

THE POETS' LABOR: INDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE PLACE OF POETRY IN
ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

Robin R. Smith: *The Poets' Labor: Industrialization and the Place of Poetry in Antebellum America*
(Under the direction of Eliza Richards)

The Poets' Labor: Industrialization and the Place of Poetry in Antebellum America argues that, in the three decades prior to the Civil War, particularly in the 1840s, male newspaper poets and the first generation of female industrial workers used poetry to represent and manage Americans' increasing anxieties about industrialization. Recent work on nineteenth-century American poetry has demonstrated verse's social and cultural importance to antebellum Americans but it has neglected the way that rapid industrialization shifted Americans' understanding of poetry and its relation to labor. To better understand the shift, this study employs an historicist-formalist methodology: by combining close-reading with an historical consideration of a poet's occupational context - especially a poet's experience of the changed sounds, pace, and social relations of that workplace due to industrialization - I uncover these poets capturing the new sounds and pace of labor through formal devices such as rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. Gender made a tremendous difference in how industrialization was perceived by antebellum Americans, therefore the four chapters examine the neglected poetry of two groups, female textile workers and male newspaper poets, who experienced major shifts in the way they worked due to the formation of the factory and the introduction of the steam-powered printing press. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that the first generation of female industrial workers

turned to poetry to demonstrate their humanity and mastery over the dehumanizing effects of industrial labor, and male professional poets wrote poetry to demonstrate the opposite, that is, the extent to which poetic production had become rote and mechanical in an industrial age.

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INTRODUCTION

The Poets' Labor: Industrialization and the Place of Poetry in Antebellum America

argues that, in the three decades prior to the Civil War, particularly in the 1840s, male newspaper poets and the first generation of female industrial workers used poetry to represent and manage Americans' increasing anxieties about industrialization. Recent work on nineteenth-century American poetry has demonstrated verse's social and cultural importance to antebellum Americans (Cohen 12). However, it has neglected the way that rapid industrialization shifted Americans' understanding of poetry and its relation to labor. To better understand the shift, this study employs an historicist-formalist methodology: by combining close-reading with an historical consideration of a poet's occupational context - especially a poet's experience of the changed sounds, pace, and social relations of that workplace due to industrialization - I uncover these poets capturing the new sounds and pace of labor through formal devices such as rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. Because of the formal devices unique to poetry and the social value of poetry in antebellum society, writers turned to verse to manage the seemingly deleterious effects of industrial labor, sometimes even incorporating the new and threatening industrial sounds and rhythms into their work. Unlike the explicit portrayal of the harms of industrialization in later realist novels such as *Life in the Iron Mills* or *The Silent Partner*, these poets represent industrialization indirectly in their poetry, thus demanding the modern reader pay close attention to the formal features of the poems and the way they convey the new sounds and pace of

industrial labor. Furthermore, this study focuses on poetry because its significance to workers in the antebellum era is an understudied part of American literary history. Because the productions of the nineteenth-century labor press have not, with a few exceptions, been digitized, this project is grounded in archival research in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, the American Antiquarian Society, and the (now-defunct) American Textile History Museum. Even when poetry from these archival collections has been anthologized and made more available, the poems included are mostly the few overtly political poems, rather than poetry that appears at first to be more apolitical but, I argue, shows complex ruminations on the impact of industrialization on labor.

The four chapters examine the neglected poetry of two groups, female textile workers and male newspaper poets, who experienced major shifts in the way they worked due to the formation of the factory and the introduction of the steam-powered printing press. Gender made a tremendous difference in how industrialization was perceived by antebellum Americans, and the significance of this difference came to the fore in 1840 with the publication of *The Lowell Offering*, the first literary magazine written and edited by and for working-women (Eisler 34). This milestone in American literary history, and the outpouring of public discussion by both genders on the topic of women doing industrial labor, happened in the 1840s, hence the focus on this decade in this study. For female textile workers, industrial labor represented a new opportunity to earn a wage, pursue an education, and live with other women outside of a domestic space (Putzi 155). However, for male newspaper poets, a group that includes compositors and editors, the division of labor and the replacement of human laborers by machines represented a new threat to their livelihood. Compositors who did the manual labor of printing now had to compete with machines, and editors' literary labor quickly became

overwhelming due to the ravenous demand for print that new printing technologies made possible (Rice 5).

The chapters of this project are case studies in how the two groups used poetry to represent the threat industrialization posed to workers and to poetry itself. The case studies alternate between the two groups in order to show their intellectual exchange through poetry: male professional poets writing for and about industrial workers are the subjects of chapters 1 and 3, and female textile workers who wrote poetry are the focus of chapters 2 and 4. The first two chapters deal with the two groups articulating the problems of industrial labor and exploring whether poetry could ameliorate these problems, and the second two chapters focus on poets who tried to incorporate features of industrial labor into poetry. In Chapter 1, male professional poets conflate their plight with female textile workers in order to diagnose problems with industrialization, primarily in the print shop. In Chapter 2, female textile workers use poetry to acknowledge the new and threatening features of industrial work that threatened their humanity, while at the same time using poetry to exert control over the chaos of the factory floor and to harness its energy to spur their own creativity, thereby demonstrating their humanity. In Chapter 3, male professional poets experiment with incorporating the new sounds, methods of production, and division of labor that characterize industrial labor into poetry, but for very different reasons than the female industrial workers. The male poets do so to serve an anti-industrial political agenda and to humorously, and anxiously, envision a future in which machines take over the work of humans, even to the extent of writing poetry. Finally, in Chapter 4, a former female industrial worker turned successful professional poet writes an epic poem about factory labor in 1875. Applying her 1840s experience that poetry could lead to better lives for workers, she considers new concerns about industrialization in the postbellum era: that

immigration and ghettoization might lead to less social mobility and a permanent and mistreated working-class in America.

Industrialization wrought tremendous changes in the way Americans worked in the antebellum period. The introduction of “new water- and steam-powered machinery in the first half of the nineteenth century fostered intense debate and disagreement among American men and women” (Rice 2), and this study will focus on three major changes: the new sounds, pace of work, and social relations created by industrialization. Of course, the march of industrialization across America was uneven, but while “the majority of men and women engaged in productive activity during the first half of the nineteenth-century did not work with power machinery,” as early as the 1830s “[t]he extent of mechanization as figured in popular discussion... outstripped its actual pace in the workplace” (Rice 14). Two workplaces featured most prominently in antebellum newspapers and periodicals: the textile mill and its young female factory workers, particularly the industrial city of Lowell, MA, and the print shop.

The textile mills of Lowell drew public attention as the first examples of a fully consolidated factory - that is, a factory that housed all stages of production from raw cotton to woven cloth under one roof - and, just as important, because of the gender of its workforce and the innovative treatment of the female workers by the corporations who employed them (Eisler 12). In these prototypical American factories, semi-skilled labor was divided and mechanized so that all stages of production could take place under one roof. This meant that workers performed simple, repetitive tasks for hours at a time - up to fourteen hours a day, six days a week. This was a significant difference from the setup of textile mills in the 1820s, where workers had the ability to vary tasks at will (Roediger 45). Monotonous tasks had the potential to make hours and days seem interchangeable, effectively removing the factory worker from the irregular or cyclical

passage of time experienced by artisans or agricultural workers (Pratt 126). Furthermore, though many of the workers came from farms and were used to working long hours, they were shocked by the way punctuality was enforced by factory bells and locked gates, a form of control that they found dehumanizing. As one factory woman says to another in a dialogue from *The Lowell Offering*, of all the objectionable things of factory life, “to be called and to be dismissed by the ringing of a bell savors of compulsion and slavery, and cannot cease to produce mortification” (W. J. S.). The textile mills of Lowell were incredibly productive, and “by 1855, fifty-two mills at Lowell produced over two million yards of cloth per week and employed thirteen thousand workers” (Rice 15). This productivity was made possible by the new and deafeningly loud spinning and weaving machines, such as the carding engine, throstle, spinning mule, and most notably, the power loom (15). All the machines were tended by a young female workforce that was predominantly recruited from the small towns and farms of New England. These workers were housed in dormitory-like boardinghouses and encouraged to use their limited leisure time for education and self-improvement in lending libraries and lyceum lectures, sponsored by the manufacturers.

Simultaneously, the print shop was undergoing tremendous and very public changes due to industrialization. As Rice notes, by the 1850s, “readers of the popular press would have known that paper manufacturers were now using large, complex machines to make paper [and] that newspapers were being printed on steam-powered printing presses” as opposed to being typeset and printed by skilled compositors and journeymen printers (15-16). Readers were especially aware of these changes in the print shop because periodicals and newspapers of all kinds, from genteel literary magazines to family-oriented publications to political papers, all “devoted space to discussing the promises and perils of mechanization” (16). So, not only did the

industrialization of the print shop and the introduction of the steam press drive the tremendous boom in the publication of printed materials in the antebellum era, the subject of mechanization filled these same proliferating pages, making the daily newspaper and weekly periodical visible signs of industrialization. While compositor and journeyman printing jobs were being replaced by the steam-press, editors of the antebellum press wrote about the way their labor was being changed by the steam-driven ““newspaper-paragraph and magazine-writing mania”” (qtd. Rice 17). One editor wryly remarked that the overworked editor struggling to produce content for a print-hungry readership could now write about steam power in order to ““concoct[t] paragraphs, and fil[l] out their columns, when no better subject was at hand”” (qtd. Rice 17). The “development of new printing technologies like the steam press, facilitated the abundance and diffusion of textual references to machines,” making the print shop, in addition to the textile mill, the most written-about sites of industrialization in antebellum America (17). It is the poetry written about these two sites and by the people who worked there that forms the primary sources for this study.

Industrialization in antebellum America was characterized by an increasing division of labor that tended to divide workers into “hand” and “head” workers; that is, into laborers who worked primarily with their hands and those who worked primarily with their minds. This division of labor was brought about by mechanization, in which skilled human workers, typically men, were replaced by machines that were tended by supposedly less-skilled workers, often women or children. Rice asserts that:

As managers and workers took their places on the shop floor, conception separated from execution, “head” from “hand.” Historians have shown that, by the 1830s, many Americans viewed this division between wage-workers and proprietors or managers, between people who did manual work and people who did mental work, as marking a class division (5).

This study will use the terms head-workers and hand-workers more than “working-class” or “middle-class,” because the former terms are distinctions used by antebellum Americans.

In the print shop, mechanization and the division of labor eroded the ideal, “as depicted in the prescriptive literature of the day, [of] a master craftsman working closely with his journeyman and apprentice, imparting craft knowledge and supervising the acquisition of skill” (5). This ideal of a printer who could write, edit, and print a paper was perhaps most famously embodied in the figure of Benjamin Franklin, and the extent to which he was lionized as the patron saint of printers during the antebellum era demonstrates the anxiety the profession felt about the changes in their industry (Mulford 423). Where once a skilled compositor would have weighed in on the content and layout of the paper, now the replacement of this skilled laborer by the steam-press led to an increasing tension between the handworkers and headworkers in the print shop.

In the Lowell textile mills, mechanization and the division of labor meant that in the popular discourse of the day, the young women who tended the spinning and weaving machinery were often portrayed as slaves or automatons, servants to industrial machinery that lacked any subjectivity (Zonderman 115). In their writing, the mill women acknowledge the pitfalls of working with industrial machinery, remarking on the disorienting noise and the overwhelming pace of the machines that they tended, and how these factors threatened to isolate them from each other on the factory floor and to rob them of their ability to think. As Jennifer Putzi notes in her recent analysis of the poetry of *The Lowell Offering*, verse, especially verse that referenced famous poems by well-known authors, allowed working-women-poets to demonstrate their mental capacity and their erudition, and “the relative brevity of poetry lent itself to the long working hours of the factory operatives” (157). For female textile workers, writing and

publishing poetry allowed them to demonstrate that they were not mentally-degraded automatons but human beings capable of producing poetry. Furthermore, they expertly used poetry's unique formal qualities to not only represent the new sounds and pace of their labor, but to transform potentially damaging features of industrial work into fuel for their own creativity.

During the 1840s, the publication of *The Lowell Offering* (1840-45) and its successor, the *New England Offering* (1848-50) brought issues of gender, industrial labor, and poetic production to the fore in the public discourse of the day. While my project will not make explicit connections between specific male professional poets and specific female industrial poets, during those years the two groups were certainly reading, thinking about, and being influenced by each other's work and literary experience.

One typical example of an exchange between the two groups is found in *The Chronotype*, a Boston daily newspaper that prided itself on its advocacy for working people. On May 6, 1848, it favorably reviewed the inaugural issue of the *New England Offering*, stating that "this modest magazine seems of a far higher order of literature than the fashionable Ladies' monthlies which are to be seen in all elegant parlors" (Wright). *The Chronotype's* editor, Elizur Wright, a professional newspaper editor known for his witty poetry, compliments the *New England Offering's* editors for "setting the mighty tide of *factory* mind" and he urges readers of *The Chronotype* to subscribe to it if they want to support operatives. Wright contrasts working-women's literary productions to that of their genteel counterparts and finds them of a higher order based on what they reveal about the mental capacity and humanity of the seemingly dehumanized "*factory* mind."

However, one week later, a letter to the editor written by a "mechanic" disagrees with Wright's positive review of the *New England Offering* and his recommendation that it should be

read by those who want to support the factory population. The “mechanic” claims that the *New England Offering* is simply a new version of *The Lowell Offering*, which, when it lost its “novelty,” saw its popularity decline (Mechanic). Perhaps more damning than the dismissive treatment of working-women’s writing as a novelty, the mechanic claims that the *New England Offering* and *The Lowell Offering* were both supported by the Lowell corporations, who soon realized what a valuable recruitment and advertising tool it could be. This charge that the two magazines were funded by, and therefore the mouthpieces of, the Lowell corporations is old and well-entrenched. While in the past, historians and literary critics primarily focused on debating “the extent of [the editors’] collaboration with the [Lowell mill] owners” which seems to have been minimal, more recently critics have focused on the significance of the *Lowell Offering* and the *New England Offering* in “encourag[ing] new literary modes that might be appropriate to the experiences of working-class women” (Cook 51).

Five days later on May 18, Harriet Farley, a former mill-worker and the co-editor of the *New England Offering* and *The Lowell Offering*, wrote to *The Chronotype* to publicly defend her magazine against these familiar charges. She denies that either magazine was funded by the Lowell corporations and pointedly writes, “I believe there has never been an attempt to bring down the scorn and indignation of the community upon your Mechanics, Apprentices’ and other associations, which have received far more assistance from the wealthy than the *Offering* ever has done.” Farley was clearly aware of the sexist discrepancy in the way patronage of working-men’s and working-women’s literary efforts was characterized in the popular press. As readers at the time would have been well-aware, mechanic’s libraries were extensively funded by “‘men of wealth who have realized fortunes from the genius and industry of our mechanics” (qtd. Rice 65). However, this patronage by wealthy industrialists was seen as laudable charity and seldom

led to the charges of inauthenticity that the *Lowell Offering* and *New England Offering* were often saddled with.

This exchange between a male newspaper editor and poet, a mechanic, and an industrial female poet and periodical editor demonstrates the heated debate over working women's literature and the extent to which male and female head- and hand-workers were thinking about each others' experience in the industrializing workplace. The 1840s brought issues of gender and the perception of industrial labor to the fore, providing a wealth of literary evidence. Therefore, this project will focus on that decade to mine this wealth for new insights.

In the past twenty years, literary critics such as Eliza Richards, Mary Loeffelholz, Kerry Larson, Virginia Jackson, and Michael Cohen have recovered the richness of nineteenth-century American poetic tradition. American historians and folklorists paved the way in this exploration. I am indebted to the fine work already produced, especially by my literature colleagues. While I build on their work, I will further explore issues of class and labor in poetry, to address some of the gaps and oversights in thinking about how poets chose to express the dramatic changes brought on by industrialization and faced by workers.

The significance of poetry to female industrial workers and the threat of industrial work to male professional poets is an understudied exchange in American literary history. William Charvat has argued that in the antebellum period, authorship began to transition from "a genteel and financially irrelevant hobby to... a career organized by increasingly complicated market relations" (Newbury 2-3). In my sense that professional authorship during the antebellum period was haunted by the specter of industrialization, I am also indebted to Cindy Weinstein's study *The Labor of Literature and the Literature of Labor* and her suggestion that in the antebellum period, "any manifestation of labor seemed to resonate with the ambiguous status of industrial

labor” (35). Professional authors responded in their poetry to two seemingly opposite fears. On one hand, they worried that their writing, even their poetry, would start to resemble industrial labor: repetitive, compelled, and exhausting. On the other hand, professional poets worried that their labor would seem frivolous and self-indulgent and were anxious to prove the usefulness of their poetry. In this study, I will consider the formal and thematic ways these poets foreground or efface the similarities between poetic production and industrial labor.

The excellent studies of work and literature during the antebellum period by Cindy Weinstein, Michael Newbury, and Nicholas Bromell do not include serious considerations of the poetry of the era. Anthologies such as labor historian Philip Foner’s *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (1974) do include some poetry by industrial workers in the antebellum period, and historians like Foner have done admirable work collecting and republishing the songs and poems published in the antebellum labor press. Foner makes the case that songs and poems were deeply important to the labor press since its beginnings in 1827 with the publication of the *Mechanics’ Free Press* in Philadelphia. Not only did labor publications actively solicit poetry from their working-class readers (Foner xii), many shared the belief expressed by the Lowell’s largest labor paper, *The Voice of Industry*, that “if anything can arouse the masses in our country from the fearful state of apathy into which they are sunk, the thrilling tones of the songs of labor must do it” (qtd. in Foner xv). And yet, Foner’s selection criteria for the songs was based on “how effectively they reflected the issues with which they dealt”; in other words, Foner selected songs and poems that were explicitly about work and politics over the many “sentimental songs and poems in each issue” of the labor papers, thereby neglecting poems which, I will argue, are often implicitly about industrialization, and which reveal new depths of concern in the

antebellum period. (Foner xv). In my research for this project, with this new focus in mind I returned to the archival sources that Foner and other historians used.

While historians who explore the literary record of antebellum industrial workers focus on the songs as historical-political evidence, when literary critics work on antebellum working-class poetry, they tend to struggle with the poetry of the labor press. This struggle is, in part, because the poetry of the labor press appears to be quite conventional: sentimental elegies and elegant pastoral poems abound in *The Lowell Offering* and even the more radical *The Voice of Industry*, just as they did in many middle class magazines and newspapers of the time. Indeed, “genteel sentiments” in the labor press present challenges for even recent studies that engage seriously with the literary aspirations of working-class periodicals. In a 2008 study of *The Lowell Offering*, Sylvia Cook reserves her highest praise for the prose pieces that seem to “anticipate later realism” (46). Paula Bennett, one of the leading scholars in recovering nineteenth-century American poetry, claims that even though the poetry may seem derivative, in the hands of working-women, poetic conventions become “signposts establishing the author’s claim to a middle-class sensibility as delicate as that of any well-bred miss” (54). However, she ultimately dismisses these conventional poems as a form of class betrayal, preferring political or parodic poems that ““speak truth to power”” presumably in a way that poems with “regular meter, clichéd imagery, [and] refined diction and tone” cannot (56). These dismissals of a large portion of the poetry in the labor press skew the kinds of questions critics are able to ask and answer about antebellum labor poets. Critics of nineteenth-century British poetry have been more willing to seriously engage with working-class poetry that is not explicitly political or topically about work; for example, Bridget Keegan argues for the importance of examining “how laboring-class poets conceived of themselves as writers, what they imagined the activity of poetic composition

to be, and what kinds of poetic forms they felt were available to them” (34), and work such as hers serves as a model for the kinds of questions I ask about the poets in this study. In this attention to form, I am also inspired by Caroline Levine’s work on the “reflective” mode of interpreting prosody: the idea that formal devices, such as meter, reflect “the temporal patterns of social life, mirroring or enacting a historically specific shaping of experiential time” (Levine 2). Recent work on *The Lowell Offering*, such as Jennifer Putzi’s “Poets of the Loom, Spinners of Verse” in 2017’s *A History of Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Poetry* have shown the value of devoting critical attention to the seemingly conventional poetry of *The Lowell Offering*, as well as the politically or formally radical. Such examinations should lead to more insights into the importance of poetry to industrial workers and how professional poets sought to ameliorate the threat of industrialization to poetry.

Poetry was everywhere in nineteenth-century America, and it clearly “occupied a complex position in the history of social life and sociality” of that century, so critics have sought to find the historical context for the meaning of poetry to nineteenth-century Americans (Cohen 9). As Michael Cohen notes:

While some readers found in poems a resource for critical interpretation, literary and aesthetic pleasure, and the enjoyment of linguistic complexity, many more turned to poems for spiritual and psychic well-being; adopted popular song tunes to spread rumor, scandal, satire, and news; or used poems as a medium for personal and family memories, as well as local and national affiliations. (10)

Like Cohen, I will focus on the social uses of poetry, from female factory workers “turn[ing] to poems for spiritual and psychic well- being” to male professional poets “adopt[ing] popular song tunes” or poems to spread the news about the changes they were anxiously noticing in the ways poetry was being produced and disseminated.

When hand-workers wrote poetry to demonstrate their humanity and mastery over the dehumanizing effects of industrial labor and head-workers wrote poetry to demonstrate the opposite, that is, the extent to which poetic production had become rote and mechanical in an industrial age, we can see that several radically different understandings of poetry were at work in antebellum America. In historicizing nineteenth-century Americans' understanding of poetry, Richards has identified a point of great importance for this study. In her analysis of "The Raven," one of the most famous poems of the nineteenth-century, she points out that the poem can be read as a lyric, that is, the deeply personal expression of a speaker, perhaps the poet him or herself. However, in the 19th century, it was also read as an impersonal poem, a collection of familiar and appealing sounds ingeniously arranged by Poe, which demonstrated "how permeable, how reproducible, how allusive" poetry is, and, therefore, how suited it is to being reproduced, rewritten, and widely-circulated "through a developing mass-media network" (Richards Remapping 1-2). Though the "lyric" understanding of poetry became dominant in the 20th and 21st centuries, as Virginia Jackson has argued in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, the nineteenth-century tension between understanding a poem as either impersonal or personal, that is, the expression of and a testament to the poet's individual subjectivity and humanity, is central to each of the following chapters. Male professional poets tended to fear that poetry's impersonal traits would become magnified in the industrial era, even to the point of having machines write poetry, while female poets used verse to express their essential humanity even while simultaneously acknowledging poetry's impersonal potential.

