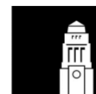

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The Literature of Labour:

Collective Biography and Working-Class Authorship, 1830-1859

Richard Salmon

In the mid-nineteenth century it was commonplace among middle-class advocates of professional reform to conceive of literature as a distinct form of social labour. For writers such as John Forster, Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and G.H. Lewes, to name some of the most prominent literary figures of the period, the cause of professional authorship was advanced through an idealized rhetoric of literary labour: the 'dignity of literature', as Forster's influential phrase from a newspaper editorial of January 1850 implies, was seen as directly analogous to the dignity of labour (35).[1] A different perspective on the conception of literary labour can be gleaned, however, when this analogy is extended to writers directly affiliated to the labouring classes, a collective body of authorship which became increasingly visible during the first half of the century. In *The Literature of Labour*, a collection of biographical sketches of working-class poets first published in 1851, Edwin Paxton Hood celebrated the 'nobility' of literary labour in terms that echo the contemporary rhetoric of Forster and Dickens, yet the class focus of his study is notably contrasting. As his subtitle declares, Hood's biographical subjects are *Illustrious Instances of the Education of Poetry in Poverty*: poets who have combined literary work with various forms of physical labour by necessity, rather than as a metaphor of choice for the writer's professional discipline. Though Hood does not dispute the right of authors from all classes to be viewed as 'Productive Labourers', and indeed argues that 'we must extend the meaning of the term, the Labouring Classes' to include them, the physical labour of his working-class subjects forms a visible component of their authorial identity (25-6). The chapter titles of *The Literature of*

Labour include 'Robert Nicoll, the Kine Herder', 'Thomas Cooper, the Shoemaker', and 'Hugh Miller, the Stone-Mason', amongst others, indicating that without the context of their original occupation (though often abandoned at a relatively early stage of life), these writers' literary work is imperfectly understood. The title of the collection as a whole complicates the proposition that literature *is* labour by reminding readers of the primacy of other forms of material work for writers who happen to have been born within the labouring classes.

The Literature of Labour was one of many volumes of collective biography devoted to working-class writers in the first half of the nineteenth century. During this period, as Nigel Cross observes, there was a vogue for prefatory memoirs and biographies of 'uneducated' poets, past and present, culminating in Robert Southey's *Lives and Works of The Uneducated Poets* (1831), an extended biographical compendium which began life as a preface to the poetry and autobiographical writing of a former servant, John Jones (Cross 128). Southey saw in Jones's *Attempts in Verse* an 'exercise of the mind [that], instead of rendering the individual discontented with his station, had conduced greatly to his happiness, and if it had not made him a good man, had contributed to keep him so' (12). While he praised the 'charm of freshness' exuded in the work of uneducated poets, Southey was not particularly concerned with their intellectual or social development, maintaining a patron's cool detachment from the impoverished circumstances of the lower classes. By contrast, George Lillie Craik's *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* (1830-1), published around the same time, points forward to the concerns with self-improvement and the moral dignity of both bodily and intellectual labour which became prevalent by mid-century. According to Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall, the 'autobiography of self-improvement' was the most characteristic form of working-class autobiographical writing throughout the nineteenth century, a form reflective of its content insofar as it commonly documents the writer's difficult acquisition of literary skills and knowledge (xvi). Middle-class advocates for

working-class authorship such as Craik, Hood, and Samuel Smiles offer a biographical equivalent to this familiar autobiographical mode, an external narrative perspective on the often already recorded experience of 'poets of labour', which reflects back – while it may also distort – their achievements of 'self-culture'. Their books were as much addressed to aspiring working-class autodidacts as they were to curious middle-class readers. Craik envisaged the exemplary lives of *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* being of primary interest to the 'children of poverty and neglect' (II, 202). In some instances, the binary division between middle-class biographer and working-class subject is inexact: the Chartist poet and lecturer, Thomas Cooper, for instance, featured as a subject in several collective biographies of workifng-class authorship while himself producing texts with a similar aim of promoting self-improvement. This chapter concentrates, though, on the genre of collective biography, the compendia of brief didactic and exhortatory biographical sketches which flourished in the three decades separating Craik's *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* from Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859), the most recognizable example of the genre for later readers. My aim is to examine the ways in which, for authors of these texts, the 'literature of labour' challenges prevailing assumptions about the division between manual and mental work, yielding new insights into the labour of literature.

1.

