**Poetry & Work**

**Some Thoughts on Paterson**

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*Work it hard, like it’s your profession.*

  — Britney Spears, ‘Work Bitch’

I.

I used to give a pep talk to new undergrads in the first week of their creative writing degrees, with a slideshow of stills from films about writers. They were mostly films I hoped they would know – *Adaptation*, *Wonder Boys*, *Stranger Than Fiction*, *Miss Potter*, *Becoming Jane*, *The Hours* – with images of writers staring into the distance, chain smoking at manual typewriters, unshaven or in dressing gowns, all awaiting the muse. The point was to get them thinking realistically about the work of writing, beyond its cultural baggage. I’d end with the scene in *Breakfast in Tiffany’s*when Audrey Hepburn’s Holly Golightly asks George Peppard’s Paul Varjak if he writes every day, then points out that his typewriter has no ribbon. ‘Don’t be like Paul Varjak,’ I’d say. ‘You have to do the work.’

Poetry’s status as ‘work’ has been up for debate since at least the 8th-century BCE, when Hesiod spent 828 lines of it extolling the virtues of an honest day’s work to his good-for-nothing brother in [*Works and Days*](http://omacl.org/Hesiod/works.html). ‘Between us and goodness, the Gods have placed the sweat of our brows,’ he tells us. ‘Work is no disgrace: it is idleness which is a disgrace.’ While Hesiod is dogmatic about work’s value, he seems less interested in what qualifies as work or not. We’re left to infer that the making of verse seemed worthwhile labour alongside managing the family farm. 27 centuries later, Philip Levine’s best-known book is just as slippery with definitions, despite being called *What Work Is* (1991). ‘[You know what work is](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52173/what-work-is),’ the speaker says twice, almost accusingly, near the start of the title poem. ‘If you’re / old enough to read this you know what / work is, although you may not do it.’ By the end of the poem, in which we (‘you’) are waiting in a queue for daily work outside an automotive plant, any assumption of work’s hard, physical nature is reconfigured towards what we might now call the ‘emotional labour’ of loving each other (or someone who looks a bit like our brother, in this case). The reason we (‘you’) have failed to open up turns out to be ‘because you don’t know what work is’ after all. For either Hesiod or Levine’s lost brothers, is poetry *work* because it attempts to restore some human connection? At the very least, do we understand work as being – like poetry – an activity that necessarily extends beyond the self?

By the standards of self-discipline I hoped to instil in my students, Adam Driver’s character ‘Paterson’ in the Jim Jarmusch’s 2016 film *Paterson*does the work. The film’s seven-day structure outlines the regimen of a presumably typical week: Monday through Friday, he wakes just after 6am, walks to the bus depot, drives a city bus all day, walks home, checks the mail, and walks the dog after dinner. Writing fills the gaps – in voice-over as he walks to work, in lines jotted in a notebook (appearing on-screen) while waiting for his route to start, then lunch breaks, and early evenings again, at a makeshift desk in his garage. In all, we see him finish seven new poems. Not bad for a week.

Yet, the question of whether this productivity can be considered ‘work’ is posed here in several, occasionally conflicting ways. Like other fictional artists at work, the writing routine in *Paterson* first invites us to gauge the amount of the apparent effort involved. By this most basic GCSE Physics definition, ‘work’ is that which involves a certain amount of force. We see this in defences of poetry like T.S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), where the misconception of poets’ ‘necessary laziness’ is rebuffed by a sense of the poet’s training as ‘a great labour,’ which one ‘must sweat for’. *Paterson*’s presiding spirit, William Carlos Williams, also makes effort a mark of value in *Spring and All* (1923), where he writes: ‘The better work men do is always done under stress and at great personal cost.’ Beyond these two modernist figureheads, early twentieth-century poets (especially American poets) generally embraced this sense of poet’s labour, perhaps recoiling from older notions of Romantic inspiration or art for art’s sake. Louis Zukofsky, in his introduction to a 1932 ‘Objectivist’ anthology (which included Williams), writes repeatedly of ‘poetry defined as a job, as a piece of work.’

