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Work on Laboring-Class Poets, Aesthetics, and Politics*

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Article 1

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## Introduction

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## Introduction

WHEN RAYMOND WILLIAMS WROTE of the democratizing of print culture that began in the early modern period as a “long revolution,” he sounded a celebratory note. He did not, however, suggest that the transformation would be an easy one.<sup>1</sup> Recovery work in literary history has enriched our understanding of the many writers of laboring background who achieved some success in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Many of these writers for whom the epithets “humble,” “uneducated,” or “labouring” appeared as essential labels—credentials as necessary for entering the literary marketplace as press cards for press conferences—were poets. Their struggles often strike modern readers as heroic, and their careers may seem miraculous. Touched by the numinous hand of celebrity, their sweaty and poorly paid day jobs now put behind them, they emerge in authorial splendor, possessed of slim volumes of verse.

The emergence of these writers into historical view as laborers as well as poets, however, is accompanied by certain critical consequences. As representatives of the working class, the downtrodden and exploited, they are often scrutinized for their political awareness and critical capacities as much as for their mastery of verse forms or ingenuity of poetic innovation. Ideology critique and political-contextual reading have been the dominant forms of critical analysis brought to bear upon these poets. Yet this emphasis might be said to contradict the animating purpose of these writers, in so far as they were first and foremost poets. Whatever their political alignments, poets have traditionally engaged with intoxicated or metaphysical inspiration, if not bardic prophecy; they have committed themselves to demanding forms and to technical expertise, whether they were writing for Ottoman courtiers, city artisans, fellow drinkers at taverns and alehouses, or country gentry, and whether their chosen medium was the broad-side ballad or the epic.

The most common question elicited by endeavors to bring neglected writers to light has always been “But were they any good?” Pious answers have often

been given to this question: intrinsic historical interest, history from below, righting the historical record with regard to the actual contributions of working-class men and women, challenges to bourgeois aesthetics. Analyzing laboring-class poetry according to strictly formal criteria without some obeisance to the ideological or political stakes involved has rarely been undertaken, if at all. It remains an open question as to whether or not the aesthetic as a category of analysis can ever float entirely free of political or ideological determinants. Yet to subordinate, if not bury entirely, formal and aesthetic questions in favor of social and political ones is to be once again complicit in tying laboring-class writers so tightly to their social difference from polite culture that their achievements cannot be appreciated artistically, but only sociologically. In raising such aesthetic matters, we hope this special issue of *Criticism* might go some way toward rectifying previous critical imbalances between history and the literary, or politics and aesthetics, with regard to laboring-class writing.

There has now been a sufficient body of textual recovery work done on British laboring-class poets for their collective literary achievement to begin to appear to public view. Laboring-class poets could be glimpsed in revisionist anthologies like Roger Lonsdale's influential Oxford pair or Andrew Carpenter's *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, but in order to engage in a serious reading of these poets, a good archive or a penchant (and patience) for microfilm was essential.<sup>2</sup> In just the last few years, however, a wide range of laboring-class poetry has appeared in edited editions both large and small. Noteworthy volumes include Robert Bloomfield's *Selected Poems*, Isabella Lickbarrow's *Collected Poems*, the last installment of the magisterial Clarendon edition of John Clare's complete poems, and *The Works of Mary Leapor*, the first critical edition of a laboring-class poet not named Clare to appear since the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The publication of the monumental Pickering and Chatto edition of poetry by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century laboring-class writers marks a watershed in terms of public accessibility and potential knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Here, over its six volumes and some twenty-five hundred pages, is ample evidence that laboring-class poetry was both a vibrant and sustained literary and cultural phenomenon. On a smaller scale, Peter Widdowson, through the University of Gloucestershire's Cyder Press, has made available new and handy reading editions of such poets as Ann Yearsley and James Woodhouse, with up-to-date critical and scholarly commentary by younger researchers such as Tim Burke and Steve Van-Hagen.<sup>5</sup> As Burke writes of Yearsley, when the stories of these poets' struggles to become poets, and to be recognized as such, come to dominate reading and discussion of their work, there is a danger that what they actually achieved in terms of craft, sublimity, and technical prowess may be lost in a biographical prison house of images and image making. Borrowing the words of the Irish poet Eavan Boland, Burke remarks, "This view of Yearsley as image rather than voice means that she is in danger of becoming 'an element of design rather than an agent for change.'"<sup>6</sup>

It is now surely time to attempt the properly aesthetic critical work that these new poems and new poets require in order to recapture something of their dynamic history as distinctive and often innovative artistic voices.