During the 1830s and 40s, Craik wrote extensively for Charles Knight, the publisher for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, founded in 1826. Viewed by David Vincent as 'a clear and deliberate attempt to establish the hegemony of middle class values over the very young culture of [working-class] self-improvement', the SDUK was a top-down organization for the dissemination of 'improving' cultural and scientific knowledge amongst

the working classes (164). Yet, despite being an official publication of the SDUK, *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* was acknowledged as an important template for subsequent narrative representations of working-class authorship by writers of varying social backgrounds. In terms of its textual form, Craik's seemingly haphazard collection of biographical anecdotes, ranging capaciously across time and place, clearly anticipates the organization of Smiles's *Self-Help*.[2] The emphasis on overcoming adverse circumstance through the exercise of labour, energy, and perseverance is the pervasive thematic motif of Craik's compendium, reproduced on countless occasions in the work of Hood, Smiles, and Cooper. Albeit 'difficulty' is an unspecific term designed to encompass various obstacles to the pursuit of knowledge and not restricted to poverty or the ingrained constrictions of social environment, Craik's model was clearly amenable to a didactic, aspirational framing of working-class biography. His insistence that self-improvement is within the reach of all, regardless of material circumstance, strikes an unfailingly optimistic note, the biographical illustrations providing 'a striking proof how independent we really are, if we choose, of those external circumstances which seem to make so vast a difference between the situation of man and man; and how possible it is for us in any situation at least to enrich our minds, if fortune refuse us all other riches' (I, 98). Like most other contemporary advocates of self-improvement, Craik is keen to distinguish between the 'work of self-cultivation' (I, 381) and worldly success. The former is presented as autonomous from the latter: just as knowledge can be achieved despite adverse circumstances, so its acquisition does not necessarily accrue any material advantage or alter social status.

Not surprisingly, given its disinclination to encourage direct class mobility, this model was invoked in subsequent publications sponsored by the SDUK. In his Introduction to Thomas Carter's *Memoirs of a Working Man* (1845), Charles Knight states that the chief interest of the narrative lies in 'the mode in which the mind of the writer has been formed,

under the most adverse circumstances' (Carter viii). A tailor by trade, Carter's autobiography of self-improvement is exemplary for Knight because it serves to illustrate the 'blessings that directly, and independent of any collateral advantage, belong to the cultivation of a taste for reading and composition' (ix). More surprising perhaps is Thomas Cooper's explicit endorsement of Craik's text in 'Letters to Young Working Men' (1849, 1855, originally published in the *Northern Tribune*), a series which had the avowedly radical aim of encouraging its readership 'to raise yourselves morally and intellectually, - and so, shame those who say you are not fit for the franchise into the perception that you deserve it better, perhaps, than themselves, and that you must and will have it' (166, 182). Hood also references *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* as a model for his own biographical practice in *The Literature of Labour* alongside Southey's 'account of self-educated, or uneducated poets and writers' (35, 60). In the case of the Scottish poet Robert Nicoll, he insists that 'difficulties are the great incentives to the pursuit after, and acquisition of knowledge'; struggle is beneficial for self-improvement, whereas 'the most favourable circumstances are real difficulties; there is no appeal to self-reliance – to self-respect' (89). Developing an argument also put forward by Thomas Carlyle in his influential essay on the poet Ebenezer Elliott, 'Corn-Law Rhymes' (1832), Hood strains the paradigm of the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties to the point of paradox: difficulty is good fortune, ease of circumstance is real difficulty. According to Carlyle, for the aspiring 'Thinker and Writer' 'it is actually, in these strange days, no special misfortune to be trained up among the Uneducated classes, and not among the Educated' since 'he, whose other wants were all beforehand supplied; to whose capabilities no problem was presented except even this, How to cultivate them to best advantage' is likely to 'attain less real culture than he whose first grand problem and obligation was nowise spiritual culture, but hard labour for his daily bread!' (159-161). Similarly, Samuel Smiles maintained that self-culture was achieved not so

much despite the ‘difficulties’ faced, but because of them: ‘These very difficulties, in many instances, would even seem to have been their best helpers, by evoking their powers of labour and endurance, and stimulating into life faculties which might otherwise have lain dormant’ (*Self-Help* 21).

The influence of *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* on collective biography of working-class authorship, then, was to help transform the negative constraints of a life of material labour into positive conditions for individual progress and self-development. If at times the results risk self-contradiction or a hyperbolic triumphalism, these narratives should be understood rhetorically, and within the context of their primary address to working-class readers. Their exemplary subjects perform a spiritualized version of the material labour which already defines them.

