Journal of American Studies of Turkey
2 (1995): 73-79.

Swirling Voices: Considerations of Working-class Poetic Property

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The political and economic power of the working classes has only rarely and temporarily risen to a level of direct influence on the traditions that constitute literary practices as a dominant cultural form. It is therefore difficult to talk about a tradition of working-class poetry in a way that does not reduce it to middle-class terms, according to which it would be viewed as a Minor literature--almost as a culturally deprived literature--qualified by a few geniuses (such as Whitman in America or D.H. Lawrence in Britain) who somehow managed in their art to transcend their working-class status. Yet if we define the "working class," as I heard Nicholas Coles define it during a panel on Working-Class Literature at the 1992 MLA Convention, as "most of the people, most of the time," then we are compelled to recognize its relevance and the importance of discussing it as best as we can on its own terms. What I seek to show in this paper is the extent to which the terms (which is to say, the dialogic manner) of working-class poetry are also our own--for most of us, most of the time: For, although constituted in part by the relationships of its subordinant status, working-class poetry also presupposes within it our own answering voices, even as our own most intimate thoughts presuppose the answering voices of those others with whom we are most familiar in the daily conditions of our lives and histories. After discussing traditions of working-class poetry in English, I focus on two contemporary American working-class poets, Peter Oresick and John Ventola.

Traditions of Working-Class Poetry in English

The tradition of working-class poetry in English is in fact comprised of many multiplying traditions, and I want briefly to sketch a number of these. Because writing is relatively low-tech, requiring none of the prohibitive capital investment that characterizes many of the other forms of cultural production, it is, by that much, available as the medium of the people. However, while the technological threshold for working-class writers is a low one, the investment required of a

writer's time presents a considerable obstacle. A body needs a certain amount of leisure and energy before it can write. For this reason, the history of working-class poetry in English has often been one of hard personal sacrifice and keenly felt alienation. In Britain, the period of greatest struggle perhaps came earliest, with the so-called "peasant poets" of the 18th and early 19th centuries such as Stephen Duck, Mary Leapor, Robert Burns, Robert Bloomfield and John Clare (see Greene). These poets were sometimes, and for a brief season, well accepted by middle-class readers. Yet many more were cast aside. In her study of 18th century poetry by laboring-class women, Donna Landry advocates an approach to these writers which I would suggest for working-class poets generally:

> writing that has been dismissed as derivative, conventional, or imitative needs now to be reread for its dialogic, innovative, and critical possibilities, for its muted protests and attempts at subversion, its curtailed yet incorrigible desires. ... [T]he material process of writing, [and] the linguistic transactions that writing involves permit them a certain access to the theoretical space from which criticism, and new ideological possibilities can emerge (Landry, 115).

There were comparatively fewer urban working-class poets in Britain before the 19th century. One of them was Wiliam Blake (1757-1827), whose father was a London hosier. It is well worth considering Blake as a working-class writer. The strong aphoristic quality of his early work, the vitality of the ballad form put to use in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), his imaginative transformations of the London streets and of the Bible (a book which formed the cornerstone of working-class literacy), his refusal ever to abandon his engraver's trade, not to mention his interest in "new ideological possibilities"--all testify to a working--class character largely obscured by canonization.

Poets in the 19th century followed in greater and greater numbers--including the Chartist poets of 1830s and 40s, and a host of shoemaker, mill hand and railway worker poets, in addition to more regionally defined "dialect" writers--poets with names such as Ebenezer Eliott, W. J. Linton, Edwin Waugh, Gerald Massey, Joseph Skipsey, Alexander Anderson and Ellen Johnston, which to this day remain obscure (see Maidment). Although workers were widely encouraged, at least in principle, to engage in literary pursuits as a means towards "moral improvement" and "self-help," real poetic ambition was seen as a dangerous or foolhardy pretension. Workers who wrote in verse were allotted, at best, second class literary status. All of these poets are important, however, because, during a period when many aspects of oral culture were rapidly disappearing, their work registered the meeting of working-class literacy with rapid industrialization and social transformation.

In the US, as was the case in Britain, 19th century working-class poets responded deeply to the manner by which the industrial discipline of the factory system was breaking down older habits of independent and collective work. Paul Berman

reminds us that "Whitman was always writing about work and toil ... for the very good reason that he himself was a man of the manual trades." He had learned "to look for the old, labor-drenched Anglo-Saxon words of ordinary life," a life which, because it was passing away, lent pathos to Whitman's idealizations of "shoemakers and hatters warbling in chorus" (102-103).

