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Into Our Labours

Work and Literary Form in World Literature

NEIL LAZARUS

FREDRIC JAMESON BEGINS the long concluding chapter of his book *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* by observing that many critics of his celebrated 1984 essay on postmodernism seem to him “to [have] confuse[d] taste [...] analysis, and evaluation” – “three things,” he says, that he “would have thought we had some interest in keeping separate.”¹ The definitions that he then proposes of these three separable forms of critical practice are very suggestive, and would certainly repay careful consideration. But it is his conceptualization of the second of them – analysis – that bears directly on what I want to explore in this essay. There is some circularity in Jameson’s formulation, unfortunately: he writes that he takes analysis “to be that peculiar and rigorous conjuncture of formal and historical analysis that constitutes the specific task of literary and cultural study.” The word ‘analysis’ appears both as what is being defined and in the definition itself. But this momentary clumsiness need not detain us unduly: what is being suggested is that the *differentia specifica* of ‘literary and cultural study’ consist in the conjoining of ‘formal and historical’ inquiry; and it follows from this that one of our central objectives as literary critics – perhaps our single central objective – ought to be to “investigat[e] [...] the historical conditions of possibility of specific forms” (297). Historical analysis; formal analysis: Jameson believes that these ‘perspectives’ are not merely to be fused or brought into simultaneous alliance but are, rather, ‘inseparable’. (With beguiling indirection, he adds that these ‘twin perspectives’ were ‘often thought to be irreconcilable or incommensurable in the past’: he knows, of course, that they are just as often and as tendentiously thought to be irreconcilable or incommensurable *today*, I take it that his

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 1995): 298. Further page references (after *Postmodernism*) are in the main text.

indirection here is tactical, predicated on the suspicion that to state this truth without varnish would be to risk offending readers whose formalist commitments remain altogether – and, indeed, militantly – free of any historicist sensibility.)

So, what exactly would literary scholarship that plausibly conjoined historical and formal analysis look like? In the renewed discussion of ‘world literature’ today, the work of Roberto Schwarz has rightly been seen as exemplary in just this respect. In *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, his study of Machado de Assis’s 1880 novel *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, Schwarz argues that the work’s “Babel of literary mannerisms,” the heterogeneity and bewildering multiplicity of its juxtapositions of narrative form and style, is to be read neither as inconsistency nor as baroque exhibition, but as a figuration of the contradictoriness of the Brazilian social order in the later-nineteenth century, “slave-owning and bourgeois at the same time.”² The sheer *volubility* of Machado’s prose is itself the point here. Schwarz draws our attention to “the profusion and crucial nature of the relationships implied in the rhythm of Machado’s prose, and the extraordinary contrasts between the voices orchestrated in its truly complex music” (16) in order to suggest that what might seem at first – and especially to a metropolitan reader – excess or superfluity is in fact “intensified realism” (73), more ‘realistic’, actually, than the Romantic, nationalist endeavours of such contemporaries of Machado’s as José de Alencar.

In *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, Schwarz describes his own methodology as an extension to the cultural field of the arguments that had been advanced by the members of a group of scholars of his teachers’ generation at the University of São Paulo, who “used to meet to study *Capital* with a view to understanding Brazil”:

This group had reached the daring conclusion that the classic marks of Brazilian backwardness should be studied not as an archaic leftover but as an integral part of the way modern society reproduces itself, or in other words, as evidence of a perverse form of progress. For the historian of culture and the critic of the arts in countries like ours, ex-colonies, this thesis has an enormous power to stimulate and deprovincialize, for it allows us to inscribe on the present-day international situation, in polemical form, much of what seemed to distance us from it and confine us to irrelevance. (3)

² Roberto Schwarz, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*, tr. John Gledson (1990, tr. Durham NC: Duke UP, 2001): 17, 3. Further page references are in the main text.

Hence Schwarz's argument that the aesthetic of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* is not simply *uneven* – “fractured” (158), its constituent elements uneasily juxtaposed, concatenated, imposed one upon the other – but also *combinatory*, its elements telescoped and accordionized. This marks the difference between Machado and his contemporaries, and also between the early Machado and Machado from the *Memoirs* onwards:

When Machado in his first phase retreated from the so-called contemporary terrain and practically excluded the new and critical discourse of individual freedoms and the right to self-fulfillment from his novels, he was fleeing from the false position in which liberal ideology and the conspicuous virtues of progress found themselves in the Brazilian context. Once this position of discernment is established, it will permit him, from the *Memoirs* on, to reintroduce the presumptions of modernity, only now explicitly marked by belittlement and dislocation, as was demanded by the circumstances. (158)

The volubility of the *Memoirs* bespeaks neither marginalization nor restriction, nor the pseudo-universality of a dominant discourse that imagines itself to be unisonant, but, rather, the accordionized combination of all aspects of Brazilian sociality: the work's volubility “squeezes” these contradictory aspects, Schwarz writes,

stretches them, and explores them in every direction, in any way it pleases. In other words, we have a firework display of a caricatured universal culture, a kind of down-market universality, in the best Brazilian tradition, in which Brás Cubas's caprice takes as its province the total experience of humanity and makes itself absolute. *It is no longer a passing tendency, psychological or stylistic, but a rigorous principle, placed above everything else, and that therefore is exposed, and can be appreciated all along the line.* This universalization establishes the axis that gives ideological power to the *Memoirs*. (18; italics in original)

No wonder, then, that a novel of the 1880s can appear to a present-day reader as anticipating the dislocated and absurd worlds of Eastern and Central Europe conjured up in the writing of the early decades of the twentieth century by such authors as Kafka and Musil.