2.

Edwin Paxton Hood produced several volumes of collective biography focussed on the self-cultivation of working-class writers, chiefly poets, during the 1850s. The son of an able seaman and a maidservant, fostered by a heraldic sign painter, Hood was himself of relatively low social origins but rose to become a Congregational minister and editor of the *Eclectic Review*.[3] His books went through several editions and appeared in a bewildering variety of revised and expanded forms. *The Literature of Labour* was continued into a second series under the title *Genius and Industry: The Achievements of Mind Among The Cottages* (also published in 1851), and both volumes were incorporated within the later *Peerage of Poverty: Or, Learners and Workers in Fields, Farms, and Factories* (First Series, 1859; Second Series, 1861). In addition to a range of other works on the theory and practice of biography, Hood also published the more directly instructional handbook on self-improvement, *Self-*

Formation: Twelve Chapters For Young Thinkers (1858). Throughout all of his writing within this field, Hood sought to inspire working men (his biographical subjects are almost exclusively male) 'to attempt some noble mental effort' while also disabusing the higher classes of their prejudice against a life of manual labour. The introductory chapter of *The Literature of Labour*, for example, calls into question the customary values which regulate the modern division of social labour:

> A certain degradation has been made to hang about the idea of work; the world has now an idea in its crotchety head that work is disgraceful – that swords, pens, or easy chairs, are the only honourable things – that spades, ploughs, hammers, are all dishonourable things; the idea floats about that it is elegant to be idle, to appear full-dressed, to walk through the world as through a ball-room, or a saloon: that it is most inelegant to plead guilty to the crime of dirty fingers, or hard hands, or to the ignoble acquaintance with forges, factories, or threshing floors. Now, before any man can be a true man, he must be cured of this insanity, he must learn that the dishonourable thing is to manage to skulk through the world without working; and the attempt of this little book is to show that mental labour may very frequently combine nobly with manly labour, and that in illustration of this it is noticeable that there have been many men confined to the loom, to the flack, and the hammer, whose intellectual attainments have been amazing (15).[4]

Here, Hood's rhetorical procedure is first to defend the value of 'work' in its socially inferior forms - the hard, dirty labour of 'forges, factories, or threshing floors' - against a refined idleness, but then to reveal that such forms of labour, conflated with the gendered term 'manly', are not incompatible with feats of 'mental labour' which, seen in context, will amaze the reader. The argument begins by elevating manual work over more respectable

uses of the hand – the pen and the sword placed in contiguity with the idleness of 'easy chairs' – yet ends by suggesting that what is truly remarkable are 'intellectual attainments' which acquire an aura of materiality by virtue of their 'combination' with the necessary and constraining pursuit of a manual trade.

The terms 'Poetry' and 'Labour' thus function as counter-signs which in the course of Hood's discussion are made to appear synonymous, fused together in an alchemical process. On the one side, labour 'crystallizes ideas; it makes the speculations of Mind material' (22); on the other side, '[w]hat a world of Poetry lies folded up in the very idea of Labour!' (18) No doubt influenced by Carlyle, Hood's exuberant panegyric to manual work is, at the same time, a spiritualization of the material world – indeed, the phrase commonly associated with Carlyle, 'gospel of labour', implies as much.[5] His exclamation: 'THE HAND – what a Poem is there – the Hand!' (19) merges body and spirit in ecstatic union. Apparently exalting a degraded metonym for the labouring class over the world of mere thought, this statement is only superficially contradicted by the equally Carlylean: 'Mind is the loom, out of which has been spun all the wonderful vesture of things which we behold' (22). This co-determination of mental and manual labour is summarized in the 1852 revised edition of *The Literature of Labour*: 'Mind, indeed, rules all; - the Hand could not do without the Mind, but neither could the Mind without the Hand' (2nd ed., 24). By extension, the antithetical terms 'Literature' and 'Labour' circulate as reciprocal elements within the same dialectic. Hood argues that 'in fact, in our true sense men could be neither Literature nor Labour, without both of these in combination' (23). As noted earlier, Hood challenges the assumption that 'Poets, Historians, and Men of Science' do not belong to the 'Producing Classes', refuting the 'Political Economist' (presumably Adam Smith) who excludes 'children of Genius' from the category of 'productive labour' (24). He seeks to 'widen and liberalise' the term 'Labour' to include professional, middle-class occupations such as surgeons and authors, positioning them

alongside jobs and trades of lower class status, such as ‘lucifer-match maker’ , ‘street sweeper’, ‘carpenters’, and ‘masons’ (25-6). All of these figures are deemed ‘Productive Labourers’ to the extent that they perform socially-useful forms of work. Wordsworth, Scott, and Dickens are cited as examples of educated professional writers who are also productive literary labourers. In consequence of his widening definitions, Hood is forced to concede that terms such as ‘The Working Classes, the Industrious Classes, the Self-educated Classes, are all very ambiguous’ (25).

