

Afterword

As I was finishing the last chapter of this manuscript, coal miners digging in Somerset, Pennsylvania, broke through to an abandoned shaft filled with perhaps fifty million gallons of groundwater. As the water inundated the hole in which they were working, most of the miners scrambled to safety, often wading or swimming as much as an underground mile through water up to their necks. Nine miners didn't make it, but were trapped inside an air chamber 240 feet below ground that was approximately 4 feet high and 70 feet long. As hours grew to days, rescuers attempted to drill a hole large enough to rescue any of the nine who might have survived the cold wet conditions, hunger, and thirst. Communication was finally established with the trapped miners on the third night of rescue efforts, when a phone was dropped into the hole and a trapped miner exclaimed, "What took you so long?"

Tom Wayman wrote a poem titled "The Country of Everyday: Literary Criticism" that ends:

When the poet goes out for a walk in the dusk
listening to his feet on the concrete, pondering
all of the adjectives for rain, he is walking on work
of another kind, and on lives that wear down like cement.
Somewhere a man is saying, "Worked twenty years for the City

AFTERWORD

but I'm retired now."

Sitting alone in a room, in the poorhouse of a pension

he has never read a modern poem.

(Oresick and Coles, 237)

I don't know anyone who confuses writing poetry and mining coal. One of my first experiences of work was in a ready-mix concrete plant, and though there were hot, humid south Ohio days when the dust caked in your hair or the handling of concrete blocks reduced your arms to wobbly rubber, I was young enough to play baseball in the evenings. Maybe if I had grown old doing that work, it would have consumed more of my energies. But jobs never filled the lives of my working-class uncles, who remained strong family men and also great sports. Several of them sang and played guitar in bars on evenings and weekends.

After acknowledging that we walk on the work of others, what are the implications? Would the miners be better off in a world without poems, even those unsympathetic to their plight? Some miners said after the rescue that they would never go below earth again; others said they loved their jobs and would continue at them. How many would exchange those jobs for the wages earned or the type of work performed by poets? (Of course, it's a joke to speak of the wages of poets unattached to some college or university.) Sharon O'Dair's provocative *Class, Critics, and Shakespeare* includes a chapter about a town in Oregon where a Shakespeare festival has replaced logging as the leading economic engine. O'Dair contends that many of the former loggers resent the transition from logging town to cultural resort, both because of the lower wages available to them *and* the inferior status that the proud loggers associate with service and cultural work (in the particular instance, aggravated by the nonunion nature of most of the festival's technical jobs). The

Afterword

working class has its own values, preferences, and exclusions, often modified by geography and local tradition.

One of my first by-lined publications was in the *Albany Times-Union*, a study of the impact that a large commercial development might have on a forested region of the Catskill Mountains. The newspaper identified the author of the report as “a local truckdriver.” At the time I was working for my stepfather, who moved furniture for a living. By this time my stepfather had left the national van line he had worked for, purchased his own eighteen-foot straight truck, and worked locally. I had been doing that kind of work since I was fifteen, and liked the flexible hours offered by my stepfather’s indulgence. I was unprepared for my mother’s response to the article.

“They say you’re a truck driver. You’re not a truck driver!” she complained.

“How else would you describe me, Ma? That’s what I do for a living.” (I was embarrassed that she thought I had inflated my job description from helper to driver.)

“But you’re not a truck driver,” she insisted. “You’re a college graduate.”

Though I had a strong sense of social class, at that moment I realized that my mother’s was more finely honed, and that because of my education, I would never again be considered working class at home—no matter how I happened to make a living.

In an article about class and culture in England, Hanif Kureishi argues that conservative Brits found the Beatles disturbing not because of any critical content in the band’s banal lyrics, but because the Fab Four represented an amoral devotion to pleasure that deflected lower-class youth from a commitment to the virtues of sobriety, hard work, and gradual self-improvement. In the neighborhood I grew up in, poetry was not a career option—especially not for men. To write modern poems was so

AFTERWORD

wild and unexpected a gesture that for a while I actually believed it might be revolutionary.

For seven years I edited a literary magazine, *Mag City*, with my friends Michael Scholnick and Gregory Masters. We were prickly about class and what we interpreted as condescension by those better dressed and better connected than we. Mostly we published poems that we heard recited at the Poetry Project or the Nuyorican Café. I think we would agree, however, that the highlight of our endeavor were the hours we spent in the company of poet and ballet critic Edwin Denby, in what began as an interview but was also a tender, profound tutorial by a gentleman whose origins were so far from ours as to seem like another planet.

Perhaps we must ask why we read or write poetry at all. Or perhaps we can never know. I sympathize with Wayman's retired worker, but lament that there isn't some poetry in his life. I suspect that if confronted with the poems of Ted Berrigan or Lucille Clifton, he would respond to them. But I know how tough it is to find those poems, and what barriers intervene.

This country's commitment to educating the "workforce" doesn't tear down any barriers, but continues to offer the greatest opportunity for children of working-class parents to vault one or two of those hurdles and gain some say in their own destiny. Traditional support for state colleges and universities, as well as substantial scholarships, affirmative action, and need-blind admission policies have allowed several generations of working-class youth to gain undergraduate and postgraduate educations.

In *The New Class Society*, Robert Perrucci and Earl Wysong argue persuasively that class divisions in the United States have widened since the Reagan presidency, that the prosperity enjoyed by the working class during the years following World War II has since been undermined by global commercial and industrial policies, that public services within the country have

Afterword

suffered, and that the education system does more to reinforce class differences and ensure the intergenerational transfer of privilege than it does to promote knowledge and extend opportunity.

