2019-01-01

Review of The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830-1910, eds. Marcus Waithe and Claire White, Palgrave, 2018

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Pen at Work:
The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830-1910
Authorial Work Ethics

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Jan-Melissa Schramm writes that Henry Fielding bequeathed to William Godwin "the discovery that realism, understood as a 'network of technical innovations', participates in larger cultural conversations about the state's surveillance of its subjects" (30). And while novels of realism, Godwin's included, did of course allow a mirror, however distorted by authorial subjectivity, to be held up to society for the observation of the state, they also prompted societal critique *of* the state and of society itself. Schramm maintains that novels of the nineteenth century "performed crucial cultural work in an era in which the threat of class war remained ever-present" (32). Her chapter is the first in *The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830-1910*, which begins by making this threat abundantly clear. Editors Marcus Waithe and Claire White use their Introduction to mark out the coordinates of socio-political upheaval in both Great Britain and France throughout the nineteenth century. For readers familiar with The French Revolution of 1798, with Great Britain's 1832 Reform Act, and with the rebellious and revolutionary events of 1848, Waithe and White's analysis serves as the navigational infrastructure by which to approach the twelve ensuing essays that examine the nature and purpose of the work of writers in the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries.

Once the socio-political stage for analysis is set, the overarching question posed by the editors is whether "literary creativity could either be captured in, or distinguished from, the terms of capitalist productivity…." (11). It is answered in an array of illuminating ways by their contributors with Schramm's chapter, subtitled "Literature and the Labour of Representation," outlining the strategies of mid-nineteenth century novelists who "positioned their work as interventions in these great public debates …" (33). She writes:

> Charles Dickens, of course, but also George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Charles Kingsley, opted to depict their the "working-class labouring" man as a Christ-like figure of perfect integrity, a workman whose speech could be

> tried and tested and proclaimed trustworthy in the court of public opinion…, thus tethering the verisimilitude of realist narrative method to the testimonial veracity of those who perform manual work (33).

This observation may be self-evident once stated, but, contextualized against the backdrop of the times, it anticipates and supports the many valuable but less obvious ones that occur throughout the book. For instance, it may seem commonplace for us today to acknowledge the power of fiction – or of visual media such as cinema – to challenge or even transform prevailing notions. But in Victorian times, it took the overt energies of writers of literary criticism such as Edwin Paxton Hood and Samuel Smiles to articulate such claims. Hood, a biographer of working class poets, sought to incorporate the physical labour of his subjects into their authorial identities, and make these visible. He saw literature in general as a form of social labour, writes Richard Salmon in his chapter "The Literature of Labour," while Smiles cast the discipline of physical labour as advantageous to the working classes in pursuit of "self-culture" (56). Each wrote to garner respect for both manual and authorial work.

Informed of their agendas, we can easily see the irony of George Sands' declaration that if she could have dug ditches rather than pen her way to a living wage, she would have. But instead, as a woman and member of the leisure class, the act of writing emerged in her life as the displacement of more recognisable forms of toil. In "George Sand, Digging," Claire Whyte establishes Sand as unreconciled to this supplanting of the manual with the mental, and therefore determined, in various ways across her writing life, to defend the legitimacy of the worker-poet, to situate the writer in the cultural landscape as someone who establishes an ethical relationship to the pen, as the digger to the shovel: both unearthing, both engaged in useful societal productivity.

As the reader moves sequentially through Waithe and White's chapters, new understandings unfold about the divergent ways in which writers, whether of poetry or prose, can conceive of their enterprise, particularly in relation to public perception. We learn from Ross Wilson that Robert Browning's career "was long characterized by work that failed to find its reward in a sympathetic (or even comprehending) audience," (90) and that this failure disappointed Browning. It also frustrated John Ruskin who encouraged Browning to write in a way "acceptable & profitable to more people" (82). Thus we see the perennial and

persistent challenges that artists confront as to when and whether to produce what today we call crowd pleasers, a preoccupation that Gustav Flaubert in some respects eschewed. In a chapter that itself is full of the pleasure of the text, Patrick Bray offers a readerly, at times even humorous critique not only of Roland Barthe's failure to read Flaubert in anything but a superficial way, but also of Flaubert's famous "stone breaking" (98) analogy. Bray makes several playful references to "loin breaking" (99) that suggest how Flaubert's writing "sets out not to propagate knowledge worthy of copying or selling, but rather to pulverize trite formulas and clichés, bringing literature back to the materiality of language and of ink on the page, which de facto takes it out of a capitalist hierarchy of labour" (99).

George Eliot, by contrast, did think in terms of the marketplace and saw literary labour as socially, morally, and historically responsible to the public it served. She wrote a good deal about the responsibilities of the writer as artist, and she resisted the notion gaining traction in the late 1800s that aesthetics should suffice. Art for art's sake did not motivate her. Instead, she accepted that readers desired a message, a moral, and the making of, in Ruth Livesy's phrase, "useful and healthy products" (115). Still, Eliot did not intend to be enslaved to the capitalist hierarchy either, and she declared that, "If one is to have the freedom to write out one's own varying unfolding self, and not to be a machine always grinding out the same material or spinning the same sort of web, one cannot always write to the *same* public" (114) (italics mine). Clearly, Eliot wished to be rewarded for her literary labour and not just financially. She wanted to be artistically challenged, or else she would have sought to please the same audience every time.