Because poetry saturated their everyday lives, antebellum Americans of all classes had a rich understanding of the variety of poetic forms and their social meanings. One fascinating political pamphlet from Boston, published in 1834, makes clear the depth of this saturation and

the extent to which poetry was a widely-accessible art form. The pamphlet was written by an anonymous “Working Woman of Boston” in support of the Boston Trades Union. It is a “colloquial poem,” a poetic dialogue between “the Aristocrat and the Trades Union Advocate.” The author claims that the dialogue is based on a conversation she overheard while waiting to see the Trades Union’s procession in a Fourth of July parade, where she hoped to get a good view of the group’s “printing press” as it was paraded down the street (iv). Her interest in the printing press reveals that the working woman is interested in the technologies for disseminating information, and at the same time, understands that poetry encourages the dissemination of information. She describes using verse to commit their political conversation to memory thus:

The gentlemen did not express their sentiments in rhyme,--and that I am obliged to present them to you in such an awkward style is not from choice but owing to a defect in early education. When about three years old I had the advantage of a few months in an ABC institution,--and in those days it was not the child who could furnish the best original idea, but the one who could commit to memory the largest portion of “The martyrdom of John Rogers,” and “Hush my babe lie still and slumber,” who were accounted the best scholars,--and feeling quite desirous of being thought a bright child it was not long before I had made myself mistress of both these branches of sublime literature.

Some learned man or other has said that the brains of children being very flexible, retain through life whatever impression is made on them, and it was in this way, that my memory was spoiled and that it now spoils everything committed to its care. It matters not what the subject is, whether grave or gay; if it be committed to memory it is sure to parcel itself out into lines of ten or twelve syllables alternately ending with the same sound. (iv-v)

This is an amazing articulation of the centrality of poetry in working-class education in the antebellum period and the way in which that education shaped working-class people’s perception of the world, and especially of politics. The ironic tone of the passage makes it difficult to ascribe sincerity to the working woman when she claims that everything she hears is translated into poetry by her memory, and yet the image of her as a speech-to-verse translating machine is immensely suggestive. The image makes clear that translating the unpredictable sound and meter

of everyday speech to the predictable “lines of ten or twelve syllables alternately ending with the same sound” is an aid to memory, but she claims it is not a voluntary one. Her early education at the “ABC institution” focused so heavily on poetic memorization as to reshape the way she hears the world, a reshaping she describes as “awkward,” a “defect,” a dubious “advantage,” and a “spoil[ing].” These negative descriptions of her facility seem to stem from her sense of passivity – it is not an ability she can turn on or off. And yet, she uses her facility for versification to present a progressive political dialogue that goes against the interests of entrenched and moneyed institutions such as “corporations, charters, [and] paper currency” and advocates for working women’s inclusion in the trades union’s cause (vi).

This working class connection to poetry, indeed the antebellum society’s focus on poetry, will be explored more fully in this project. A summary follows of the four chapters that reveal, primarily through close readings of key pieces of poetry, my conclusions about the relationship between poetry and its use to explore, express, and manage anxieties about industrialization in the antebellum era. In Chapter 1, “Commodity Poems: American Reworkings of ‘The Song of the Shirt’ and the Industrial Legacy of Thomas Hood,” I examine how in the 1840s, male poets writing for periodicals were trying to shed light on the changes to labor - the pace, duration, monotony, and, especially, the different values placed on intellectual and manual labor - due to industrialization and the division of labor it entailed. Very often, they wrote about the female textile worker to discuss how the labor of male writers, particularly poets, had also been changed by industrialization, in this case, the rapid expansion of print made possible by the steam-press. The male writers’ identification with female textile workers is problematic because it obscures the working-women’s actual experiences and concerns by the comparison to the male poets’ experiences and concerns. Nonetheless, these poems deserve careful analysis because they reveal

how male poets, and much of society, thought about the changes in their labor and how labor is valued.

While newspaper poets expressed concern about poetry's increasingly mechanical nature, a working- woman's literary culture was forming in Lowell, MA, and the poetry of this culture forms the focus of Chapter 2, "Bringing Poetry Into the Factory and Bringing the Factory Into Poetry: Working Women's Poetic Strategies." Here, in America's most famous industrial city, thousands of ambitious young women came together to live and work away from their families in the textile factories and the corporate boardinghouses. A group of these women formed a literary magazine called *The Lowell Offering*, which was written and edited by female textile workers from 1840-1845 and which launched the literary career of several women, most notably Lucy Larcom. In *The Lowell Offering* and its successor, the *New England Offering*, Larcom and others female textile workers published poetry that reveals strategies for using verse to combat the new and insidious effects of industrial labor. *The Lowell Offering* allowed these women to show their British and American readers "what factory girls had power to do," as a poem in the magazine's inaugural edition proclaimed (Hall). In poetry and prose, the writers sought to demonstrate that, though they were industrial workers, they were not dehumanized automatons. In order to do this, the writers acknowledged the new and sometimes frightening features of factory labor, including the overwhelming noise, an uncontrollable pace, and numbing repetition of the work. The poets' strategies for coping with the industrial environment are manifested in the form and content of their poems. In what may appear to be a contradiction, they seek to acknowledge the dehumanizing potential of industrial labor while simultaneously showing poetry's power to harness and ameliorate the harm of this new form of work. First, I will establish what exactly was considered dehumanizing about the new sounds and pace of industrial

labor. Next, using Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1844 poem "The Cry of the Children," I will demonstrate how a famous poem captured the new sound and pace of industrial labor, demonstrating to an Anglo-American audience the children's, as well as poetry's, vulnerability to the industrial soundscape. Then, through several close-readings of poetry from *The Lowell Offering*, I will demonstrate that factory women offered the complicated argument that poetry could help them manage the dehumanizing potential of the pace and noise of the industrial workplace.

While female industrial workers, who valued the education, camaraderie, and financial independence offered by industrial labor, used poetry to offset the potentially dehumanizing aspects of the factory, in Chapter 3, "The 'Iron Harp' and 'Machine Poetry': Poetry in the Age of Mechanical Production," I explore how professional poets who wrote for newspapers increasingly perceived the labor of producing poetry through the lens of industrial labor. Americans were voraciously consuming newspapers during the antebellum period, and the poets noted changes in the pace of their labor, as well as the way the labor in the print shop was divided and valued. Some newspaper poets began to incorporate some of industrialization's most distinctive features --industrial sound and mechanical methods of production -- into poetry. Exploring more deeply a theme introduced in Chapter 1, this chapter focuses on two distinct case studies of male newspaper poets who incorporated the mechanical into poetry to, in one case, spur political action, and in the other, to entertain the newspaper's readership while expressing anxiety about skilled workers being replaced by machines and the unskilled workers who tended them. Part I focuses on how a then-famous labor poet, A.J.H. Duganne, strategically incorporated distinctly mechanical, industrial sound into his labor poetry in order to make common cause between industrial and artisan laborers. Duganne published his poems in *The*

Voice of Industry, Lowell's most prominent political paper, and he became a favorite poet in that paper, hailed by them as "the poet of Industry." Part II focuses on a recurring column from the *New York Sunday Mercury* called "Machine Poetry," which imagines what would happen if machines could write poetry, with humorous and unsettling results. The machine poetry column also expresses an impersonal understanding of poetry: in this column, poetry is not understood to be the authentic, thoughtful expression of an individual's psychology, but rather it is impersonal, structured by sound rather than sense, and therefore liable to being easily produced by machines. Its unique formal features allow poems to be dismantled and reassembled in a host of novel ways. This column imagines that poetry, governed by formal rules and divorced from human psychology, might be produced by machines tended by unskilled workers, a thought-experiment that inspires humor, but also expresses an underlying anxiety about automation and the diminishing value of skilled labor in an industrializing era.

In Chapter 4, "Creating a 'Democratic Neighborhood' Through Poetic Exchange: Lucy Larcom's *An Idyl of Work*," I turn to the legacy of these debates in the postbellum era, where the exploitation of industrial workers was becoming an even more visible problem. Chapter 4 focuses on a postbellum epic poem, *An Idyl of Work*, by Lucy Larcom, the most successful poet to emerge from the antebellum literary culture of Lowell. As a laborer in the textile mills in the 1840s and a contributor to *The Lowell Offering*, Larcom wrote poetry to demonstrate that it was an art form particularly well suited to protecting the individual worker against the dehumanizing noise and pace of factory labor. However, in the postbellum era, Larcom perceived a new threat: the stratification of American society into fixed classes of laborers rather than the socially-mobile antebellum culture she remembered and from which she benefitted. In her nostalgic epic poem, she dramatizes a group of female industrial workers using different genres of poetry to

fuse disparate and resistant individuals into a community that valued adaptability, selflessness, and compassion. This community also prepared working women for careers and social mobility, opportunities that Larcom feared were lacking in postbellum America. The poem is fascinating on many levels, partly for its revelations about the changes in labor and partly for its nostalgic look at the 1840s. However, most importantly for this project, through close readings of many of the poems, I show that this poem epitomizes the role of poetry in the 1840s that the previous chapters explored.

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CHAPTER 1: Commodity Poems: American Reworkings of “The Song of the Shirt” and the Industrial Legacy of Thomas Hood

“The Song of the Shirt” by Thomas Hood caused a sensation in England and America when it was originally published in *Punch* in December of 1843. Though readers today view the poem by Hood, a then-popular but now-minor British poet, as merely the story of an overworked seamstress, nineteenth-century readers saw the story of both an overworked worker and an overworked writer. Why did this pathetic ballad, so different from the comic verse for which Hood was famous, hold such deep meaning for its nineteenth-century audience?

The poem begins by describing a seamstress “[w]ith fingers weary and worn, / With eyelids heavy and red, / ... Plying her needle and thread” while singing her work song, the “Song of the Shirt” (lines 1-8). Her complaint, told in first-person, details how she works into the night, alone in her garret, assembling shirts for the burgeoning market in men’s ready-made clothes. Yet all her hard work earns her only enough for “A bed of straw, / A crust of bread—and rags” (43-44). The seamstress directly blames male consumers as the source of her suffering, reminding them “It is not linen you’re wearing out, / But human creatures’ lives!” (27-28). The poem struck a chord with both British and American readers. Starting in February of 1844 it was reprinted in a broad range of American newspapers for a wide swath of the American public: from *The Liberator* to *The American Farmer* to *The Southern Literary Messenger*. However, “The Song of the Shirt” was not merely reproduced in America, it was imitated and parodied to tell the stories of a wide variety of professions, from the humorous complaint of an editor in a

newspaper office to the indignant protest of a journeyman printer and, even, the bawdy tale of a sex worker-turned-seamstress. I will analyze Hood's poem and some of the reactions it inspired to explore how male poets writing for periodicals struggled with the changes brought about by industrialization. While their identification with the female textile worker sheds light on their views of their own labor and its value in the industrial age, unfortunately, it also eclipsed the women's experience, the very people experiencing the industrialized noise, pace, and alienation the poets feared.

A critical point, I argue, is that in "The Song of the Shirt," Hood presents the seamstress as an industrial operative, rather than a craftswoman, a presentation that is in keeping with the rapid industrialization of the British textile industry at the time. In doing this, I argue that Hood rewrites the widespread Victorian trope of the poet-as-sewing-woman, made famous by poems such as Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott," into a new trope for his changing world: the overworked-professional-poet-as-industrial-operative. Through this identification, an identification that furthered his own celebrity, the famously overworked and underpaid professional poet and editor made the provocative claim that there are similarities between writing poems for the rapidly-expanding popular daily press and doing industrial labor. Critics today tend to read Hood's poem as a protest against working conditions of a seamstress in the textile industry. However, American obituaries for Hood and the multiple responses to "The Song of the Shirt" reveal that nineteenth-century readers saw both an overworked textile worker and an overworked writer. In fact, the industrial seamstress' plight was often overshadowed by the professional poet's, an eclipsing that Hood's letters reveal he partly encouraged. For American male poets, the comparison of the professional poet to the industrial seamstress represented a unique opportunity to think through the dramatic changes brought by the new

industrial factories: the deafening sound of machinery, frenetic pace of production, and isolation from other workers wrought by the division of labor. The poets found these similarities most strikingly in the rapidly industrializing and expanding printing industry. However, this overlay of the plight of the professional male poet on the plight of the female industrial worker, encouraged by Hood and developed in American response poems, ultimately exposes the limits of this identification. The increasing division of laborers into head-workers and hand-workers limited the effectiveness of the comparison. Significantly, it is a division that industrial women workers rejected, and they used their poetry to express this rejection, as we will see in Chapter 2.

Part I: Hood and “The Song of the Shirt”

Though reminiscent of clothes-making in the home, an older mode of domestic production, the seamstress was increasingly understood as an industrial worker. Though to modern readers, “The Song of the Shirt” may represent a pre-industrial mode of production, featuring a lonely woman in a garret sewing “Seam, and gusset, and band, / Band, and gusset, and seam,” in fact, seamstresses were an integral part of the burgeoning ready-made clothing industry in America and Britain (Zakim 36). In 1867, Karl Marx used the language of textiles to draw the connection between British factory workers and traditionally non-industrial workers whose labor was being reshaped by industrialization:

Besides the factory operatives, the manufacturing workmen and the handicraftsmen, whom it concentrates in large masses at one spot, and directly commands, capital also sets in motion, by means of invisible threads, another army; that of the workers in the domestic industries, who dwell in the large towns and are also scattered over the face of the country. (305)

As Marx writes, the rise of factories and of mass production affected occupations that were previously considered domestic as now they began to be thought of as industrial. Marx uses the

textile metaphor of the “invisible thread” to figuratively tie a “domestic” worker, such as a seamstress, to capital, which also controls “the factory operatives.” He creates an image of capital that, like a puppeteer, manipulates all workers, though their occupations seem dissimilar. Marx’s explanation illustrates that the textile industry, to nineteenth-century thinkers, was one of the foremost examples of the conversion of craft and domestic labor to industrial labor, due to its concern for maximizing efficiency and extending the working day.

In “The Song of the Shirt” Hood demonstrates how the seamstress’ labor - repetitive, monotonous, and ceaseless - is governed by the unnatural constraints of industrial work-time, even though she sews in an attic, not a factory. The monotonous repetition of her work is formalized into the monosyllabic refrains “Work – work – work!” and “Stitch! stitch! stitch!” that punctuate the poem (41, 85). The description of her work doubles back on itself as she counts off “Seam, and gusset, and band, / Band, and gusset, and seam” and then, four stanzas later, repeats these lines, starting with “Band” (20-21, 53-54). These inversions reinforce the idea that her work process is circular, and therefore never-ending. This sense of work that never ends was a hallmark of industrial work-time, which served capital’s interest in obtaining the maximum productivity from every laborer (Thompson 90-91). The seamstress’ labor stretches beyond the natural limits of the day as she works through both the “the cock... crowing aloof” and the “stars shin[ing] through the roof” (10,12). Finally, as Sarah Lodge notes in her recent study of Hood’s poetry, the seamstress is also excluded from the natural rhythms of life: “the swallows ‘brood’ under the eaves, raising their young, while the seamstress’ obsessive brooding over her production can end only in death: the enforced conditions of labour are contrasted with the natural rhythms of growth, care, and respite” (195). Barred from respite by the physical and economic constraints of her labor, the seamstress can enter only imaginatively the pastoral realm,

a place where she might “breathe the breath / Of the cowslip and primrose sweet” (65-66).¹ In this poem the seamstress’ dream of leisure expressed through poetry represents her human potential; though her body has become an automaton that can even “sew [buttons] on in a dream!” her mind is freed, through poetry, to imagine other modes of being governed by the natural, seasonal rhythms that are opposed to the unrelenting demands of industrial labor (24). Though repetitive labor has made her “heart... sick, and the brain benumbed / As well as the weary hand,” her song continues past the end of the poem, as “still with a voice of dolorous pitch,-- / Would that its tone could reach the Rich! -- / She sang this ‘Song of the Shirt!’” (55-56, 87-89).

The seamstress in “The Song of the Shirt” is not merely representative of the industrial worker, she also represents Hood himself, the consummate overworked and underpaid professional poet. The introduction of the suffering seamstress of the “The Song of the Shirt” emphasizes her isolation – she is so lonely in her attic that she “thank[s]” her shadow for falling on the wall beside her as she works (47). As many critics have noted, this isolation calls to mind the Romantic ideal of the solitary literary labor of the poet rather than the work conditions of seamstresses at the time, who usually labored in poorly-ventilated and crowded sweatshops (Lodge 196).² However, these critics do not, as I do, suggest that Hood encourages his readers to identify the seamstress with himself. Indeed, Hood himself had for some time made the

¹ This reference to breathing the breath of flowers rather than the poisonous air of a poorly-ventilated attic is grounded in government reports about the health hazards of the ready-made clothing industry: The “Second Report of the Children’s Employment Commission,” a report published in 1843 that described the unhealthy work conditions of London’s 15,000 young seamstresses, had especially singled out poor air quality as a deadly threat to the seamstresses’ health (Lodge 194).

² Hood’s American audience would have been well-aware of the poetic, rather than industrial, and unhealthy associations with garrets: in a March 2, 1844 article, “The Poetry of Garrets,” the editor of the *Manchester Operative*, a newspaper aimed at the female textile operatives of Manchester, NH, describes how garrets are always reminiscent of “poets and authors... an infinitude of melancholy and lanky associations of skin and bone” and how they are “venerable shrines of unrewarded genius” (1).

connection between his labor as a magazine poet and the labor of industrial textile production. In 1839, describing his first success in publishing, Hood recalled, “Here was success sufficient to turn a young author at once into ‘a scribbling miller,’ and make him sell himself, body and soul, after the German fashion, to that minor Mephistophiles, the Printer’s Devil!” (qtd. in Jerrold 58). A scribbling miller was a machine for carding wool that was powered first by horses, and then by steam (“Scribbling”). Hood’s description of himself as a scribbling miller characterizes the pace of his writing as inhuman and mechanical, similar to the pace of the seamstress’ industrial labor. By linking himself to the suffering seamstress, Hood critiques the Victorian trope of the male-poet-as-female-weaver exemplified in Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (Joseph 24). Hood’s seamstress is a far cry from Tennyson’s weaver. In the earlier poem, the weaver is torn between the demands of art and life, but Hood implies that the choice between art and life is a concern only for elites such as Tennyson. For Hood’s weaver who deals with more basic issues, the choice between life and art is a foreign concern, as it is also to the struggling, overworked professional poet.

After the success of “The Song of the Shirt,” Hood built upon the connection he had forged between himself and his most famous poetic speaker, both to express solidarity with industrial workers and to advance his own fame at a time when he desperately needed the financial rewards of celebrity. Published on Dec. 16, 1843, the poem was an immediate hit, and the increased celebrity from the success of “The Song of the Shirt” helped Hood as he struggled to launch his own *Hood’s Magazine* in the first few weeks of 1844. Hood reassured his nervous printer that the magazine would succeed, reminding him that, due to the success of “The Song of the Shirt,” “We have almost all the public press at our back, & such notices as Booksellers cannot buy!” (qtd. in Morgan 592). However, literary and financial success came too late to

Hood; despite the successes of “The Song of the Shirt” and Hood’s protest verse that followed it, including “The Lay of the Laborer” and “The Bridge of Sighs,” Hood’s already weak health, which was further weakened “by a damaging strain, recurrent with the preparation of each issue of the magazine,” began failing under the burden of editing *Hood’s Magazine* (Morgan xvii).