Hence aesthetic questions are posed by most of the essays in this issue, though their authors do not necessarily come to the same conclusions or have the same views regarding the irreducibility of politics and ideology for aesthetics. Steve Van-Hagen finds that although appreciative criticism of Stephen Duck has begun to appear, particularly in the work of John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, no critic has as yet done justice to Duck's formal ingenuity. Van-Hagen argues that Duck's best-known poem, *The Thresher's Labour* (first published in 1730, revised by Duck for his subscription volume in 1736), not only stretched and refashioned the heroic couplet in boldly innovative ways, but also established a new genre, neither pastoral, georgic, counter-pastoral, nor plebeian georgic, but something distinctly new. Van-Hagen observes that Duck relates the laboring activities he shares with his workmates to "classical precedent," and "experiments with the means of poeticizing them." We thus find ourselves in the midst of a "self-reflexive work," as Duck "poeticizes the very processes through which he arrives at the poem we are reading." *The Thresher's Labour* emblemized this "Duckian mode" of poeticizing manual work," according to Van-Hagen, subsequently influencing later poets of the laboring classes, and some middle-class women, who found it a capacious vehicle for articulating tensions between their poetic ambitions and their socially marginal status.

Although Van-Hagen's assertion of Duck's continuing influence throughout the eighteenth century may strike some readers as contentious, there is evidence to support this claim. James Woodhouse, for instance, in his nearly twenty-eight-thousand-line autobiographical epic, *The Life and Lucubrations of Crispinus Scriblerus* (not published as a complete poem until posthumously in 1896), acknowledges Duck as a precursor before writing some scintillating couplets on the constraints faced by a laborer poet. The audience for Woodhouse's first volume, *Poems on Sundry Occasions* (1764), is described as divided, some reading it "with rapture," while some "drawl with doubt," because it has been many years since Duck "had thresh'd his harvest out," and since that time no other "Rustic had been seen / Who sung so deftly on the daisied green!" (4:189–92). As if emboldened by recalling Duck's example, Woodhouse embarks upon some remarkable couplets that well repay formal analysis of the sort that Van-Hagen recommends:

'Twas then suppos'd no Clown could thrum a verse,  
 So soft—smooth—simple—solid—strong and terse;  
 Fit for sheer Fools in male or female shape—  
 Much less learn'd Critic's keen remarks to scape.  
 None could bind couplets—stanzas twist, and bend,

Figures, and tropes, at tongue's and finger's end,  
 But those that folios, learn'd, would, frequent, thumb,  
 Whose titles strike rude, English, readers dumb.  
 None without Latin stilts could stalk sublime,  
 In bold blank Verse—or more elaborate Rhyme.

(4:193–202)

Turning the tables on his skeptical polite audience, who cannot believe that anyone unlearned in Latin could write good English verse, Woodhouse demonstrates his virtuoso abilities by crafting sinuous couplets in which to parody their fears. His “stanzas twist, and bend,” replete with alliteration and assonance, chiasmus and zeugma, commanding his readers to follow the satirical imperatives that his ingeniously placed commas deliver. The voice that mocks those who “frequent, thumb” “learn’d” “folios” (a brilliant image of casual pedantry) shares the sensibility of “rude, English, readers” who cannot read Latin titles, but, unlike them, is far from being dumbstruck. Lacking “Latin stilts,” the poet nevertheless “stalks”—and captures—the sublimity, not of Miltonic blank verse, but of a still more elevated form, “more elaborate Rhyme.”

While Van-Hagen's work offers us new ways of appreciating Duck's acknowledged “best poem,” Jennifer Batt's essay recuperates a contemporary image of Duck in the London coffeehouse that should spur further reassessment of his poetic output beyond *The Thresher's Labour*. The view of Duck as “thresher poet” dominated eighteenth-century popular culture—thanks particularly to the satirical squibs of the Scriblerians and other would-be wits—and has in some measure tyrannized critical appraisals of his long literary career ever since. Twenty-first-century readers do Duck a disservice if they restrict their ideas about him to the threshing floor and the hay or harvest field. As Batt's research reveals, once his poetry had been published, Duck appeared in contemporary periodicals not so much as a rustic but rather as a literary celebrity who enjoyed royal patronage and frequented coffeehouses, engaging with polite culture in a tasteful and discriminating way. Given the global markets and cultural exchanges within which English coffeehouse culture was situated, we might see Duck as participating in a more globally inflected as well as urbane literary culture than he previously had been seen to frequent. As recent work on the coffeehouse has shown, this locus of English (and European) public-spirited debate was in fact more deeply indebted to the coffeehouse culture of the East and the Ottoman Empire than it was to any native European traditions.<sup>7</sup> As Steve Shapin has observed in a review of Markman Ellis's and Brian Cowan's books, along with “a dark, hot, bitter brew,” coffeehouse patrons also bought with their penny “forms of sociability that were explicitly, if eclectically, modeled on those of the coffee houses of Smyrna, Aleppo, Cairo and Constantinople. ‘The Ottoman Origins of Modernity’ might make Habermas swallow hard, but, follow his arguments