As *The Labour of Literature…* progresses, its focus shifts to the ways in which both British and French writers began to concern themselves less with moral ethics than with "writerly conduct" (128). Richard Hibbit outlines how Baudelaire was "always searching for a way to combine his own ideal of writing with the need to earn a living" (144). He cultivated a "dilettantism" that he stood by. It was a way of seeing the work of the writer or poet as requiring both inspiration and effort, worthy of societal appreciation, but also meant to be rewarding for its producer, financially if possible, but otherwise emotionally profitable for the "work alone" (143).

The chapter on William Pater provides some slight contrast, because it at once acknowledges Pater's "moralism" while also making plain that he saw

writing as "craft," (153) as "sculpture," (153) and certainly as "labour" (152). Marcus Waithe argues that "the artisanal and the intellectual enter new relation" in Pater's work as articulated in his 1888 essay "Style," because he "subtly aligns the ethical and institutional models governing their practice" (153). Pater looked to Flaubert, Waithe tells us, for confirmation that the endeavour of writing could requite "literary toil" while also yielding the pleasure of "meditative craft." His essay, along with many of the others in the book, probes connections to French and English literary and artistic trends and movements of these eight decades including aestheticism (art for art's sake), the *Bildungsroman*, decadent writing, fin de siècle, mimesis, novels of literary and journalistic life, and eventually modernism.

The picture that emerges in the final chapters is that, beginning in the late nineteenth century, and on both sides of the Channel, writers of realism, who were striving toward the imitation of life, began to see themselves more and more as worthy artists, not merely as some kind of fictional journalists. Literary mimesis comes to be seen as a form of labour or, in Matthew Potolsky's words, "a kind of production, a way of turning given materials into something else" (167). Oscar Wilde had an ambivalent view of realism, but came to see the authorial imitation of life as socially and artistically valuable because, unlike the work produced by newspaper men with their "ink stained hands" (179), literary art, however realistic or naturalistic, "invents" (179). It therefore is indeed labour, and thus it achieves the status of real work.

The work of machines is another thing, though, as drawn out in the final part of the book. Technologies of reproduction toward the end of the century, while not a direct threat to the intellectual creativity of writers, nevertheless situated literary 'product' more centrally in the capitalist economy: for in a world of easy mass distribution, the marketplace is the determining factor in what gets published. In his chapter on George Gissing's novel *New Grub Street* (1891) Anglo-French connections are fully realized as Edmund Birch probes Gissing's debt to Balzac, whose *Illusions perdues* (1837 – 1843) had also treated the competitive nature of the business of writing. *New Grub Street* confronts commodification in the context of trade and distribution to such an extent that it even undermines the mechanics of marriage, upending love in favour of material success.

"The manufacture of printed stuff" (196), in the words of one of Gissing's characters, is a fundamental concern of the final three chapters. Emile Zola was an intense advocate of craft, with its requisite slowness, as an antidote to the

dehumanizing effects of industrialisation. In a particularly fine chapter called "Worlds of Work and the Work of Worlds," Susan Harrow elaborates the many ways, especially through personal correspondence with other writers, that Zola advocated for an understanding of metaphorical work (i.e. writing work) as a worthy companion to manual work. He also posited himself and some of his own characters as models of an ethic that privileges both pleasure and rigour. "Craft," he believed, could be restorative for an overworked mind and body and, if widely indulged as an impulse, could offer socially antithetical safeguards to "the constraining forces of modernisation" (207).

For all its constraining forces, though, modernisation did increase the probability of women in the arts at the turn of the century. The growth of female-centric journalistic writing of a certain kind in France during these years prefigures women as both consumers and producers of cultural artefacts (224). Nicholas White demonstrates via the work of Zola, Maupassant, Collette and several other French writers how aesthetic development beyond the limits of exclusively male-authored Naturalism gained momentum, as mimesis yielded to diegesis (234). And the final chapter of the book, a Coda by Morag Shiach, looks partly to modernist women writers to locate literary labour in an "immaterial space"— a psychological room of one's own – away from capitalistic concerns and wage-based considerations. She explores the economic precarity of the modernist writer (and of today's modern writer too) by suggesting that it obliquely inspires a certain kind of freedom. If, in Beckett's words, "suffering is the main condition of the artistic experience" (249), perhaps a more "sacred space" (250) opens to creativity, away from expectations of financial remuneration.

The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830-1910 performs, for its own part, the type of labour characteristic of truly thorough literary criticism. It brings together multiple strands of interrelated arguments while hosting deeply informed academic insights so that the knowledgeable reader is brought to higher scholarly ground. Its illuminations are humane, too, in that its subject matter is not the written word *per se*, but the passionate motivations of those who put it to page.