Paul Kingston takes a contrary position in *The Classless Society*, insisting that the terminology of class analysis is outmoded, that because of geographic and intragenerational mobility, American society can more accurately be described in terms of stratification. Though he concedes that economic inequalities under what he calls triumphal capitalism continue to accelerate, he denies that these inequalities determine political attitudes or cultural tastes. He suggests instead that “niche” politics and marketing interfere with the development of any broad-based political movement aware of its genuine economic interests.

Lacking sociological expertise, I find aspects of both analyses convincing, but am unable to weigh the validity of either. It’s alarming, however, that these contrary analyses agree on the growing inequality within American society. They agree too that the current lack of class consciousness in the country renders any immediately effective political response to this crisis unlikely. It’s unsurprising that neither has much to say about poetry. Kingston writes that “about a tenth of American adults claimed to have read anything with some pretensions to literary distinction,” and these “reading sophisticates are disproportionately concentrated within the ranks of the (female) upper and upper middle class” (138). Please note that even those who would substitute stratification for class must occasionally fall back upon the terminology of class to communicate with the rest of us. Note too that perhaps it’s inevitable that any American who writes poetry will be considered unrepresentative of their class.

Maybe I was ruined by public education and the myths propagated by its devoted teachers. Maybe I’m nostalgic about my own library card to the Harmanus Bleecker branch of the Albany Public Library; it certainly opened worlds for me and allowed

AFTERWORD

me to read books more expensive and expansive than comics—though I read a lot of them too. But as I glimpse what’s happening in Iraq and Afghanistan, Youngstown and Flint, or Liberia, the grand vessel of hope for Melvin Tolson, the library card issued to young apprentice Walt Whitman still represents opportunity. I know that reading isn’t for every child, and am not advocating a hierarchy of working-class clerks. Free loans of musical instruments, free art materials, and free access to sports equipment are important too. In many parts of this country, they used to be widely available, particularly for public school students. I’m aware also that literacy can alienate you from loved ones and even yourself. Perhaps that’s what happened to Stephen Duck or David Schubert—*after* they lost faith in their own imaginations and succumbed to the authority of their oppressors.

Poems may also connect. Grace Paley put it simply when she said that “we need our imaginations to understand what is happening to other people around us, to try to understand the lives of others” (202). Cliff Fyman’s “One Busy Busboy” neither preaches nor exhorts, but reveals the forbearing, gracious good nature of someone doing a demanding job.

- Cliff, are you working?
- Cliff, you have a party.
- Give me one plate.
- Cliff, do you want to work this Sunday?
- How’s Table 44?
- Cliff, my boy, you’re going to learn something very soon.
Trust me.
- Bring the spinach.
- Clear off Table 42. Move!
- Cliff, bring one coffee please to the guy on 31 with his back to here.
- Did you give that fucking guy his coffee yet?
- Would you grab this stuff off the floor?

Afterword

- I need a wine cooler on 51.
- Cliff, put 2 Sanka 2 coffee, eh?
- When this clears up a little, kind of make this tablecloth longer.
- Cliff, clear off Table 30.
- Cliff, you're all right.
- Cliff, pour more coffee.
- Cliff, one more coffee here!
- Bread and butter for the Chicken Lady!
- Start using your brain, ok?
- Give them 2 espressos.
- Set 53 for me real quick please?
- I said quick—that means today.
- Cliff: plates.
- Shmucko, I need a wine cooler on B, please.
- Cliff, what are you doing? Get me tartar sauce. I said tartar sauce. Hurry.
- Cliff, there's some Mondavi white wine in there. Bring it out to Tony for me, please?
- Eh, you give bread and butter Table 51? Use your brain.
- Eh, more butter plates.
- The coffee's cold whatever you're doing.
- Brains, brains.
- You put any amaretto in there?
- Cliff, is that fresh coffee?
- One tea, eh?
- Cliff! One tea, eh?
- Cliff, use your brain. You see cups? Put cups, put fire.
- Cliff, give me 2 Sanka 2 coffee.
- Cliff, take all this stuff inside. Never stop, never stop.
- Get a tray for your glassware.
- I think the boss went around Manhattan in a truck, rounding up busboys off the street.
- Ashtrays, saucers come on.
- Bread and butter for 40. Right away!
- Look alive.

AFTERWORD

- Cliff, is that a clean cloth on Table 42?
 - Cliff, there's a napkin on the floor under Table 51.
 - Give me 4 Sanka and a tea for the lady in black. 4 Sanka and a tea for the lady in black.
 - Don't forget to pick up that napkin.
 - Cliff, we don't need all these ashtrays over here. With 25 ashtrays it's a little hard to work here.
 - 2 coffees on 30 you hear me?
 - Cliff, the napkin.
 - Cliff, set up 41!
 - Watch it!
 - Cliff, it's not 12 o'clock yet.
 - Glass of water.
 - Coffee on 40.
 - More salad plates!
 - You gave the cups on 40 but you didn't give the coffee.
 - Sorry to wake you but Table 31 has to be cleared.
 - Cliff, put a fresh cloth on Table 50 and one set-up for me thank you.
 - Cliff, make that Table 54.
 - Hi, Clipper, the boys are after you to juggle. What else do you do—card tricks?
 - Cliff, take those 4 candlesticks and give them to Chuck.
 - Cliff, pick up the flowers, baby.
 - Cliff, right on time.
- (Fyman, "One Busy Busboy," *Transfer* 5 [1990]: 106–8)