

The Contested Terrain of Working-Class Literature

Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy: *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007

reviewed by Russell Harrison

“Oh, How It Goes on and How You Live through It!”

– Meridel LeSueur

At close to 900 pages of densely-printed text and spanning three and one-half centuries (mid 1600s-2002), this book presents both problems and possibilities for the reviewer: Problems in that in no way can even a review essay more than suggest the issues involved in doing it justice; possibilities in that, the topic being so broad, while one can't say just anything, one can touch on a lot of topics.

By way of introduction, I might note that all four words of the title are problematic. Almost uniquely, “we” are a country of immigrants speaking a number of languages: the Los Angeles school system is said to have students from more than 120 different countries. The ongoing battle over making English the official language of the U.S. attests to the conflicts involved in what defines an American. Then we come to the issue of what constitutes work and the working class. To take the phrase first: The divergent path that the American working-class has taken from its European counterpart has long presented a problem for theorists. More than a third of a century ago, Mario Tronti wrote on this topic: “It is this modern Sphinx, this obscure enigma, this social thing-in-itself which we know exists but which cannot be known: the *American working class*.”¹ To their credit, the editors do not let themselves be bound by a rigid notion of what constitutes work, and therefore working-class. As they write in the “Introduction”: “It is important to note, too, that just as there is no single working-class identity, there is no single working-class literary aesthetic. Because the American working-class is large and particularly diverse, its literature is multi-vocal, embracing the richness of language differences and styles of utterance” (xxiv).

This understanding of class inevitably results in a different understanding of what constitutes work. For instance, the work of domestic servants is represented here in such stories as Alice Childress's “Like One of the Family.” Coles and Zandy write in a footnote: “Some readers may be surprised by the inclusion of slave writing in this collection, especially if their definition of the working class follows Marx's classic account of the (industrial) proletariat” (xxviii). Lastly we arrive at that much-dinged *Ding an sich*: Literature. What constitutes it? This question is naturally unanswerable and, in some ways, objectionable. It is objectionable in that any attempt to come up with a definition or typology almost always seems to be aimed at exclusion of some writer or group of writers. With respect to the topic under discussion here, the exclusion is aimed at those who work and /or those who write about work. This group has often been excluded from mainstream literary discourse, both with respect to literature and criticism about literature.

Why this should be interesting is relevant to this book and worth a short discussion. The Canadian poet and critic, Tom Wayman, has addressed the topic in his book devoted to work writing, where he speculates that:

It may be that the roots of the academy's disinterest in daily work as a central and important matter lie in the history of university studies. Academic inquiry and discussion, especially in the humanities, goes back to an ecclesiastical tradition which looked to sources other than the secular world as the origins of wisdom. Indeed, the further a concern was from everyday experience, the more it seemed to speak of the divine font of knowledge.²

The question then becomes, naturally enough, why do we have to look to sources other than the material here and now? Well, if the here and now is too awful to think about, we wind up creating a literature of escape(ism).

This the anthology, *American Working-Class Literature* decidedly does not do. As the foregoing paragraph suggests, the book is inclusive and uninterested in either fine-tuned definitions or overarching schemata. As the authors write: “‘Literature’ is, like ‘working class,’ an unstable and contested concept” (xxiii). What the anthology does is provide a tremendous number of texts in many genres with a strong focus on the 20th Century. (Nearly 60% of the selections were originally published between 1925 and 2000.)

While the world of work, especially for the First-World proletariat, has changed significantly in the past 75 years, one is sometimes startled at how *little* has changed. In 1906, Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle* with its vivid depiction of the division of labor:

One scraped the outside of a leg; another scraped the inside of the same leg. One with a swift stroke cut the throat; another with two swift strokes severed the head, which fell to the floor and vanished through a hole. Another made a slit down the body; a second opened the body wider; a third with a saw cut the breastbone; a fourth loosened the entrails; a fifth pulled them out—and they also slid through a whole in the floor. (233)

The Jungle is a hundred years old and though, I suspect, little taught these days, still remains a classic. Yet for anyone familiar with the contemporary documentary literature on work, it continues to cut a little too close to the bone, as the following excerpt from the popular collection of work interviews, *Gig*, reveals:³

I work in Department 20 with about a thousand other people. It’s equally divided between men and women. Our job is to separate the wings, legs, and breasts. We also do some deboning. After we separate, another department packages the chickens and sorts them by weight. Then another department labels them and packs them in crates and stamps them for shipping.⁴ (227)

The anthology has its depressing share of such *plus-ca-change-plus-c’est-la-meme-chose* moments. In Josephine L. Baker’s “A Second Peep at Factory Life” (published in *The Lowell Offering* [1840-1845]), we see an example of the downward pressure on wages that is a structural *sine qua non* of capitalism:

There is one thing that must be mentioned ere we part, that is the practice of sending agents through the country to decoy girls away from their homes with the promise of high wages, when the market is already stocked to overflowing. This is certainly wrong, for it lessens the value of labor (52)