A letter from Hood to Thomas Reseigh shows how the success of “The Song of the Shirt” offered opportunities for financial gain for Hood. Furthermore, it shows how he continued to build the connection between his seamstress and himself as a poor, struggling poet. He turned down Reseigh’s invitation to attend “Mr Bacon’s masterly reading of the ‘The Song of the Shirt’” because “I have been too near singing the Song of the Swan, & too recently, to admit of such delights... Pray say this to our friend & explain how slowly I am compelled to mend – so slowly that I am *darn’d* if I know when I shall be *mended*” (qtd. in Morgan 621). Hood’s pointed instruction to “say this to our friend & explain,” specifically to pass along his pun that ties his condition to the work of the seamstress, reveals why the audience for the “The Song of the Shirt” would have found the link between Hood and seamstress so compelling. Hood gives his admirers permission to indulge in the pleasures of the intentional fallacy particular to poetry: “the idea that the lyric poem originates deep within an individual psychology” (Richards 208). Hood invites Reseigh and his powerful friends to read Hood’s own plight into that of the seamstress’: both are “compelled” to labor, one to sew, and one to write poetry, in order to keep themselves alive and to stave off “the Song of the Swan.” This instance of aligning professional poetry with industrial labor was strategic and eventually successful: Reseigh, “one of [Hood’s] later friends,

confidential clerk to a city firm of solicitors,” was “largely responsible for the Memorial Fund collected after the poet’s death” (Jerrold 396-397).³

In the last year of his life, Hood continued to publish serious verse protesting a variety of social ills and still aligned his own occupation as a professional poet to that of industrial laborers. To his close friend and doctor, Hood writes about the success of “The Lay of the Labourer,” a poem he published almost a year after the “The Song of the Shirt”: “I hope it will do good to all parties, - to me among the rest, to be very candid – for I am a Labourer too” (qtd. in Morgan 661). This line shows the depth to which Hood sympathized and even identified with the plight of the workers he gave voice to in his poetry. He genuinely hoped that his verse might affect social change. However, in another letter to his doctor, Hood is more pragmatic about how he will measure the “good” the poem has done him: “The ‘Labourer’ has made a great hit, and gone through most of the papers like ‘The Song of the Shirt.’ I think it will tell in the sale at the end of the year” (qtd. in Morgan 669). The “sale” Hood refers to here reflects the extent to which Victorian authors came to rely on the Christmas season commerce (Lodge 84). In another letter to this same friend, Hood remarks of “The Lay of the Laborer”: “I have done a Poem for the Mag [Hood’s *Magazine*] some say beats the ‘Shirt,’ but I don’t think it. If the moneyed man, does take to it – we will have a capital campaign” (qtd. in Morgan 670). This exchange is reminiscent of Poe’s appraisal of “The Raven” in a nearly-contemporaneous letter to his friend Frederick W. Thomas, in which Poe describes the success of his own blockbuster poem: “‘The Raven’ has had a great ‘run’, Thomas – but I wrote it for the express purpose of running – just as I did the ‘Gold-Bug’, you know. The bird beat the bug, though, all hollow” (Poe 3). The similarity between Poe,

³ A British seamstress, E.L.E., “used Hood’s poetry... as vehicles through which [her] own voice could be broadcast” in an 1848 volume of her own poetry titled *Poems by a Sempstress, Being an elegiac ode to the memory of the late Thomas Hood, and other poems* (Lodge 198).

one of the most incisive observers of the literary marketplace, and Hood shows that Hood was always aware of his poems as commodities that needed to sell – his social protest verse was as market-oriented as his comic verse. “The Song of the Shirt,” especially, was written to succeed: Hood submitted it to the Christmas edition of *Punch*, the bestselling issue of the year (Leary 40). In the letter that accompanied his submission of the poem to *Punch*, Hood stated “I send the Song of the Shirt – will it be too grave for Punch? If not there may be some more of it” (qtd. in Morgan 668). This letter shows that Hood was carefully considering the market, and would write more protest poems in the vein of “The Song of the Shirt” only if the poem were successful. In a contemporaneous letter to an engraver friend who sometimes illustrated *Hood’s Magazine*, Hood worried about the saturation point of the market for social protest poetry, expressing anxiety that the somber genre would come to dominate his magazine: “You mentioned as subjects Our Overseer, Our churchwarden... One will do very well occasionally – but not as a regular series, as I am anxious for variety, and do not wish for a regular set at the Poor Laws a la [The London] Times – Do you understand?” (qtd. in Morgan 677).

Hood’s social protest poetry stems from his understanding of himself as a commodity-producer and his subsequent sympathy with the producers of other commodities, such as seamstresses producing shirts. Prior to the publication of “The Song of the Shirt” and social protest poems that followed, Hood was best known for his comic verses; however, after his death eulogists and critics began to dismiss his comic poetry as too silly. For example, an obituary in the American magazine *The Knickerbocker* distinguished between Hood’s amusing comic verse and his more profound protest verse that demonstrate that “his heart was in their [industrial laborers’] sad condition... there was no forced affection in his efforts to serve his fellow creatures: they were spontaneous and passionate; and all the art of picturesque and descriptive

power bestowed upon them was but appropriate and congenial ornament, neither covering nor concealing the rich stream of benevolence that flowed beneath” (69). Twentieth-century critics continued to value Hood’s later, more overtly socially-conscious poetry as a more authentic representation of his poetic voice and his most significant contribution to poetic tradition, anticipating as it does the social protest verse of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens (Lodge 2). Peter Morgan, compiler and curator of Hood’s letters, provides a summary of this tradition established by Hood’s earliest biographers, John Clubbe and Walter Jerrold, in the first half of the twentieth century. Morgan asserts that Hood’s “humanitarian” verse “appeals most strongly to those modern readers who sympathize with the writer’s attempt to combine his art with the expression of social conscience” (Morgan xi). Following this logic, the reader who is drawn to Hood’s comic verse is more puerile and less modern, attracted by the entertainment value of the “crackling puns” (xi). Hood’s most recent critics, Roger Henkle and Sara Lodge, have astutely complicated this traditional appraisal by praising Hood’s popular comic verse, hailing Hood as “the first poet laureate of the consumer culture,” though they disagree over whether Hood’s comic poetry reveals dread of or delight in consumption and consumer capitalism (Henkle qtd. in Lodge 25).

I argue that Hood’s identification with workers in “The Song of the Shirt” was simultaneously altruistic and self-serving, and nineteenth-century American response poems reveal the ethical dilemma posed by the widespread popularity of his poem and the uneasy analogy he makes between professional poets and industrial laborers. Hood himself made this analogy explicit in his prefatory note to “The Lay of the Laborer,” his popular follow-up to “The Song of the Shirt”:

As my works testify, I am of the working class myself, and in my humble sphere furnish employment for many hands, including paper-makers, draughtsmen,

engravers, compositors, pressmen, binders, folders, and stitchers – and critics – all receiving a fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work. (qtd. in Lodge 176)

Hood wants to align himself with the “working class” in the increasingly industrial world of printing. Lodge notes that Hood, the son of a London bookseller-printer who studied engraving before becoming a professional poet and man of letters, was always aware of the “material creation of literary products” (187). However, Hood simultaneously maintains distance from these workers by presenting himself as a job-creator “furnish[ing] employment for many hands... all receiving a fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work.” While expressing at the same time solidarity with and distance from the “many hands” of print culture, this preface to “The Lay of the Laborer” reveals the increasing stratification between those who worked with their hands, such as compositors or type-setters, and those who worked with their minds, such as critics. The author might furnish them employment equally, but the critic responds with his or her own words, while the working class simply repeats what the author has furnished.

Part II: American Responses

American readers reacted strongly and sympathetically to “The Song of the Shirt.” Broadly reprinted, it was also widely imitated and discussed. As American obituaries and response poems show, readers recognized that Hood and his “The Song of the Shirt” eclipsed industrial workers under the shadow of the professional poet even as it claimed to represent laborers. For example, in an 1847 appraisal of Hood’s poetic legacy, a writer for the *Christian Inquirer*, a magazine based in New York, began by valuing Hood’s “three or four humanitarian poems” over the rest of his oeuvre, noting that “The Song of the Shirt” particularly “lifted the comic mask from the features of poor Hood, and led the way not merely to sympathy with a class of unhappy operatives, but to a knowledge of the heart, hitherto concealed, of the author” (52).

This eulogist notes that class sympathy is “merely” the first goal of the poem, a stop on the way to the greater goal of knowing the privileged and individual “heart” of the poet. In an obituary from the popular Boston magazine *Littell’s Living Age* that combines prose and poetic tributes to Hood, the eulogist dwells on the debt that American readers owe Hood for the “brilliant products of his mind” (13). This debt of gratitude is not just a figurative debt, but it is also a literal one since the lack of “all the copy-right laws that the cupidity of Dickens could have devised” means that American readers of Hood never properly paid for his poetic productions (13). Therefore, they are complicit in denying him, as the tribute poem phrases it, “bread and breath” (line 23). The writer suggests, “Would it not be a noble tribute to poetic genius... if the liberality of Bostonians should be put forth, voluntarily, to pay back to the widow and fatherless children of Thomas Hood some portion of the debt which we all owe him?” (13).

Significantly, the writer then pointedly suggests that “the ‘merchant princes’ of Boston head an American movement to show gratitude and respect to ‘an eminent FRIEND OF MAN’” (13). The merchant princes of Boston were the powerful families of the Appletons, Lowells, Lawrences, and Cabots, who had industrialized textile manufacture in New England, and in so doing, acquired enormous wealth (Rice 15). By implying that the men who had developed industrial cities such as Lowell had a special debt to pay to Hood, the eulogist connects Hood to not just the British, but to the American industrial worker, a connection which the eulogy’s poem, written with the same meter and rhyme scheme as “The Song of the Shirt,” reinforces:

Whilst he, who befriended the POOR,
Lies low in his silent bed,
Shall his widow and helpless orphans ask
In vain for their daily bread?
Oh! Ours should it be to sustain,
And penury’s hand avert
From the gloomy and desolate hearth of him
Who sang “The Song of the Shirt!”

Women, weary and faint,
Over their midnight oil;
Sturdy laborers, ground into dust
By the ceaseless wheels of toil;
Unfortunates rushing on to death—
As WEALTH struts proudly on—
Whilst he labored alike for bread and breath—
Such were the themes of his song. (lines 9-24)

The anonymous poet aligns Hood with the impoverished seamstress he created by using language that would have evoked the familiar poem for American readers: the “daily bread” denied to Hood’s widow and orphans recalls the “crust of bread” that is the seamstress’ meager reward for her ceaseless toil, and of course the line “[H]im / Who sang ‘The Song of the Shirt!’” evokes the final line of the original poem’s opening and closing stanzas, “She sang ‘The Song of the Shirt!’” The tribute poem draws further parallels between Hood and seamstresses who “labo[r] alike for bread and breath,” a line which evokes both the pulmonary illness that eventually killed Hood and the unhealthy, lint-filled air of textile factories. Furthermore, it extends the connection between a “head” and a “hand” worker to include “sturdy laborers” being crushed by “ceaseless wheels of toil,” an image that evokes industrial machinery. The plight of Hood and other laboring men and women is ignored by “WEALTH,” presumably represented by the “‘merchant princes’ of Boston” that the poem’s preface singles out for rebuke.

As Stephen Rice summarizes in *Minding the Machine: Languages of Class in Early Industrial America*, “Historians have shown that, by the 1830s, many Americans viewed the division between wage-workers and proprietors or managers, between people who did manual work and people who did mental work, as marking a class division,” and it is into these murky waters of American class formation that “The Song of the Shirt” was thrown. As Hood’s obituaries demonstrate, many Americans were willing to accept that the plight of the overworked

poet and the overworked industrial operative were similar. However, obituaries with their generic imperatives towards praise may not reveal fully the nuance and class negotiation that the conflation between Hood and the seamstress inspired. I argue that the full impact of the conflation is found in the poems written in reaction to Hood's work. These poems, which I call response poems, rework not just the form but also the themes of Hood's original poem into a new and different meditation on the nature of labor and social relations under industrialization as it was being experienced in America. "The Song of the Shirt," an immensely popular poem, inspired many parody poems, which borrowed the poem's distinctive formal features and mobilized them, seriously and humorously, for new causes. Two examples are the anti-smoking "The Song of the Pipe," published in the *Maine Farmer* on Feb. 20, 1845 and the anti-war "The Song of the Sword," published in the *Liberator* on Oct. 11, 1844. However, some poems go beyond parody into something more involved, a more sophisticated and complex poetic response to the issue of industrial labor raised by Hood's poem.

Part III: "The Song of the Dicky"

For instance, "The Song of the Dicky," as its silly title implies, is one of the more lighthearted poetic responses to Hood's poem, yet it is nonetheless a meditation on the difference between hand and head labor. Appearing in *The Anglo American* on March 2, 1844, only three weeks after "The Song of the Shirt" had been reprinted in that paper, it ridicules the attempt of poets, such as Hood, to identify with hand-workers. A dicky is, as the poem's prefatory note explains, "a species of linen breast plate tied on with string; and, with the aid of a waistcoat, calculated to deceive the eye of the most wary into a belief that the wearer is enabled to go the entire *corazza*," that is, that the wearer is able to afford the whole shirt ("The Song of the

Dicky”). The prefatory note goes on to explain that the poem relates the “misery of the helpless men-about-town, who have not a shirt to sing about, but supply its place by a front, or ‘dicky.’” With tongue firmly in cheek, the poem’s note further asserts that this misery is “equal” to “the misery of the unfortunate work-woman” described in “The Song of the Shirt.” The poem’s humor hinges on the incommensurate experiences of the working-woman and the man-about-town. The first stanza of the poem gives a sense of the ridiculousness of that comparison:

In a garret airy and high,
With features seedy and sad,
Stood a gent in ungentle attire,
For never a shirt he had.
Scrub! Scrub! Scrub!
Working away like a brick, he
Washed his front in a tub,
Singing the song of a dicky. (1-8)

The poem foregrounds its setting in a garret, a haunt long associated, as we have already seen, with poets. Instead of an emaciated figure clothed in “unwomanly” rags, the man-about-town is just in “ungentle attire” – his minor tragedy is not being able to live up to his class aspirations, rather than the seamstress’ starvation. The response poem’s rhyme scheme and diction contribute to its humor as the parodist rhymes “brick, he” with “dicky.” In a sense, a dicky is a textile parody, a ridiculous imitation of a whole shirt, just as the poem is a ridiculous imitation of its source poem. Rather than the rhythms of industrial work in the seamstress’ chant of “Band, and gusset, and seam/ Seam, and gusset, and band” in “The Song of the Shirt,” a chant that helps the reader imagine the seamstress’ repetitive work of constructing clothing, the dandy enumerates the “Frill, and buttons, and tape, / Tape, and buttons, and frill” that decorate his shirt-front as he washes it in a tub (29-30). He chants “Scrub! Scrub! Scrub!” and encourages himself to be a “Swell! Swell! Swell!” despite the “poverty, hunger, and dirt” that surround him (5, 21-22). This dandy quite literally cannot afford the shirt that the seamstress is killing herself to make;

however, given half a chance, the dandy would eagerly purchase the seamstress' products – he longs for trendy garments such as a “Chesterfield wrapper so flash,” a “long black stock,” and a “new vest with a double-breast” (14, 26, 27) And of course he longs for:

Oh! That a shirt entire
I could on my shoulders fix,
The ‘striped regatta’ at two-and-four,
Or the long-cloth at four-and-six,
Or even the outfit calico,
At a shilling, would make me glad; (lines 33-38)

The specificity of the dandy's desires, his description of the wrapper as “flash,” that is, associated with men's sporting culture, and his detailed knowledge of the relative social worth of different cloths show the extent to which he has internalized the marketing of men's clothes, particularly the gaudy clothes of the “flash” set; he is a man who admires the clothes of other men (Cohen et al. 6-7). Indeed, the ready-made clothing industry was dominated by the production of men's clothing, and “by 1850, men's clothing constituted the largest manufacturing enterprise in New York, the country's largest manufacturing city” (Zakim 3). In “The Song of the Shirt,” the seamstress was dehumanized by her piece-work: industrial work fragmented her sense of self, and poetry offered only a temporary option to reclaim this self. In “The Song of the Dicky,” a dandy who refuses to work wears pieces of a shirt to give the illusion that he can afford a whole suit; that he is, in essence, a true gentleman. This alignment of a suit and a social role shows the extent to which the self is being defined as the power to consume in antebellum American culture. The poem pokes fun at the notion, advanced by the over-identification of Hood with the seamstress, that men of fashion, men of culture, men about town could claim to understand “the misery of the unfortunate work-woman” (“The Song of the Dicky”).

Part IV: “The Song of the Editor”

In a similarly lighthearted style, another American response poem, “The Song of the Editor,” makes it clear that “The Song of the Shirt” was perceived to be about the production of text as much as the production of textiles. “The Song of the Editor” was originally published on March 5, 1845 in the *St. Louis Reveille*, a publishing venue nationally famous for humorous prose and poems, especially “Old Southwest” humor (Oehlschlaeger 2). This brand of frontier humor typically concerned the adventures of poor white men in Alabama, Arkansas, Missouri, and other southern states (Pratt 126). The poem’s author, Richard Elliott, was “a newspaperman from the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, area” who frequently contributed humorous pieces to the *St. Louis Reveille* under the penname “John Brown” (Oehlschlaeger 26). Elliott’s poem was a hit, reprinted in venues as diverse as the abolitionist *Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist* and *Scientific American*. The poem is written from the point of view of a newspaper editor, an occupation that Elliott was familiar with and that was increasingly seen as more intellectual head-work, separate from the hand-work of the journeymen (Rice 5). Much like “The Song of the Shirt,” it calls attention to the differences and similarities between mental and physical labor; however, this poem, set in a newspaper office, delves more self-consciously into the power contest between head- and hand-workers. In many ways, the editor’s labor fits the criteria for industrial labor laid out by “The Song of the Shirt”; it too is compelled by deadlines, never-ending, repetitive, and alienated from natural rhythms. While “the world outside, with joyous din, / Moves gaily on,” for the editor “the world within / Is labor and toil and care” (lines 5-7). Always under the pressure of “tomorrow’s ‘leading article’,” the editor mines “Reason’s powers, and Memory’s store” and forces himself to “Write! Write! Write!” for “Tho’ fancy soar on a tired wing, / She must still her tribute celestial bring, / Nor own a weary flight!” (29, 25, 21-24).

Not only is the editor compelled by deadlines like an industrial worker, he also does hack-work for others without proper remuneration: the editor in this poem is a “party hack,” a foot-soldier who must “echo the yell of the greedy pack” and “aim, like death, at a shining mark, / As he speeds the poison dart!” (32, 33, 36-37). Granted, this “dart” is more libel than lethal, but the editor’s only reward for his risk is the party’s “thanks,” not the spoils of victory (40). In another example of the editor’s sense of compulsion, the poem’s speaker describes the editor as “him who wears the *galley* chain,” punning on the editor’s dependence on the galleys, or proofsheets, and likening him to a galley-slave (16).

And yet, despite being a slave to the galleys, the editor is also the man in charge, the one who “makes the press-gang go” (17). While he may “beat” “his brains” to write the daily leading article, he does this “As he *turns* his easy chair” – his work, while taxing, is not in reality physically similar to the monotony of labor in the rapidly industrializing American print-shop (19, 10). The increasing gulf between the head-workers and hand-workers becomes a part of the poem’s humor, as the two groups of workers struggle for dominance in print. While the editor prides himself on how “over the world he ranges” as he reads the morning’s news, the printer’s devil frequently challenges the editor’s mastery (50). A printer’s devil was an apprentice in a printing establishment, often the youngest and least skilled worker, who performed tasks such as mixing tubs of ink and fetching type (“Devil”). For example, while the editor frantically “clips” articles from other papers and “pastes” them together to form the copy for the compositors to set, the printer’s devil has other plans (41, 51). Full of mischief and malice:

The “Devil” appears, with a grin and bow--
“Please, sir, they’re waitin’ for copy now,”
He says in accents solemn;
“The foreman thinks he’ll soon impose
The outside form, with scraps of prose,
And the *leader* may be a column!” (55-60)

The “*leader*” is another name for the paper’s leading article penned by the editor (“Leader”). The devil’s joke centers on authorship, for while the editor may think he is the author and “*leader*,” or head of the paper, not only is the paper composed primarily of clippings from other papers, but the foreman and the journeymen have the ultimate power to manipulate the content and form of the paper and turn “the *leader*” into a lowly “column.”

Indeed, the author of “The Song of the Editor,” Richard Elliott, describes the changes in the antebellum American print-shop that he witnessed firsthand in his 1883 memoir, *Notes Taken in Sixty Years*. Elliott was steeped, not only in the specialized language of the print-shop that forms the core of the poem’s puns, but also in the power dynamics of the newspaper office. Elliott’s familiarity with printing lingo that he exhibits in the poem reflects his experience as a journeyman printer and later a newspaper editor in his native state of Pennsylvania (Gardner and Simmons 3-4). As Elliott recalls in his memoir, though he learned to farm from his father, in 1833 at age 18 he “unfortunately read the life of Benjamin Franklin” and was immediately convinced that the path to distinction was becoming a printer-editor (Elliott *Notes* 53). His father helped him purchase a small rural paper with a manual printing press, and, like Franklin, Elliott aspired to be both a man of letters and a laborer. To prove his ability to be both, he determined to imitate Franklin by following his example of composing poetry in type and printing it in his newspaper (54). Elliott recalls how “when one or two of our exchanges,” that is, free copies of papers that editors exchanged with each other, “came in with my piece copied, I felt all the warm and delightful glow of successful authorship!” (54). However, as Elliott notes, the importance of his authorship was far from unquestioned by the two journeymen printers who worked with him. In one instance, “Ivan MacIvor, the jour.[neyman] printer” read “On Time,” another poem that Elliott had composed in type and “disputed [Elliott’s] assumption that Time ‘hastens’” (54). To

show Elliott “how to write usefully he set up a poem of his own” also on the topic of the passage of time (55). This interaction illuminates not only the process of intellectual exchange in a rural newspaper office in the mid-1830s, but also the important role poetry played in articulating ideas by inspiring response-poems. Ultimately, the “The Song of the Editor” reflects Elliott’s awareness of a growing conflict between head- and hand-workers in print-shops, all of whom were struggling to be seen as authors, not just hands.

Part V: “The Song of the ‘Jour’”

Especially in America, journeymen printers, known as *jours*, were “proud of their literacy, their role in disseminating knowledge, their combination of mental and manual labor, and their status within the trades” (Pretzer 169). Yet industrialization, which had transformed the textile industry in America, was also changing the labor in printing shops. The anonymous author of “The Song of the ‘Jour.’ A Parody” agrees with Hood’s implication in “The Song of the Shirt” and Elliott’s assertion in “The Song of the Editor” that the business of letters has become an increasingly industrial trade:

With weary heart and hand,
“With eyelids heavy and red,”
A printer stood by his time-worn stand,
To toil for his daily bread.
Click! click! click!
How bootless his efforts were!
And sad was his voice, for his heart was sick,
As he sang this “Song of the Jour.” (lines 1-8)

Significantly, the anonymous poet aligns the industrial seamstress with the journeyman printer, rather than the professional writer. Published on May 23, 1844 in the *Maine Farmer*, this anonymous poem resists celebrating the antebellum boom in printing, which was often hailed as a sign of American progress (Groves 109). Instead, it exposes how consumer demand creates a

work atmosphere in which the journeyman printer must, like Hood's seamstress, exceed the limits of the natural day by "toil[ing], o'er the midnight oil" (line 47).⁴ In the early republic, these journeymen often moved between master printers' workshops and had reasonable hopes of eventually becoming master printers themselves, a Franklinesque ideal of the printer as both head- and hand-worker (Pretzer 170-171). However, as in the rapidly industrializing textile industry, the demand to speed production and cut costs led to an increasingly mechanized workplace and a more rigid division of labor (Groves 109).