Closer to home, we find another critic whose thinking about literary form in historical perspective is particularly noteworthy. In his essay “Notes on English Prose 1780–1950,” Raymond Williams writes of Dickens, for instance, that “the most important thing to say about [him] [...] is not that he is writing in a new

way, but that he is experiencing in a new way, and that this is the substance of his language."³ In Dickens's work, he continues,

the scale and nature of the change break through the composed forms and set out in new ways. [...] We can then see more clearly what Dickens is doing: altering, transforming a whole way of writing, rather than putting an old style at a new experience. It is not the method of the more formal novelists, including the sounds of measured or occasional speech in a solid frame of analysis and settled exposition. Rather, it is a speaking, persuading, directing voice, of a new kind, which has taken over the narrative, the exposition, the analysis, in a single operation. Here, there, everywhere: the restless production of a seemingly chaotic detail; the hurrying, pressing, miscellaneous clauses, with here a gap to push through, there a restless pushing at repeated obstacles, everywhere a crowding of objects, forcing attention; the prose, in fact, of a new order of experience; the prose of the city. It is not only disturbance; it is also a new kind of settlement. (93–94)

Jameson's own work might also be cited in these terms, for he, too, has been concerned very significantly with the relations between capitalist modernity and literary form. Recall, if you will, his repeated statement of the centrality of combined and uneven development for any understanding of modernism. The terms of his meta-commentary here are well known:

Modernism must [...] be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development, or to what Ernst Bloch called the 'simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous,' the 'synchronicity of the non-synchronous'.⁴

Less often cited are his many profound readings of individual modernist writers, works, and situations that collectively underpin and light up the general formulations.⁵

In the concluding chapter of *Postmodernism*, in a section entitled "Notes Toward a Theory of the Modern," Jameson calls for "a comparative sociology of modernism and its cultures." Such a sociology, he says –

³ Raymond Williams, *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1991): 91. Further page references (after *Writing*) are in the main.

⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 315.

⁵ In just one of these, from "Secondary Elaborations," Jameson writes of modernist literary production in its historical context, and presents its peculiar power as a function not of its radical modernity but, on the contrary, of its relative backwardness. Here, modernism "gives off a message that has little to do with the content of the individual works: it is the aesthetic as sheer autonomy, as the satisfactions of handicraft transfigured" (*Postmodernism*, 307).

which like Weber's remained committed to measuring the extraordinary impact of capitalism on hitherto traditional cultures, the social and psychic damage done to now irrevocable older forms of human life and perception – would alone offer an adequate framework for rethinking 'modernism' today, provided it worked both sides of the street and dug its tunnel from both directions; one must, in other words, not only deduce modernism from modernization, but also scan the sedimented traces of modernization within the aesthetic work itself. (304)

This formulation might be taken to ground the research that I have been engaged in recently, and that follows on from the collectively written WReC (Warwick Research Collective) volume, *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015).⁶ The overarching ambition of this work is to contribute to the formulation of a new comparativist approach in literary studies today. In a new project, I have begun to explore the social phenomenology of work as it finds literary representation in different locations across the world system from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The transformation of the nature of work, and the identification of the effects of this transformation on social consciousness, has obviously been a central feature of writing across the range of the past 150 years, from Gaskell, Flaubert, and Melville to Panait Astrati, Mulk Raj Anand, and Agnes Smedley, and on to Bessie Head, Lawrence Joseph, and Aravind Adiga. By examining how work in its multiple and changing modes is formally registered in literary works, my intention is to take further the argument advanced in the WReC volume, that 'world literature' is literature that registers the human experience of capitalist modernity.

A specifically literary contribution to the cultural history of work, the new project, which I have provisionally entitled *Into Our Labours*, will examine the literary encoding of two aspects of the 'worlding' of modernity. These two aspects are interlinked – indeed, they are both part of the same world-historical process – but they are perhaps analytically distinguishable. First is an 'inaugural' moment linked to the experience of modernization, commodity production, and wage labour. Much celebrated literary writing has lingered significantly on the moment when commodification achieves sufficient density to become the organizing principle of society and to insinuate itself into the fabric of everyday life, becoming visible as the uncanny colonizer of consciousness and the puzzling substrate of 'common sense'. We might plausibly label this body of work 'modernist', it seems to me, but only if we stop thinking of it as being

⁶ WReC (Warwick Research Collective), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015).

geographically or historically discrete in these terms: there is no reason to start with, or to stop at, Baudelaire, Döblin, Hamsun, or Fitzgerald, for instance: such other writers as Wang Anyi, Ayi Kwei Armah, Abdul Rahman Munif, and Arundhati Roy will enable us to make the arguments we need to make just as well, and in some respects even better. The second moment is then that governed by the experience of capitalist development in its consolidation, regularization, and global dispersal. Again, there is a lot of celebrated writing that has been concerned to find formal means by which to capture and question the experiences corresponding to this development: I am thinking here not only of the work of such contemporary writers as Thomas Pynchon, Rana Dasgupta, Monica Ali, Jamaica Kincaid, Victor Pelevin, Carlos Fuentes, Pepetela, Yuri Andrukhovych, and Roberto Bolaño but of their many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century precursors, among them Zola, Mallarmé, Conrad, Upton Sinclair, and Pío Baroja.