By ‘productive’ labour, Hood has in mind both the economic and cultural value of literary production, the two being interwoven in their benefits. This includes the effect of popular authors on the ‘whole material condition of a country’ - their stimulation of the demand for paper, lead for type, printing presses, and so on (24). In such instances, literary labour has a demonstrable economic impact: ‘one man may, by his own force of genius, be the means of giving employment, to hundreds and thousands of men’ (24-5). At the same time, the ‘value’ which writers create ‘in return for their existence’ has a wider social valence:

> He is adding to the amount of social wealth; he is increasing the amount of social confidence; he is adding to the proportion of social intelligence; he is lending firmness to the guarantees of social rectitude, by his sagacity and wisdom – by his probity and consistency – by his perseverance and courage: he is a Social Labourer (26)

Within the broader context of political economy, then, Hood views literature in general as a form of social labour. Yet the purpose of *The Literature of Labour* is to accord a ‘distinct’ status to those aspiring writers who also ‘toil upon these pursuits which are indispensable to the very sustenance and foundation of society … who prepare the raw material for society’

(26-7). While Hood's critique of political economy pushes him to collapse the distinction between literature and labour, his interest in the figure of the working-class autodidact maintains this distinction through the organizing concept of 'combination'. The 'combination of Literature and Labour' is the common thread linking Hood's biographical exemplars in all of its various permutations and degrees of efficacy (58). While some of his subjects 'show, after all, much more worldly prudence than genius', others 'develop a genius so strong, that it shook from it all the pleadings of worldly prudence, and hugged a darling poverty of the body to the highly endowed and wealthy soul'. Hood does not 'advocate the disjuncture of Genius and Prudence', a one-sided cultivation of literary imagination or worldly ambition, but, as with analogous binaries, recommends some kind of balance between the two (36). Whatever its outcome, the attempt to combine literature and labour in one person has the merit at least of contesting the separation which 'in the course of these latter ages' has led to 'diminished … respect for each other' (2nd ed. 24). In a similar vein, the opening chapter of *Genius and Industry* sets out to dispel the 'notion that Genius may dispense with labour – that it is the companion of idleness and luxury; that its inspirations come unsought ; that it disdains *all* yoke and contemns all labour' (2nd ed., 13). By the 1850s, in the wider context of concerted endeavours to establish authorship as a legitimate profession, Hood's argument for the positive role of labour in shaping 'Genius', rather than constituting its antithetical term, was not unfamiliar; his assertion that genius must be 'harnessed' to 'bear the yoke' of everyday routines of work belongs to a post-Romantic rhetoric of normalization and democratization employed by writers of different social backgrounds (19). Again, however, Hood's theorizing of the relationship between genius and labour has a specific class dimension missing from similar pronouncements by his contemporaries.

3.

In later editions of *The Literature of Labour* Hood amplified his contention that the ‘combination of Literature and Labour’ was not a uniquely modern phenomenon, but could be traced back to earlier historical periods. The volume as it expanded comes to present a history of the labouring-class poet from the Anglo-Saxon period through to the nineteenth century, with chapters devoted to such figures as ‘Cedmon The Ploughman, The First English Poet’ and ‘Taylor, The Water Poet’ (an ‘uneducated’ seventeenth-century poet also discussed by Southey). Nevertheless, the vast majority of writers featured in *The Literature of Labour* and *Genius and Industry* are poets contemporary with the date of publication or belonging to the immediately preceding generation. What differentiates these figures, according to the taxonomy of the books’ chapter divisions, are the types of manual labour which they pursued in combination with their literary aspirations. Typically, each chapter synchronizes a dual narrative of physical and intellectual labour, leading to various permutations of conflict and accommodation. In many cases, the form of physical labour associated with the poet is based on a limited period of his life, somewhat distorting the overall biographical representation. ‘Robert Nicoll, The Kine Herder’, for example, began herding cattle at the age of seven, and ‘while herding’ commenced both his external ‘life of labour’ and a voracious pursuit of knowledge, studying Latin, geometry, and the work of Walter Scott (81-2). Yet Nicoll went on to become an apprentice grocer in Perth, aged 15, and then to write for periodicals, eventually becoming the editor of the *Leeds Times* in 1836 (on his premature death at the age of 23 he was replaced in this role by another Scot, Samuel Smiles). While Nicoll’s boyhood experience as a ‘Kine Herder’ was clearly only one of his various forms of employment, Hood uses this figure to convey the broadly rustic character of Nicoll’s poetry, stamping his identity as ‘Scotland’s Second Burns’ (2nd ed., subtitle of Chapter V). The ‘Kine Herder’ licenses conventional pastoral tropes such as Nicoll’s ‘flute of mountain reeds’ in a way that