The "Song of the 'Jour'" gives voice to the printer standing by "his time-worn stand" – this word, "time-worn," at once suggesting both that the stand, or press, is part of a long and storied labor tradition and that it was been worn down by the grind of industrial work-time (line 3). Lines such as "How little they know of the printer's wo, [*sic*] / Whom the papers go among!" compel the newspaper reader to imagine the person who set the type in the newspaper (23-24). Appearing as it did in *The Maine Farmer*, a weekly rural newspaper, this poem's goal might be to insert the voice of hand-workers into the newspapers at a time when these laborers were beginning to be regarded as hands rather than minds contributing to the creation of printed material (Pretzer 161). A description of a compositor's labor shows the end result of this line of thinking, that is, regarding the compositor as an automaton: "His copy lies before him... He reads a few words, as many as he can readily remember, and then proceeds to pick up the letters composing them, one by one... he has learned his copy by heart, though indeed he forgets the words as soon as he picks them up" (Guernsey 118). Though "The Song of the Jour" is not attributed, an author signature would be beside the point – in a literal sense, the poem is

⁴ Since the poem was published in a Maine newspaper, readers who understood French might have initially expected a song about the day, or "jour." Instead, they found a poem about unlimited work that emphasizes the unnatural duration of the printer's day.

attributable to the ‘jour’ who set the type and printed the page, though it may not be “authored” by him.

In the mid 1840s when these poems were published, journeymen typically operated the printing presses as pressmen or set type as compositors (Pretzer 162). The fact that this jour “pl[ies] the stick” marks him as a compositor. A compositor received his copy from the editor who decided which articles would appear in what order. With a page of copy before him, the compositor would select types from the small compartments on his desk and, working a few words at a time, place the ems, or units of type, into the stick, holding the type all in place with the thumb of one hand (Ringwalt 169). The jour’s complaint of “Work! Work! Work! / Without an hour’s respite,” is justified (line 43-44). Though accuracy had always been required, the growing demand for speed was reinforced by the increasing popularity of type-setting competitions for compositors in the late antebellum period. The contests were prompted by bets the compositors made with each other, by editors of rival newspapers who pitted their compositors against each other, and by salesmen trying to convince publishers to invest in new labor-saving printing technology (Ringwalt 168).

For example, as John Luther Ringwalt records in his 1871 *American Encyclopaedia of Printing*, “In or about 1852, the proprietors of a logotype patent called at the office of the *New York Courier and Inquirer*, to urge the adoption of a new system of logotypes, which, as they claimed, would enable compositors to set up 1500 ems per hour” (168). The foreman claimed he had compositors who could exceed this rate, and the salesmen challenged him to prove it, so “this controversy led to a formal trial of speed [and] on a given day an editorial leader was cut from a newspaper, the type furnished, and the race commenced” (168). In the end, one of the paper’s compositors, Thomas T. Sutcliffe, was declared the winner having set 2487 ems (an article-length

piece) in an hour and a half (168). Though Ringwalt presents Sutcliffe and others as John Henry-esque compositors, holding their own against the incursions of technology, the very fact that these workers were pitted against machines shows a dramatic shift in the way their labor was understood – from the Franklinesque ideal of the printer as consummate man of letters, equal to the author in importance, to the idea of the compositor as equal to and replaceable by a typesetting machine. The journeymen’s ideal of combining the virtues of men of letters and laboring men continued to erode as the century wore on, as shown by the speed-trials and in Ringwalt’s recommendation that, to increase speed, compositors avoid “false motions” in picking up type, for these “not only consume time, but become chronic and increase in number and intensity, so that some men fairly shake themselves to pieces” (169). This warning against unnecessary motion not only anticipates the quintessentially industrial efficiency studies of Taylorism, but also explains why the jour in the poem particularly complains about his “mind devoid of peace; / A trembling frame, and shattered nerves” (lines 36-37).

Part VI: “Tale of a Shirt”

Editors battling compositors for authority, jears with “trembling frame[s] and shattered nerves” and seamstresses working themselves to death – if these were the threats that industrialization posed to American workers, especially in the textile and print industries, then what was to be done? Walt Whitman, deeply concerned about the working class, offered an unexpected answer in the shape of a bawdy response poem to Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt.” Whitman published the “Tale of a Shirt: A Very Pathetic Ballad,” on March 31, 1844 in the *Sunday Times & Noah’s Weekly Messenger*, a New York paper that Whitman had edited (Mabbott 99). The poem is a burlesque about a seamstress named Sally Stitch who trades her

sustaining, even fulfilling work as a prostitute for that of a seamstress, where she wastes away under the unending labor, and eventually dies. Whitman concludes the poem with this moral:

Had that sweet girl worked less, and not
Got into such a pucker:
She might have lived this day, instead
Of being a gone sucker. (lines 37-40)

Whitman scholar Herbert Bergman identified this poem as Whitman's in 1982 and it has since been digitally anthologized in *The Walt Whitman Archive* (Gibson 546). The parody is markedly different in tone from other poems Whitman wrote before *Leaves of Grass*; of the twenty-five poems Whitman published during this time--mostly didactic poems that take on death, ambition, and historical subjects--only one other parody exists, "The Death and Burial of McDonald Clarke." This tribute to an eccentric poet whom Whitman admired was written in 1842 (Reynolds 90). It was a somber parody of Irish poet Rev. Charles Wolfe's then-famous "The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna," an 1817 tribute to a fallen British war hero (Rubin 215).

In a prefatory note to "Tale of a Shirt," Whitman described how he drew upon Hood's "idea of that interesting girl, sitting stiff and stark, holding the last shirt by the tail." The phallic imagery of a "stiff and stark" girl holding something "by the tail" combined with the wink-and-nudge of the euphemistic word "interesting" evokes the long-standing stereotype of the sexually available seamstress (Harris). This allowed the poet to irreverently exploit the raunchy possibilities of Hood's virtuous verse, as he does in the poem's opening stanzas:

A love-ly maid named Sally Stitch
I once did sure-ly know,
Who made things for the tailor men
And made them "very low."

This love-ly maid had rosy cheeks,
Her waist was round and plump;

I used to love to look at her
A standing at the pump. (lines 1-8)

The line “[she] made things for the tailor men / And made them ‘very low,’” implies that Sally Stitch has done things for the “tailor men” that can only be hinted at as “‘very low.’” Given the sexual connotations of the word “know,” which are only reinforced by the speaker’s winking emphasis on “sure-ly,” it is further implied that the speaker has also enjoyed Sally’s “very-low” services. This euphemistic description of Sally’s sexual labor obscures the financial arrangement involved and makes it unclear whether she has sex for money or pleasure (or both). However, though many of Whitman’s contemporaries would have ascribed mental depravity and physical ill-health to a woman who is promiscuous, Whitman’s second stanza describes Sally Stitch as the picture of health, “rosy cheek[ed]” and “plump” (lines 5-6). Lest the reader think that her health is unrelated to her sexual activity, Whitman coyly positions her before the “pump,” a word that the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes has had the connotation “to copulate (with a woman)” since 1730 (“Pump”). The second stanza represents a dramatic departure from the mainstream stereotype of the seamstress as sex-worker, as can be seen in the *Workingman’s Advocate* public scolding of “W,” published a week after the “Tale of a Shirt” appeared. The *Workingman’s Advocate*, which as its name implies was a pro-labor paper, blasts “W” (Whitman’s penname) for burlesquing “Hood’s admirable composition, ‘The Song of the Shirt,’ which has had such an extensive circulation in this country--the moral of which was so excellent and so evident” (“Heartlessness”). The paper goes on to criticize him for seeming to “gloat in... lustful triumph over the victim of destitution” (“Heartlessness”). The poem’s opening lines, an unusually positive portrayal of sexual labor as sustaining and enjoyable, reflect Whitman’s famously positive and frank depiction of human sexuality in his poetry. Furthermore, the poetic speaker who “loves to look” seems analogous to the “flaneur” persona Whitman developed in his

journalism (Brand 156). The flaneur, who would also come to shape his poetic persona, “Looks with its sidecurved head curious what will come next, / Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it” as he phrases it in the 1855 edition of “Song of Myself” (*Leaves of Grass* 15).

However, when Sally Stitch trades in her sex work for industrial labor, the results are grim and ultimately fatal. Whitman describes how the demands of ready-made work, the same kind of labor performed by Hood’s industrial seamstress, affected Sally Stitch:

But O, the change! she who had been
As fat as any whale,
Soon dwindled down to be a thing
All waspy, wan, and pale.

I’ll tell you how it happen-ed,
As all the people say;—
Some shirts this love-ly maid must make,
Before a certain day.

She sewed, and sewed, and sewed again,
Indeed ’twas all so-so;
But O! alas! and lack-a-day!
Horror, and death and woe!—

By Tuesday night, these shirts were due,
On Wednesday by day-light,
Within Miss Stitch’s little room
Was Seen a horrid sight!—

There sat Miss Stitch, all cold and dead,
Upon her lowly chair
Fixed were her eyes—blue was her nose—
And clammy was her hair. (lines 9-28)

The aspects of Sally’s labor that mark it as industrial and that ultimately kill her are the deadlines and quotas hinted at in “Some shirts this love-ly maid must make, / Before a certain day” that force her to sew and sew and sew again – labor that is painfully repetitive, seemingly endless, and alienated from any sense of craftsmanship or pride in the product of the labor as

demonstrated the poet's appraisal of the work as "all so-so," or mediocre. Like Hood's seamstress, Sally Stitch is drained of vitality by the pace of her labor, becoming a skeletal automaton "All waspy, wan, and pale."⁵ In this portrayal of industrial labor, Whitman is in keeping with mainstream depictions of it as deleterious to mental, physical, and even moral health, charges that labor reformers such as Seth Luther had been making since at least 1832, when he said that "The whole system of labor in New England, more especially in cotton mills, is a cruel system of exaction on the bodies and minds of the producing classes, destroying the energies of both" (qtd. in Rice 2).

In the "Tale of a Shirt," Whitman, who had been working as a compositor, journalist, and newspaper editor in New York for several years, also weighs the comparison that Hood proposed between the industrial worker and the professional writer. Like Hood and Tennyson, Whitman uses a sewing woman as a stand-in for the poet, and like Hood, Elliott, and the anonymous author of "The Song of the Jour," he was very familiar with the constraints of writing for the papers, complaining "'not that the work is hard,' but that 'one man has to do so many things' that 'good work is difficult' [due to] 'the haste of preparation and the amount needed'" (Whitman qtd. Bergman lxiv). Bearing this in mind, Sally Stitch's textile labor appears to be inflected with the same haste, simple repetition, and concern for quantity that drove Whitman as the journalist and novice newspaper poet. Ultimately, Whitman recommends a life of sensual pleasure and leisure over a life of work, a recommendation in keeping with thoughts he was beginning to formulate elsewhere in his journalism, for example in an essay written four years earlier, in

⁵ Unlike the other American response poems, "Tale of a Shirt" does not imitate some of the most distinctive stylistic features of Hood's poem, such as the three word refrain ("Work—work—work!") and the repetition of lines ("It seems so like my own-- / It seems so like my own"). However, in keeping with the poem's comic purpose, Whitman does imitate some of Hood's dramatic language, pushing the pathos of "The Song of the Shirt" into laughable bathos, for example when the poem's speaker interrupts the tale of Sally Stitch to cry "But O! alas! and lack-a-day! / Horror, and death and woe!"

which he declares, “How I do love a loafer!” (“Sun-Down Papers no.9” 1).

For American newspaper poets from Elliot to the “Jour” author to Whitman, “The Song of the Shirt” represented a way to discuss the increasing stratification between labor and aesthetics, as well as the dehumanizing effects, and in fact dangers, of the repetition, pace, and alienation of industrial labor. Whitman attempts to resolve this stratification by recommending forms of labor that he imagines are immune to the constraints of industrial labor, such as Sally Stitch’s sexual “labor” over her industrially-inflected textile labor. Ultimately, in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman forged a middle way, balancing the techniques he had learned as a professional journalist with an erotic aesthetic that he hoped would resist industrialization’s encroachments into American verse.

These poets, all men, felt the pressure of the quick pace, unrelenting deadlines, and new social relations brought about by the industrialization of printing in antebellum America. One of the most visible symbols of this industrializing world was the factory girl who left her family and quiet rural life for the noise, isolation, and hard work of the textile mills. The male poets sympathized with these women and used the women’s perceived plight to explore their own condition, particularly the changes brought about by the rapid expansion of print made possible by the steam-press. However, these American responses to “The Song of the Shirt” tended to eclipse the experience of female industrial workers and did not reflect how women felt about their new labor. The women experiencing these changes first-hand also wrote poetry, and in the following chapter I will explore how the factory women used poetry to explore and define their place in the industrial world. Although they were well aware of the dehumanizing effects of the noise, pace, and isolation of the factory, the women poets of the factory saw poetry as a means, not just of acknowledging the potential harms of industrial labor, but managing them.

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CHAPTER 2: Bringing Poetry Into the Factory and Bringing the Factory into Poetry: Working-Women's Poetic Strategies

Lucy Larcom, one of the most famous poets to emerge from the textile mills of Lowell, recalls in her memoirs a scene from her school-days that would have been familiar to many of her fellow workers in the 1840s:

One of our greatest school pleasures was to watch Aunt Hannah spinning on her flax-wheel, wetting her thumb and forefinger at her lips to twist the thread, keeping time, meanwhile, to some quaint old tune with her foot upon the treadle. A verse of one of her hymns, which I never heard anybody else sing, resounds in the farthest corner of my memory yet:—

“Whither goest thou, pilgrim stranger,
Wandering through this lowly vale?
Knowest thou not 't is full of danger?
And will not thy courage fail?”

Then a little pause, and the refrain of the answer broke in with a change, quick and jubilant, the treadle moving more rapidly, also:—

“No, I'm bound for the kingdom!
Will you go to glory with me?
Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!” (*New England Girlhood* 43-44)

Like thousands of ambitious young women, Lucy Larcom left her small town and common-school to work in a textile factory and live in a boarding-house. Although her work was in textiles, as Aunt Hannah's had been, the contrast between their environments was dramatic, and perhaps a little frightening. Larcom's new environment with its unrelentingly noise, pace, and social isolation, contrasted sharply with the slower, self-driven, and socially embedded nature of Aunt Hannah's work.

Larcom recognized that Aunt Hannah used her song to help her laboring body “kee[p] time,” but, significantly, she is in charge of the pace of her song just as she is in charge of the pace of the spinning-wheel at which she works. She changes the rhythm of the song, allowing her energy and pace to vary: while the refrain is a stimulant, the verse affords her the chance to slacken her pace and relax. Furthermore, her actions are connected to the message of the verse: the slower verse concerns dejection and loneliness, while the refrain expresses hope and confidence. The coordination of her movement with the hymn shows that her mind is processing the hymn’s meaning at the same time her body is harnessing the song’s energy, which work together to accomplish the necessary labor of cloth-production, all the while surrounded by friends and family. Her song is about transcendence and how the body’s labor in the present world helps earn the spirit’s reward in a world to come. As Larcom did later in her poetry, Aunt Hannah uses her song to deepen her mind’s connection to the body’s work.

In the 1840s, while newspaper poets responded to increasing industrialization by writing worriedly about poetry’s increasing mechanicity, a working-class literary culture was forming in America’s most famous industrial city: Lowell, MA. Here, thousands of ambitious young women who had left their families and rural life came together and experienced industrialization directly. In their textile factories and boardinghouses, some of the women formed a literary magazine called the *Lowell Offering*. The publication, written and edited by female textile workers from 1840-1845, and its successor the *New England Offering*, published from 1848-1850, gave these women an opportunity to show readers “what factory girls had power to do” (Hall, “Lowell” line 2). In the poetry of the *Lowell Offering* and the *New England Offering*, women workers use their verse to combat the new and insidious effects of industrial labor. They were determined to demonstrate that, though they were industrial workers, they were not automatons. However, in

order to do this, the poets had to acknowledge the new and sometimes frightening features of factory labor, including the overwhelming noise, uncontrollable pace, and resulting social isolation of the work. While acknowledging the dehumanizing potential of industrial labor, the poets seek to show poetry's power to control the effects of this new form of work.

First, I will establish what exactly was considered dehumanizing about the new sounds and pace of industrial labor. Using Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1843 poem "The Cry of the Children," I will demonstrate how a famous poem captured the new sound and pace of industrial labor to show industrial workers' vulnerability to the industrial soundscape. Then, through close-readings of poetry from the *Lowell Offering* and *New England Offering*, I will demonstrate how factory women proved that poetry could help them manage the dehumanizing potential of the noise, pace, and social isolation of the industrial workplace.

Part I: Noise

Recent work in sound studies has focused on uncovering how sound has been historically constructed. In Karin Bijsterveld's *Mechanical Sound*, a history of how mechanical sound has been framed as noise in the Western world, she describes four categories of literary "textualizations of mechanical sound in terms of its sonic characteristics," or, how literature represents mechanical sound as "intrusive sound, sensational sound, comforting sound, and sinister sound" (43). She takes into consideration "the quantity of sound-sources described, the distance portrayed between the protagonist or narrator and the sound, the direction of the sound, its rhythm, and its evaluation" (43). She does this because literature "contribute[s] to the dramatization of the sound of technology" (43). Though her study does not consider the *Lowell Offering*, *New England Offering*, or the other texts produced by the mill-workers of Lowell, her

description of intrusive sound nonetheless usefully sums up many of the contributors’

descriptions of the factory soundscape:

Intrusive sounds are usually expressed as a multitude of different sounds or a series of recurrent sounds. These sounds invade or threaten the existence of something or someone that is vulnerable or fragile, such as nature, harmony, or one’s heart, body, mind, or security. The noise frightens the protagonist and seems to move closer and closer toward or even into it... Intrusive sounds violently enter the protagonists’ world, often all at once, and endanger something cared for. The simultaneousness of different sounds creates chaos or forms a deep rumble that affects a subject’s body. (44)

To understand the persistence of the idea that unwanted sound, especially mechanical sound, can threaten the self, we have only to look at a popular modern artifact - noise-cancelling headphones. In his 2011 article, Mack Hagood argues that “[s]oundscaping through headphones may function as a defensive tactic for travelers, creating a sonic refuge” from “the roar of the engines... the sound that would have otherwise ground away at your well-being for six hours” (582). He analyzes Bose’s marketing campaign for its “QuietComfort” headphones and finds that purchasing this technology allows consumers to access an “ontological shift that reconfigures [their] relation to their surroundings” (583). Similar arguments have been made about personal music devices from the Walkman to the iPod - they allow individuals to “disconnect from the networks of sound and sociality in which one is implicated” and to control outside noises to create personal space (580). In effect, the mill-women who read, recited, and composed poetry while doing industrial labor were attempting to gain the same control - just as active noise cancellation headphones listen to the sonic environment and use “tiny microphones and signal processing to produce an out-of-phase copy of the aural environment in an attempt to negate its phenomenological existence,” mill women drew on the rhythms of poetry to transform the new and sometimes frightening rhythms of the factory (573).

Mechanical noise, the new sound of industrialization heard particularly clearly in mechanized textile factories, was often identified by nineteenth-century Americans as one of the chief threats of industrialization. As historian Mark M. Smith notes in *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, “outside home and urban work, industrialization in the North took hold in particular regions that less than a generation earlier had sounded like the countryside” (133). In the din of newly mechanized factories of Lowell, Massachusetts, the first generation of American industrial workers confronted a shocking change in their occupational soundscape. Lowell was unique among industrial towns in the 1830s and 40s for the speed with which industrialization occurred there and the extent that it dominated the town. While the new sounds of growing industrialization in New England varied from village to village and from factory to factory, the textile industry “while fitful, happened quickly,” and “although the machines stopped frequently for lack of cotton, parts, water, and labor, when operating they were constantly in motion, emitting a low and continuous hum” (134). Though industrial machinery was understood to be loud, in contrast, industrial workers were supposed to be silent, as “inside the factory, workers were regulated by aural signals [like bells] and were required... to perform even peripheral work noiselessly, which suggested efficiency and order to the masters of capital and labor” (134). Melville’s 1855 description of the paper factory in “The Tartarus of Maids” gives an example of the popular perception of the way factory noise could silence workers: “Not a syllable was breathed. Nothing was heard but the low, steady, overruling hum of the iron animals. The human voice was banished from the spot” (Melville 675).

Melville’s words highlight the silencing potential of the factory’s pervasive din and the fear that it made the workers less human. In fact, the mill women of Lowell frequently wrote about the noise of the factory and how it affected their working and writing. In two non-fiction

essays published in the *Lowell Offering*, one worker described how, on first entering the mills, “the noise almost confused me—there was such a smashing among the looms I hardly knew what to think” (L.T.H. 110). Another worker using the penname Susan compared the din of the mill to the sonic awe of Niagara, reassuring the folks at home “that people learn to sleep with the thunder of Niagara in their ears, and a cotton mill is no worse, though you wonder that we do not have to hold our breath in such a noise” (170). This odd remark about holding one’s breath to keep noise out is followed by a curious simile from Susan that the constant hum of the machines made it seem “as though cotton-wool was in my ears” especially when she left the mills at night (170). These remarks about the insidious nature of factory noise may reflect the workers’ fear that the mill was insinuating itself into their bodies via their mouths and ears, and perhaps into their minds, even into their voices. In fact, Susan compares the noise of the factory to “crickets, frogs, and jewsharps, all mingled together in strange discord” (170). This reference to a jewsharp, or mouth-harp, a folk instrument that produces a droning hum and is held in the player’s mouth with the player’s jaw acting as a resonator for the instrument, is especially evocative of a human voice being replaced by mechanical sound. Bearing this fear in mind, reciting poetry to oneself and creating an internal soundscape may have been one of the consolations of poetry for female factory workers, especially when managers’ prohibitions of talking or the drone of the factory drowned out the human voice and made conversation or sharing poetry or song with others impossible (Smith 135).

