reading Dante and Ariosto, before bidding farewell to childhood dreams which “pass’d / Before me, ever fresh and novel, / Then sank away, to leave at last— / *Diavolo!* the pick and shovel.” The bathetic contrast between the rather effete Italian oath “*Diavolo!*” and the gritty rhyme-word “shovel” sums up his dilemma and that of other Parnassian laborer poets wittily and neatly.²⁸

But although his more “literary” poems are always interesting (he travelled to Italy and produced from this a substantial and serious sonnet sequence, “In Rome”), the world’s general expectations of him were right in the sense that what he most excelled at was a poetry of industrial and domestic life.²⁹ His biographer quotes the summary of Anderson’s achievement offered in the first volume of D. H. Edwards’s *Modern Scottish Poets* (1880):

He sends on his passions rushing with the trains, and retains in his own bosom and home the peace which passeth all understanding. His aims are high and wide, and his thoughts have an elevating effect of the mind; while he shows a culture of intellect, a nobility of mind and heart and a command of language and imagery which would have been astonishing even if the highest training had been received in college halls or classes.³⁰

Despite the critic’s rather patronizing astonishment at the spectacle of a self-taught poet writing ambitiously, this hits several true notes: in the “passions rushing with the trains,” the “high and wide” aims, and the “culture of intellect.” There is a tremendous sense of scale and purpose in his work, and there are a number of poems that reflect Anderson’s engagement with Renaissance and later literary texts. In Anderson, perhaps more than any other poet of the period, the railway, the amazing new transport system of the nineteenth century, finds its heroic chronicler. Like his

fellow laboring-class poets William McGonagall (discussed above) and the Scillonian shipwreck-poet Robert Maybee (1810-1891),³¹ Anderson finely chronicles the appalling and sudden disasters the new transport systems could deliver; but he also thrills at the romance of the railway, and is well aware of its poetic potential as both a metaphor and a site of reverie, a place where the poet can dream of metaphysics, political progress and social change. Anderson explicitly wished to ennoble the railwayman and his “iron horse,” as he makes clear in the “Prefatory Note” to *Songs of the Rail*.³²

He was also able to “ennoble” family life, as his once-celebrated dialect poem “Cuddle Doon” demonstrates (supporting D. H. Edwards’s comment on Anderson’s domestic “peace”). This affectionate account of a mother putting her restive children to bed makes an instructive contrast with both of Anderson’s principal poetic concerns: the tough, masculine world of the railway “surfaceman,” and the learned intertextuality of the voracious autodidact.³³ As with Laycock (and indeed Wilson), at the end of the day we are left with the image of the aspiring male poet using all that hard-won autodidactic learning and poetical craft to describe something as simple and unpretentious as cuddling a child.

The clear difficulties Anderson and Skipsey have in successfully communicating their Parnassian aspirations may be compared and contrasted with the experience of laboring-class women poets of the period, such as Ellen Johnston (c. 1835-1873). Johnston expends the sort of effort Skipsey puts into his underappreciated philosophical poetry on questions of her personal and literary identity. Again, she was clearly tremendously ambitious, setting out her stall with a bold and brazen panegyric to a powerful industrialist (“An Address to Napier’s Dockyard”—Robert Napier (1791-1876) was known as the “father of Clyde shipbuilding”), and boasting on her title page the patronage of both the Queen and the Prime Minister—a level of patronly achievement unmatched since the days of Stephen Duck, 150 years earlier. On her title page she is billed as “The Factory Girl”—the capital letters and definite article suggesting that she is both claiming unique title to the soubriquet and using her occupation as a badge of poetic integrity. This was a common tactic: Alexander Anderson, for example, used the railway soubriquet of “Surfaceman” throughout his career. Shadowing the seemingly supreme confidence of all this, however, are a number of poems such as “The Factory Girl’s Farewell” and “Lines to Mr James Dorward” which seem darkly to interrogate her

own role, especially within the factory community.³⁴ The poem “An Address to Nature on Its Cruelty” begins:

O Nature, thou to me was cruel,
That made me up so small a jewel;
I am so small I cannot shine
Amidst the great that read my rhyme.
When men of genius pass me by,
I am so small they can't descry
One little mark or single trace
Of Burns' science in my face.
Those publications that I sold,
Some typed in blue and some on gold,
Learned critics who have seen them
Says origin dwells within them;
But when myself perchance they see,
They laugh and say, "O it is she?"
Well, I think the little boaster
Is nothing but a fair imposter;
She looks so poor-like and so small,
She's next unto a nought-at-all;
Such wit and words quite out-furl
The learning of 'A Factory Girl'."³⁵