about the London coffee house, and that's one place they lead."<sup>8</sup> Now we can appreciate that Duck, an iconic figure of the laboring-class poet, should also be seen against this culturally hybrid background.

Bridget Keegan returns more explicitly to the question of aesthetics, though she is less sanguine than Van-Hagen about the current state of our reading capabilities so far as laboring-class poetics is concerned. Religious poetry has often posed problems for secular critics, and the perhaps deceptively simple devotional verse of Susannah Harrison is no exception. Yet Harrison's *Songs in the Night* (1780) was one of the best-selling collections written by a laboring-class poet in the later eighteenth century, with a popularity that sustained at least fifteen editions in Britain and America. The book was still being reissued as late as 1823. Harrison's verse is not easy for most modern readers of laboring-class poetry to engage with, let alone enter into wholeheartedly. As Keegan puts it, it will be difficult for most English-reading audiences to follow Harrison's lead and willingly "rationalize or ignore the social and privilege the divine, eternal, and transcendental." Harrison's poems, with titles such as "Longing to be Dissolved" and "Renouncing the World," do not announce a program for changing the world so much as a mystical superseding of it. Keegan asks whether, now that we have a much fuller picture of laboring-class writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than was previously available, we might be able to enlarge our own aesthetic capacities in order to comprehend "the artistic complexity with which male and female laboring-class poets engage religion." Religious devotion provided some writers with enabling poetic license, legitimating aspirations to philosophical elevation and mystical experience that otherwise would have been denied them. Learning the codes of eighteenth-century religious discourse, Keegan claims, makes possible a fruitful reading of poems on Job by a variety of poets, from the comparatively well-known Stephen Duck, Mary Collier, Mary Leapor, and John Clare to the more obscure carpenter poet William Brimble and Scottish weaver poet James Maxwell. Keegan concludes that even when religious verse, such as Harrison's, absolutely resists being recruited into a tradition of political protest poetry, its significance remains undeniable for those writers "whose spiritual rather than social status gave them the inspiration and confidence to write at all."

James Woodhouse claimed poetic inspiration both spiritual and political, and as Peter Denney shows, aesthetics and politics appear inseparably intertwined in the common ground of the eighteenth-century landscape park. Denney reveals how the presence within the park pales of Woodhouse, an established laboring-class poet by the 1770s, not only disturbed the self-congratulatory complacencies of Elizabeth Montagu's moralized landscape but also threw into doubt the very property relations that the landscape park itself had been designed to rationalize and conceal. In the light of Denney's essay, we can read-just our perspective glasses regarding laboring-class viewers as well as views of the countryside as it underwent ambitious building projects such as Montagu's

at Sandleford Priory. Woodhouse was employed by Montagu as her steward during Lancelot “Capability” Brown’s redesigning of Sandleford, and in *Crispinus Scriblerus* he reveals how from the worker’s point of view these idealized Arcadian landscapes were, as Denney puts it, “nothing less than pastoralized fortresses, designed to defend the authority as well as the property of their proprietors against a propertyless, pauperized populace.” Equally important, however, according to Denney, is “the poet’s irreverence,” for that in itself was a gesture of resistance to “the sentimental attitude toward laborers that the Brownian landscape park helped to consolidate.”