On the understanding that work equals effort, and compared to other toiling cinema caricatures, the poems in *Paterson*come suspiciously easily. Even when revisiting one in another free moment, not a single word is crossed out or reconsidered. Many are written straight through, titles included, with Driver’s voice-over mimicking the pace of transcription, rather than compositional hesitation. (Compare this to the labour on display in a recent issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, for instance, with its annotated drafts of ‘[poetry in action](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/01/books/review/corral-collins-zhang-poetry-works-in-progress.html)’.) From interviews, we might suspect the character’s writing process is a reflection of the writer-director’s own. ‘[I don’t rewrite](https://www.filmcomment.com/article/jim-jarmusch-paterson-gimme-danger-interview/),’ Jarmusch has insisted. ‘I don’t do multiple drafts.’ In her thoughtful comparison of *Paterson*and Terence Davies’ 2016 Dickinson biopic, *A Quiet Passion*, Lucy Scholes argues that this apparent effortlessness, as much as ‘frustrated genius’ clichés, points to formal limitations when depicting creative labour. Perhaps, her headline suggests, ‘[the lives of the poets aren’t all that cinematic](http://lithub.com/the-lives-of-the-poets-arent-all-that-cinematic/)’. After all, no one wants to watch someone question a tiny decision for hours or days, eventually reverting to the initial choice, then rethinking the entire project in a way that makes the reworked bit irrelevant. Real-world creativity is hopelessly non-linear, full of false starts and trial-and-error. Too much happens invisibly, unconsciously. Cigarettes and crumbled pages around the bin are easy visual shorthands. If a story requires actual progress at some point, a montage will suffice. I’ve stopped assuming writers on film hold sway over students.

II.

If poetry’s status as work is worth asserting, it needs to go beyond semantics and subjective difficulty into more practical considerations of how the making of poems is valued (in various senses) alongside other kinds of labour. To this end, *Paterson*nudges the question of whether poetry *is* work towards a more interesting one about what *kind of* work it might be. In more and less subtle ways, Jarmusch gives us a chance to weigh poem-making against, on one hand, more material types of ‘creative’ work, and on the other, the waged work of Paterson’s bus driving job. The structure and editing foreground a sustained comparison of the former. While Paterson writes ‘at work’, his wife Laura makes things at home: sewing or painting curtains, making or refashioning clothes, redecorating their house, learning to play the guitar, or baking cupcakes for the local farmers market. Immediately, we’re confronted with the historically lopsided status and often strongly gendered division of work that takes place in the public or private sphere.

For the philosopher Hannah Arendt, this apparently ancient division of public and private is partly linked to the raising of intellectual labour over manual labour (or what we now call white- and blue-collar work) in classical Greek society. In *The Human Condition*(1958), Arendt singles out ‘poetry, whose material is language’ as ‘perhaps the most human and least worldly of the arts, the one in which the end product remains closest to the thought that inspired it’ – in other words, as almost purely intellectual labour. Leaving effort aside, this gives us the option of evaluating the work of poetry in terms of its material (or immaterial) nature. In *The Craftsman*(2009), however, the American philosopher Richard Sennett diverges from his Arendt (his former teacher), in his insistence on the merging of mental and manual labour in the work he venerates as ‘craft’. ‘Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking,’ Sennett insists. In this way, *craft* and its products represent ‘the intimate connection between the hand and head.’

But Sennett himself also acknowledges the unequal status of different crafts, linking to Arendt’s distinction between public and private realms in his defence for the male focus of *The Craftsman*. ‘Most domestic crafts and craftsmen seem *different in character* than labor now outside the home,’ he writes (with my emphasis). ‘We do not think of parenting, for instance, as a craft in the same sense that we think of plumbing or programming, even though becoming a good parent requires a high degree of learned skill.’ In Sennett’s historical account, this is simply the way it is. The preface of Matthew Crawford’s *Shop Class as Soulcraft*– also published in 2009, and in the UK as *The Case for Working with Your Hands*– apologises likewise that ‘it so happens that most of the characters who appear in this book are men.’