Later, during the so-called period of "proletarian literature" of the 1930s, fueled by the economic crisis of the depression, working-class writers made a significant impact on American literature. Writers connected with this tradition include novelists as well as poets, such as Claude McKay, Charles Reznikoff, Joseph Kalar, Michael Gold, Langston Hughes, Anzia Yezsierska, Pietro Di Donato, and many others. Although not always of working-class origins, they were mostly raised at the margins of working-class communities, and tended to lean towards the Left in their political views. As a group, however, they were held together less by any straight-forward political program than by the general belief that literature should "have both a basis and a function within social reality." Many were "children of immigrants, or immigrants themselves . . . likely to have learned their literary and social aspirations while coming of age in the ghettos of Chicago or New York," at a time when "labour-drenched words" were likely to be spoken with many accents other than "Anglo-Saxon" (Klein, "The Roots of Radicals": 153). Together with their African American contemporaries, these writers contributed not only to the re-making of American literature, but also to the "democratization of the idea of authorship in America" (Klein,*Foreigners* :181). Critical interest in their work continues to be revived, aided by recent books by Barbara Foley and Cary Nelson. The memory of a "proletarian movement" can help us keep the category of "class" alive in the age of multiculturalism.

A large number of American poets write today as part of the legacy of the relative prosperity won by organized labor during the post-World War II period, and other post-war concessions, such as the GI Bill which sent ex-servicemen on to higher education. My feeling is that the body of work that has been produced out of that relative prosperity, which allowed portions of the working class to shade into the lower middle class, is of some importance. Some sons and daughters of 50s factory workers are now teachers and professors, and they are the ones who have produced a great deal of the verse printed in recent working-class poetry anthologies (see Oresick and Coles; Robinson; and Zandy).

Successive Cultural Displacements

One such poet is Peter Oresick, who has some poems included in *Working Classics* (1992), a collection which he also helped to edit. In "After the Deindustrialization of America, My Father Enters Television Repair," Oresick juxtaposes images from a television documentary on British history with those

from standard American history--"Here there were Indians, mound builders"--and from local and personal history, in order to graft a consideration of the shape of working-class history in general:

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My hands hold, my father's solder the wires--
picture rolls once, then steadies ... an English castle!
The voice over drones about Edward I,
who, to subdue the Welsh, built castles.
Some sixty years, dozens of engineers, the masses
conscripted from the villages.

My father moves on to a Zenith
with a bad tuner ...
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What the poem achieves is a depiction of successive cultural displacements, an evocation of successive economically conditioned cultural settlements--feudalism, capitalism, post-industrialism--that are moved through, "entered" and left, in much the same way as the father "moves on" from one worn out TV to another. There is succession--pictures which "roll and steady" then roll again--but there are also parallels: between the Welsh castle and the man's home; between the growth and "obsolescence" of the feudal town and the growth and exhaustion of Oresick's own Midwestern factory town; between king Edward and king Eisenhower (Edward with that imperial "I" after his name, Eisenhower with the personal pronoun forming the first syllable of his); between the grandfather as rural laborer and the same man, after his immigrant journey from pre-industrialism to post-industrialism, as suburban grass cutter. The building of the factory town had taken,

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Some half dozen years, German engineers, and hundreds of Slavic peasants.

Grandfather sat on his samovar
warming himself and making excuses,
but finally, he set off.
Got a room, became a shoveler.
Got a wife, a company house.
Ford City:  a valley filling with properties.
...
Edward's castles were in ruins
by the 15th century.  Not from Welsh armies,
but the rise of the middle class.
The town around a castle thrived:
tailors, smithies, cobblers, coopers.
Drawing in the Welsh peasants.
And what with intermarriage and the rise of capitalism ...
a castle grew obsolescent.
...
During Eisenhower's reign
my grandfather retired and mowed his lawn
until I took over ...

Once in the garage he showed me a scythe.
He mowed hay in the old country, and the women
would follow, raking it in windrows.