If this seems unusually self-lacerating, the emphasis on being “small” should alert us to the fact that what is going on here is actually a very familiar literary strategy, one often employed by poets of humble origin. Mary Leapor in the eighteenth century had frequently and wittily berated herself for her supposed lack of physical and literary height, for example, while Ellen Johnston's Scottish contemporary the dressmaker-poet Jessie Russell (1850-1923), openly confesses to “littleness” in her poem “Preface”:

I know not aught of learnèd themes,
Nor of the world of wealth and power;

My little world at home redeems
The voidness of a leisure hour.³⁶

Happily she then fills the rest of her book with poems on such “learnèd themes” as Scottish history, geography and mythology, and on such aspects of “the world of wealth and power” as municipal corruption, labor strikes and the emergence of feminism.³⁷ Laboring-class poets (of both genders) were adept at cannily getting the criticism in themselves, before their official critics could do so, while ventilating what were often genuine anxieties and self-doubts.

I think it would be superficial to suggest that the generic boldness and flexibility the laboring-class poets often display in this period indicate any decrease in the pressures they experienced in becoming poets, which were intense and various. What I have tried to show here is that despite these pressures they often succeeded in writing effectively and ambitiously, and that their inventiveness invites a richer critical response than their work has often received. If we are truly to “recover” hidden traditions such as laboring-class poetry, a fuller understanding of literary and social context and an imaginative boldness on our part—to match that of the poets—will certainly be needed.

NOTES

1. Brian Maidment, ed., *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987).
2. John Goodridge, ed., and Bridget Keegan, associate ed., *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets, 1860-1900*, vol. 3 of *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets 1800-1900*, 3 vols., gen. ed. John Goodridge (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006). I am grateful to Professor Keegan for her work on many materials in the present essay, including research on the Hartley disaster (see note 16).
3. <<http://human.ntu.ac.uk/research/labouringclasswriters/elsie1.htm>>, visited 1 June 2006.
4. For more on Ben Brierley, see Ben Huk, *Ben Brierley 1825-1896* (Manchester: Neil Richardson, 1995); “Benjamin Brierley,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

5. Fanny Forrester, "Toiling in the City," ll. 5-8, *Ben Brierley's Journal*, April 1870, 58-59.
6. Fanny Forrester, "In the Workhouse—A Deserter's Story," ll. 113-16, *Ben Brierley's Journal*, November 1872, 121-22.
7. Florence Boos, "The 'Homely Muse' in her Diurnal Setting: The Periodical Poems of 'Marie,' Janet Hamilton, and Fanny Forrester," *Victorian Poetry* 39: 2 (2001): 255-86. On Forrester see also Susan Zlotnick, "Lowly Bards and Incomplete Lyres: Fanny Forrester and the Construction of a Working-Class Woman's Poetic Identity," *Victorian Poetry* 36:1 (1998): 17-35.
8. [Ben Brierley], "Fanny Forester," *Ben Brierley's Journal*, 23 January 1875, 37.
9. John Gregory, "Horrible Frost," ll. 27-36; *Idyls of Labour* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co.; Bristol: W. Mack and J. Hayward, undated [1871]), 90-91.
10. "The Bristol Cobble [sic] Poet: An Appreciation of John Gregory," *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 7 December 1912, 17.
11. Sally Mullen, "The Bristol Socialist Society (1885-1914)," in *Bristol's Other History* (Bristol: Bristol BroadSides, 1983), 36-67; this passage, 42.
12. David Worrall, *Theatrical Revolution: Drama, Censorship, and Romantic Period Subcultures 1773-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
13. Useful discussions of the MacGonagall phenomenon include Hamish Henderson, "McGonagall the What" in his *Alias MacAlias: Writing on Songs, Folk and Literature* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), 274-94; Valentine Cunningham, ed., *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 585-88; William Donaldson, "William McGonagall," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edition.
14. Joe Wilson, "Aw Wish Yer Muther Wad Cum!," ll. 9-24, in *Tyneside Songs and Drolleries. Readings and Temperance Songs, Collected Edition* (Newcastle: Thomas and George Allan, [1891]), 2-4.
15. "Life of Joe Wilson" by "A," *Tyneside Songs and Drolleries*, xviii-xlii; the poems named are also included in this edition. For more on Joe Wilson and his tradition see Thomas Allan, *Allan's Illustrated Edition of Tyneside Songs and Readings, with Lives, Portraits, and Autographs of the Writers, revised edition* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Thomas & George Allan, 1891), 473-82 and

passim; Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1974), 151-58.

16. Joe Wilson, "In Memory of the Hartley Catastrophe, January 16th, 1862. By which 204 Men and Boys were buried alive in New Hartley Pit," ll. 1-8, in *Tyneside Songs and Drolleries*, 32. An instructive comparison can be made with Joseph Skipsey's "The Hartley Calamity." Skipsey is similarly restrained and also uses (less unusually for him) "standard" English. His poem is written in ballad metre, as a heroic story rather than as an elegy. It begins:

The Hartley men are noble, and
Ye'll hear a tale of woe;
I'll tell the doom of the Hartley men—
The year of sixty-two.

