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Marcus Waithe and Claire White, eds., *The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830-1910: Authorial Work Ethics*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan/Springer Nature (Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture), 2018. xv + 268 pp. Index. € 89.99 (hb). ISBN 978-1-137-55252-5; € 74.96 (eBook). 978-1-137-55253-2.

Review by Martyn Lyons, University of New South Wales (Sydney)

Georges Simenon once wrote of his own writing practices: “I need the physical contact. I am an artisan. I have the feeling, in front of my machine, of painting or producing a sculpture. If I could engrave my novels in stone or steel, I would be even happier.”[1] In representing himself as a skilled artisan working with his hands, Simenon wanted to measure his distance from the effete Parisian intellectuals who considered him second-rate. Simenon does not figure in this collection of essays, which focusses on nineteenth-century authors and never strays into non-canonical genres, but his artisan self-image goes to the heart of the problems it poses. How, ask Marcus Waithe and Claire White, and in what figurative language, did writers imagine themselves as “workers”? How did they conceptualise and justify what they do, in an age when the “gospel of work” viewed labour as essential to good morality and individual fulfilment? The editors refer not only to the work ethic of individual authors, but to work ethics in the plural, asking what values they implicitly defended, and how they understood their own social responsibilities and the nature of their profession? The answers to these questions, the editors hoped, would be addressed with an eye to parallels between France and Britain, and to the intersection of cross-channel influences.

In self-justification, writers compared themselves in different ways to manual workers. Flaubert, in Patrick Bray’s chapter, described himself as a *casseur de cailloux*, a stone-breaker, as he demolished and pulverised every romantic cliché in the book. He toiled away relentlessly to produce finely-crafted sentences, in which the agony of their production would be invisible. George Sand, in Claire White’s lucid exposition, saw writing as digging (*piocher*). In this way she expressed her bourgeois fantasy of solidarity with the working class. Just as the individual artisans whom she sponsored dreamed of being poets, so in her turn Sand envisaged herself labouring at the side of stonemasons. This inter-class ideal was effectively destroyed by the June insurrection; the 1848 Revolution, born in part from the intellectuals’ idealisation of *le peuple*, had made class war a violent reality.

George Eliot, presented in Ruth Livesey’s impressive contribution, had an ambivalent attitude to writing as work. On one hand, the author of *Middlemarch* saw the writer as a manufacturer, although her factory was dedicated to producing the moral reflections and “sententiousness” for

which she became renowned. On the other hand, Eliot entertained a concept of writing as small-scale craft work, not destined for a wide audience like her successful novels, but directed at a small but discerning coterie, rather like a French literary *salon*. This is incidentally one chapter in which the editors' combined Franco-British programme is successfully fulfilled; Livesey stresses Eliot's responses to French models of wisdom literature, especially by La Bruyère and Pascal.

Émile Zola consistently analysed his writing as hard work, as Susan Harrow's excellent commentary on his correspondence shows. In the Rougon-Macquart novels, he created fictional labourers in many trades from sex workers to coal miners, but empathised with their toil and echoed their everyday work rhythms. Zola adopted the motto "Nulla dies sine linea"—not a day without writing. This suggested composition as a slow work of accumulation, as the author carefully and rigorously created a finished work of high quality. Zola recommended following a fixed working rhythm like his imaginary workers, urging a disciplined life of daily application to the job, not forgetting the need for intervals of recreation.

Throughout most of this book, the question of cultural work hinges on Roland Barthes' idea that 1848 was a turning point, which produced a new "code of literary labour", in which art was valued more for its own sake than for its social utility. The book therefore ranges from realist and naturalist writers to the dilemmas of aesthetes like Walter Pater and Joris-Karl Huysmans. Huysmans compared himself to a *parfumeur*, combining various ingredients to improve on anything that nature could possibly offer. This too was a craft, but a highly refined one. It sought to transform nature and perfect it, not to copy brutish reality in the style of the naturalist novel. Yet as aesthetes distanced themselves from mundane reality they faced some practical problems. How could they write and survive while remaining aloof from the literary market and independent of bourgeois culture? Despising crass commercialism was all very well, but the rent had to be paid and compromises had to be made. In fact, Huysmans wrote his decadent novel *À Rebours* not in perfumed luxury, but at his desk in the Ministry of the Interior, and on government-headed notepaper.

According to Sartre, Baudelaire could never settle down to a regular work discipline. Richard Hibbit argues that for Baudelaire, writing inferred guilt, as he was always dependent on other people's money. Although he wanted to consider leisure as a form of literary work, he could hardly afford to do so. If the Baudelairean dandy was ever involved in work at all, it was work for symbolic rather than economic profit. On the basis of this Bourdélien antithesis, Hibbit interestingly characterises Baudelaire as the proponent of an oxymoronic "dilettante work ethic." The poet worked, but not for money, and never felt the need to be useful.

The essays gathered here emerged from a conference held in Cambridge in 2012. It has taken six years for them to see the light, and one hates to think of the "anxieties of editorship" experienced in the meantime by Waithe and White to produce it. The fourteen chapters are short, and they each have their individual bibliography. The editors have tried to keep a tight grip on proceedings, offering not only an introduction and an epilogue, but also an introduction to each of the main sections of the book. This ensures coherence but, as with all collections of essays, the end result still remains a little uneven, both in quality and in the varying degrees of assiduity with which the contributors respond to the collective agenda. I have concentrated here on those essays I found most rich and at the same time most accessible to the lay reader.