'Grocer' evidently would not (118). Arguably, a more convincing articulation of rural labour is found in the chapter on 'John Clare, The Peasant Poet', which contrasts Clare's attachment to nature as a site of quotidian labour with that of educated, middle-class poets for whom it is primarily a place of leisured contemplation. Hood begins his biographical sketch of Clare by remarking that 'never have Literature and Labour been more beautifully combined' (128).

The characterization of artisan crafts is also (at most) suggestive and figurative in its uses, rather than bearing concretely on the poetic style or thought of poets such as 'Thomas Cooper, The Shoemaker' and 'Thomas Miller, the Basket Maker'. Hood declares that '[t]he Shoemaker's craft seems ever to have been a noble cradle for great minds', though neglects to give any explanation of why this might be (197). Cooper's epic poem *The Purgatory of Suicides* (1845) is lauded as '*the* Poem of Labour', exhibiting a 'sinewy and muscular strength' (216), yet this poetic achievement remains associated with his imprisonment for Chartist political activities rather than bearing any specific correspondence with the nature of his manual work. The chapter on 'The Foresters' – a group of self-educated poets based near Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire, including Thomas Miller and Spencer Hall – in *Genius and Industry* makes a more discernible effort to consider the effects of environment and craft on poetic composition. Hood implies that the polished character of Miller's verse reflects the dexterity of his manual work as a basket maker: 'It is not saying too much to affirm that there is an elaborate finish, a retrospective retouching of the canvass or the marble, a delicateness of stroke … which, however they enter into all Poets, do not abound in any of the Poets of Labour' (155). Miller, he concludes, 'is the most aesthetic of humble poets' in his 'combining fervid feeling, and most fervid expression, with a calm and deep surveying' (155). Such attributes, though, are more clearly connected to the idyllic setting of the forest in which his poetry is supposedly formed: a landscape beautiful but not sublime and providing an escape from the nearby industrial city.

The most direct links between poetic composition and manual work in any of Hood's biographical compendia are located in figures who are taken to embody labour in its most brutely material form. In *The Literature of Labour*, 'Hugh Miller, The Stone-Mason' is perhaps the clearest example of this type. Miller's scientific interest in geology, expressed in his poetry, derives specifically from his trade as a stone-mason and quarryman. Physical labour is thus presented as the immediate stimulus for intellectual curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties, manifested in literary production:

> In boring and cutting a way into the rocks of old red sandstone, there were many circumstances that excited our author's curiosity … He found there the important truth, which he presses on the attention of his readers in his writings, that there are few professions, however humble, that do not present their peculiar advantages of observation; none in which the exercise of the faculties does not lead to enjoyment (235-6).

Manual trades which require, or at least connote, the exercise of physical strength to transform their materials, such as workers in stone and iron, appear to have held particular resonance as figures of literary labour. In *Genius and Industry*, Hood declared that '[t]he user of the hammer, is as truly a child of human imagination as the user of the pen', drawing a direct equivalence between the instruments of material and intellectual labour (70). The degree of masculine force symbolized by the hammer is obviously key to its efficacy as a metonym for the literary labour of working-class poets, to the extent that the distinction between these two forms of work (and also the distinction between figurative and literal meaning) is collapsed: Hood eulogizes the 'men who, from wood and iron, from granite rocks and marble blocks make poems, - poems felt, handled, - not dreams, but realities' (70).