When *Paterson*premiered at the Cannes festival last year, Jarmusch recalls some ‘feminist French journalist’ accusing him of making ‘[a throwback to ‘50s domesticity, et cetera, with this character of Laura](https://www.filmcomment.com/article/jim-jarmusch-paterson-gimme-danger-interview/).’ He finds this ‘a little shallow,’ however, and is ready with a long reply, which ends with him exclaiming ‘I’m a feminist!’ (Elsewhere, he tempers it to ‘[I consider myself a feminist, in a way](http://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/jim-jarmusch-paterson/).’) To the French journalist and others questioning the film’s undeniably regressive gender roles, he explains: ‘Laura lives how she wants; she does what she wants. She’s entrepreneurial, even if it’s in a domestic set-up like selling cupcakes. She wants to maybe be musical – she’s very artistic in décor – so to say that she is not liberated, if one were to say that, then I wonder how these people think of all the working-class women in the world that are washing their families’ clothes or making food.’ When Jarmusch tells a female interviewer that ‘domesticity is a fact of how social structure works,’ he isn’t far from Sennett’s matter-of-factness regarding the difference in character of that work. Yet, his defence of Laura’s ‘entrepreneurial’ set-up also points to an essential difference between the two main characters’ approach to their respective crafts.

To some extent, Jarmusch comment and his film’s characterisation of Laura situates her creative work within what is often enthusiastically described as a new craft economy. As Judy Hong, an analyst at Goldman Sachs, puts it in an [online video](http://www.goldmansachs.com/our-thinking/pages/rise-of-craft.html) from last spring: ‘We are in the midst of a craft revolution.’ Although corporate finance might focus on the economic impact (or threat) of craft beer and other locally-sourced or handmade ‘artisanal products’, books like Mark Hatch’s *The Maker Movement Manifesto*(2013), Chris Anderson’s *Makers: The New Industrial Revolution*(2013), Peter Korn’s *Why We Make Things & Why It Matters*(2017), Richard Ocejo’s *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*(2017), and many more, promote ways in which individual ‘makers’ now thrive within a growing creative marketplace. Sales of sewing machines have boomed in recent years, and the UK chain Hobbycraft reported [record annual sales](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jun/23/hobbycraft-sales-and-profits-rise-amid-art-and-craft-boom?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other) in 2016. The fibre arts forum [Ravelry](https://www.ravelry.com/" \t "_blank) now boasts 7 million users; and [Etsy](https://www.etsy.com/), the central online marketplace for handmade (and vintage) items, oversaw more than US$2.84 billion in purchases last year. In the UK, television phenomena like the *Great British Bake Off* or the *Great British Sewing Bee*, often credited as drivers of the ‘craft revolution,’ can also be seen as symptomatic.

In *Paterson,*Laura’s work reflects this growing cultural sense of creative activity being increasingly bound up in commercial ambition or viability. Although we’re not told whether she has an Etsy account or sells her work anywhere besides the farmer’s market, the lure of the so-called creative industries is made explicit in other ways. Making a plea for a new guitar and DVD lessons, she parrots its YouTube advert: ‘In no time at all, I could be playing away and realising my dream!’ On another day, it’s her baking that will fulfil ‘my dream – to have my own cupcake business, of course.’ In her child-like, manic pixie enthusiasm – which Driver’s Paterson seems to find amusing at best – she swears her music could make her ‘a big star, like one of the greats,’ or that ‘we could be rich from cupcakes.’ Despite the writer-director’s claim that this makes her ‘liberated,’ the film is fairly consistent in the humour it derives from her capricious and unrealistic dreams.