The factories today are mostly closed down ...
                                    (Oresick and Coles 180-183)
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The series ends with the poet in his car rehearsing the illusion of mobility and perhaps contemplating the nature of the succession that will both separate him from and bind him to his own children, or perhaps it would be better to say, that will bind them to him. For what remains constant through the series of cultural displacements is the condition of class subordination, and the view of history from the lower strata of society, on which the poet hopes to gain a longer, perhaps higher, perspective. It is a view of working-class culture as that which is thoroughly conditioned by its history of class subordination, and it leads to a vexing question: What does the working-class poet possess in his own right? What is valuable or recoverable in working-class cultural inheritance that is not either handed down from above or distorted by the conditions and ends of servitude? To what extent are his "properties" his?

It may be sufficient to notice that in the lines of succession outlined by Oresick something of working-class culture itself might be said to endure, that the life of the people exists in some shape outside the castle walls as it does, however altered, in the line of pensioners outside the factory, even if what endures is but the capacity to endure, to build a life, to move on. The organization of working-class lives does not depend on any specific economic settlement. When the factory closes, the life of the people goes on. Something may endure of *Gemeinschaft* that adapts transformations to it, or, at least, of shared strivings, a glimmer of which may be seen, for example, in the looks and gestures of recognition exchanged between the poet's son and a factory pensioner--"a man/with my face"--that come at the end of Oresick's poem.

Alienation and the Poetic Subject

It is also important to observe that the standing of the poet's "I" in "After Deindustrialization" is such that it does not stand alone. Personal memory, here, is inextricably bound to group memory. It is always a memory of others, most notably of others' busy hands--soldering wire, shovelling sand, cobbling, tailoring, washing dishes, starting an engine--almost as if the work of hands by itself is enough to set off a chain of collective memory. Personal identity is given little meaning apart from collective identity. The "I" is only a moment that "takes over" in a chain of ever altering yet ever similar circumstances, funded by what came before and invested in what will follow. This ideal of a working-class collective subjectivity works in contrast to the "sovereign subject" and "abstract individualism" which are dominant assumptions of middle class writing and middle class culture (Gagnier 39).

Much working-class poetry involves such a dialectic of conflict--between opposing working and middle class values finding expression in the tension between group identifications and individualist assumptions. It is a dialectic, however, which is too

readily subsumed from the dominant middle class perspective in terms of normative individuation. From that dominant perspective, an over-attachment between self and others is made to appear as a regressive step in the process of personal and poetic "development"; whereas detachment would signal a progressive step, one in which the underprivileged status of the working-class subject was in a stage of being "overcome." This dominant arrangement insures that identity conflicts in working-class poetry are read as resolved only in favor of middle class terms. Thus, working-class poetic failure is often located in a failure to individuate, in a writer's unoriginal imitation of superior models, or in both.

The work of John Ventola, a Buffalo, NY writer whose poems appear in the anthology *The Workplace* (Robinson), often seems open to this sort of normative misinterpretation. Ventola's poems usually depict a lyric subject divided between personal aspiration and local connectedness. They are also peppered with literary allusions. In "Leaving Western NY," for example, there are "modern-day Joads." The "tyger" that "leap(s)/ out of an orange-blue flame" in "The Alterboy" is spelled with a Blakean "Y." The speaker in "Approaching Hopi Point" carries his camera "strapped across (his) chest/ like a bandoleer." But to call a working-class poet to task for such choices has been a familiar tactic at least since Thomas Carlyle's criticism of Ebenezer Eliott in 1832. For Carlyle, Eliott's *Corn Law Rhymes* suffered from "the tang of the circulating libraries" (26). He cautioned the poet against the use of "wild words" as well as emotional extravagance, and advised him to keep within the range of his native subject matter. The emotional qualities of Ventola's poems are often quite pronounced, often expressing a sense of urgent impasse or painful anticlimax as in feelings of "desperate escape" and "reluctant survival." Yet it is precisely by this mixing of styles and discord of feelings that his poetry registers broader cultural conflicts.

Ventola's "Talking to Dante," for example, contrasts the abstraction of a high cultural afterlife with concrete images from the living hell of the loading docks--the nausea of "diesel fumes," "constant drone of idling trucks," "industrial safety boots on aching feet." The poem's formal apostrophe--"Dante Alighieri,/I too know something about Hell"--succeeds as a parodic appropriation of high literary style that claims for the working-class subject the status of poetic speaker. At the same time it deflates that status by bringing Dante to earth to engage in a workman-like style of linguistic one-upmanship. The apostrophe may also express the poet's wish to engage an all but lost (old country) cultural inheritance and a memory worn language. For although the poet may not be able to read the *Inferno* in the original Italian, he can yet make Dante attend to his American vernacular.