The importance of poetry to the mill women is reinforced by “Solitude,” a short story from the *Lowell Offering*. In this story, one of several short stories in which the contributors detail the obstacles they have to overcome to write, the author, “Sally,” begins by apostrophizing “Lovely Solitude! Sages have praised thee! Gifted tongues have sung of thee in their sweetest

tones” (272). What began as a poetic apostrophe to Solitude quickly becomes a “prose-aic” chase around the boardinghouse, as Sally chases solitude from room to room, describing in the third-person how “as often as she hath for a moment caught a glimpse of thy charming features... some invidious interloper chased thee yet further away” (272). Sally’s poetic language, full of personification, elevated and antiquated diction, and classical allusions to the amorous pursuits of Apollo are in stark contrast to the pronounced regional dialects of the various “interlopers” who pursue Sally to her attic retreat. While Sally sits in the attic with Solitude, waiting for poetic inspiration, she is interrupted by several fellow workers. While a few mock her, the others quickly excuse themselves when they realize what Sally is attempting, showing they share her belief in its importance. Though her poetic language may have seemed pretentious, her fellow workers’ sympathy with her pursuit of solitude makes it clear that they take Sally’s poetic aspirations seriously. At the end of the story, Sally is called from the attic to help with some chores and she sadly bids her muse “a long farewell!” (274). This short story of a woman who set out to write a poem ultimately implies that a prose contribution to the *Lowell Offering* testifies to the author’s constant interruption, but a poem in the *Lowell Offering* testifies to the author’s ability to create and hold on to a moment of solitude, successfully finding that tranquility that Wordsworth asserted was so important to a poet in his famous aphorism: “[p]oetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (407).

In their memoirs, mill women remark on the omnipresence of poetry in the textile factory, not just in their conversation and reading, but in the mill itself in the 1830s and 40s. Former worker Harriet Hanson Robinson explains that since the spinners and weavers “were not allowed to read books openly in the mill... they brought their favorite ‘pieces’ of poetry, hymns

and extracts, and pasted them over their looms or frames, so that they could glance at them, and commit them to memory” (28). Lucy Larcom asserted in her memoir that memorizing poetry was not simply an amusement for the mind, but a way to escape the discord of the factory and create an internal soundscape. She recalls how, when working in the dressing room of the factory and conversing and trading poems with her workmates, the “huge, creaking framework beside us would continually intrude upon our meditations and break up our discussions, and silence all poetry for us with its dull prose” (*New England Girlhood* 228). However, when the “dull prose” of the machine’s noise intruded on her thoughts, Larcom recalled how “the poetry I held in my memory breathed its enchanted atmosphere through me and around me, and touched even dull drudgery with its sunshine” (134). These lines reveal the importance mill women placed on the silent, portable sound of poetry over prose, or even song, because it could be recited in one’s own mind, thereby creating an internal soundscape that would protect them from the cacophony of the machinery and ameliorate their isolation from each other, even when factory noise made communication impossible.

Closely linked to the concern about industrial noise were fears about the sharp increase in the pace of labor in an industrial setting. For example, the inaugural issue of the *Manchester Operative*, a weekly newspaper published from 1843-45 in the factory town of Manchester, NH, describes how things stand in 1843: the industrial age “cause[s] the slow tiring horse to be succeeded by the untiring engine speeding us on the wings of the wind, and the sound of the single spinning-wheel to be lost amidst the din of thousands” (“Prospectus”). The sense of breathless exhilaration mixed with nostalgia for the older, slower sounds and pace of life can be seen again and again in newspapers and magazines aimed at factory workers, and it reflects the new reality of work in the mills. Prior to the 1840s, “New England factories, like those in Great

Britain, generally assigned a pair of looms to each operative” (Roediger and Foner 52). When Larcom began working in the mills in the 1830s as a bobbin-girl, she would have seen weavers who “worked in pairs or in small groups and could trade tasks or even leave the job entirely for short periods [, a] pace of work [that] allowed for talking and reading on the job” (52). Though this arrangement did not disappear overnight, as can be seen in Larcom’s remembrance of her time as a weaver, in the 1840s supervisors began assigning more looms to each worker so that “no fewer than three, and sometimes four looms per person were typical” (52). Roediger and Foner’s language in describing this change is quite suggestive in the context of workers’ poetry, as they emphasize that now “the speed of individual looms, measured in ‘beats per minute’ (an index expressive of how *rhythms of the mill derived from the machine*) was varied to achieve optimal production” (52, emphasis mine). The pace was now set by the machine, not by the workers themselves. In a sort of proto-Taylorism, production was brutally increased “through the wresting of the control of the pace of production from workers” (147). What’s more, Roediger and Foner indicate that the power looms were each set to a slightly different tempo, which in effect eliminated the rhythm of the clicks and clacks of the shuttle in the power loom, so rather than one overwhelming beat, workers had to attend to the cacophony of rhythms of up to four different looms.

As we have seen with Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt,” British poets influenced Americans’ ideas about industrial labor, not only in the content of their social-protest poems, but also in the innovative ways they used formal poetic devices to replicate the experience of industrial labor. While Hood used inversion and refrain to create a sense of the monotonous, relentless pace of industrial labor, Elizabeth Barrett Browning experimented with meter to capture the cacophonous, disorienting sound of the factory in her extremely popular poem, “The

Cry of the Children,” published in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in August 1843. In this excerpt, the child-workers describe the noise on the factory-floor:

For all day the wheels are droning, turning;
Their wind comes in our faces,
Till our hearts turn, our heads with pulses burning,
And the walls turn in their places:
Turns the sky in the high window, blank and reeling,
Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling:
All are turning, all the day, and we with all.
And all day the iron wheels are droning,
And sometimes we could pray,
‘O ye wheels’ (breaking out in a mad moaning),
‘Stop! Be silent for to-day!’ (77-88)

Critic Herbert Tucker asserts that the heavily “syncopated... trochaic stanza[s]” of this particular section of the poem are “nauseatingly ill-proportioned to human measure” – in other words, that reading them aloud is so difficult and feels so unnatural that it even makes him feel ill (289).

Trochaic meter has been associated with the unnatural since at least the time of Shakespeare, who used it to represent the speech of the witches in *Macbeth* and the fairies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Tucker’s use of the term “syncopated,” meaning that stress falls on an unexpected syllable and violates the reader’s expectation of the meter, has two possible interpretations. He could be pointing out that the trochaic meter itself is a syncopation of the more common iambic meter. Or, to identify an even more complicated soundscape, he may be pointing out that the trochaic meter itself is syncopated, as it is in this line: “Till our hearts turn, our heads with pulses burning.” In order to maintain the chant-like regularity of the trochaic meter, the reader is forced to put the emphasis on the second syllable of “pulses burning,” violating the typical pronunciation of “pulses burning.” The trochaic meter is made all the more irregular by the way each line varies in length with no clear pattern: a hexameter line is followed by a tetrameter line, which is followed by a pentameter and a trimeter, and so on. Furthermore,

though the end rhyme scheme is a regular abab, a few internal rhymes make these lines difficult to read. For example, in the line “Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling,” the internal rhyme of “sky” and “high” makes “window” sound clunky, just as in the following line the mellifluous “l” sounds in “long light” begs to be followed by a word like “lingers,” not the plodding sound of “adown.” The trochaic meter, a meter already estranged from the “naturalness” of iambic meter, combined with this syncopation and misleading internal rhyme and alliteration makes the bourgeois reader *feel* the unpleasant disorientation the children experience in the factory. Interestingly, this irregular, syncopated rhythm seems at odds with the way the factory sound is described in this stanza as constant and monotone, “droning” “all the day.” Though Tucker does not note this discrepancy, I argue that Barrett Browning is making the point, through the irregular and jumpy meter, that the effect the noise produces is jarring rather than stabilizing or lulling.

Four months prior to the publication of “The Cry of the Children,” Larcom wrote in the *Lowell Offering* about the sound of poetry and industrial labor from the perspective of an industrial worker who had actually lived with the new soundscape. Larcom chose to partake of its “enchanted atmosphere” by reciting poetry to herself while working (*New England Girlhood* 134). As a close reading of one of her poems demonstrates, she uses poetry to transform her environment.

Larcom chooses the Aeolian Harp as her topic, a symbol of poetic receptivity to the environment made popular by Romantic poets (Trower 2). Perhaps the best known poem in this vein (then as now) is Coleridge’s 1795 poem “The Eolian Harp,” which describes “the idle flitting phantasies” that the occasional music of the harp inspires:

The stilly murmur of the distant Sea
Tells us of silence.

And that simplest Lute,
Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!
How by the desultory breeze caressed[.] (lines 11-14)

As the above lines demonstrate, “The Eolian Harp” is in the iambic pentameter of blank verse, a meter that supposedly most naturally replicates the cadences of the English language. This representation of artless naturalness is reinforced by blank verse’s lack of a rhyme scheme and, as Timothy Morton notes, the iambic pentameter line, “Tells us of silence. / And that simplest lute” is broken up between stanzas and formatted in such a way as to imply a long pause, thereby making the poem seem as natural and “arrhythmic as the notes from the Aeolian harp itself” (Morton).

In contrast to Coleridge’s well-known poem, Larcom’s “To the Aeolian Harp,” published in the *Lowell Offering* in April 1843, is written in trochaic meter. As Barrett Browning would do four months later, Larcom draws upon trochaic meter’s association with mechanicity and artifice, a metrical choice that seems especially odd in portraying an instrument known for relying on the fickle caprice of the wind. She subtly calls attention to the contrast between the spontaneity of the harp and the rigidity of her chosen form in the first stanza:

HARP! whose strings the passing breeze
Waketh to light symphonies,
Rude, yet strangely mild;
Thou a mirror art to me,
Where the *spirit*-harp I see,
O’er whose strings mysteriously
Float life’s breezes wild. (lines 1-7)

Through the inversion of words in the fourth line (“Thou a mirror art” rather than “Thou art a mirror”), Larcom cleverly acknowledges that she will continue to treat the harp as a mimetic or “mirror art,” i.e., the passive harp acted on by nature mirrors the way the passive poet is acted on by larger forces. At the same time, the poem’s form, as illustrated by the inversion, will be stylized and *not* mimetic of nature.

While Barrett Browning syncopated the mechanicity of trochaic rhythm to break up its potentially lulling quality, Larcom's trochaic meter is extremely precise – each stanza is exactly seven lines long, each contains exactly seven syllables (save the third and seventh, which contain 5), and each line has a masculine, or stressed, ending. This precision suggests the oppressively regular sound of the factory, the “dull prose” Larcom describes in her memoir, which she needed to transcend to write this poem (*New England Girlhood* 228). Larcom's strategy carried some risk. In a poem in the *Lowell Offering*, which, after all was a literary magazine partly designed to prove that the first generation of American industrial workers were not becoming automatons, Larcom wrote about the unpredictable, natural Aeolian harp using a programmatic and mechanical scheme. Some readers might mistake this deliberate strategy as a weakness; the relentless, repetitive sound of the factory had seeped into the poetic voice, indeed, the subjectivity of the working-woman.

Instead, by skillful use of a precise trochaic meter in her meditation on the Aeolian harp, Larcom shows her mastery of the new and potentially frightening soundscape that surrounded her for as much as 14 hours a day. Much as Barrett Browning does, Larcom captures the industrial soundscape in the form of the poem so that the reader may hear it, and in doing so, she acknowledges the power of the industrial soundscape. However, the meter in Larcom's poem does not strike the reader as nauseatingly oppressive. Rather, Larcom handles the meter quite lightly in this poem, converting the monotonous pace and tone of the factory environment into a pleasurable regularity. Trochaic meter need not be oppressive or nauseating, as it is in “The Cry of the Children.” It can also be a real source of pleasure, as Fanny Osgood, a contemporary of Larcom's, demonstrated in her poem, “The Fan: A Lover's Fantasy.” This poem is written in a precise trochaic meter with consistently masculine endings just like Larcom's. Osgood uses the

meter to represent the “rhythmic seduction” of the fan waving in the hand of a beautiful young ingénue (Richards 86). In “To the Aeolian Harp,” though the meter and rhyme are quite regular, Larcom handles both with great delicacy, showing her mastery of sound. For example, the odd number of lines in each stanza means that couplets or a balanced rhyme scheme such as abab will not work; the aabcccb rhyme scheme is more elaborate and pleasurably withholds the bb rhyme from the reader for a short time. We can see her mastery of complex prosody in lines such as these:

There, Afflictions, furious, rush,
And the strains of gladness hush,
Hope did whilome sing. (22-24)

The unusual number of commas in the first line, one between each word, seems to break up the trochees without actually disturbing the rhythm, and the complicated syntax and use of the archaic word “whilome” creates a complex phrase that belies the poem’s steady rhythm.

In one instance Larcom breaks the poem’s hyper-regular meter, and this moment illustrates how her interpretation of the harp, the symbol of poetic receptivity to the environment, departs from Coleridge. It comes when, towards the end of the poem, the speaker imagines the otherworldly sounds of heaven:

Comes the Spirit! glorious One!
Waking there a seraph-tone,
[C]reates upon the lyre.

Thus, its strings by grief are riven,
Thus, the notes of earth and heaven
Blending, o’er it thrill:
Till, when Life yields not a balm,
Adverse winds no longer harm;
Cometh Death: —a mighty calm,
And the harp is *still*. (33-42)

As we can see, the third line of this excerpt is iambic trimeter rather than trochaic (creates is the typical pronunciation of the word, not creates) and has either one or two extra syllables depending on how “lyre” is read. The fourth and fifth lines are both trochaic, but they also have an additional syllable each and are the only lines in the poem with feminine, or unstressed endings. These may seem like small variations, but they stand out in a poem this regular, and significantly the lines are trying to describe the tones of heaven, which have the potential to be radically different from earthly ones. The ways in which both Larcom’s poem and Coleridge’s treat heaven reveals their attitude towards poetic receptivity to the environment. In Coleridge’s poem, he describes the harp played by the breeze as “Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,” and initially embraces the harp’s exquisite sensitivity (line 15). However, the harp’s passivity eventually becomes terrifying, as the poet is led to wonder whether the poet has any agency at all over the creation of his art, or whether he himself is a “subject Lute” at the mercy of any “idle flitting phantasies, / [that] Traverse my indolent and passive brain” (43, 40-41). The poet is rescued from these disturbing thoughts by his pious lover, and he reminds himself to put his trust in the God that “gave me to possess / Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honored Maid!” (63-64). By the grace of God, the male poet possesses, “Peace,” or the ability to self-regulate, as well as property and a woman.

As one might imagine, the idea of a poet’s sensitivity, or even vulnerability, to external forces as figured in the Aeolian Harp had different stakes for a woman poet immersed in a strange new soundscape. In content, Larcom’s poem is at first similar to Coleridge’s, as she initially embraces the harp’s receptivity, the way in which:

There, Thought moveth, all sublime;
 There, the varied gusts of time,
 Joys and sorrows mingling chime,
 Mingling echoes ring. (11-14)

The musical alliteration of “I” and “L” sounds in the phrase “mingling chime, mingling echoes ring” once again coaxes pleasure from repetition. But Larcom does, understandably, share Coleridge’s fears about the poet’s vulnerability to external forces – after briefly describing the sweet tones “bland Affection” (15) can draw from the harp, she dwells at length on the tones the harp produces when moved by “fitful” “Grief and Care,” to “a low, deep moan” and even to the discordant “wild shrieks of Madness” (19, 18, 21, 25). However, whereas Coleridge concludes the poem by urging himself to submit to the larger agency of God, Larcom concludes the poem by urging herself to take control of the song she produces:

Mortal! guard thy *heart!* be wise;
There let no harsh discord rise,
And thou may’st in Paradise,
Hear the harp’s “new song.” (46-49)

Larcom’s use of the word “discord” here might remind us of Susan’s description of the rhythmic yet droning noise of the factory as “crickets, frogs, and jewsharps, all mingled together in strange discord.” Significantly, Larcom encourages the poet to guard her heart against “discord,” implying that the poet, unlike the harp, possesses agency and the ability to use poetry to master the disc(h)ord of the factory. By doing that, the poet may imagine different, otherworldly rhythms as foreshadowed when the poem meter changed during the description of the “seraph-tone” (34). Thirty years after she wrote this poem, Larcom described her struggle with and triumph over the challenging and sonically chaotic world of the mills in her memoir:

I loved quietness. The noise of machinery was particularly distasteful to me... [but] I discovered... that I could so accustom myself to the noise that it became like a silence to me. And I defied the machinery to make me its slave. Its incessant discords could not drown the music of my thoughts if I would let them fly high enough.” (*New England Girlhood* 183)

Larcom’s “To the Aeolian Harp” shows the reader the mechanical “discords” she had to overcome to write this poem. She demonstrates that poetry gave her the power to take a

potentially oppressive external rhythm and transform it into art, thereby suggesting that poetry can enable one to transcend one's surroundings and taste the "new song" of Paradise (line 49).

Part II: Pace

Of course this idea of poetry as transcendence can be problematic – in Larcom's understanding, is poetry a way for the laborer to alienate herself from monotonous physical labor, to separate her "free" mind from her "imprisoned" body? The crux of the issue rests in the extent to which the mind is divorced from the body. It is worth remembering that, in the first few stanzas of Larcom's poem, the poet, or Aeolian harp, is sensitive to the environment to the point of physical pain expressed in "moan[s]" and "shrieks." However, Larcom concludes the poem by affirming the poet's power to harmonize mind with body; in her words, to "guard thy *heart!* Be wise; / There let no harsh discord rise." Ultimately, for Larcom, the poet's mind and body are not as vulnerable to discord as the Aeolian harp; in fact, the poet's mind can protect the worker's body by creating "new" and different songs.

However, Larcom discusses all of this indirectly, as if indirection in her poetry were another means of escaping the bombardment of industrial noise. Indeed, while the prose in the *Lowell Offering* and *New England Offering* often explicitly refers to the realities of the factory world, these same realities are remote in the poetry. One of the chief objects of the *Lowell Offering* and *New England Offering* was to prove there was "mind among the spindles"; to disprove the idea that the noise and pace of mill-labor might deaden the mind. Yet, this phrase itself implies disembodiment – not that there is "mind among the hands" or "mind among the workers," but mind amidst and despite the machines. This perceived separation and indirection suggests alienation, as if the poetic mind is completely separate from the laboring body. To

explore further this question of alienation, we will look closely at “Fancy,” a poem from the *Lowell Offering* that describes, as few do, the process of composing poetry on the factory floor. In this poem, the reader must decide if poetry helps this worker transcend her labor, or if it is her labor at the power loom that informs her poetry.

Obviously, the work situation facing the textile workers at Lowell was a world away from Aunt Hannah’s flax-wheel, which introduced this chapter. Her nieces were industrial weavers, meaning they were surrounded by noise that isolated them from each other and threatened their ability to think. They worked at an unrelenting pace that afforded little room for the natural ebb and flow of effort represented in Aunt Hannah’s weaving: rather than driving the hand-loom themselves, they were responsible for monitoring the labor of the power-loom that drove the shuttle back and forth. In “Fancy,” published in the *Lowell Offering* in July 1841, an anonymous mill woman writing under the pen name Fiducia describes monitoring her power loom (or looms) while composing poetry in her head:

O swiftly flies the shuttle now,
Swift as an arrow from the bow;
But swifter than the thread is wrought,
Is soon the flight of busy thought; (lines 1-4)

As we’ve seen in Melville’s “Tartarus of Maids,” performing simple, repetitive tasks was thought to deaden the worker’s mind through monotony, but Fiducia argues instead that the swift rhythms of factory work are a stimulant to the mind, a propulsive activity that encourages the mind to undertake the rhythmic but, significantly, not deadening work of poetry. And so this poem begins with an image of harmony, of the rhythms of labor inspiring the rhythms of poetry, and vice versa.

Unfortunately, this harmony between the mind and the machine’s rhythm is short-lived. Certainly not a mindless automaton, the speaker of “Fancy” has such an overabundance of

mental energy that she splits into two personae: a truant Fancy who rejects the mill, and the more rational speaker who cautions against recklessness, only to become intoxicated by Fancy's power to imagine new worlds. A mill-worker abandoned by her creative ability would seem to be the very image of an alienated worker. And indeed, in stanza two Fancy disobediently indulges herself creating a green, springtime world populated by "bright manly youths and maidens too" (24). At this point, Fancy has become the "law" of the poem (18). Her voice has the world-making, musical quality associated with the lyric speaker, and the rational poetic speaker fades into the background as she becomes intoxicated with Fancy's poetic power while "music filled the ravished air," the "air" being the poem itself (26).

Now the worker's mind is operating at a different pace than her body. Throughout the poem, the iambic tetrameter meter remains as steady as the click and clack of the shuttle in the power loom. However, the content and the form of Fancy's world create a sense of acceleration: plants grow and music begins in stanza two, and in stanzas 3 and 4 people dance and begin to drink. The poem fosters this sense of building momentum through anaphora: beginning consecutive lines with "And" creates a sense of gathering energy (25-28). This anaphora becomes more and more pronounced, culminating in the beginning of stanza 4. Moreover, with the exception of stanza 2 and the beginning of stanza 3, the poem is written in present tense, and the immediacy of the poem's action is reinforced by the frequent occurrence of the word "now" which creates a sense that Fancy's world, rather than the factory world, is unfolding right before the readers' eyes. Fancy's pastoral fantasy becomes progressively more intoxicating and engrossing for the speaker, as she is drawn into the "mazes" of the "dances" and watches the youths and maidens as "on, on" they move, raising a throne to their "queen" (28, 27, 31, 35).