Carlyle's 'Corn-Law Rhymes' is a clear influence on this particular image of the labourer-poet, based as it was on a partial and somewhat erroneous understanding of Ebenezer Elliott's role in the iron work trade. Carlyle famously characterized Elliott, the Corn-Law Rhymer, as 'a voice coming from the deep Cyclopean forges, where Labour, in real soot and sweat, beats with his thousand hammers "the red sun of the furnace"'. An analogy between 'pen and hammer' is made on the assumption that the fierce political satire of Elliott's verse expresses his personal experience of industrial labour (159). The pen is transfigured into a bludgeon with which the voice of 'real' labour expresses its anger. Yet as Marcus Waithe points out, Carlyle misunderstood (or misrepresented) both Elliott's politics and his class status: 'Elliott's economic position for most of his life was not that of a labourer, but of a "master"' in his family's iron foundry (126). Waithe suggests that '[b]y clothing Elliott in the garb of a workingman, whose poetry was hammered out at the forge … [Carlyle] could reserve the possibility of a manually-inflected art, operating at a safe distance from Grub Street' (130). Hood's chapter 'The Men of Iron' in *Genius and Industry* develops a similar account to Carlyle's of Elliott's cultural significance as a literary expression of authentic material labour. Iron work of itself suggests a heroic creative capacity to remould the material world at its most obdurate: 'To conquer so stubborn a thing as iron is itself a poem – an epic poem' (171). Elliott's industrial labour defines him in opposing terms to the delicate, quasi-rural craft of Miller and the Foresters: 'In his verse there is nothing that merits the usual denomination of elegance – nothing polished: they are not marble, but roughly hewn granite blocks, with millions of beautiful mica sparkles flashing over them … the verse melts us, but it is like heated iron' (182). Where Miller is a poet of aesthetic beauty corresponding to the tranquillity of his forest idyll, Elliott is sublime in the roughness and turbulence of his poetic language, a product of industrial manufacture.

For the second edition of *The Literature of Labour*, Hood added a chapter on 'Literature and Labour in France' in which he considers 'the three great poets of French Labour': Beranger, Reboul, and Jasmin (208). Until the last 'half century', he contends, France did not have as strong a tradition of self-educated poets as Britain, but by the same token its literary culture was less commercialized. Unlike some working-class poets in Britain, the French 'do not adopt poetry as a money-making expedient, it is not with them a force employed to escape from labour' (214). Hood shares the distaste of most middle-class authors of self-help literature towards the 'desire of rising in life, that is, of getting into society' by means of literary talent (216). His insistence on the possibility of 'combining' literature and labour is intended to mitigate the urge to approach the former as a potential escape-route from the latter. The figure of Jean Reboul, 'the Poet Baker', for example, offers a model for such combination through the idea of the 'double life'. When approached by admirers of his poetry during his working hours as a baker, Reboul is said to have announced the hours when he was on duty as a poet and told them to come back later. Hood interprets this biographical anecdote not as evidence of a tormented self-division or the constraints of material circumstance, but of an efficiently regulated duality:

> in rightly constituted minds, and rightly harmonised societies, the life of Labour and of Literature may be made most gracefully to combine; "to lead," as M. Dumas said to Reboul, "a double life." We have a dual being, have we not? Dual existence, in the temple of dust, and in the house not made with hands; and heaven has lent to us motives for the cultivation of both, and thus binding in our present state the two ends of our life – the mortal and the immortal (216).

Even this positive example of the possibility of maintaining a harmonious balance between discrete physical and mental activities, however, falls short of the resolution offered by poetry (or song) which is performed during the very act of physical labour. While Hood

argues that 'the age in which we live is remarkable for the songs from the most eminent pens consecrating every variety of labour', he also observes a decline in the traditional folk custom of work-songs (*Genius and Industry* 55). Poems extolling the nobility of labour abound yet there exists a dearth of song accompanying work itself. In *The Peerage of Poverty*, Hood cites the self-educated poet and biographer of Burns, Allan Cunningham, who believed that the custom had survived in Scotland where '[s]ong seems to have been the regular accompaniment of labour': 'In the south, I am not sure that song is much the companion of labour; but in the north there is no trade, however toilsome, which has banished this charming associate' (91). Hood briefly speculates on the possibility of reviving this pre-industrial cultural practice in which the boundary between 'literature' and 'labour' is more radically destabilized than in the case of Reboud's 'dual existence'. Potentially at least the two examples offer different models of co-existence, sustaining one mode of labour alongside the other without sacrificing either - the overarching concern of Hood's writing.