The definitive statement of the dock worker in "Talking to Dante" is that "Hell is the thought of spending forty years this way." A similar sense of imprisonment is evoked in Ventola's "The Blackbird," a creature who "Like most of us,/. . . flew into the plant,/happy to have gotten in," only to become "desperate for escape." Yet

for anyone who can manage it, escape can bring the feeling of being a "guilty survivor," as it does for the family told about in "Leaving Western NY":

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... they kept looking back
as they slowly drove away,
reluctantly saving themselves.
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The thoughts of the poet on vacation in "Letter From California" conclude in a similar vein, expressing the wish that "we were home." This poem rehearses a series of spatial and temporal relocations that recall Oresick's litany of cultural displacements, associating a cannery in the Central Valley with "the Chevy Plant on River Rd [in Buffalo]/ where Grampa used to work," and "replacing" the Mediterranean Sea with Lake Erie, and, by extension, with the Pacific Ocean. As the poet travels west with his family, he thinks of their journey as one that might complete, reverse or otherwise correct the earlier immigration made by Grampa. He imagines Grampa as having been a sort of confused Columbus who had "believed that America ended" where Lake Erie begins, "never suspecting it contained/a place so much like his native Palermo" as this place in the California sun. Yet the echoing of that displacement seems to leave the poet himself feeling disorientated about the true whereabouts of "home," and struggling to secure a "recovered memory" for the "soothing [of] my restless dissatisfaction." "Letter From California" is a self-consciously ambitious poem, and, at the same time, relentlessly chatty. Its main topic of conversation, as it turns out, is the weather. These strands of chat and poeticism come together uncomfortably, for example, when the poet wonders,

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... if the Arctic god has breathed the last
of his white-cold breath down the narrow streets
of Buffalo's Westside and hissed into the
microscopic hole in our living room window
his malevolent message ...
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Nevertheless, this clash of rhetorical styles is in perfect keeping with the poem's clash of emotions, the ambivalence of "wishing all of you were here" while "wishing we were home." Significantly, it is this mode of collective address that proves most representative of working-class poetry in general. The resistance of the lyric subject to make itself over psychologically in the middle class mold is hardly a poetic failure at all. Here as elsewhere, Ventola's use of the first person plural, as well as his concern to reach out to physically absent others, helps to suggest that, notwithstanding anyone else the poet may write for, there may exist for working-class poetic imagination a generative audience of similarly situated and familiar others, others who travel with the poet wherever he goes.

Working-Class Poetic Property

Ventola's poetry helps to suggest the positive import for working-class poetry of working-class culture itself--both its modes of social self-construction and of linguistic consciousness. The "lunch box full of conversations" which in one mood can represent "Hell" for the poet of "Talking to Dante," in another mood discloses a positive store of poetic resources, a linguistic food which may be defended in the same spirit as Sancho Panza defends his use of proverbs to Don Quixote. "Why should you be vexed," Sancho asks, "if I make use of my own property, seeing as I have no other--no other wealth except sayings and more sayings?" It is precisely in this notion of collective linguistic property that working-class poets find their wealth. It is the kind of cultural wealth which, in another context, a character in Meyer Levin's 1930s novel *The Old Bunch* is in the process of discovering for himself. "Think of the people you know," he muses,

> and you find yourself thinking not of people you know today but of the people you grew up with. Because you really knew their class background. Or is it because they were the people you really knew all of your life? Whether near or away from them, you measure yourself by their standards, for these are the ideas you had grown into, when you first became aware of the social world. They are the unchangeable flesh of your mind. (qtd. in Klein, 1971: 156)

What is recognizable, and, I think, distinctive, across a wide range of working-class poetry is evidence of a specific kind of generating audience, an "unchangeable flesh of mind," a linguistic consciousness of "sayings and more sayings" born of the experience, the limitations as well as the richness, the habits as well as the creative responses, whose habitation is the work-a-day world of similarly situated others. This swirl of voices, in terms suggested by V. N. Volosinov, consists, for the individual poet, of a range of responses which, fostered with respect to specific material limits, reflects and constructs a system of value--a collection of evaluative "accents." In order to approach working-class poetry on its own terms we must be prepared to hear those accents and their claim to the collective linguistic property we all share.

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