Set alongside the treatment of Paterson’s writing, the film’s vague spoofing of (or sneering at) the craft economy returns us to the question of poetry’s work status. Is poetry a ‘craft,’ if that category implies (for Sennett, Crawford, and the film) commercial potential? Or is its economic autonomy preserved in Arendt’s sense of its relative immateriality? Although some would debate the definition of craft as [the making of things for sale](https://www.yahoo.com/news/never-say-this-to-a-knitter-really-just-dont-do-108914213375.html), Jarmusch’s praise for Laura’s entrepreneurialism also contradicts his own film’s more persistent sense of her husband’s poetry as a special mode of activity, removed from the economic contingencies associated with other creative work – to the point that we might be reluctant to think of it at work at all. This is supported by the apparent ease with which Paterson composes, with invisible intellectual labour taking precedent over the sort of material labour we see Laura dirtying her hands with. But Arendt herself, clarifying her suggestion that ‘of all things of thought, poetry is closest to thought, and a poem is less a thing than any other work of art,’ is quick to add that even a poem ‘will eventually be “made,” that is, written down and transformed into a tangible thing among things.’ (‘Poetry,’ after all, means ‘making’.) Although she is critical of Marx’s theory of labour in other ways, Arendt follows his emphasis here on its essential material context. ‘Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature,’ Marx writes in *Capital*(1867). It is, by definition, an activity that affects and manipulates the world beyond our thoughts.

In *Paterson*, the resistance to seeing one’s poetry as ‘a tangible thing among things’ is crucial to the narrative, to the extent that – narrowly avoiding a predictable spoiler – the notebook in which he records his poems becomes literally immaterial. Of course, to Laura’s craft mentality, Paterson’s reluctance to share his work seems unimaginable. ‘You know, darling,’ she says as an afterthought to the cupcake conversation. ‘I really think you should do something about those beautiful poems. They should belong to the world.’ Though he laughs off her phrase ‘the world,’ he also opts to recite other people’s poems whenever she asks to hear any of his work. On another day, softening him up for the guitar conversation, Laura makes Paterson promise he’ll photocopy what she calls his ‘secret notebook’ – ‘Baby, I’ve been asking for a year, at least.’ Ultimately, these worldly considerations are superseded by a stoic and solitary dedication to his art. If *work* is necessarily social – in any economic, ethical, or otherwise interpersonal sense – this must be something else.

III.

An economic definition of *work* is one with which poetry remains distinctly uneasy, perhaps because it is used so often to disqualify it from that category. Basil Bunting (another occasional Objectivist) satirises an all-too-typical attack in his poem ‘[What the Chairman Told Tom](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/what-chairman-told-tom),’ in the voice of an arts council committee denying support for Tom Pickard’s work in Newcastle. It starts:

            Poetry? It’s a hobby.

            I run model trains.

            Mr. Shaw there breeds pigeons.

            It’s not work. You don’t sweat.

            Nobody pays for it.

While some contemporary poets might argue that the fact ‘nobody pays for it’ affords poetry a freedom or degree of autonomy from market values, others are increasingly vocal in defending the role of ‘[professional poet [as] a job like any other](https://katefoxwriter.wordpress.com/2015/02/)’ as grounds for fair payment. (And on *[HuffPo](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lisa-marie-basile/dispelling-the-myth-of-th_b_5325739.html" \t "_blank).*)

Compared to its interest in poetry’s relation to other creative practices, *Paterson*is resolute in its separation from the protagonist’s waged work. The decision to make Paterson a bus driver mostly facilitates his writing habit, within the film’s broader fantasy of working class life and the place for creative practice within it. Rather than a means of survival, Jarmusch himself sees the character’s work routine as what allows him ‘[to drift, allows him to create things](http://www.imdb.com/videoplayer/vi591181337?ref_=ttvi_vi_imdb_11).’ Elsewhere, he explains: ‘Because he doesn’t have to think about what clothes does he wear each day, what time does he go to work … everything is laid out for him, and that [lets him be a poet](https://www.filmcomment.com/article/jim-jarmusch-paterson-gimme-danger-interview/).’ (It is unclear where this leaves Laura, in her lack of routine and uniform.) Reviewing the film for [the TLS](https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/poetry-in-paterson/), the poet Alan Brownjohn agrees that the film ‘sensibly implies that writing poetry is helped by a stable, ordered, even unromantic life.’