In alignment with Schwarz's enigmatic definition of form as "the abstract of social relations,"⁷ my ambition is to seek to determine the relation between changing modes of work and transformations in the forms, genres, and aesthetic strategies of the literary writing that seeks to describe, represent or bear witness to these changes. The *literary* registration of the vast historical process of 'development' or 'modernization' sometimes makes itself known to us through a crisis of representation, as the forms of space- and time-consciousness demanded by life in contexts in which the commodity has become the dominant social form are counterposed with inherited ways of seeing and knowing, now under acute pressure, if not already obsolete. The divide between 'old' and 'new', between urban and land-based forms of consciousness is acutely registered in Lao She's *Rickshaw*, for instance. The narrator tells us that when 'Camel' Hsiang Tzu (Xiangzi) first arrives in Shanghai, "he was a country boy and not like the city folks who hear the wind and expect the rain."⁸ Very quickly, however, Hsiang Tzu's sensibilities are remoulded in accordance with the rigours of life in the city. What Lao She deplors as 'individualism' is nothing other than the social logic corresponding to capitalist urbanism:

Rumors, truths – Hsiang Tzu seemed to have forgotten the farmer's life he once led. He didn't much care if the fighting ruined the crops and didn't pay much attention to the presence or absence of spring rain. All he was concerned about was his rickshaw; his rickshaw could produce

⁷ Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, ed. John Gledson (London: Verso, 1992): 53.

⁸ Lao She, *Rickshaw*, tr. Jean M. James (1937; Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1979): 12.

wheat cakes and everything else he ate. It was an all-powerful field which followed obediently after him, a piece of animated, precious earth.

The price of food went up due to drought and news of warfare; this much Hsiang Tzu knew. But like the city folk, he could only grumble about the high cost of food. There was nothing he could do about it at all. So food was expensive; did anyone know how to make it cheaper? This kind of attitude made him concerned only about himself; he put all other disasters and calamities out of his head.⁹

Hsiang Tzu's every thought and action register his own thoroughgoing objectification through labour. Everything he sees he reckons as exchange value, in terms of what it costs or how much it might realize; everything he does he calculates as investment or expenditure. His 'needs' are merely those that enable his social reproduction as labour power. He eats only what he has to eat to keep himself strong enough to pull his rickshaw; he sleeps just enough to enable him to recover from the day's exertions; he has no friends, and he keeps his dealings with the other rickshaw men with whom he comes into contact to an instrumental minimum; he dislikes drinking, does not gamble, has no interest in women or in conversation – indeed, he regards language with mistrust, as a wasteful indulgence. Lao She makes it clear that Hsiang Tzu's gruff inarticulacy is to be understood as the effect of a form of systematic repression that is simultaneously social and psychological.

In many literary works, the fact of combined unevenness is gestured at through barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar. Consider, for instance, the opening pages of Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea*, a novel whose carefully layered representation of Bloch's "simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous" has seldom been given the attention it deserves. The novel's own blurb, for instance, introduces its *mise-en-scène* thus: "Untouched by the twentieth century, the small fishing village near Bombay was still ruled by the age-old seasonal rhythms."¹⁰ Perhaps a paragraph or two of the work, read out of context, might seem to support this construction:

At the edge of the village was a big pond. Here buffaloes stood knee-deep, drinking or bathing. Lotuses bloomed – crimson ones with crimson leaves and green stalks. Ducks paddled between the large, flat, round leaves, and china-white egrets stood in the shallows, fishing. On the farther bank women were washing clothes and shouting and laughing as they beat the clothes on flat stones and sent up showers of water. They

⁹ Lao She, *Rickshaw*, 12–13.

¹⁰ Anita Desai, *The Village by the Sea* (1982; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

were dressed in bright pin and orange and lime-green saris which they had tucked up at their waists so that they could wade into the water and stand in the mud. They seemed to be enjoying this part of their house-work.¹¹

Reading on, however, we discover that, far from being somehow “untouched” by the twentieth century, Desai’s village by the sea is everywhere structured by the play of modernity. Its peripherality is a mark, not of its being *outside* modern development, but of its specific location *within* it. The paragraphs immediately following the above describe boys and girls in khaki uniforms attending schools that had presumably been established during the colonial era; provide evidence of the capitalization of both fishing and agriculture in the village – the fish caught are trucked to Bombay to be sold, as are the crops that have been grown – and of the ‘slow violence’ of environmental despoliation consequent upon overproduction; provide evidence, also, that wealthy people in Bombay are buying and refurbishing homes in the village to live in during their holidays (so that the village is progressively being drawn into a new service and leisure economy); and give us news that a government-owned cement factory is going to be built near the village, and that wage-labourers are going to be recruited to work in it. When Hari and Lila lament their poverty, and discuss the limited options open to them, they refer to all of these realities, construing them as existentially simultaneous – which for them, of course, they are: local, regional, national, trans-national; colonial, post-colonial; capitalist, pre-capitalist, non-capitalist. Rather than the ‘big-picture’ sociological view from outside, the characters can only see impersonal, external forces that dominate them, with a few tiny windows of opportunity created in the interstices of these from time to time.

The representation of *work* in Desai’s novel is interesting, not least because, in a gesture characteristic of the dominant ideology of the aesthetic, the novel represents work either by not representing it directly at all or by representing it through reference to consciousness. There is a concern to register the existence and the actuality of a sexual division of labour. Where Hari is concerned, work is described as being hard, dangerous, physically demanding; what this poor young man does, with diminishing returns, on his tiny plot of land, his livelihood actively jeopardized by capitalist modernization, is brought into explicit *qualitative* counterpoint with factory work, wage labour. Hari’s friend Ramu tells him: “The Government is going to build a great factory here”.¹²

¹¹ Desai, *The Village by the Sea*, 12.

¹² *The Village by the Sea*, 13.

Hari thought about it all morning while he worked quietly in the field behind their hut. All the time that he hoed and dug out stones and pulled up roots, preparing the single small field for a winter crop of vegetables, the same words kept ringing in his ears – ‘A job. A factory. Many jobs. Many factories....’ He was soon sweating in the sun as he bent and pulled and tugged and dug. Once he cut his big toe quite painfully on a sharp stone. Once, as he approached a sturdy ixora bush that had to be cut, he saw a black snake slither under it and hide so that he had to leave it alone. But all the time he thought of the factory and a job. [...]