4.

The most celebrated example of mid-nineteenth century collective biography, Smiles's *Self-Help; With Illustrations of Character, Conduct, and Perseverance* (1859), has surprisingly little to say about the figure of the labouring-class poet, one of the prominent contemporary archetypes of self-culture. Smiles had previously written about several of the poets featured in the books of Craik and Hood in his brief series 'Poets of the People' (1847-8), published in *Howitt's Journal of Literature and Popular Progress*. Of the five writers included in the series (which ended with the discontinuation of the journal) Robert Nicoll, Thomas Cooper, and Beranger are also discussed in Hood's later compendia, which may well have borrowed source material from Smiles's detailed biographies. Smiles's account of Cooper, in particular,

emphasizes the heavy burden of literary labour, exacerbated by the physical debility resulting from the author's period of imprisonment. Smiles is keen to point out that professional authorship – the career on which Cooper embarks after his release from prison - is not a release from labour but an accumulation of it: 'it is the fate of almost every man of the present day who devotes himself to the pursuit of literature, and the advancement of political freedom to have to perform nearly as much toil as a steam-engine' (Vol. 3, 247). The main focus of the series, though, is on the relationship between poetry and political representation rather than on forms of labour: the other radical poets featured are Samuel Bamford, a cotton weaver, and Victor Hugo, described as the son of a distinguished general and a noblewoman. Published a decade later, *Self-Help* is broader and more diffuse in scope; its framing of the topic at a level of such generality and inclusiveness, in both geographical and historical terms, that it appears to evade specific class contexts altogether. By including examples of self-help from individuals of 'all ranks and conditions of life', Smiles diverts attention from the specific questions of the materiality of labour posed by Hood's biographical subjects (20). Moreover, the disparate range of knowledge which the exemplary figures of *Self-Help* pursue – a feature shared by *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* – takes it well beyond a consideration of literary labour per se. That being said, *Self-Help* has much in common with the texts already discussed in this chapter, and it is worth sketching here, by way of conclusion, the arguments which Smiles develops on a broader scale about the relationship between physical and mental labour, 'rank' and achievement, and the value of collective biography itself as a genre.

While the practice of self-help is not exclusively reserved for the working classes, Smiles models its efficacy on the humble virtues possessed by those whom he describes as the 'artisans of civilization' (20). The attainment of greatness in any sphere of knowledge or culture is assisted by the exercise of personal attributes as likely to be learned (if not more so)

in the lower reaches of society as by inherited wealth or privilege: 'Great men of science, literature, and art – apostles of great thoughts and lords of the great heart – have belonged to no exclusive class nor rank in life' (21). 'Difficulty' is once more a positive determinant of achievement rather than an inhibiting condition. Smiles views the discipline of physical labour as the chief 'advantage' of the working classes in the pursuit of self-culture: 'that they are in early life under the necessity of applying themselves laboriously to some mechanical pursuit or other, - thus acquiring manual dexterity and the use of their physical powers'. Conversely, he contends, 'youths of the leisure classes' are 'taught to associate labour with servility' and thus fail to develop the character traits requisite for intellectual development (264). Both classes are maimed by their one-sided development, but it is evident that the working classes fare better. Like Hood, Smiles's ideal configuration of a life of labour is one of balance and combination: 'It seems possible, however, to avoid both of these evils by combining physical training or physical work with intellectual culture' (264). In a similar way, Smiles elevates 'the commoner qualities', such as 'common sense, attention, application, and perseverance' above the notion of innate or transcendent genius, but also suggests an accommodation between the two sides: true genius is defined by its capacity to embrace the prosaic labour which others disparage (90). An overarching aim of *Self-Help* is to challenge the widely-assumed separation of 'the man of genius from the man of ordinary mould', a legacy of early-nineteenth-century 'Romantic' ideology (91).