In the preface to *Shop Class as Soulcraft*,Crawford sets out against such romanticisation of seemingly ‘unromantic’ life: ‘I want to avoid the precious images of manual work that intellectuals sometimes traffic in. I also have little interest in wistful notions of a “simpler” life that is somehow more authentic, or more democratically valorous for being “working class.”’ In *Paterson*, by contrast,a child poet who Paterson meets on his way home from work doesn’t hide her amusement at ‘a bus driver who likes Emily Dickinson.’ In the final scenes, Paterson himself is dubious of a poet visiting from Japan, who sagely assures him, ‘a bus driver – this is very poetic.’ For the sake of realism, Adam Driver apparently spent three months taking lessons to get his bus licence before filming began. The poems his character writes, however, are all by the veteran New York poet Ron Padgett. This is suggestive in itself – the assumption that one might learn to drive a bus convincingly in three months, but that the poetry needs a ringer. Alas, rather than explore the comparison between the work of writing and the work of driving a bus, the latter remains at best a useful routine or a quirky and conveniently visual backdrop. One of Padgett’s new poems for the film extends this wholesome distancing from waged labour:

          I knock off work

          Have a beer at the bar

          I look down at the glass and feel glad

Again, William Carlos Williams is a curious point of reference. As the film’s last scene (briefly) acknowledges, Williams was another writer with a day job, working as a general practitioner and paediatrician, delivering over 2,000 babies in his long medical career. ‘[I love that poets have other jobs](https://www.filmcomment.com/article/jim-jarmusch-paterson-gimme-danger-interview/),’ says Jarmusch, namechecking Frank O’Hara and Wallace Stevens. ‘You’ve got to have another job to do this stuff. No poet ever did it for the money.’ The sense of a work routine facilitating creative practice – like Paterson’s bus route – is recorded by Williams as well. ‘Only medicine, a job I enjoyed, would make it possible for me to live and write as I wanted to,’ he writes in his *Autobiography*(1955). In ‘times of stress,’ he explains in the same book, ‘it would be comforting to be carrying a poem in my head, searching for an aberrant structure – and unable for the whole day to get it down.’ We can imagine Jarmusch’s Paterson agreeing.

Williams’ wider thoughts on work, however, suggest a deeper correspondence than the film allows. An insistence on work’s inherent virtue connects Williams not only to Sennett’s elevation of ‘an enduring, basic impulse, the desire to a job well for its own sake,’ but further back through American pragmatist philosophy, a Protestant work ethic, and probably all the way to Hesiod. ‘One must work, hard at times, to no purpose other than the bare mechanics of the work itself,’ Williams writes in one letter, before a long account of recent patients. To his adult son, he explains, ‘I don’t want a vacation and couldn’t enjoy it if I had one. I want to work and to keep working, it soothes my mind. I feel then that I am doing my part as I want to. For wherever we are, every stitch of work we do all helps the general cause.’ In *A* *Novelette*, from the 1920s, he puts it most bluntly: ‘I cannot not work.’ These excerpts blend the compulsion and inherent value of work in a way that splits the difference between Marx’s emphasis on alienation (the idea that all work ‘is *external*to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being’) and the sense of reconnecting through work, which Sennett or others inherit from William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement’s notions of ‘creative labour’.  What Williams (like his friend Zukofsky) resists, however, is the drawing of hard and fast distinctions between the writing of poetry and other waged work – comparing, sliding between, and using the word ‘work’ in reference to both throughout his writing.