He stopped to study his hands. They were worker’s hands – square and brown and callused. It was true he had done nothing with them but dig and sow and break coconuts from the trees and drag nets in the sea, but he could teach them to work machines. He felt sure he could. Was he sure? No, perhaps not quite sure.¹³

We note here both the abstracting quality of the language used to describe Hari’s work – the hoeing and digging and pulling are relatively unanchored as real activities – and also the studied emphasis on the joylessness of the work, the physical demands it makes and its stultifying repetitiveness – hoeing and digging and pulling and pulling and tugging and digging.

Desai’s approach is different with Lila. Here, a sentence that reads “It was time to start work” is followed by several intricate paragraphs that do not describe her working but, rather, set up a lexical economy which functions to place Lila and her village – or, better, Lila-in-her-village – relative to both history (‘development’) and nature:

It was time to start work.

She climbed over the dunes that were spangled with the mauve flowers of seaside ipomea into the coconut grove and passed the white bungalow that was locked and shuttered. It belonged to rich people in Bombay who came only rarely for their holidays. Its name was written on a piece of tin and tacked to the trunk of a coconut tree: *Mon Repos*. What did that mean? Lila had never found out and she wondered about it every time she walked past it, up the path that led through the coconut grove.

The morning light was still soft as it filtered through the web of palm-leaves, and swirls of blue wood-smoke rose from fires in hidden huts and mingled with it. Dew still lay on the rough grass and made the spider webs glitter. These webs were small and thickly matted and stretched across the grass, each with a hole in the centre to trap passing insects.

¹³ *The Village by the Sea*, 14.

Butterflies flew up out of the tussocks and bushes of wild flowers – large zebra-striped ones with a faint tinge of blue to their wings, showy black ones with scarlet-tipped wings, and little sulphur-yellow ones that fluttered about in twos and threes.

Then there were all the birds flying out of the shadowy, soft-needed casuarina trees and the thick jungle of pandanus, singing and calling and whistling louder than at any other time of the day. Flute-voiced drongoes swooped and cut through the air like dazzling knives that reflected the sun and glinted blue-black, and pert little magpie robins frisked and flirted their tails as they hopped on the dewy grass, snatching at insects before they tumbled into the spider's traps. Pairs of crested bul-buls sang from the branches. A single crow-pheasant, invisible, called out 'coop-coop-coop' in its deep, bogey-man voice from under a bush, and a pigeon's voice cooed and gurgled on and on. It was the voice of the village Thul as much as the roar of the waves and the wind in the palms. It seemed to tell Lila to be calm and happy and all would be well and all would be just as it was before.

But when Lila came to the log that bridged the swampy creek and led to their hut on the other bank, she looked at the hut and knew that nothing was as it had been before, and nothing was well either.¹⁴

The reader notes how the focalization shifts repeatedly from Lila to an external (and explicitly metropolitan) consciousness. It is the latter, obviously, that knows what to do with "Mon Repos," but also that can work with "spangled" and "ipomea" and that has a familiarity with zebras and their stripes. Reported and free indirect speech are both used, as well as the external narration that, among other things, represents "the voice of the village Thul" to us. The opening paragraph of the passage is marked not only by its relative density but also by the studied use of adjectives that seem to have an almost Adamic quality: mauve flowers, white bungalow, rich people. This is Lila's consciousness, presumably. In the subsequent paragraphs, the extension of the colour palette and its complexification (notably through the use of hyphenation) suggests the merging of Lila's consciousness with that of another observer, and secures the sympathetic identification of ourselves as readers with Lila: blue wood-smoke, zebra-striped and sulphur-yellow butterflies, showy black butterflies with scarlet-tipped wings, flute-voiced drongoes, etc. Nature and village Thul are on one side; work and hardship are on the other: "she looked at the hut and knew that nothing was as it had been before, and nothing was well either."

Jameson suggests that research into world literature should involve

¹⁴ *The Village by the Sea*, 8–9.

the comparison, not of [...] individual texts, which are formally and culturally very different from each other, but of the concrete situations from which such texts spring and to which they constitute distinct responses.¹⁵

I derive my new project's title from John Berger's trilogy of works, *Into Their Labours*, which deal with the experience of the residual Alpine peasantry across the twentieth century. In the moving "Historical Afterword" to *Pig Earth*, the first volume, Berger attempts to formulate something like a metaphysics of peasant life: he does so, he explains, because he believes that peasant culture is quite literally threatened with extinction by modern capitalist development, and that what is at issue in this obliteration is much more than the – as it were – contingent eclipse of a social class whose time has come and gone. *Into Their Labours* represents his attempt "to examine the meaning and consequence of [the] threat of historical elimination" facing the peasantry worldwide.¹⁶ Spinning off from Berger's work, my own project is, then, intended as an examination of the ways in which social labour overall has been transformed over the course of the past two centuries, and more specifically of the ways in which these developments have been represented in literature.

My interest, partly, is in the relationship between mental and manual labour – for example, in Yang Jiang's *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters*, a memoir first published in the early 1980s. A notable academic, author, and translator, Yang, together with her husband Qian Zhongshu (also a distinguished scholar and novelist, author of the remarkable *Fortress Besieged*¹⁷), was 'sent down', during the Cultural Revolution, at the age of sixty, to the cadre school of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, to work on a communal farm. The general instruction, following Mao Zedong's 'May 7 Directive' of 1966, was for Chinese intellectuals to be taught to 'unclass' themselves through political study, manual labour, and the progressive unlearning of 'bourgeois' habits and forms of thought. Yang's memoir is exceptional for its modesty, forbearance, and generosity, even in its recording of the hardship of the life that its author was forced to endure in her two years 'down under'. At one point Yang describes the staging, one evening in her camp,

of performances and skits on the theme of manual labour. Among the sketches was a short play about a member of a certain regiment who

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 86–87, fn. 5.