At this moment, when a queen is introduced, Fancy moves from the role of “law” maker to a more servile role, weaving garlands, setting the table, and fixing drinks for the “youths and maidens” she created (24-40). The poetic speaker was intoxicated by music, Fancy has been intoxicated by dance, and now the guests are becoming intoxicated by the “enchancing wine” before a crisis emerges – who is in control of the poem (51)? With no one in control, the poem veers into a collapse in stanza five, a hodgepodge disaster that is tantalizingly unspecific, described in a series of one-line images that never cohere but give a sense of the sublime destructive power of a “whirlwind,” earthquake, or flood (56-60). Fancy’s alienation from the poem’s speaker was ultimately unsustainable, and her intoxicating fantasy world fell apart when, to paraphrase the poem’s beginning, busy thought exceeded the swift shuttle.

Though Fancy’s “giddy” world is gone, she is reconciled with the rational poetic speaker, who begs her to stay and be “governed by a ‘factory bell’”; literally, the rhythms of the factory (74). Though this could be read as failure - the industrial worker’s creative Fancy dominated by factory labor - this reading ignores that the factory setting itself inspired the poem, and that Fancy survived to be reconciled with the poetic speaker. I want to suggest that at the beginning of the poem the speaker’s poetic Fancy converted the tremendous energy of the mechanical loom into creative power, making a giddy world. In stanzas 3 and 4, the poem itself escapes the speaker’s control, speeding to its own destruction in stanza 5. Finally, the speaker reasserts control over her own creative energy and instead of accelerating to the breaking point, the poetic speaker asks her Fancy to be governed by a “factory bell.” The scare-quotes around that phrase suggest that the factory belle could be the factory girl herself. Rather than a moment of self-discipline, the poem is about the act of writing, of fitting creative energy to the formal requirements of poetry. With the excessively regular sound and pace of factory labor as its

backdrop, this poem cleverly accelerates and decelerates, playing with the rhythm and drawing on it for creative power. Fiducia describes and demonstrates how one can play with and against the rhythms of the factory as a spur to one's own creativity, ultimately creating both cloth and a poem, a surplus value that accrues to the worker, and not the corporation.

An assumption running through this argument is the idea that poetry or song might have the power to ease labor while also helping the body “keep time.” It is certainly not a new assumption, and it is a question that has been taken up more extensively by folklorists and sociologists than by literary scholars. For example, in a 2013 study of the role of music in the workplace in pre-industrial and industrial Britain, sociologist Marek Korczynski focuses on the “dialectical relationship between fancy and function, between the creative and imaginative scope of music and the way in which music is materially functional for the habits, the movements and the structures of work” (10). In focusing on dialectics and the give and take between work and play that is involved with singing (and, I would argue, composing poetry) on the job, Korczynski seeks to remedy “work song literature’s narrow focus on instrumental functionality,” positing instead that singing paradoxically called attention to both the “alternative social worlds” of the song, and “whatever a worker was physically doing in executing a task” (63-64). They argue that for laborers “singing generated a form of play in the midst of work, as if, in daydreaming, work was to wake up and find itself transformed into play” (13).

Part III: Social Isolation and Alienation

Another problem with factory noise was the way that it isolated workers from each other. This alienation from social connections might further the de-humanization of the women in the factory. Poetry was a major part of the social fabric of nineteenth-century America, serving to

connect individuals with each other (Kete 25). When the improvement circle that constituted the *Lowell Offering* met to share the prose and poetry they had written on the factory floor or in the factory boarding house, they were combining social bonding and literary creation. This important combination will be the subject of Chapter 4, but a quick review of such titles as “The Parting, Addressed to an Intimate Friend” and “Last Effort of the Poetess: Addressed to a Friend, Who Requested the Writer to Continue Her Poetical Contributions to a Social Circle,” shows the connection between socializing and creating. These two poems, which are representative of much of the poetry contributed to the *Lowell Offering* and *New England Offering*, are also typical of nineteenth-century verse.

However, one remarkable poem from the *New England Offering*, the short-lived continuation of the *Lowell Offering*, finds the factory poet forming a social bond with the mass-produced textile. In this fascinating poem, “A Dialogue Between My Rug and Me, Gratefully Inscribed to A. Wright, Esq.” Adelaide, a former mill-worker and writer who primarily contributed poetry to the *Lowell Offering* and *New England Offering*, contemplates a beautiful chenille rug sent to her by Alexander Wright, the superintendent of the Lowell Manufacturing Company in Lowell, one of the centers of antebellum carpet production (56). In fact, the *New England Offering* reported on the grand opening of the “new Carpet Mill” in its inaugural issue in April 1848, stating with appreciative awe that “the mill is said to cover more than an acre of ground; it is lighted at the sides and from the roof” and is “ready to receive its machinery” (24). Alexander Wright was a superintendent and treasurer of this mill, which was one of only two mills in the country where chenille carpeting was being mass-manufactured by machine (Cole and Williamson 34n). Chenille carpet is fuzzy and soft, and the tufted chenille thread can give the carpet a shimmering appearance. Mass-production of chenille carpets had only been recently

developed in 1839, so the wool chenille rug Adelaide describes would have been a novel luxury, especially in the Choctaw Mission, Arkansas, where Adelaide then resided (116-117). In her memoir, Harriet Hanson Robinson identifies Adelaide as one of the pennames of Miss Lydia S. Hall, “whose productions aided largely in the celebrity of the Offering especially in the line of poetry.” Her “poetical articles of singular merit, stamped this ‘Adelaide’ as a remarkable writer” (125). Robinson recalls that “[s]he left Lowell before 1848, and went as a missionary to the Choctaw Indians, traveling on horseback a greater part of the way, across the unsettled region” (155).

In this poem, then, a former textile operative uses a poetic dialogue to imaginatively converse with a factory-produced textile. She received a textile as a gift, and in turn produced a text that was a public thank-you gift to Alexander Wright, a part of the “gift economy” of nineteenth-century literature explored by Leon Jackson in *The Business of Letters* (3). The poem announces its genre in its humorous and surreal title: it is a dialogue, a poetic genre dating back to antiquity that consists of “a responsive conversation [that] expresses diverse viewpoints, which are thereby opened to possible change” (Nichols and Tucker 357). It is a philosophical genre that dramatizes ethical questions and the process of changing one’s mind. The conflict in the poem is between the speaker, Adelaide, who feels that the expensive, factory-made chenille rug is incompatible with both her rustic “Indian home” and her class status, and the rug itself, which argues that it too can be a part of the social world (line 2).

When the poem opens, Adelaide keenly feels the incongruity between her rustic “Indian home” and the shimmering rug delivered to her in the wilds of Arkansas, very far from civilization and its luxury goods (2). She asks the rug, “whence hast thou come? / And what would’st thou here in my Indian home?” (1-2). These questions introduce musings on the labor

that created the rug and transported it from the Lowell textile mills, not on the identity of the gift-giver, already established as “A. Wright.” Indeed, this is a poem written by a poet who, like so many of her contemporaries, was fascinated by the beauty and sophistication of a mass-produced commodity and the astounding expansion of infrastructure that made this circulation of consumer goods possible. Furthermore, the poem is even more interesting because it is written by someone who worked in the textile industry and is therefore in the rare position (at that time) of being both consumer and producer. This interest is only deepened by the fact that the poem’s explicit audience, a mill superintendent, and its implicit audience, the readership of the *New England Offering* which, like the *Lowell Offering*, was largely the female employees of the Lowell mills, were all very familiar with mass production. Consistent with the other poems in the *Lowell Offering* and the *New England Offering*, this poem does not explicitly refer to the factory setting, but its roots there are revealed in a host of subtle ways. Like the other poems, it uses poetry to guard workers against the particular harms that their work exposes them to: deafening and isolating sound, a relentless pace, and in this case, alienation from their own labor and the products of it.

Alienation for female textile workers was closely connected to the social isolation previously explored - the way that sound isolated workers from each other. In this poem, Adelaide also experiences alienation and isolation from her friends, but not through factory labor, which she has left behind, but through her change in occupation and physical distance from them. When one of her friends gives her a mass-produced commodity, she initially fails to see how a factory made object can transmit human affection. Her skepticism acknowledges how industrialization alienated both the worker and the consumers from the commodity. Though the poets writing in the *Lowell Offering* and the *New England Offering* were unaware of Marx’s

writings on alienation, which he began to theorize contemporaneously with them in 1844, as industrial laborers they would experience firsthand the problematic new aspects of industrial labor he identifies. For Marx, alienation manifested itself in several ways, which include, most significantly for this study, the alienation of the workers from their products and the alienation of the worker from the act of production (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 28-29). The former occurs because the industrial worker and the consumer have no say in designing the product or how it is produced – the capitalist class controls this (30). The result is the frustration of creativity and a lack of a sense of ownership of the product. To illustrate this, Marx offers an example of how fulfilling an older mode of artisanal production was, which demonstrates his idea of a laborer who is not alienated from his products:

Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings. Each of us would have, in two ways, affirmed himself, and the other person. (i) In my production I would have objectified my individuality, its specific character, and, therefore, enjoyed not only an individual manifestation of my life during the activity, but also, when looking at the object, I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be objective, visible to the senses, and, hence, a power beyond all doubt. (ii) In your enjoyment, or use, of my product I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a human need by my work, that is, of having objectified man's essential nature, and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another man's essential nature . . . Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature. (*Comments on James Mill*)

The second relevant aspect of Marx's concept, alienation from work itself, is applicable to factory workers because industrial labor consists of accomplishing several monotonous processes, the repetition of which can seem endless. This endless quality means that the worker does not get a sense of gratification from her labor but rather comes to regard her own labor as external to herself. Indeed, the extent to which Adelaide, who had years of experience of textile millwork, seems to play dumb and pretend that she cannot fathom how the rug was made is initially surprising.

We can find clues to the influence of the factory in the rug's initial depiction of its creation, which emphasizes the tumult and chaos it was born from:

I've wandered o'er hill-top and mountain,
And laved in the spray of the fountain;
I've sported on crags that would craze you,
And leapt over gulfs that would 'maze you. (lines 3-6)

Perhaps the image of being “laved in the spray of the fountain” conjured up the dammed Merrimack River whose waterpower drove the mills; at any rate, the verbs “sported,” “craze,” “leapt,” and “maze” certainly conjure a frenetic, almost dangerous level of energy. This is contrasted by a description of stillness, as the rug goes on to describe pausing in its journey to Adelaide to “la[y] on the green-tufted lawn at night, / All bathed in the stars’ soft, silvery light” (7-8). Even this tranquil moment is infused with language that evokes the rug’s creation, for chenille fabric is known for having a tufted, silvery appearance derived from the way the fibers are processed (Cole and Williamson 38). At this point Adelaide interrupts the rug again to make it clear that she is more interested in the labor and processes that went into making it rather than the story of how it was transported to her. She asks, “But whence is thy brilliance? Did'st borrow thy hue / From the gems in the brook, or from morn's shining dew?” trying to parse how the rug could be so colorful (15-16). Though exaggerated for comic effect, Adelaide is essentially pointing out that the rug is not “natural,” that is, not the product of older, artisanal methods of production, which necessarily relied on less vivid, naturally-derived dyes. Pressing the rug to reveal its origins prompts it to acknowledge that it is made of wool:

Nay; I was a fleece, in my rambles!
The sheep went, alas! to the shambles:
And I, through a host of mutations,
Have passed to new names and relations. (19-22)

In this moment, the rug acknowledges the multiple processes or “host of mutations,” and significantly, the multiple workers, or “new names and relations” that went into its creation. It describes how, in order for it to be made:

Earth's storehouse was ransacked, her mysteries revealed,
Mineralogist, botanist, all were afield;
The chemist, the artist, and more from that throng,—
The genius, the workman, the tasteful, the strong,—
Research, perseverance, and toil, have combined
With science, and skill, and taste well refined;
All wrought in their sphere, — And behold I am here. (23-29)

The rug’s description of its origins emphasizes the collaborative processes and division of labor involved in the mass manufacture of consumer goods. Adelaide marvels at the rug as a spectacle of the modern consumer good, assembled by innumerable hands and made possible by manifold new techniques, in contrast to the handicraft good made by one possibly familiar person using age-old techniques, a contrast that would have been especially vivid given Adelaide’s surroundings: a rural “Choctaw Mission” where, in 1849, mass-produced goods, especially luxury ones, would likely have been outnumbered by goods produced by older, artisanal methods.

At this point the poem reveals the source of Adelaide’s hesitation in accepting the rug into her rustic home: it seems fundamentally out of place in the “wide wilderness” where she now lives (36). Such a spectacular object, she protests, is not suitable for her home, but belongs instead in “splendid halls, / Where rare old paintings deck the walls: / Where mantels groan with nature's store, / And silken curtains sweep the floor” (31-34). With this statement, Adelaide seems to express a deferential class humility – the chenille rug seems like something a wealthier, aristocratic person would own, as it would be in keeping with their bespoke “rare old paintings” and “silken curtains.” However, the sincerity of her class humility is called into question both by the overall tone of the poem, which is semi-humorous, and its publishing context: contributors to

the *Lowell Offering* and *New England Offering* were consistently proud of their status as working women and rarely if ever expressed sincere class-based self-abnegation. For example, in “Gold Watches” an essay from the *Lowell Offering* that explicitly touches on the greater access to luxury goods that mass production made possible, the essayist writing under the name “A Factory Girl” responds to an 1841 editorial published in a middle-class magazine, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, in which Sarah Hale bemoans the industrialization that made affordable reproductions of luxury items possible and gave working-women the economic power to “imitat[e] their betters” (Eisler 183). In the *Godey’s* piece, which “A Factory Girl” quotes in “Gold Watches,” Hale asks “How stands the difference now? Many of the factory girls wear gold watches, and an imitation, at least, of all the ornaments which grace the daughters of our most opulent citizens” (45). To this, “A Factory Girl” mockingly replies:

O the times! O the manners! Alas! How very sadly the world has changed! The time was when the *lady* could be distinguished from the *no-lady* by her dress, as far as the eye could reach; but now, you might stand in the same room, and judging by their outward appearance, you could not tell “which was which.” Even gold watches are now no *sure* indication--for they have been worn by the lowest, even by “many of the factory girls.” (45)

This shows that mill-workers were quite conscious of the way that their labor not only gave them the purchasing power to afford luxury items, but that the mass production of luxury items made them more affordable and hence more accessible to consumers like themselves. Therefore, we can infer that when Adelaide seems to protest the rug’s fitness for her home, it is not a deep-seated sense of class inferiority at work, but something else.

This something else points to the main work that the poem must accomplish: Adelaide must come to see that the mass-produced good is still part of the social, and in this case, Christian world. She must be convinced that it is not a commodity alienated from the labor that produced it, but that it can be used to reinforce social bonds and a sense of community across distance, as

poetry did in nineteenth-century America (Cohen 181). To persuade her that it belongs to her social world, the rug must first overcome the sense of isolation she is experiencing as a missionary in the south. Juxtaposing the New England winters she is used to with this new climate, the rug forces her to consider the way they share the same sky: “Burn the stars with harsher glow / Here, than on thy hills of snow? / Fainter are the rainbow dyes / Here, than in thy native skies?” (39-42). This comparison prompts her to acknowledge the proximity of Lowell and the Choctaw Mission when considered on a grander scale. Just as the two locations share the same skies and the same beauty can be found in their “rainbow dyes,” they are also linked by friendship, as demonstrated when the rug rebukingly asks her

Are the links of spirit broken?
Doth not Friendship know its token?
Hast thou, 'mid thy sterner duty,
Lost thy yearning love for beauty? (49-52)

Just because she is far away does not mean she has been forgotten by the friends she made while she was a textile worker at Lowell, and the gift of both rug and poem are a testament to this lasting social bond.

As the line “Hast thou, 'mid thy sterner duty, / Lost thy yearning love for beauty?” indicated, part of the rug’s rhetorical strategy is to link a love of beauty to a love of God, and then demonstrate that the mass-produced commodity can be beautiful, that its creation is ultimately derived from God, and that it is therefore an unalienated part of the social fabric of this community. Interestingly, Adelaide’s missionary work amongst the Cherokee is presented as significantly more difficult and hostile to an aesthetic sense than her previous career as a factory worker. After Adelaide states emphatically that she knows it is part of her Christian duty to love beauty since God created a beautiful world, the rug launches into an extended meditation on God’s fancy, or creative power, in relation to man’s:

[He who] traced out many a silver thread
 O'er the "chenille" in nature's bowers,
 Inwrought her "rugs" with choicest flowers;
 Who taught old ocean his wild roar,
 And made the coral depths his store;
 Who chained its wild surges and whitened its crest,
 And with many-hued shells its margins dressed;
 Who filled from his life-cup the ambient air,
 And wrote his great name on all that is fair,—
 He formed the elements, the spell he wrought,
 By which all hearts in beauty's mesh are caught.
 He loans creation to man's potent will,
 His varied patterns teach the varied skill;
 Luxuriant fancy, swift as searching thought —
 Lo! What a model-copy they have wrought! (66-80)

This passage likens God's irrigation of the earth with rivers to "trac[ing]" out silver thread over the fuzzy "'chenille'" of the grass, which God the weaver has likewise "inwrought" with flowers. God's creation of the seas as described in Genesis 1:2 ("And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters") has been reworked into something like the labor of an interior decorator, who "whiten[s]" the foams and "dress[es]" the beaches with "many-hued shells," a description that recalls the "splendid halls" "[w]here mantels groan with nature's store" (31, 33). This familiar portrayal of God is in keeping with the rug's purpose: to convince Adelaide that there is a connection between natural beauty and beautiful objects, such as the rug, created by humanity's art and science. Significantly, the rug uses verbs to describe God's labor that also evoke working with textiles, such as tracing, embroidering, bleaching, and dressing, and the line "His varied patterns teach the varied skill" not only draws upon the process of creating garments from a pattern, but also seems to tacitly endorse the division of a complex process, such as making textiles, into simpler tasks performed by many hands of varied skill that was the hallmark of the modern factory such as the Lowell textile mills. By describing God's labor of creating the natural world using language that evokes the factory production of textiles, the rug

makes the case that as “[m]an’s handiwork,” it proclaims God’s glory, whether the product of a single artisan or, in this case, the product of industrial collaboration between “The chemist, the artist, and more from that throng,---/ The genius, the workman, the tasteful, the strong” (82, 25-26). Though the division of labor may have rendered the relationship between producer and product more complex than it used to be under an artisanal or domestic mode of production, this dialogic poem reassures Adelaide and her fellow factory workers that the products of their labor, and the labor itself, is equally imbued with God’s creative energy and is therefore meaningful, not alienated.

At this point the poem adds a new layer by self-consciously reflecting on poetry’s, and this poem’s in particular, role in binding industrial laborers to each other and to the products of their labor. The rug wistfully states:

Had I a life, my being should proclaim
Man's handiwork, as his great Teacher's fame;
Had I a tongue, I'd whisper thee a name
Which to thy gratitude has ample claim.
But, silent will I spread me in thy sight,
And bind thy friendship to the good and *right*." (81-86)

Of course, the rug has been given a “life” of sorts and certainly a “tongue” by poetry; as Adelaide replies, “My spirit hath thy gentle accents heard, / And learned its duty from thy every word” (89-90). Some may object that a product taking on a life or a power that it exerts over its producer is a key component of Marx’s theory of alienation, in which the commodity becomes more valuable than the person (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 28). However, that interpretation ignores the fact that this commodity is imbued with life because it represents social bonds – because it is a gift, it speaks, and just because it is an industrially-produced gift does not mean it speaks any less about human connection. Here, poetry has the power to make the mass-produced commodity socially meaningful, or at least to make its social value legible to the awed

and perhaps wary consumers whom Adelaide represents at the poem's beginning. This section of the poem relies heavily on paralipsis, "the device whereby a speaker pretends not to discuss a subject while actually doing so" (Baran 61). The rug does this, not only by speculating on what it would do if it could, but also by punning on "bind[ing] thy friendship to the good and *right*," a cheeky reference to Alexander Wright, the gift-giver (line 86).

Just as poetic personification allowed Adelaide to see the social and Christian meaning in this factory-made luxury item, poetry allows her to craft a suitable thank you that reinforces the social bonds between the two, and, by publishing this poem in the *New England Offering* and making this a public thank-you, it reinforces her bonds with the rest of her friends and community back in Lowell, as she implies when she says "[T]hou, my own chenille, if in or out of sight, / Shalt waken grateful memories of the generous, good, and *right*," a construction that both refers to Alexander Wright by punning on his name as well as the community with the plural "the generous" and the "good" (105-106). She is effectively exchanging textile for text, a connection that she makes when she describes "weav[ing] in song the fancies [the rug] hast lent" (92). She is modest about her poetic production, calling it an ephemeral "prayer" and wishing it were "half so eloquent" as the musings the rug inspired (97, 91). But it is no ephemeral "prayer," nor even a tribute poem included in a private thank-you letter to Alexander Wright; it is a poem submitted for publication in a literary journal and intended to communicate, in addition to thanks, a broader point about the industrial laborer's relation to the mass-produced commodity.

The dialogue genre dramatizes the process of changing one's mind, and in this poem we see the poem's speaker, Adelaide, move from a position of skepticism and isolation to feeling more connected to God and her fellow man. This reconnection to the social world is accomplished, surprisingly enough, by the gift of a mass-produced consumer good, which is

given voice through poetic personification to persuade her that it is a product, not of unnatural or incomprehensible processes, but of God's creation and human affection. Through the poem, she comes to see this factory-made object as a part of the natural and social world, and in the poem's final stanza Adelaide calls attention to how the process of writing the poem made her see the commodity in a new light, which ameliorated her sense of alienation.

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CHAPTER 3: The “Iron Harp” and “Machine Poetry”: Poetry in the Age of Mechanical Production

For industrial workers, poetry offered a remedy to the potentially dehumanizing aspects of industrial labor. This remedy was particularly crucial for female industrial workers for whom industrial labor offered a rare opportunity for education, camaraderie, and financial independence. In contrast, male professional poets who wrote for and edited newspapers increasingly equated the labor of producing poetry with industrial labor. Poets who wrote for newspapers often made this equation as they struggled to meet the demand for their work as Americans voraciously consumed newspapers during the antebellum period (Rice 17). As described in Chapter 1, these poets noted changes in the pace of their labor, as well as the way the labor in the print-shop was divided and valued. So, while textile operatives were using poetry to combat the dehumanization that society feared they would suffer in the industrial workplace, newspaper poets were incorporating some of industrialization’s most distinctive features-- industrial sound and mechanical methods of production--into poetry, hoping to draw attention to dehumanizing changes in their work brought about by industrialization and to voice their fear that machines, not humans, would soon be writing poetry.