Though Smiles is best known for his collective biographies of 'Industrial Heroes' (89) – most notably, *Lives of the Engineers* (1861-2) and *Industrial Biography: Iron Workers and Tool Makers* (1863) – *Self-Help* also includes 'writers of books' and 'creators of works of art' amongst the 'hands and minds' which represent the 'industrious spirit of England' (37). Contemporary writers born within the labouring class, such as Robert Nicoll and (especially) Hugh Miller, are amongst the many literary and intellectual figures cited within *Self-Help*,

and Smiles enlists more illustrious names – Shakespeare and Ben Jonson - in support of his theory that 'humble rank' often stimulates the development of greatness (22). Overall, though, Smiles's emphasis is on the habits and characteristics which sustain productive literary labour irrespective of the writer's social origins. A favoured example is Walter Scott, the son of an attorney, whose professional experience as little more than a 'copying clerk' in a lawyer's office contributed to his 'perseverance' in the literary field:

> He himself attributed to his prosaic office discipline that habit of steady, sober diligence, in which mere literary men are so often found wanting. As a copying clerk he was allowed *3d.* for every page containing a certain number of words; and he sometimes, by extra work, was able to copy as many as 120 pages in twenty-four hours, thus earning some *30s*.; out of which he would occasionally purchase an odd volume, otherwise beyond his means (99).

On the one hand, the 'dull routine' of Scott's clerical work offers a convenient parallel career, allowing him the time and resources to focus on more congenial literary work (both reading and writing) after hours. But on the other hand, the discipline and economization in the use of language learnt in the office itself becomes a model for Scott's professional authorship, bridging the gap within the dual existence initially outlined. Scott's literary labour enacts the prudential virtues associated with the bourgeois professional, as does Wordsworth's (another attorney's son) – 'both of whom, though great poets, were eminently punctual and practical men of business' (223). Scott's career is thus an apt illustration of Smiles's view that 'there was no necessary connection between genius and an aversion or contempt for the common duties of life' (99).

An even more striking example of the inclusiveness of Smiles's account of the relationship between literature and labour in *Self-Help* is that of Edward Bulwer Lytton, a

man of inherited title and wealth who becomes a prolific professional author lauded for his 'industry':

> He has worked his way step by step, disdainful of ease, and animated throughout by the ardent desire to excel. On the score of mere industry, there are few living English writers who have written so much, and none that have produced so much of high quality. The industry of Bulwer is entitled to all the greater praise that it has been entirely self-imposed (33).

Here, the very fact of Bulwer's privileged social background becomes the rationale for Smiles's praise of his voluntary labour. Given that the pleasures of material fortune are less conducive to self-improvement than the pursuit of knowledge under difficulty, Bulwer's determination to achieve distinction by his own effort comes to seem as remarkable, if not more so, than the intellectual attainment of working-class autodidacts. Unsurprisingly, Smiles does not pursue the social implications and contradictions of this argument in any depth. Rather, the illustration stands as one more instance of the generalized character traits - 'Self-respect, self-help, application, industry, integrity' (320) – to be applied in all forms and contexts of human endeavour.

Notwithstanding the disparate nature of its 'illustrative sketches of character', S*elf-Help* was, in its inception, primarily addressed to a readership of working men (8). Originating in a series of lectures delivered to mutual improvement societies in Leeds during the 1840s, the book was shaped by the broader culture of working-class self-improvement, its characteristic narrative forms and modes of address, even as it stands apart from this context.[6] Like his contemporaries Craik and Hood, Smiles conceived the genre of collective biography as a means of reproducing the practices of self-culture through imitative reading. 'The chief use of biography', he maintains, 'consists in the

noble models of character in which it abounds'; each 'record of a noble life … serves as a model for others to form themselves by in all time to come' (305). While all readers potentially benefit from this narrative form, its main efficacy lies in the absence or paucity of formal education. As Smiles suggests in his Introduction to the first edition of *Self-Help*, the numerous exemplary lives featured in such volumes are rendered in the manner of 'busts rather than full-length portraits' (8). For all the individualism of his doctrine, what this enables is a dramatization of the collective labour of self-cultivation.

Notes

[1] For a fuller discussion of this debate, see Salmon, pp. 103-110.

[2] This capaciousness did not extend to significant inclusion of women, a fact acknowledged by the subsequent publication of a complementary volume, *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties. Illustrated by female examples*, in 1847.

[3] For a contemporary biographical account of Hood's life, see Giddins.

[4] Unless otherwise indicated in parentheses, page references for this work refer to the 1851 First Edition.

[5] Later in his career Hood acknowledged his debt to Carlyle in a full-length biography: *Thomas Carlyle: Philosophic Thinker, Theologian, Historian, and Poet* (1875).

[6] For further discussion of the origins of *Self-Help* in Smiles's work as a journalist and lecturer during the 1840s, see Tyrrell and Jarvis. On the wider culture of working-class self-education during the nineteenth century, see Rose.

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