¹⁶ John Berger, *Pig Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 1979): 213.

¹⁷ Qian Zhongshu, *Fortress Besieged*, tr. Nathan K. Mao & Jeanne Kelly (1947; London: Penguin, 2006).

risked life and limb to keep the fire in a brick kiln going even though the roof was about to cave in. Someone said it was based on a true story. Another regiment put on a performance that was simply called 'Well-digging'. The whole regiment crowded on to the stage and moved around in a large circle as though they were pushing a well drill while they chanted a work song in chorus. There was no script and no other action apart from the circling movement and rhythmic chanting. Everyone moved and worked as one, drilling on without stopping until they reached the right depth. 'Hey-ho, hey-ho!' – the choral reverberation reminded me of a once-popular film theme song, 'The Song of the Volga Boatmen'. Listening to the performers, I could nearly see the boatmen on the riverbank pulling their boats along, step by step, struggling forward exhausted and leaning all of their weight against the ropes. Although the well-digging piece was a little monotonous it was more realistic and moving than the heroics in the kiln with its message 'to fear neither hardship not death'. At the end of the evening everyone went away full of praise for the well-digging performance; after all, people said, it didn't require any rehearsal: all they had to do was climb on the stage and do it.

Suddenly someone blurted out,

'Just a minute. There must be something ideologically wrong with it... It must be... that is, if intellectuals are so impressed by it, it must mean...'

Everyone understood the point he was trying to make and laughed knowingly. This was followed by an uncomfortable silence. We quickly changed the subject.¹⁸

There is a good deal that might be said about this passage. Yang and her camp-mates recoil from the heavy-handed moralism of the sketch about the brick-kiln, which, in its explicit didacticism, undertakes to tell them how to think, preferring a piece in which aesthetic mediation has been stripped away almost completely, such that what is enacted comes close to not being a representation at all but, rather, the thing that it represents – in this case, the work of well-digging – itself. The sketch presents itself as mute, but it provokes considerable discussion. It is 'realistic', of course – what else could it be, since (if I might put it in such arch terms) it is what it nearly is? – but it is also artistically 'moving'. It *is* work; it *shows* work; and between the being and the showing, a gap comes into view that the members of the audience – by virtue, arguably, of their very experience as writers and teachers – are immediately able to recognize as reflecting on the relationship between work and culture, or between manual and

¹⁸ Yang Jiang, *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters*, tr. Geremie Barmé, with Bennett Lee (1982; New York & London: Readers International, 1984): 29–30.

mental forms of labour. Yang and her colleagues home in on this enigmatic quality of the sketch, finding it intellectually pleasing or 'good to think'. But because they are acutely conscious of the fact that they have been 'sent down' precisely to unlearn their intellectualism – and we must assume that some of them, at least, are open to this re-education; Yang herself certainly seems to be – they are plunged into doubt about the reliability or political correctness of their interpretation of the performance. "If intellectuals are so impressed by it," as one of them says, "it must mean..." Where thought in accordance with the party line is concerned, it seems that an impasse has been reached: on the one hand, the aesthetic representation of manual labour fails if it succeeds; on the other, it does not, of course, succeed if it fails. The brick-kiln piece is dismissed as a bad play; but the well-digging piece seems to become 'good' only to the degree that its ostensible blankness is given the opportunity to signify something – that is, in interpretation; and interpreting plays and thinking about what they mean is the work of intellectuals, and as such inseparable from social privilege. Yang and her colleagues find themselves trapped in the vicious circle of an anti-intellectualist intellectualism. Opposed, on the one side, to 'bourgeois' culture, which romanticizes work or else ignores it altogether, they do not quite trust, either, a sketch that reflects on work *as* work, for they understand that what gives this latter sketch its meaning and value is nothing other than its estrangement from work *as* culture – and this estrangement, or mediatedness, always already bespeaks the social division of labour that they have been 'sent down' to unlearn. The situation might be stated in Adornian terms: where the relation between mental and manual labour is concerned, "the split between them is itself the truth."¹⁹

Yang seems to be open to the re-education mandated by the Maoist directive, an openness that manifests itself in her memoir. In a chapter explicitly addressed to the subject of labour, Yang describes the work that she and the colleagues in her regiment undertake in digging their own well, soon after their arrival at the camp. She focuses at first on the arduousness of their toil, the sheer physical exertion involved in "shovelling out dry earth" to a considerable depth. But then, when the mud below the dry earth is reached, the lexicon of Yang's account switches decisively from an objective to a subjective register, for she perceives mud not merely in material terms – as wet earth – but in cultural-value terms, as *disgusting*. A footnote in the English translation of *A Cadre School Life* explains that "Urban Chinese regard walking barefoot as distasteful

¹⁹ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, tr. Edmund Jephcott (1987; Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2002): 107–108.

and mud with absolute revulsion."²⁰ "The distaste one has for mud –," Yang writes,

with its usual mixture of phlegm, mucus, urine and faeces – vanished once we had taken off our shoes and socks and started walking around in the warm and yielding ooze. It was slippery and wet, but it did not seem at all 'dirty'. You felt the way you did about a loved one with a contagious disease, holding hands and kissing without concern for becoming ill yourself. The thought suddenly struck me: is this what they mean about 'changing your attitude' toward physical labour?²¹

The passage describes an ideological movement: from an urban, metropolitan, intellectualist outlook to a different outlook, better informed about other ways of seeing and doing things and also more respectful towards these other ways. This movement is captured, even in English translation, in the shift from the formal pronomial construction with which Yang begins the passage ("the distaste one has for mud"), which simply takes for granted that the privileged speaker's way of seeing things is the only way possible, through the familial "you" of the middle sentence, to the socially more inclusive discursivity of the final sentence, in which self and society, consciousness and authority, appear to occupy the same universe without mutual antipathy: "The thought suddenly struck me: is this what they mean about 'changing your attitude' toward physical labour."