This chapter focuses on two distinct case studies of male newspaper poets who incorporated the mechanical into poetry to, in one case, spur political action, and in the other, to entertain the newspaper’s readership while expressing anxiety about skilled workers being replaced by machines and the unskilled workers who tended them. Part I focuses on how a then-

famous labor poet, A.J.H. Duganne, strategically incorporated distinctly mechanical, industrial sound into his labor poetry in order to make common cause between industrial and artisan laborers. Duganne published his poems in the *Voice of Industry*, Lowell's most prominent political paper, and he became a favorite poet in that paper, hailed by them as "the poet of Industry." Part II focuses on a recurring column from the *New York Sunday Mercury* called "Machine Poetry," which imagines what would happen if machines could write poetry, with humorous and unsettling results. The machine poetry column also expresses an anti-Romantic understanding of poetry: in this column, poetry is not understood to be the authentic, thoughtful expression of an individual's psychology, but rather poetry is understood to be impersonal, and its unique formal features allow poems to be dismantled and reassembled in a host of novel ways. This column imagines that poetry, governed by formal rules and divorced from human psychology, might lend itself to being produced by machines tended by unskilled workers, a thought-experiment that inspires humor underlain with anxiety about automation and the diminishing value of skilled labor in an industrializing era.

Part I: The "Iron Harp" of A.J.H. Duganne

Immersed in the new and deafening noise of mechanized factories, the first generation of American industrial workers confronted a shocking change in their occupational soundscape. As historian Mark M. Smith notes in *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, "outside home and urban work, industrialization in the North took hold in particular regions that less than a generation earlier had sounded like the countryside" (133). Part I of this chapter seeks to address historical questions about the sound of working-class poetry – should the new sounds of

industrial labor shape the sounds of the poem, and if so, how can a poem capture an industrial soundscape?

The new sounds of industrialization were deafening and monotone, which many feared would silence and dehumanize the workers (Rice 2). Previously, when the sounds of labor were described or mimetically represented in a poem, they tended to be pastoral and artisan (Van-Hagen 423). Poets who were not laborers might include them to confer honor on labor, a subject considered unpoetic except in the georgic genre, which focuses specifically on agricultural labor (425-426). Eighteenth-century Britain saw a boom in the publication and popularity of poetry by working-class poets and these poets sometimes included the sounds of labor in a poem to make their verse more “authentically” working-class; however, this inclusion could also lead to their identification as merely “working-class” rather than “poet,” a result that would have been especially unappealing to Americans who generally viewed their society as not having a class hierarchy, or at least not one as rigid as the Old World’s. Another risk in including the sounds of industrial labor in a poem was the public perception that exposure to this new, overwhelming sound dehumanized and silenced workers, and, therefore, it was not an appropriate subject for poetry. I will examine male newspaper poets’ responses to industrial noise and situate these poems in their sonic, historical, and political context.

The way pro-labor poet Duganne incorporates the sounds of industrial labor into his poems is heavily influenced by his occupational background and political aims, and, significantly, his understanding of poetry’s efficacy differs from those of the female industrial poets I discussed in the previous chapter. I argue that Duganne hoped that including the discordant sounds of industrial labor in pro-labor poetry would create alliances between factory workers, farmers, and artisans, and inspire productive social discord, a revolutionary

reorganization of society in which manual labor would be considered of equal, or even superior, value to mental labor.

Eighteenth-century England witnessed a flowering of working-class verse (Landry 5). Often enabled by subscription and patronage, male and female laborers began publishing collections of poetry, and one of the earliest and best known of these working-class poets was Stephen Duck. His 1730 poem, *The Thresher's Labour*, earned him accolades and a spot in the royal court (Van-Hagen 421). In this poem, Duck “does not just describe everyday objects or processes, however, but mimetically *evokes* the sights and sounds of physical labor” (422). For example, in lines such as “[f]rom the strong Planks our Crab-Tree Staves rebound,” the “six strongly (and equally) stressed syllables... convey the sense (and sound) of powerful, strenuous, equal whacks” (430). The sound of threshing is captured in the poem’s prosody and alliteration, and its diction “mingles specific everyday and colloquial terms with a familiar neoclassical poetic medium” (422). Duck “opened a new avenue of literary expression” for working-class poets as evidenced by “the number of poems published in the 1730s, often addressed to him, in which poets assert the literary possibilities of their own labour... such as Collier’s *The Woman’s Labour*, Robert Tattersal’s ‘The Bricklayer’s Labours’ ... and Leapor’s *Crumble-Hall*” (441). These poems “demonstrated that the experiences of labour itself could be the basis of poetry” (Greene 108). These poets would likely have been familiar to nineteenth-century British and American readers of all social classes, who were equally familiar with eighteenth-century as nineteenth-century verse, if not more so (Loeffelholz 16). For example, one former mill woman recalled that in the 1840s at Lowell, she and her peers counted Pope among their favorite poets (Robinson 23).

There was, however, a downside to working-class poets “describing the vigorous performance of physical labor and depicting labor and laborer with respect and dignity” as shown in the fate of Stephen Duck (Van-Hagen 422). *The Thresher’s Labour* became Duck’s most famous poem and made him into a celebrity, or perhaps more accurately, a literary curiosity. His depiction of his agricultural labor had been suggested by a middle-class patron, Rev. Stanley, who encouraged him to “write about the life he knew” (Van-Hagen 422). By incorporating the sounds of labor, Duck satisfied a middle-and-upper-class readership’s desire for “authentic” verse (Landry 12). However, these readers so strongly identified Duck as working-class that Duck, a man of literary ambition, struggled to be taken seriously as a poet, even after he was brought to court by Queen Caroline (Van-Hagen 3). Biographers from the eighteenth century onward have claimed that this struggle may have contributed to his suicide in 1756 (Landry 61). The example of Duck shows that the sonic representation of labor in poetry exacerbated the precarious position of working-class poets by highlighting their familiarity with physical, rather than literary, labor. This sonic representation of labor would have been especially unpopular with antebellum Americans raised with a belief in their nation’s fluid class structure and social mobility, even as industrialization was making “the formation of distinct class positions” increasingly visible (Rice 4). Perhaps the tragic example of Duck and other working-class British poets may have discouraged American working-class poets with literary aspirations from representing their labor poetically through sound.

Another risk of including the sounds of industrial labor in a poem was the public perception that exposure to this new, overwhelming sound dehumanized and silenced workers. As noted in Chapter 2, while the sounds of industrialization in New England varied from village to village and from factory to factory, as Mark Smith notes, industrialization was soon

widespread and the noise of the machinery was pervasive. In contrast to the noise of the machines, workers themselves were supposed to be silent, “which suggested efficiency and order to the masters of capital and labor” (134). In the 1840s, American ideas about the debilitating effects of industrial labor and noise were partly drawn from immensely popular British poems such as Thomas Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt” and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children,” as well as the innumerable essays that filled the pages of the popular press (Rice 16).

Called “the city of spindles” after its many industrial textile mills, Lowell, Massachusetts was the nation’s foremost industrial city, and its literary culture will serve as a case study of what working-class and professional poets thought poetry could do with this new sound of labor. The literary culture in Lowell is well represented by its most prominent publications of the 1840s, *The Voice of Industry* and the *Lowell Offering* and *New England Offering*. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the mill women wrote in the *Lowell Offering* and *New England Offering* about the insidious nature of industrial noise and the way it threatened their ability to think and isolated them from each other, but both literary magazines also demonstrate how they composed and recited poetry on the job to create a protective internal soundscape and stay connected to each other despite sonic isolation. We saw how Larcom and many other mill women who wrote for the *Lowell Offering* and *New England Offering* were invested in demonstrating that, though they were industrial workers, they were not automatons, and to this end their verse eschews explicit references to the new industrial soundscape. However, because of his gender, occupation, and political agenda, pro-labor professional poet A.J.H. Duganne had a different take on whether the sounds of labor should be incorporated into poetry for the working-class, arguing that, in order for labor to be given due respect, its sounds must be incorporated into poetry.

A.J.H. Duganne, a prolific but forgotten nineteenth-century American poet and writer, was both a professional writer and a political figure in antebellum America. In his effort to support himself as a professional writer from the 1840s to the 1880s, Duganne wrote in an astounding variety of genres, penning some of the first American dime novels, volumes of satirical and serious poetry, and pedantic treatises on the role of art in America (Johannsen). He also published his poetry in a wide variety of magazines for diverse audiences. After reviewing Duganne's publishing venues in the antebellum period (in the *Making of America* and *American Periodical Series* databases), I determined that in this period, Duganne published primarily in the *National Era*, a free soil and abolitionist paper known for its emphasis on literature (Pierson 61). Not only was this political paper famously the first to publish Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it also prioritized poetry, putting it on the front page when other abolitionist papers relegated it to the back (Hochman 37). Publishing extensively in a political paper that emphasized poetry made sense for Duganne, who expressed his view that art was a proper vehicle for political thought in treatises such as 1853's *Art's True Mission in America* and *A Sound Literature, The Safeguard of Our National Institutions* (Johannsen). In addition to the abolitionist *National Era*, Duganne also published frequently in the "cheap weeklies" *Gleason's* and *Ballou's*, the mainstream *Saturday Evening Post*, and the Fourierist *Harbinger*. Duganne also published in mechanics' magazines, though this was not the bulk of his publication, as well as religious magazines, many women's magazines, and agricultural journals. The imperative to be genre-flexible gave Duganne plenty of experience tailoring his rhetoric to his audience's tastes and interests, a flexibility that served him well as a writer and politician.

In the 1840s, Duganne became interested in the cause of the working class (Denning 48). This interest led him to fervently support the cause of land reform, a movement led by George

Henry Evans, one of the most prolific editors of the antebellum labor press (Zahler 19). In the early 1840s in papers such as the *Workingman's Advocate* and *Young America*, Evans began to articulate the central tenet of land reform, which came to be called National Reform: the vast portion of land in the United States that was owned by the government should be sold for reasonable rates in small parcels to men who intended to settle the land, thereby preventing wealthy speculators from buying large parcels of land as they had been doing (64). Helene Zahler's 1941 study of *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy 1829-1862* remains the standard work on land reform (Wilentz 536 n.14). She summarizes National Reform's logic thus: "by offering [settlement as] an alternative to wage labor, free land would draw surplus workers out of the cities" (Zahler 68). Among other things, this would "'prevent such a surplus of workmen in factories as would place the whole body (as now) at the mercy of the factory owners'" (Evans qtd in Zahler 33). Ultimately, National Reformers hoped to "restor[e] the skilled worker to the position of the independent craftsman," and initially dismissed techniques such as striking for higher wages or shorter workdays as mere distractions on the road to abolishing the system of wage-work that industrialization had introduced into the US (37).

However, these early dismissals led to a problem for National Reform in the mid-1840s: factory workers tended not to care about the land reform movement (57-58). Since the 1830s, many factory workers, including the female textile operatives at Lowell, had been deeply involved in the Ten Hour movement, which, as its name implies, sought to limit the workday without a reduction in pay (Roediger and Foner 43). A factory worker writing in the *Workingman's Advocate* on June 29, 1844 claimed that the long working days threatened to reduce them to the "'disagreeable, servile and degrading' position of English workers" (qtd in Zahler 59 note 4). The National Reform movement, which was based in New York City and

Boston, was trying to spread to industrial towns such as Lynn, Fall River, and Lowell, all of which had major industrial textile mills and large populations of factory workers (Zahler 59). So, in the mid-forties, National Reformers began to present their settlement plan as aligned with factory workers' interests rather than essentially separate or even opposed to their concerns; for example, National Reformer Mike Walsh "presented the ten-hour day and land reform as companion issues in his lectures at Fall River and Lowell" (60).

Duganne, one of the foremost literary representatives of National Reform, had a mission: to woo industrial workers to the political cause of National Reform (45). To industrial operatives, land reform must have seemed like the distant concern of farmers and small producers who wanted to work the land – what relevance did this pastoral dream have to the wage-earning industrial worker? National reformers like Duganne wanted to find a way to make common cause between agricultural and industrial workers and to acknowledge the notable features of factory work, such as the overwhelming sound, without overemphasizing its separateness from other forms of labor. One might expect that a political movement which so idealized the social panacea of agriculture would express itself in pastoral odes or agrarian georgics; however, Duganne took a different tack to appeal to industrial workers. He began publishing in the *Voice of Industry*, Lowell's largest labor paper (45). Some of his poems were explicitly pro-land reform, but others were not. I will argue that in "The Song of Toil," one example of this latter group of poems, Duganne sets out to harness the sounds of the factory that would have been familiar to Lowell's workers and demonstrates how these sounds can be used to create productive social discord and collective action among workers of all occupations.

The publication of Duganne's poetry in the *Voice of Industry* was made possible by that publication's changing attitudes towards land reform. Initially, the *Voice of Industry* had been

skeptical of National Reform and focused on the Ten Hour movement; however, by 1846 it was promoting land reform in editorials, quoting Evans' *Young America*, and printing Duganne's free-land lyrics (72). Poetry was prominent in the *Voice of Industry*, more prominent than in other pro-labor and National Reform papers like the *Workingman's Advocate* and *Young America*. The *Voice of Industry* valued poetic expression as a means of political reform, demonstrated by the fact that unlike other labor papers, each issue included a dedicated poetry column on the front page and typically a second poetry section at the paper's centerfold. The front-page poetry column was preceded by an engraved image of a harp, an easily recognizable trope for poetic sound.

Indeed, poets writing for the *Voice of Industry* used the trope of the harp to contrast the harsh new sounds of the factory with the refined, traditional sounds of poetry. In a February 20, 1846 article on the Valentine's Day meeting of the "Ladies' 'Labor Reform Association'" to discuss the Ten Hour movement, the anonymous author includes a poem that she claims was handed to her by "some unknown factory girl" at the meeting who wanted it to be published in the *Voice of Industry*:

Ah! leave my harp and me alone -
My grief thou may'st not share,
Responsive to its plaintive tone
Will flow refreshing tears.

Far from the factory's deaf'ning sound,
From all its noise and strife,
Would that my years might run their rounds
In sweet retired life.

But, if I still must wend my way,
Uncheered by hope's sweet song,
God grant, that, in the mills, a day
May be but '*Ten hours*' long.
Lowell Feb 14 1846. (1-13)

The anonymous poet in the *Voice of Industry* withdraws from her audience and longs to withdraw from the factory. She wards off would-be sympathizers by claiming they cannot know her, and instead of connecting with her audience, she rejects them, flatly stating “My grief thou may’st not share” (2). She communes with her harp and it provides her some cathartic release, as “[r]esponsive to its plaintive tone / [w]ill flow refreshing tears” (3-4). In this description, there is a direct exchange between sound and emotion. Rather than stating that she cries refreshing tears in response to the harp’s music, the poet invests the harp with agency: it makes plaintive tones, and tears flow in response. No human agency intervenes to interpret the sound. The political context of the poem’s framing article and the poem itself suggest that the factory’s noise is the primary cause of her suffering, as the poet turns to her harp to travel “[f]ar from the factory’s deaf’ning sound / [f]rom all its noise and strife” (5-6). Like Larcom’s use of “discord” in her poem “To the Aeolian Harp,” this poet uses “strife” to describe the factory noise. Both words connote social as well as sonic disturbance. Rather than managing this “deaf’ning” disturbance by creating an internal soundscape through poetry, the woman longs for physical removal from the factory and for leisure in which “my years may run their rounds / [i]n sweet retired life” (7-8). The consolation that poetry brings to Larcom as a means of managing dehumanizing noise is not shared by this poet; instead, she “must wend her way” in the factory, “[u]ncheered by hope’s sweet song” (9-10). Rather than using poetry as a refuge, she holds out hope for poetry’s political efficacy. By presenting factory noise as evidence of the need for a reprieve, in the form of a ten-hour workday, from her discordant environment, she effectively leverages the representation of sound in poetry to political ends. Thus, this poem by an anonymous factory woman straddles the line between Larcom’s aesthetic politics and Duganne’s political aesthetic.

Whereas Larcom and the anonymous factory woman in the *Voice of Industry* present themselves as poets struggling against a discordant environment and wishing to remove themselves from it either mentally or physically, Duganne seeks to incorporate the clashing and discordant sounds familiar to industrial laborers into poetry. One notable way he achieves this effect is through the figure of a poet violently strumming an “Iron Harp” in “The Song of Toil.” “Iron,” with its connotations of metallic, abrasive sound and the so-called “iron age” of industry, makes the typically soft notes of the harp dramatically more forceful, and through this powerful instrument Duganne hopes to align all workers and to inspire productive social discord.

Published by the *Voice of Industry* on June 4, 1847, the poet of “The Song of Toil” opens by casting his poetic lot with the laborer rather than the literati:

LET him who will, rehearse the song
Of gentle love and bright Romance!
Let him who will, with tripping tongue,
Lead gleaming thoughts to Fancy’s dance;
But let ME strike mine Iron Harp, —
As Northern harps were struck of old!
And let its music, clear and sharp,
Arouse the free and bold! (1-8)

Right from the beginning of the poem, Duganne rejects the verse of other, leisured poets as too “gentle,” “bright,” “gleaming,” “tripping,” “danc[ing]” and “Fancy”-full. Fancy was a feminine personification of poetry that Eliza Richards has shown was a significant figure in genteel magazine and salon poetry of the 1840s (Richards *Gender* 81). Duganne knew this salon scene well and he repeatedly satirized it, first in 1846 in a short novel titled *The Daguerreotype Miniature*, again in an 1849 poem for *Holden’s Dollar Magazine* titled “A Mirror for Authors,” and once more in an 1851 book-length poem, *Parnassus in Pillory* (Hayes 80). Fancy was also a favorite personification among *Lowell Offering* contributors, as we saw in the previous chapter. The first four lines of the poem, in which the fanciful, even effeminate, poets are described, are

full of mellifluous “I” sounds, but this lulling effect abruptly changes when the speaker introduces his own “song of toil.”

“The Song of Toil” incorporates industrial sound both mimetically, through meter, and descriptively, through diction. While Larcom’s poet-as-Aeolian-Harp is buffeted by the winds of chance and must struggle against the environment to eschew discord and maintain harmony, and the anonymous poet in the *Voice of Industry* contrasts harsh factory noise with the plaintive tones of her harp, in sharp contrast Duganne’s poet-as-Iron-Harpist controls his poetic instrument to create sound that inspires social discord. The regular meter, simple rhymes such as “old” and “bold” and “sharp” and “harp,” preponderance of monosyllabic words and avoidance of excessively Latinate or obscure words contrasts strongly with Larcom’s more prosodically complex poem (5-8). The predominant sound of this poem is of repetitive labor, not the more fitful, fantastic sound of the Aeolian harp. The “Song of Toil” evokes factory workers through the word “strike” (5). Although independent producers also went on strike during the antebellum period, two of the most famous strikes in this era were led by the female operatives of Lowell, who went on strike in 1834 and again in 1836 to protest a reduction in their wages (Zonderman 204). These strikes gained great notoriety because the participants were female and, therefore, “strike” would have evoked the famous protests of 1834 and 1836 for a Lowell audience (200). In the second stanza, the poet describes how the waves of sound from the “iron harp” will join the “song of toil”:

My hands that IRON HARP shall sweep,
Till from each stroke new strains recoil;
And forth the sounding echoes leap,
To join the arousing SONG OF TOIL:
Till men of mind their thoughts outspoke,
And thoughts awake in kindred mind;
And stirring words shall nerve the weak,
And fetters cease to bind! (9-16)

In his description of the poet's violent playing, Duganne is surely influenced by Emerson's poem "Merlin I." Published in his 1837 *Poems*, Emerson, like Duganne, begins the poem by dismissing "[t]hy trivial harp" and "jingling serenader's art" ("Merlin I" lines 1 and 5). He proceeds to emphasize the physical labor required of the poet, declaring:

The kingly bard
Must smite the chords rudely and hard,
As with hammer or with mace;
That they may render back
Artful thunder, which conveys
Secrets of the solar tract,
Sparks of the supersolar blaze. (9-15)

Duganne's version of this harpist is similar to Emerson's in that both poets emphasize the forceful, almost violent labor required of the poet. While Larcom imagines the poet as a passive Aeolian harp and the *Voice of Industry* poet imagines the harp as an agent who acts upon the poet to ease her grief, Duganne presents the harp as a tool subordinate to the poet, an instrument that should be used with force and purpose. However, while in Emerson's poem Merlin's playing results in a transcendental, supernatural awareness of nature, Duganne's percussive poet creates collective, political action captured in the phrase "the arousing Song of Toil." By calling it "the" rather than "my" song of toil, Duganne figures the poem as the collective voice of industry.

In Emerson's famous poem, Merlin's poetic labor gives him the awesome ability to interpret the ineffable language of nature itself (Cavanaugh 29). In Duganne's rendering of this Anglo-Saxon myth, rather than emphasizing poetry's supernatural power, he significantly chooses to highlight poetry's ability to foster collective action. However, both Emerson and Duganne emphasize the labor that is required of the poet – this is no leisured or dreaming poet, but a poet who sounds "rude" and "hard" and whose gestures evoke the labor of swinging a tool or a weapon, a comparison Emerson makes through the simile, "[a]s with hammer or with mace"

(Emerson “Merlin I” lines 10-11). While Emerson uses simile, Duganne goes further and implies that “stirring words” might, like an actual hammer, be able to break “fetters” (Duganne lines 15-16).