Waithe and White signposted the Franco-British connections inherent in the project, but not all contributors picked up this cue. Among those who did, Ruth Livesey examines George Eliot's debt to La Bruyère, while Marcus Waithe considers French influences on Walter Pater. Matthew Potolsky compares Oscar Wilde and Joris-Karl Huysmans, but only superficially in my view, only getting down to the decadent writers themselves on page nine of his fourteen-page text. Edmund Birch does a good job of explaining George Gissing's debt to Balzac in *New Grub Street*, his portrayal of struggling writers in a cut-throat market which recalls the *Illusions Perdues*. Unfortunately, whenever cross-channel influences or parallels are identified, they all flow in one direction only—from France to Britain and never in reverse. A majority of contributors is based in Britain, and none work in France. Presumably the conference on which the book is based was a monolingual event.

The writers discussed in this book, with a couple of exceptions, seem to operate in a strange vacuum, into which publishers rarely intrude. The contributors seem blind to the possible influence of publishers on work habits, deadlines, word-lengths, not to mention authors' responses to the book market more generally.

It also seems a pity that, given the centrality of the “writer as artisan” image, the book tells us nothing about the artisan's tools, which we know were very important to all *compagnons* and were symbolic of each *corps de métier*. But the writer's instruments are overlooked here. The quarrel of the quill and the steel pen can illuminate the way nineteenth-century novelists and poets reflected on their “trade” and the value of their production, to say nothing of the impact of the typewriter at the end of the century. This remains one of the book's blind spots.

As the editors are well aware, the notion of professional authorship was doubly problematic for nineteenth-century women, who were encouraged to play a domestic role and protect the moral high ground, leaving men to battle with their greedy, competitive fellows in the marketplace. As feminist scholars have shown, women writers adopted a variety of strategies to subvert or accommodate dominant gender expectations. They impersonated men, or declared their complete indifference to making any profit from their work, or vicariously enjoyed a freedom denied them in real life through the struggles of their fictional protagonists. In spite of its promising title, Nicholas White's disappointing chapter is about gender politics in fiction, and does not systematically address specifically female “anxieties of authorship.” Only Ruth Livesey in her essay on George Eliot answers the call here to consider the gendered dimension of writers' work. George Eliot adopted a male persona, but this became transparent after 1859. She rejected literary transvestism and, unlike many amateur women writers, refused to consider literature merely as a charming sideline. Instead she became a true professional, responding and adapting to the demands of writing for periodicals. Writing gave her the financial independence she needed to escape a provincial life of domestic labour. But she had a serious purpose: a sense of moral duty justified her writing life and overcame any residual reluctance to publish.

H-France readers will appreciate the excellent translations of citations in French, and I expect they will particularly appreciate the contributions on George Sand, Baudelaire and Zola. I hope they will accept the editors' invitation to cross the Channel and consider the “anxieties of authorship” from an international perspective.

In the epilogue, the editors spring a surprise on the reader by revealing their secret subtext,

rooted in today's context. When the humanities are under threat and neo-liberal values demand scholarship with tangible results and enduring impact, how do we justify our own "work" as scholars and writers? My guess is that defining ourselves as Huysmans' *parfumeurs* will not cut it. Nor, I feel, will presenting ourselves as Flaubert's stonebreakers satisfy the usual requirements for our research grant projects to be original, productive and significant. We will need more, perhaps, of Eliot's professionalism, Zola's application to the job and above all Simenon's productivity.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Marcus Waithe and Claire White, "Introduction: Literature and Labour"

Jan-Melissa Schramm, "'[A] common and not a divided interest': Literature and the Labour of Representation"

Richard Salmon, "The Literature of Labour; Collective Biography and Working-Class Authorship, 1830-1859"

Claire White, "George Sand, Digging"

Ross Wilson, "Ruskin, Browning / Alpenstock, Hatchet"

Patrick M. Bray, "Flaubert's *Cailloux*: Hard Labour and the Beauty of Stones"

Ruth Livesey, "Marian Evans, George Eliot, and the Work of Sententiousness"

Richard Hibbitt, "Baudelaire and the Dilettante Work Ethic"

Marcus Waithe, "'Strenuous Minds': Walter Pater and the Labour of Aestheticism"

Matthew Potolsky, "The Work of Imitation: Decadent Writing as Mimetic Labour"

Edmund Birch, "Literary Machines: George Gissing's Lost Illusions"

Susan Harrow, "Worlds of Work and the Work of Words: Zola"

Nicholas White, "Gender Difference and Cultural Labour in French Fiction from Zola to Colette"

Morag Shiach, "Coda: Immaterial Labour and the Modernist Work of Literature"

Marcus Waithe and Claire White, "Epilogue: Work Ethics, Past and Present"

NOTES

[1] André Parinaud, *Connaissance de Georges Simenon; tome 1: le secret du romancier, suivi des entretiens avec Simenon* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1957), 403.

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