As she watches the dramatic enactment of well-digging, cited earlier, Yang recalls the "Song of the Volga Boatmen," which she remembers as the theme song from an old film. She could be referring here to Cecil B. DeMille's *The Volga Boatmen*, first released in 1926, and which she might have seen either in China or during the three years that she spent at Oxford University in the UK in the mid-1930s. *The Volga Boatmen*, however, was a silent film, and it is more likely that Yang is thinking of Sun Yu's *The Big Road (Dàlù)*, a 1934 film dramatizing the ordeal of a group of workers who are endeavouring to build a highway for the Chinese resistance to use in their struggle against the invading Japanese forces. Like *The Volga Boatmen*, *The Big Road* was also made as a silent film, with music and sound effects added in distribution to enhance its appeal and popularity.²² Commissioned to write the theme song, Nie Er used the "Song of the Volga Boatmen" as his model for the track that came to be incorporated into

²⁰ Yang Jiang, *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters*, 33.

²¹ *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters*, 33.

²² See Sue Tuohy, "Metropolitan Sounds: Music in Chinese Films of the 1930s," in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1999): 200–21.

the film.²³ The “Song of the Volga Boatmen” has its own interesting history. An old shanty sung by barge-haulers (*burlaks*) on the Volga River, its lyrics were first collected by Mily Balkirev and published in 1866 in a book of Russian folk-songs contributing to a Herderian project of cultural nationalism. The song is said to have inspired Ilya Repin’s renowned 1873 oil-painting *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, the first of Repin’s great protesting depictions of the hardship of peasant life in Tsarist Russia.

Certainly, the shanty has generally been spoken of in the context of a progressive politics, in which clear-eyed documentation of social relations has gone hand in hand with protest at the exploitation of the labouring classes. The song became very popular throughout Europe in the early years of the twentieth century, initially through recitals by the great opera singer Feodor Chaliapin, who toured very widely in these years, and whose appearances at La Scala and in programmes mounted and arranged in London and Paris by Sergei Diaghilev helped to put the great Russian operas of the nineteenth century, by such composers as Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov, on the world’s stage. “The Volga Boatmen” has remained a standard repertoire piece ever since Chaliapin’s performances of it. Transliterated into English, it was performed to great effect by Paul Robeson; and at the request of the League of Nations, the Spanish composer Manuel De Falla wrote and released an arrangement of the song in 1922 (*Canto de los remeros del Volga [del cancionero musical ruso]*), the proceeds from which were donated to providing relief for the millions of Russian refugees who had been displaced from their homes during World War I.

Chaliapin was born and raised in the city of Kazan, at the confluence of the Volga and Kazanka Rivers. In 1917 his then close friend Maxim Gorky helped him to publish his autobiography, which appeared as a series of articles in the Russian journal *Letopis*. Gorky himself had moved to Kazan as a young man in 1884. In the third volume of his own autobiography, *My Universities*, published in 1923, he would write of the desolate years that he spent in the Tatar capital – years in which the only university he actually attended was the university of life, and in the course of which he worked in a series of demeaning and dispiriting jobs, struggling to eke out an existence and barely managing to survive. In a remarkable sequence in *My Universities*, Gorky describes his recruitment as a *burlak* one night. A barge has run aground on the rocks below Kazan, and

²³ In the year following, incidentally, and shortly before his premature death in Japan at the age of twenty-three, Nie Er also composed his “March for the Volunteers,” which subsequently became the national anthem of the People’s Republic.

additional hands are needed immediately to retrieve and stow the goods with which the barge is laden before it sinks or breaks up. Gorky's account is both exceptional and, at the same time, exemplary of one important way in which progressive writers tend to represent work and working people. Gorky frames the event as "The music of toiling men drew me down to the Volga. Even now it has an intoxicating effect and I remember very clearly that day when I first became aware of the heroic poetry of everyday life":

A gang of stevedores took me on to help unload the cargo. It was September, the wind was blowing upstream and made the waves angrily dance on the grey river as it savagely tore at their crests, whipping up a cold spray. The fifty men who made up the gang gloomily huddled under tarpaulins and old mats on the deck of an empty barge that a little tug had in tow, panting away as it scattered red sheaves of sparks into the driving rain. [...]

The stevedores bunched together into a black mass on the dark deck and growled like bears. The foreman finished his prayers first and screeched: 'Get some lamps! Come on, let's have some work out of you! Come on, lads, God help us!'

And those ponderous lazy men, drenched by the rain, began to show how they could work. Just as though they were going into battle they rushed onto the deck and down into the holds of the grounded barge, whooping, roaring and cracking jokes. Sacks of rice, boxes of raisins, hides, furs from Astrakhan, flew past me like feather cushions. Stocky figures tore by, urging each other on with their howling, whistling and violent swearing. It was hard to believe that these were the same morose, sluggish men who only a few minutes before had been gloomily complaining about life, rain and the cold – now they were working away gaily and quickly, and with great skill. The rain became heavier and colder, the wind rose and tugged at their shirts, blowing them up over their heads and baring their stomachs. In that damp murkiness, dark figures worked by the dim light of six lamps and their feet made a dull, thudding sound on the decks. They worked as though they had been starved of it and as though they had been waiting a long time for the sheer pleasure of throwing sacks weighing 160 pounds or more to each other, and tearing around with bales on their backs. [...]