One advantage of the book’s length and its decided tilt towards the literature of the last three-quarters of the 20th Century is that it allows us to see just how radically work and the working class – and thus proletarian literature have changed –over that time span. Mike Gold’s well-known essay of 1929, “Go Left, Young writers!” argued for a proletarian literature that was “the real thing; a knowledge of working-class life in America gained from first-hand contacts” (382). His profile for the new proletarian writer was “a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, and steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America” (382). Thus in 1929 Gold was arguing for a writer who was young, male, (apparently) lacking in higher education and, above all, engaged in hard physical labor. Compare this stance with Wayman’s critique of the “authoritarian left” (82) which has a problem “with the new work literature” because of “the educational level of a number of its practitioners. Some, though by no means all, of the new industrial poets have a college education”(82). “[T]he concept of an increasingly college-trained work force seems to disturb many on the left” (82-3). (It would be interesting to know whom Wayman has in mind here, but for our purposes it little matters that Wayman gives no examples of such authoritarian leftists.) What is important here is that Wayman is implicitly reflecting the change in the composition of the working class in the 20th Century, both in terms of provenance and in terms of its curriculum vitae.⁵

As the editors write in their introduction to that section of the anthology entitled, “Affluence, Cold War, and the Other America: 1940s-1970s”: “The clarity of a line drawn between capital and labor blurs into murkier relationships. The public face of labor is less *dramatically* visible. The world of workers has simultaneously expanded, spurred by new technologies, and, ironically, shrunk into more recessed and private spaces” (583). As classic industrial work such as steel and automobile manufacturing began to be downsized and offshored, the worker profile sketched by Gold became less and less relevant. The tremendous increase of women in the work force, for example, changed its composition and as the anthology shows the literature of work reflects that change. Indeed, there are far more contributions from women in this anthology than one might have expected.

In traditional left thinking, especially in Europe, the working class has been seen as the revolutionary subject, the only class that can revolutionize all society because its project is not the hegemony of any one class, but the abolition of all classes. But what has been the writer's role in this project. There was one school of thought that writers and writing should be directly engaged in the effort to radically change society, that literature should be a kind of literarization of Lenin's 1902 handbook on making a revolution, *What Is to Be Done?* One of the most artistically successful examples of this is Brecht's 1930 *Lehrstück, The Measures Taken*. But this was a dicey undertaking, due to a dynamic that, not only glorified the role of the communist party but was, mistakenly, in my opinion, viewed as Stalinist and anticipatory of the Purges of the late 1930s, and it was never performed again in Brecht's lifetime.

But there is another treatment of revolutionary art that sees a different relationship between literature and radical social change. Engels, writing to the German novelist, Minna Kautsky suggested that:

the socialist problem novel in my opinion fully carries out its mission if by a faithful portrayal of the real relations it dispels the dominant conventional illusions concerning these relations, shakes the optimism of the bourgeois world, and inevitably instills doubt as to the eternal validity of that which exists with-out itself offering a direct solution of the problem involved, even without at times ostensibly taking sides.⁶

It is this view that we see operative in *American Working-Class Literature*. We see any number of texts that "shake the optimism of the bourgeois world." This is clearly the case with writers such as Marge Piercy, Dorothy Allison, and Carolyn Chute whose "Faces in the Hand" is a masterpiece. Cherrie Moraga's play "Heroes and Saints," written, according to its author, "in response to the numerous events that took place in 1988 which brought growing visibility to the United Farm Workers' grape boycott in protest against pesticide poisoning," is as powerful as any of the "Tendency Literature" that Engels was in part responding to in his letter.

However what I find lacking in the anthology is a negativism, manifested in a refusal of the whole capitalist enterprise and specifically of the role of work in that enterprise. It is a negativism and a refusal that appear in such work writers as Charles Bukowski, the poet known as Antler, and Ben Hampton, writers inexplicably omitted from this anthology.⁷ But such an "attitude" is missing, for example, from the "Digger" poems of Jim Daniels (in the anthology) which evince a sadness and a pathos and most of all a resignation – all understandable feelings. To be clear on this point: in no way do I suggest that anyone tell workers (or any writers, for that matter) what and how to write, that there be a "message." (In any event, everything written has a message.) But it seems to me that the selections are weighted on the side of acceptance and more weight might have been given to resistance, even if that resistance is subjective and unorganized.

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Notes

¹ Mario Tronti, "Workers and Capital," in *Telos*. Winter 1972 (14), 55.

² Tom Wayman, *Inside Job: Essays on the New Work Writing*. Madeira Park. B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1983. (85)

³ The editors do not include any of the interviews in *Gig*, but do include two interviews from Studs Terkel's 1972 classic, *Working*.

⁴ "Poultry Factor Worker," in Bove, John et al., *Gig: Americans Talk about Their Jobs*. New York: Three Rivers, 2000.

⁵ I should note that Wayman was writing about Canadian literature. For the points I make here, there is no significant difference.

⁶ Friedrich Engels, "Letter to Margaret Harkness" in Craig, David, ed. *Marxists on Literature: An Anthology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1975, (268).

⁷ Hampton's 1991 book about working at General Motors, *Rivthead: Tales from the Assembly line*, was widely noticed. Bukowski's *Factotum* has been widely read and is perhaps the epitome of this "refusenik" ethos. At one point, Henry Chinaski, the novel's protagonist reprises this "refusal-to-work" ethic: "My idea was to wander about doing nothing, always avoiding the boss, and avoiding the stoolies who might report to the boss" (130). Charles Bukowski, *Factotum*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press. 1975.