Poems by Joseph Skipsey (Blyth: William Alder, 1871), 107-12.

17. John Bedford Leno, "A Horrible Crime," ll. 25-48, in *Kimburton: A Story of Village Life. Second and Enlarged Edition* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1889), 17-18.
18. Joe Wilson, "The Row Upon the Stairs," ll. 44-51, in *Tyneside Songs and Drolleries*, 33-34.
19. *The Collected Writings of Samuel Laycock*, second edition, with an Introduction by George Milner, M.A. (Oldham, London and Manchester: W. E. Clegg; Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co.; John Heywood Ltd; Abel Heywood & Son, 1908), x.
20. Laycock was born at Marsden, near Huddersfield, Yorkshire, where he worked in the mill from the age of nine. At the age of eleven he moved with his family to Stalybridge near Manchester, where he worked as a powerloom worker until he was laid off. Thereafter he spent most of his life on the Lancashire side of the Pennines, so I think it reasonable to claim him as a Lancashire poet.
21. "Ther's No Good i' Ceaw'rin' i'th' Dust," ll. 1-5; *Collected Writings of Samuel Laycock*, 4-6.
22. "Welcome, Bonny Brid," *Collected Writings of Samuel Laycock*, 3.
23. "Starved to Death," ll. 1-16; *Collected Writings of Samuel Laycock*, 126-28; this passage, 126). The words "priest" and "Levite" are biblical terms for the Jewish priesthood, here referring to an excessively worldly clergy.

24. Laycock's phrasing picks up a number of ideas from the famous speech beginning "This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle" (*Richard II*, II.i.40-52), principally that the island is a royal, providentially blessed, fertile and Edenic garden.
25. "Starved to Death," ll. 17-24; *Collected Writings of Samuel Laycock*, 126-28.
26. See especially Robert Spence Watson, *Joseph Skipsey: His Life and Work* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1909).
27. *Poems by Joseph Skipsey*, 70, 101.
28. Alexander Anderson, "A Retrospective Ode," ll. 49-56, *A Song of Labour and Other Poems* (Dundee: Printed at the Advertiser Office, 1873), 40-43; this passage, 42.
29. Alexander Anderson, "In Rome—A Poem in Sonnets," *The Two Angels and Other Poems, by Alexander Anderson, with an Introductory Sketch by George Gilfillan, Dundee* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co.; Edinburgh and Glasgow: John Menzies & Co., 1875), 121-39.
30. David Cuthbertson, *The Life-History of Alexander Anderson ("Surfaceman"), Author of "Cuddle Doon" and other Poems* (Roseville, Inveresk, Midlothian: privately published, [1929]), 13.
31. For more on Maybee see "Robert Maybee," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Owen Ashton and Stephen Roberts, *The Victorian Working-Class Writer* (London: Cassell, 1999), 65-69; *Robert Maybee the Scillonian Poet*, Publication no. 9 (Scilly: Isles of Scilly Museum, 1973).
32. Alexander Anderson, "Prefatory Note," in *Songs of the Rail, by Alexander Anderson ("Surfaceman")* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co.; Edinburgh & Glasgow: John Menzies & Co., 1881), [5]-6.
33. Alexander Anderson, "Cuddle Doon," *The Two Angels and Other Poems*, 72-73. "Cuddle Doon" is still known and valued in Scotland, and I am indebted to Lorna Sherry for the information that the poem was recently voted Scotland's favourite poem in a phone-in program on BBC Radio Scotland.
34. Ellen Johnston, *Autobiography, Poems, and Songs of Ellen Johnston, the "Factory Girl,"* Second Edition (Glasgow: William Love, 1869), 93-96 and 86-87.

35. "An Address to Nature on Its Cruelty," ll. 1-20, *Autobiography, Poems, and Songs*, 141-42.
36. Jessie Russell, "Preface," in *The Blinkin' o' the Fire and Other Poems* (Glasgow: Cossar, Fotheringham & Co, 1877), iii-iv. A clever and characteristically double-edged example of Mary Leapor's self-deprecations is her "The Epistle of Deborah Dough," where her useless scribbling, ignorance of practical skills and lack of physical height are adversely described by a highly unreliable narrator. See *The Works of Mary Leapor*, ed. Richard Greene and Ann Messenger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 186-88.
37. These themes are well illustrated by poems such as "Signs of Our Times," "The Muse's Protest," "The Carpenter's Wife's Advice," "Woman's Rights Versus Woman's Wrongs," "The Recantation," "Home Rule," "Intimidation," and "The Tower of Thor," in *The Blinkin' o' the Fire and Other Poems*, 18-19, 23, 28-31, 37, 43, and 74-76.

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