The politics of the countryside is similarly inescapable from poetics in Tim Burke’s study of Lord Lonsdale and his protégés William Wordsworth and John Hardie, a cabinetmaker and author of an 1839 volume of occasional poetry. The shared panegyric anxieties of these two poets, as they seek to cultivate Lonsdale’s patronage in a moment of scandal and political instability, are striking. Lonsdale’s right to a magistracy and his masculinity are jointly at issue. Both Wordsworth and Hardie struggle to secure a certain image of chivalric nobility for Lonsdale in their verse as a means of rescuing his public reputation and making themselves indispensable to him in his PR campaign. As Burke discovers, the same difficulties beset the famous poet as well as the obscure poet. Burke observes that as in Wordsworth’s sonnet, “the more Hardie’s daring plebeian voice tries to articulate Lonsdale’s noble masculinity and the repose of ‘truth’ on Lonsdale’s name, the more it seems likely to misfire. The rhetoric threatens to unravel, to reveal instead a vulnerability, in both Lonsdale and his supporters, to ‘vile traitors’ and reproving dissent.” We might have thought there was little left to uncover about Wordsworth’s relations with patrons, but Burke’s discovery of Hardie and his poetry sheds new light on both Wordsworth and the historical import of laboring-class verse.

John Goodridge concludes the issue with a new chapter in the history of laboring poets’ contributions to nineteenth-century British culture. Focusing on shared rhetorical strategies in the work of Fanny Forester, John Gregory, William McGonagall, Joe Wilson, John Bedford Leno, Samuel Laycock, Joseph Skipsey, Alexander Anderson, and Ellen Johnston, Goodridge returns us to the question of aesthetics once again. Melodrama emerges from his analysis as a peculiarly compelling nineteenth-century form that may at first strike modern readers as alien and sentimental. Goodridge suggests reanimating our sense of the theatrical and performative in dealing with such texts. If we do, a new world of more attentive and engaged reception potentially opens up. Similarly, dialect poetry may clash with modern sensibilities, but needs to be read with ears retuned to the recitative dimension of poems performed in public places. These poets’ “Parnassian” aspirations were often inseparably linked with their desire to imbue traditional poetic vehicles with astonishing new content. The railwayman poet, with his “iron horse,” represents a newly ennobled bard riding a new Pegasus.

However, Goodridge suggests, it would be misleading to assume 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.” He argues that despite these pressures, “they often succeeded in writing effectively and ambitiously.” Their very inventiveness “invites a richer critical response than their work has often received.” But in order to deliver on that promise of a more nuanced and less prejudiced critical response, Goodridge concludes, we ourselves will have to strive for a “fuller understanding of literary and social context, and an imaginative boldness on our part—to match that of the poets.”

The authors of these essays have all endeavored in their own ways to provide that fuller understanding of literary as well as social context for which Goodridge calls. Whether they have succeeded in matching their subjects’ imaginative boldness is another matter. They have, however, acknowledged that the poets about whom they write are at least as compelled by aesthetic motivations and ambitions as by political or social imperatives. And that is an imaginatively bold statement in itself.

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### Notes

1. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).
2. See Roger Lonsdale, ed., *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) and *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Andrew Carpenter, ed., *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 1998). Anthological recovery of Scottish laboring-class poets—easily the largest group in this period, according to national and linguistic determinants—has yet to be undertaken.
3. See Robert Bloomfield, *Selected Poems*, John Goodridge and John Lucas, eds. (Nottingham, Eng.: Trent Editions, 1998; second enlarged edition, 2005); Isabella Lickbarrow, *Collected Poems and a Biographical Study*, Constance Parrish, ed. (Grasmere, Eng.: Wordsworth Trust, 2004); John Clare, *Poems of the Middle Period, 1822–1837*, vol. 5, Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P. M. S. Dawson, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003); Mary Leapor, *The Works of Mary Leapor*, Richard Greene and Ann Messenger, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
4. John Goodridge, gen. ed., *Eighteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets, 1700–1800*, 3 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), and Goodridge, gen. ed., *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets, 1800–1900*, 3 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006).
5. Ann Yearsley, *Selected Poems*, Tim Burke, ed. (Cheltenham, Eng.: Cyder Press, 2003), and James Woodhouse, *The Life and Lucubrations of Crispinus Scriblerus: A Selection*,

Steve Van-Hagen, ed. (Cheltenham, Eng.: Cyder Press, 2005). Subsequent references to the poetry of Woodhouse will be to this edition and cited parenthetically by chapter and line numbers in the text.

6. Tim Burke, introduction to Yearsley, *Selected Poems*, v-xxiv; this passage, xi.
7. See Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Phoenix, 2005), and Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (London: Yale University Press, 2006).
8. Steven Shapin, "At the Amsterdam," *London Review of Books* 28, no. 8 (20 April 2006): 14.