I joined in, grabbed some sacks, dragged them down and threw them to someone. Then I ran back for more and it seemed that I too was caught up with everything and whirling around in a mad dance. Those men could go on working furiously and gaily without getting tired, without sparing themselves, for months, for years, and they would have

no trouble in seizing belfries and minarets in the town and taking them wherever they wanted to!

I spent that night in a state of ecstasy that I had never experienced before. My soul was brightened by the desire to spend my whole life in that half-insane rapture of work. Waves danced around the sides of the barges, rain lashed the decks, and the wind whistled over the river. In the greyish haze of the dawn, half-wet naked figures ran swiftly and incessantly, shouting, laughing and revelling in their own strength and labour.²⁴

Here is an account of the humanity-engendering, world-making power of incorporated labour. Gorky does not show us one man working and ask us to multiply this image fifty times in our heads, one for each labourer. Rather, he presents us with an image of a transcendental, collective subject of labour. The work that Gorky's Volga boatmen perform is not merely skilful or dedicated or swift, though it is that, too. It is, rather, creative, erotic, demoniacal; rapturous, ecstatic, furious, gay, mad. It is both entranced and entrancing. Gorky describes this work as the "heroic poetry of everyday life": in his representation of it, it seems to escape prose and the prosaic, the routine and the quotidian. Such work can evidently move mountains, seize belfries and minarets, make and break cultures and social worlds.

The relation between language and labour in this passage bears thinking about. Notably, Gorky's description of the work of the boatmen is rhetorically rich. "Waves danced around the sides of the barges, rain lashed the decks, and the wind whistled over the river": allusive, insistently metaphorical, self-consciously 'writerly', the language here seems to want to do justice to the transfiguring quality of the work it is describing by itself exceeding the boundaries of naturalistic denotation. It is as though the writer believed that it was only by lending enchantment or heightened resonance to his own language that the enchanting character of the labour that he is attempting to describe could be represented properly: as though an elective affinity of sorts existed between this kind of physical labour and this kind of thought or writing.

Gorky's practice might, then, be distinguished from an influential variant of left-wing anti-intellectualist idealism that, because it impatiently wants to bring before us the spectre of an apocalyptic moment in which the existing social division of labour will collapse, and word become deed, has little time for the idea that mental labour might have its own medium, its own formal properties

²⁴ Maxim Gorky, *My Universities*, tr. Ronald Wilks (*Мои университеты*, 1923; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979): 32–34.

– that language might (try to) *register* manual labour, but that it cannot be folded into it. In his 1957 essay “Myth Today,” Roland Barthes famously counterposed two modes of language – a first, valorized mode, representative of “man as producer,” and said to be in evidence “wherever man speaks in order to transform reality [...] wherever he links his language to the making of things”; and a second, degraded form, observable, by negative implication, wherever language undertakes to “preserve [reality] [...] as an image.”²⁵ The binary opposition that Barthes constructs in his essay, between a transformative language, on the one hand, and a merely reflective one, on the other, is too reductive, it seems to me. His model for transformative language is revolution, which he defines as a “cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it *makes* the world; and its language, all of it, is functionally absorbed in this making.”²⁶ But Gorky’s prose directs us, rather, to the idea that language might lodge a claim to adequacy in its representation of reality – and especially of new realities – not by seeking to dissolve itself in any extra- or non-linguistically-conceived “making,” but by struggling to be true to reality – and especially to new realities – in accordance with its own specific character and attributes.

The gap between mental and manual labour clearly looms as a problem for politically progressive writers – a source of guilt, among other things, as well as of the anti-intellectualist intellectualism to which I referred in my discussion of Yang Jiang’s *A Cadre School Life*. In the work of some of these writers, however, writing (and mental labour generally) is often brought into focus *as work*, with its own – specific and irreducible – modes and materialities. Literature in this idiom is, of course, often realist or naturalist in register, but it is by no means always or exclusively so. Acutely conscious of the gap or discrepancy between manual and mental labour, writers often deploy the language of craft or artisanal production metaphorically or ironically in description of their work, signalling their recognition of the immateriality of the social use-values that it produces, but allowing them to hold fast to the idea that their work is not for this reason *useless*. Thus, Seamus Heaney in his great poem “Digging” from his 1966 volume evocatively and slyly entitled *Death of a Naturalist*:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers (1957; New York: Hill & Wang, 1984): 18.

²⁶ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 18 (italics in the original).

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
 Bends low, comes up twenty years away
 Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
 Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
 Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
 He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
 To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
 Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
 Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
 Than any other man on Toner's bog.
 Once I carried him milk in a bottle
 Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
 To drink it, then fell to right away
 Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
 Over his shoulder, going down and down
 For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
 Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
 Through living roots awaken in my head.
 But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
 The squat pen rests.
 I'll dig with it.²⁷

Heaney figures working the land as the means of cultural transmission across the generations: the poet himself, his father before him, and his grandfather before his father in turn: social production and cultural and familial reproduction have been threaded together in this process. However, the poet is unable to assume his bespoken position as the heir to this tradition. "I've no spade to follow men like them," he says: does he lack the skill, the aptitude, or, more likely, has he been trained to other things? But the desire looms nevertheless to bring what he *has* learned, to bend what he *now* does, to the task of cultural reproduction that it was once thought he might shoulder simply by virtue of being his father's son, but that, it is assumed, he has abandoned, because he has chosen a

²⁷ Seamus Heaney, "Digging," in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966; London: Faber & Faber, 1988): 13–14.

different path or because a different path has been chosen for him. What if writing also can be understood as digging – as a digging in another medium? And we then see that the poet's language in this poem is self-consciously straining to put into words, feelings, sensations, emotions – the “cool hardness of potatoes,” the “squelch and slap of soggy peat” – that had presumably always been perceived and experienced and understood, but perhaps never before articulated, by those men who had lived by the fruits of their labour, cutting turf and heaving sods.