Another quirk of Williams’ writing career might also be illustrative alongside the anti-climactic loss of Paterson’s notebook. While the film takes its name and premise from Williams’ five-volume long poem ‘upon the resemblance between the mind of modern man and a city,’ Jarmusch admits that ‘*Paterson*, by the way, is [not one of my favorite poems](http://time.com/4605637/jim-jarmusch-paterson-interview/) – in fact, it goes over my head. I don’t understand a lot of it.’ Instead, he compares the film’s interest in ‘[anti-significance’](https://www.filmcomment.com/article/jim-jarmusch-paterson-gimme-danger-interview/) to Williams’ more famous ‘The Red Wheelbarrow.’ Although the book it comes from – *Spring and All*(1923) – is now safely regarded as Williams’ most important contribution to twentieth-century poetry, there were 47 years after its publication, when it was not only lost to readers in its complete form, but disregarded by its author even more emphatically than Paterson lets go of his ‘secret notebook’. In 1923, after a friend in Paris agreed to print *Spring and All*, most of the 300 copies were destroyed by customs officials when they reached the US. As Williams’ biographer Paul Mariani tells the story, they were simply confiscated ‘as foreign stuff and therefore probably salacious and destructive of American morals.’ It might also have had something to do with the fact that Williams’ little blue book had come from the same printer that produced James Joyce’s filthy *Ulysses*the year before.

While the book’s lost history is a curiosity of publishing, the more pertinent aspect may be that Williams himself made no effort to reprint the volume in his lifetime. Not only that, he later dismisses the book – which Ron Silliman would dub ‘[the apotheosis of modernist writing](http://ronsilliman.blogspot.co.uk/2008/07/i-have-been-rereading-spring-all-in.html)’ – as a mere ‘travesty,’ which he ‘had a lot of fun with … a mixture of philosophy and nonsense.’ Williams makes no mention of it in his otherwise comprehensive *Autobiography*, and his determination to carry on with new work offers a parallel, not only after the fact, but in the first lines of *Spring and All*itself:

If anything of moment results—so much the better. And so much the more likely will it be that no one will want to see it.

In my experience teaching *Spring and All*, students sometimes find those opening sentences hard to take at their word – especially students self-funding a return to education in hopes of improving their writing to a publishable standard. When Williams answers himself in that later interview, admitting that, indeed, ‘Nobody ever saw it—it had no circulation at all,’ it seems too easy to read a retrospective bitterness onto a book written in relative obscurity, and partly in response to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*(1922). Yet, Williams’ enormous output – over 40 volumes of poetry, novels, plays, and criticism, without retiring early from his medical practice – reflects his understanding of poetry as worthwhile work. Like the notebook tucked in Paterson’s jacket or behind the driver’s seat of his bus, Williams scribbled lines onto [prescription slips](http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3969416) in any spare moment between patients. Although no one would accuse Williams of lacking publishing ambition, the work ethic in his day job carries into the ‘hard battle,’ as he describes it in *Spring and All*, confessing: ‘I myself seek to enter the lists with these few notes jotted down in the midst of the action, under distracting circumstances—to remind myself of the truth.’

Along with the book’s material loss and Williams’ later dismissal, *Spring and All*’s opening is as bracing as ever in its rejection of the sort of professionalism Andy Merrifield takes to task in his provocative recent book, [*The Amateur*](https://www.versobooks.com/books/2405-the-amateur) (2017). Rather than accept a rigid distinction between ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ based on pay, Merrifield advocates amateurism as ‘an alternative sensibility,’ which might be as readily adopted by ‘underground amateurs,’ working to ‘de-professionalise’ themselves and the hyper-professionalised world around them. Outsider writers and thinkers like Franz Kafka, Jane Jacobs, Rachel Carson, and Arendt are Merrifield’s examples – among whom Williams and his fictional acolyte would sit well. For both, it’s continuing the work that matters.

IV.

In the months or years I’ve been searching for a line through notions of poetry as work – before Jarmusch’s *Paterson*offered so many obvious points to push against – or in the couple of weeks I’ve spent writing and completely rewriting this essay, I’ve had plenty of time to wonder ‘is this work?’ And worse: Is my struggle to articulate these issues partly rooted in anxieties about the enforced valuation of my own writing practices, as someone paid an academic salary in expectation of poetic ‘outputs’? Maybe it explains my wariness about leaping to comparisons between poetic and academic labour.