Here is Camara Laye, writing from Paris in 1953, and recollecting his childhood in the town of Kouroussa, in what was then the French colony of Guinée. He is describing the annual harvest, when people from all the nearby villages would come together to help gather the rice crop:

On the day of the harvest, the head of each family went at dawn to cut the first swath in his field. [...] Once the signal had been given, the reapers set out. [...] When they had reached the first field, the men lined up at the edge, naked to the loins, their sickles ready. My uncle Lansana or some other farmer – for the harvest threw people together and everyone helped everyone else – would signal that the work was to begin. Immediately, the black torsos would bend over the great golden field, and the sickles begin to cut. Now it was not only the morning breeze with made the field tremble, but also the men working.

The movement of the sickles as they rose and fell was astonishingly rapid and regular. [...] [I]f I happened to stop work for a moment and look at that long, long line of reapers, I was always impressed and carried away by the infinite love and kindness of their eyes, as they glanced here and there. Yet, though their glances were also distant and preoccupied, though they seemed miles from their task, they never slighted it. Hands and sickles moved without interruption.

And, what actually *were* they looking at? At one another? A likely idea! Perhaps at the distant trees or the still more distant sky. And again, perhaps not. Perhaps they were looking at nothing. Perhaps there was nothing to look at, and this only made them seem distant and preoccupied. The long line of reapers hurled itself at the field and hewed it down. Wasn't that enough? Wasn't it enough that the rice bowed before these black bodies? They sang and they reaped. Singing in chorus, they reaped, voices and gestures in harmony. They were together! – united by the same task, the same song. It was as if the same soul bound them.²⁸

²⁸ Camara Laye, *The Dark Child*, tr. James Kirkup & Ernest Jones (*L'Enfant noir*, 1954; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984): 56–61.

Every literary representation of labour is, of course, unforgoably a representation. What is evoked here is perhaps less the work being done than the writer's attitude towards what he is describing. Here the work itself is abstracted in and by its description: we see sickles and hands and fields, but impressionistically rather than naturalistically. This is *aesthetic* production. Movement, fluidity, grace, strength, the flowing of bodies and the trembling of the field; colour and song – the black bodies and the golden crop, the harmony of the song repeated, at a much deeper level, in the unity and togetherness of the community, bound together, as the writer puts it, by the same great soul. The passage also, and simultaneously, describes the writer's own externality to these proceedings. Again, as with Heaney, a different road has been marked out for him: Heaney takes milk to his grandfather; Camara Laye takes water to his uncle. Like Heaney, he has been placed on the path of education which will take him away from the community whose integrity he therefore seeks to recall – indeed, remember – with such passionate longing. He recalls how upset he was to be told by his elders that he could not participate in the harvest, but only watch it. Following a road that would lead him from Kouroussa to Conakry and on to Paris, his migration across the social division of labour – manual to mental work – marked also by a migration across the international division of labour, colony to metropole, he feels his separation from his family, peers, community as a wound, that perhaps his writing can help to heal, bringing him back to them, and bringing them something of value from where he has been.

The social value of mental labour is fiercely debated and disputed across the range of the literary corpus. The attempt is often made to defend such labour – on the one hand, against the instrumentalist charge that, since it is 'unproductive' (of exchange-values), it is without warrant; on the other, against the ultra-leftist and anti-intellectualist charge that it is decadent or indulgent, something like playing the fiddle while Rome burns. Hence, for example, the urgent discussions between Baako and Ocran in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*, and between Omovo and Okocha in Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love*, which turn on the question of how writers and artists can justify themselves in social contexts in which the most fundamental of material needs – for food, for shelter, for 'freedom' from physical extermination, even – often remain unmet. A different line of vision unfolds in Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, which explores in horrifying detail the effects of the commodification of thought and writing – of literature and the creative process – in the new world of capitalist class relations. The protagonist of this 1890 novel is a vulnerable young man from the countryside who comes to Christiania (Oslo) and struggles to make a name for himself as a writer. Make a name for himself? In fact, his economic situation is so desperate that his strug-

gle is, rather, to earn enough from his writing just to stay alive. In one typical passage, we encounter him waking up very early one morning, his mind bursting with ideas. His alertness is half-delirium. He is starving – he hasn't eaten anything at all for days and hasn't had a proper meal for weeks. He takes up a pencil and starts to write. What is then striking is that his ideas begin to take for him the form of saleable goods, whose true measure is monetary. His hope is only to be able to sell what he writes, to turn his ideas into money, to be exchanged in turn for food:

All at once, one or two remarkable sentences occurred to me, good for a short story or a sketch, windfalls in language as good as I had ever come on. I lay saying the words over to myself and decided they were excellent. Soon several other sentences joined the two; instantly I was wide awake, stood up, and took paper and pencil from the table at the foot of my bed. It was like a vein opening, one word followed the other, arranged themselves in right order, created situations; scene piled on scene, actions and conversations welled up in my brain, and a strange sense of pleasure took hold of me. I wrote as if possessed, and filled one page after the other without a moment's pause. Thoughts poured in so abruptly, and kept on coming in such a stream, that I lost a number of them from not being able to write them down fast enough, even though I worked with all my energy. They continued to press themselves on me; I was deep into the subject, and every word I set down came from somewhere else... I became giddy with contentment, gladness swelled up in me, I felt myself to be magnificent. I weighed the piece in my hand and assessed it on the spot with a rough guess as five kroner. No one would ever haggle about five kroner for this. On the contrary. In view of the quality, one could call it pure thievery to get the piece for ten. The last thing I had in mind was to do such a remarkable work free; my experience was that one did not find stories of that sort lying about on the street! I decided definitely on ten kroner.²⁹

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