I popped into work this morning to pick up some marking (one part of my job that I’m certain is work), despite having taken annual leave for the week, in hopes of finishing this essay before term starts. I feel guilty for working on leave, although the impossibility of using my allocated leave in term breaks makes the days I put up an email away message feel arbitrary. (And where does the work end anyway, I reassure myself. Am I allowed to read the news, if I promise not to write about it?) Coming from the post room with my stack of marking (does ‘stack’ make it sound like a lot?), I ran into our department manager in the stairwell where so many unscheduled meetings take place.

All summer, we’ve had Lord Adonis gunning for higher education on Twitter, taking crowd-pleasing potshots at our ‘[3-month summer holiday](https://twitter.com/Andrew_Adonis/status/885030902346252288)’. Colleagues quickly filled social media with photos and other proof of work with the hashtag #[academicsummer](https://twitter.com/hashtag/AcademicSummer?src=hash" \t "_blank). Mary Beard answered ‘[what do academics do on their summer “vacation”](https://www.the-tls.co.uk/academics-summer-vacation/)’ in the TLS. Of course, I’m in complete solidarity against Adonis’s ruse. But I still feel guilty bumping into anyone on campus when I’ve been working from home. I tell myself that having worked as a university administrator for 18 months after finishing my PhD makes me more emphatic regarding our industry’s unique divide between ‘faculty’ and ‘staff’ (or between those teaching on permanent and precarious contracts). But all of these questions about the nature of ‘work’ have practical repercussions in a workplace where some employees are paid for regular hours and others say our flexibility just means we’re always working.

I ask about the holiday our department manager mentioned when we spoke last month. I hadn’t realised it was a diving trip, with real shipwrecks. I tell her the thought of being underwater in the ocean fills me with dread, but admit it sounds amazing. (Unthinkingly, I also make a mental note to check if the library was able to get the edition of [Adrienne Rich](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/diving-wreck) for my teaching this term.) She’s a certified instructor, it turns out. ‘It’s my other life,’ she laughs, and continues: ‘I know all of you have your personal lives and interests bound up in your jobs, but I have to get away to be myself.’

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The idea of poetry as ‘work’ is only worth defending if it leads to better questions about its material contexts. These might be questions around the hidden consumption of resources by this supposedly ‘least worldly of the arts,’ or ways in which that resource dependence works to exclude and privilege certain poets. Or they might be questions about how the labour of poetry is regulated, subsumed, or exploited in relation to other, interconnected labour markets. In any event, the naming of poetry as ‘work’ is potentially part of a wider effort to dispel the myth of its economic autonomy – the primary myth behind which it hides its own labour – alongside myths of its inherent virtues or radicality. Poetry can’t be both ‘work’ and unquestionably edifying. But calling poetry ‘work’ or ‘creative labour’ or ‘a job like any other’ can be more than a way to claim its value or demand respect, by avoiding glib comparisons that overlook the alienating effect of most waged labour. It can be more than a means for gatekeeping between serious poets and so-called hobbyists. Finally, it can be less a kneejerk defence of its cultural value than a means to acknowledge its relatively privileged status. Not all work, not even all craft or creative work, has a place in school curriculum or as many different periodicals or prizes discussed in mainstream press, for instance. Not all work has access to public funding or to so many institutions that support its training and propagation. Not all work was included in the [list of trades](https://twitter.com/19acres/status/909033017460568064) that will supposedly sustain the UK economy outside the EU. Not all work is admired by strangers in ways that might come across as patronising. Not all work has films made about it. Most importantly, not all work aims or allows for the self-actualisation presumed of poetic labour.

None of this has any implication for the privilege or struggle of individual poets, of course. Nor it is to suggest poets shy away from claims to work or labour. Rather, it is in hopes of shifting the emphasis of that claim towards the material circumstances of poetry’s production and the material impact of its products. This means being less enamoured of its inherent virtue than of its social potential – less the fantasy of solitary toil than its debt to human and worldly connections. As Philip Levine doesn’t quite say, that’s what work is.

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