In the final stanza of the poem, Duganne embraces the awful power of industrial or “iron” sound, implying that it can overwhelm sense and topple tyrants (18). Duganne employs the qualities of industrial noise that others feared -- its metallic clash, its disorientation, discordance, and ability to overwhelm -- and turns it to political action. Thematically, sound is not coaxed from the iron harp, but beaten, repeatedly, building into a torrent of sound until it “crash[es]...o’er soul and sense” and “shake[s] the thrones of mortal kings,” an evocation of a worker’s revolution ruled by sound rather than sense (17, 20). Duganne’s vibrations are of a completely different kind than the soft, fluttering, trembling notes of an Aeolian harp. Indeed, Duganne’s “iron harp” is more drum than harp, more rough and percussive than soothing, and in that regard better suited to expressing the cadence of rhythmic physical labor than the occasional harmonies of the Aeolian harp. In the final stanza, the poet insists that the sounds, not just of laborers, but also of the instruments of labor must be incorporated into the song of toil:

And ring of axe—and anvil-note;
And rush of plough through yielding soil;
And laboring engine’s vocal throat, —
Shall swell the SONG OF TOIL! (21-24)

This list is especially important because it includes the new class of industrial workers through the figure of the “laboring engine” along with the more traditional Jeffersonian and artisan figures of the woodsman, smith, and farmer, the favorites of the National Reform movement (Zahler 194).

Through their poems, Larcom, the anonymous factory woman, and Duganne served their own political and aesthetic agendas. For Larcom, a factory worker whom the public perceived as

possibly dehumanized and silenced by this new soundscape, poetry was a consolation on the job and published poetry was a testament to her ability to master the industrial noise. The anonymous factory woman refused to share the private consolation that her harp, or poetry, provided her, and turned instead to political agitation to limit the deleterious effects of the factory system. Duganne sought to win converts to National Reform among industrial workers by demonstrating to them that the land reformers heard them and their concerns. However, the two known poets' occupational backgrounds must be taken into account. Though both would eventually support themselves by literary labor, Larcom worked in a Lowell textile mill for ten years. Biographical information on Duganne is quite limited, however it seems he had no experience doing industrial labor. Indeed, his embrace of industrial noise in order to woo industrial workers to the cause of land reform, while perhaps well-intentioned, is problematic. Zahler points out that the National Reformers had a particular method in winning converts to their cause: "Labor might be indifferent [to land reform] – some workers might even be hostile—but its loosely organized public meetings could be taken over by determined and articulate men. Once this had been done, they could declare themselves labor's spokesmen. Were they to repeat the claim often enough, the workingman himself might come to believe it" (64). This claim throws new light on the *Voice of Industry*'s assertion that Duganne represented "the poet of labor."

Indeed, while nineteenth-century society was grappling with the effects of the new industrialization, some poets such as Larcom, the *Voice of Industry* poet, and Duganne tried to use their poetry to control and harness industry's power, specifically the power of the new soundscape. Another group of poets, those who wrote for newspapers, also struggled with anxieties of the new industrial world. They feared its power for two reasons: the demand for

newspapers was growing rapidly, forcing writers into evermore demanding schedules, and the growing mechanization of the printing process began to threaten the writers' and editors' place in the production of newspapers. Would mechanization continue to increase until the machines controlled the entire process, including the writing itself, making human creativity obsolete?

Part II: The Humor and Anxiety of “Machine Poetry”

In the 1840s, the *New York Sunday Mercury* published a remarkable series of poems under the heading “Machine Poetry,” in which a poet, possibly one of the paper's editors, using the penname “Spoons, O.G.” imagines what would happen if machines could write poetry. Spoons claimed that the poems were ground out by a new kind of poem-machine and implied that their creation was automatic, almost as if the formal features of the poems, such as meter, rhyme, and anaphora, have taken command of the poem, a result that, as we shall see, was both humorous and unsettling (“William Williams”). The creation of poetry without human input is the exact opposite of Emerson's organic model of poetry as a “metre-making argument... a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing” (Emerson “The Poet” 7). Because not many copies of the *New York Sunday Mercury* remain, I located only eight poems in this series, the first published in December 1842 and the last published in September 1844, which makes possible different interpretations if more columns are eventually located. However, the extant columns are notable for two reasons: they poke fun at a culture saturated with poetry and they clearly demonstrate that culture's anxiety about industrialization, expressed in the idea of machines writing poetry. Writers and editors particularly feared that machines could potentially replace head-workers, newspaper editors, and poets in the same way that composers and other skilled

hand-workers in the print shop were being replaced by machines, such as the steam-press, and the unskilled workers who operated them. The poems comment on the production and reception of the 1840s newspaper itself, raising questions of authorship (for example, if a machine produces the poem, who is the author - the laborer who operates the machine or the editor who owns it?), portraying the power dynamic between the producer and consumer of print and poetry, and drawing attention to the capaciousness of the newspaper and its somewhat jarring ability to contain both humorous and cynical verse as well as the serious and sentimental.

Before exploring the anxiety that underlies these poems, it is worth noting that, unlike Duganne's earnest and political attempt to incorporate the industrial into poetry, these poems are comic poems intended to amuse and engage readers. That they succeeded is evident because the machine poems inspired reader reaction and imitation. Modern readers must work to try and "get the joke" that they represent, but doing so allows us to understand the fascination and meaning they held for their readers. While the prefatory notes to the machine poems provide fascinating glimpses into how they were imagined to have been produced, the poems themselves are comic and often farcical: of the eight poems I located, only one poem is explicitly about the production of poetry by machine; of the others, two are word games (one a riddle and the other a word picture), one is an excerpt from and then a parody of the famous eighteenth-century poet Oliver Goldsmith, and three are German- or African-American dialect poems. As diverse as these comic poems seem, I will demonstrate that they are bound together by a shared assumption that the newspaper's readership is deeply familiar with a wide variety of poetic genres, and because of this, that same readership takes pleasure in seeing familiar poems and genres broken down and recombined in a variety of novel ways. In this way, the "Machine Poetry" column partakes in an

understanding of poetry that Eliza Richards has outlined in her analysis of the popularity of Poe's "The Raven" and the parodies it inspired (Richards "Poe's Lyrical Media" 163).

According to this understanding of nineteenth-century verse, readers derived pleasure from poetry that foregrounded "how much it is like other forms of linguistic expression [and] how it is composed of previously existing materials," in other words, poetry that displays its "reproducibility, not its originality" (163, 164). The interest in and enjoyment of poetry in this way stems from the tremendous expansion of print in nineteenth-century America; readers were drawn to poems that "could circulate through a developing mass-media network, instructing readers about the communications terrain through which it travels" (164). I argue that "Machine Poetry" gives prominence to the industrial circumstances of its composition and production in an increasingly mechanized print shop. Not only that, the machine poems that quote and then parody Goldsmith and that slip into and out of dialect portray poems as what Richards calls "reproducible verbal objects" which can be broken down, repurposed, and rewritten in a variety of funny and pleasurable ways (164). The way that the machine poetry column frames dialect poetry and parody is especially interesting, for it treats different dialects and registers of poetic voice as if they are just one setting among many on the poem-machine; the poem machine is equally capable of sounding like a German immigrant, a performer in a minstrel show, a Romantic poet, and a poet of the age of sensibility, such as Goldsmith. This wide range of poetic voices and registers originating from one mechanical source suggests that poetry is essentially impersonal – it does not originate from "deep within an individual psychology" as lyric poetry is often thought to (Richards "Outsourcing" 206). Nor then is dialect poetry the authentic expression of a racial or ethnic identity that it was sometimes claimed to be in the nineteenth century. As Michael Cohen has demonstrated in his analysis of Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect

poetry, nineteenth-century readers could also perceive dialect poetry as one genre among many and not necessarily tied to the speaker's racial or ethnic identity (247). That poetry could be impersonal and recombined nearly endlessly, while freeing, also prompted anxiety, as I shall explore.

The *New York Sunday Mercury* was a paper best known in the 1840s for its humorous pieces. It began publication as the Sunday Morning Visitor on May 12, 1839 [and] attracted wide attention with its theatrical notes and 'machine-made' poetry" (Lee 392). In another popular column, "Short Patent Sermons by 'Dow Jr.,'" a simpleton takes an uncomplicated aphorism and stretches it into a bombastic, overwrought sermon. This column was popular and widely reprinted in "a large portion of the press throughout the country," and the columns were eventually collected and published by the *New York Sunday Mercury's* editors in 1841 (Dow vii). The *New York Sunday Mercury's* lavishly illustrated and humorous holiday issue of the paper is similar to the elaborate illustrated holiday issues produced by *Punch*, the best known comic paper in the Anglophone world (Hood Source). The machine poems seem to have been published in the early 1840s as I did not find them in the extant copies of the *New York Sunday Mercury* from the second half of the decade, which suggests that they were a response to particular technological and social developments in the early 1840s. In the 1850s, the *New York Sunday Mercury* seems to have become associated with the bohemian New York scene; it published many of Adah Isaac Menkens' verses from 1859-1861 as well as her defense of Whitman's poetic genius (Kleitz 294). The most recent critical work on the paper is *Writing and Fighting the Civil War*, William Styple's 2000 collection of articles written by the paper's soldier correspondents.

Among the *New York Sunday Mercury*'s efforts to amuse, the machine poems call attention to themselves as built verbal objects, capable of being combined and recombined in multitudinous ways. The poem that demonstrates this most clearly is titled "Machine Poetry. My Aunt KT." This poem comprises three parts – the first is a kind of verbal game:

She laid upon her BR,
I nevermore shall CR,
She was a kind old DR, (1-3)

The poem uses "KT" for Katie, "BR" for bier, "CR" for see her, and because of this the poem makes most sense read aloud, or rather sounded out - it practically begs to be voiced.

Expectations set up by the poetic form that the last word of each line will rhyme assist the reader in figuring out the riddle of what word or phrase the letters represent. This typographical game is in keeping with many short pieces from nineteenth-century American newspapers and is not really meant to be "read" in terms of analyzed for deep meaning; rather it is a game about reading that plays with the difference between reading with the eye and hearing with the ear.

But "My Aunt KT" is only one portion of the whole column. After that short poem concludes, the line "Now, Nimrod, move the cylinder one notch, and we'll have something else" introduces the next portion of the poem: a snippet from one of Goldsmith's most recognizable poems, "When Lovely Woman Stoops to Folly." Realizing this, the voice (presumably Spoons, to whom the column is credited) interrupts to chastise Nimrod, the operator of the "cylinder," or poem-machine: "Hold on!—that's Goldsmith—let us have a couple stanzas of our own." What follows is a parody of Goldsmith's poem:

When lovely woman stoops to mopping,
And finds too late that men 'make *tracks*,'
What use is there in raving, hopping?
What threats avail 'behind their backs?' (1-4)

This column, at once complex and silly, demonstrates the pleasure in poetic language as a word-game that characterizes all the machine poetry. From the riddle of “Aunt KT” to the excerpt from and subsequent parody of Goldsmith, the column invites readers to take pleasure in recognizing a verbal pattern and the silly uses to which it may be put, like the complaint of a housewife about the tracks on her just-mopped floor. The interjections from Spoons dramatizes the moment of poetic composition, which is not a lone writer in a lonely garret but a newspaper editor ordering his subordinate, “Nimrod,” to manipulate the poem-machine and churn out different verses, both serious and silly.⁶ When Spoons insists “let us have a couple of stanzas of our own,” only to be greeted with a parody that copies Goldsmith’s wording quite closely, the column suggests that poetry, or at least newspaper poetry, is derivative, but that this very lack of originality is a source of pleasure. In essence, “Machine Poetry” pokes gentle fun at a culture saturated with verse.

Central to the enjoyment of the “Machine Poetry” columns was nineteenth-century Americans’ fondness for imitation and parody, which we have already seen in Chapter 1. Two columns, appearing seven months after “My Aunt KT,” demonstrate how machine poetry, with its emphasis on poetry as a language-game, engaged readers. These poems, both published under the heading “Machine Poetry,” claim to be the products of readers of the *New York Sunday Mercury*, who, inspired by Spoon’s example, have constructed poem-machines of their own. They have churned out their own verses using these machines and have sent them to the *New York Sunday Mercury* to be published. Now, it is unclear whether readers in on the joke actually wrote to the editor of the *New York Sunday Mercury* or whether they are both fabrications, but

⁶ This exchange between Spoons, O.G., the attributed author of the “Machine Poetry” columns, and “Nimrod,” his subordinate and the operator of the “poem-machine,” asks the readers to visualize the moment of the poem’s production, imaginatively taking them inside the print-shop and raising the questions about the poem’s authorship as all the machine poems do. By calling the machine’s operator “Nimrod,” a biblical tyrant, Spoons pokes fun at the balance of power between the editor, operator, and machine - which is the actual tyrant?

both cases have the desired effect: the cycle of imitation, publication, and imitation again corroborates the popularity of the “Machine Poetry” column, circulating through and engaging the *New York Sunday Mercury*’s readership. The first reply, written by “A.D.” from “Newtown, L.I.” is addressed to:

Messrs. Editors—You can tell Spoons, O.G. that I intended to set up an opposition to his Machine Poetry, but I shall have to give it up, since my Machine is broke down and I have no more tin to repair it, so here is my first and last experiment:-- (A.D.)

This prefatory note frames the writing of poetry in the language of manufacturing – A.D. seems to have noted Spoons’ success in the production of poetry and wants to break into the business himself as competition, or “an opposition,” to Spoons. However, he has run into technical difficulties with his poem-machine, and so he has submitted an inferior product to the *New York Sunday Mercury*. The poem itself, “To E*****,” is a 12-line ditty written in what seems to be German or Dutch dialect, judging by lines such as “The werry wust I knows on,” meaning “The very worst I know of” (line 2). It is silly to the point of the nonsensical and a little bawdy: the speaker claims he is sorely tried by the teasing and bewitching ways of “E*****” an unnamed young woman, who sits on his lap and makes him feel quite “nice” until he’s ready to lay down just about anywhere (8-12). In a note immediately below the poem, Spoons comments on the poem’s silliness, wryly noting that “Mr. A.D.’s machine is evidently out of order—perhaps beyond repairing” (A.D.). However, Spoons promises his readers that “Next week I shall set the old original machine in motion again. It is well greased and in first rate condition” (A.D.). Though it is unclear whether “To E*****” is an imitation of another machine-poem, perhaps one from the missing issues of the *New York Sunday Mercury*, it is clear that part of the humor and the appeal of the machine-poetry column was the way it encouraged playful banter about the rote mechanistic of poetic production.

“Sticks’ Reply” continues this reader-editor exchange over machine poetry. Its prefatory note comes from another reader of the *New York Sunday Mercury*, a Mr. “Sticks,” who refers to “that Long Island chap,” or A.D., “who ground out something for you a few weeks since” (Sticks). Sticks claims that he has bought A.D.’s poem-machine, fixed it, and is now submitting the product of the repaired machine to the *New York Sunday Mercury*. Sticks points out that the machine is extremely “easy” to operate, implying that it makes poetic composition accessible to anyone, but jokes that what the machine “ground out” is not as “refined,” in the sense of both finely ground and rarified, as he would like (Sticks). The machine can produce poems at a pace humans can’t match, working all through the night as he notes: “I set it a-going last night, and out came the following” (Sticks). The poem itself is offered to Spoons, along with Sticks’ other machine productions, as a reserve of verse in case Spoons’ poem-machine breaks and he finds himself unable to meet his newspaper readership’s demand for poetry, for example “when a screw gets loose, or the cranks want *ileing*” (Sticks).

Interestingly, this poem, like A.D.’s, is in a Dutch or German dialect as well (signaled in both poems by replacing the “w” with “v,” as in “vish” for “wish” or “vas” for “was”). In his prefatory note, Sticks makes a point that he and A.D. are both “resourceful Yankees” - that is, native-born Americans and not German immigrants - so the machine that they both used is churning out poems in a dialect they do not themselves speak (Sticks). The actual poem itself is another silly ditty, this time about longing to be the man in the moon, but though the poem is silly, the processes it describes are related to the hunger for and creation of print. In the poem, a speaker with a German accent tells his friend Sam that he wishes that the sky was just a bowl and “all the stars green peas,” a vision of a completely edible, consumable world (line 2). Not only that, but in the speaker’s fantasy world, peas are constantly in season so “instead of having them

/ A little while in June, / I'd have 'em all the year round, Sam, / And eat them with a spoon" (5-8). This constant availability means that the speaker can satisfy his hunger every day, not just occasionally. Significantly, the tool he'll use to consume the peas and appease his appetite is a "spoon" which reminds the reader that "Spoons" is the means of bringing machine-poetry to the *New York Sunday Mercury's* readers. Just in case the reader misses the significance of this reference, the following stanza begins by musing "vat a long spoon / 'Twould take to reach 'em, though;--" (9-10). The speaker muses that the only obstacle that remains between him and the consumable good is distance, and the thing that will bridge that distance is an unbelievably long spoon. I take this to be a comment on how the newspaper, represented by Spoons, is capable of satisfying the hunger for print across increasingly vast distances in the 1840s as newspapers proliferated.

But then, since this poem is so fanciful, the speaker imagines a new persona that will bridge the distance between himself and the stars, or peas - he will simply become the man in the moon so that he's able to eat as much as he can hold. Imagining himself as the man in the moon, with direct, unlimited, unmediated access to the thing he hungers for renders the speaker generous, to a point. With a newfound condescension, he tells Sam, to whom the poem is addressed, that he will share his bounty with him, occasionally, because it gratifies him to see Sam satisfying his appetite:

I'd toss you down a bowlful, Sam,
For dinner, now and then;
And ven I seed you eat 'em, Sam,
I'd look at you and grin.
And you vould laugh, I knows you vould,
As fast you plied the 'spoon,'
To think you vas on such good terms
Vit the man vot's in the moon. (17-24)

The poem's speaker has shifted from a tone of longing to a tone of smugness when he is able to imagine himself having direct, unmediated access to the commodity he desires - no longer will his ability to satisfy his hunger be limited by a "spoon." To map this shift in power onto the relationship between newspaper editor and newspaper reader, if the speaker can stand-in for Sticks and the addressee is Spoons, which the prefatory note certainly suggests, then it would seem that Sticks, rather than the patient consumer of the poetry Spoons deigns to provide, now has direct access to poetry by virtue of owning his own poem-machine. He can now, as the prefatory note states, consume not just one but many poems, and he can set the machine to producing them whenever he likes, even at night while he sleeps. Like the speaker in the poem, by acquiring the poem-machine, the means of poetic production, Sticks is now the producer, and Spoons is the less powerful consumer whom he may permit to share his bounty, but only when he feels like it.

Machine poetry's facility with different dialects suggests that dialect poetry, and perhaps all poetry, is not necessarily rooted in personal, ethnic, or racial identity; rather, it is performative and impersonal. Like "My Aunt KT" and its quotation from and subsequent parody of Goldsmith, another machine poem, "Autumnal Musings," relies on jarring shifts in tone and wide-ranging quotation to create a sense of the capaciousness of newspaper poetry. The poem's title, "Autumnal Musings," indicates that it's going to be Romantic, perhaps melancholic in tone. The first stanza fulfills that promise rather crudely, only to have the attempt at an elegiac tone rudely interrupted by the second stanza:

The rose and the lily no longer now bloom,
The tulips and daises have found them a tomb,
The green of the willow is fading away,
But the evergreens flourish, as much to say,
 'O take your time, Miss Lucy,
 Just take your time, my dear,

O take your time Miss Lucy,
Miss Lucy, Lucy Long.' (1-8)

The trees' song is the chorus of "Miss Lucy Long," a minstrel show favorite that was popularized by Barney Williams of the Kentucky Minstrels in 1842, only two years before this poem was published (Lott 165). This startling contrast between the formulaic autumnal poem, which begins by mourning the passing of flowers and therefore the summer, and what is essentially a pop song is jarring to the modern reader but likely funny to the *New York Sunday Mercury's* readers, who took pleasure in this recombinatory approach to poetry. The song, when heard in full, relies on mocking Lucy Long, a coquette-ish and "grotesque" stereotype of an African-American woman (Lott 165). However, this excerpt, taken out of the context of the minstrel show, seems to express patience, almost as if the trees are urging the melancholic speaker to take his time and relax - as the evergreen itself promises, spring will come again.

The next stanzas continue to subvert what the reader has come to expect from a mournful autumn poem by interspersing elegiac verses with lyrics from popular songs. A "lone butterfly" with "calico wings" floats by, "silently" singing the carefree tune "Fare ye well, Miss Dinah gal, / I'm going over the mountain" (11-16). The robin, lonely since his mate has migrated south, tries to distract himself by singing "O lovely Lucy Neal, / If I had her by my side, / How happy I would feel" (28-35). The blackbird lingers though food is becoming scarce and still sings "Git out the way, Old Dan Tucker, / You're too late to come to supper" (36-41). Oddly enough, the content of the minstrel songs is appropriate to the creature singing them - the butterfly is in fact leaving because he is dying, the robin misses its mate, and the blackbird is indeed "too late to come to supper." The humor of the poem is found in the mismatch between the tone of the poem and the tone of the song excerpts - while the poem draws on conventional, elevated poetic diction, for example "a wanness is spread o'er the late blooming vale," the song excerpts have

the ersatz Black vernacular dialect of minstrel songs, including words like “whar,” “git,” and “gal” (10, 22, 40, 15). This impersonal nature of poetry and its ability to be recombined in startlingly pairings is amusing, but those qualities also produce anxiety over the future and value of poetic labor and authorship by raising the question, “what if machines wrote poetry?”

To better understand the anxiety underlying the concept that machines might write poetry, it is important--and perhaps surprising--to realize that a “poem-machine” did exist, though not in exactly the same form that the *New York Sunday Mercury* imagines. A cluster of articles gathered under the title “A Latin Hexameter Machine” and published in *Littell’s Living Age* on November 1, 1845, contemporaneously with the “Machine Poetry” columns, gives several different takes on the topic of a “poem-machine” – the British “Eureka” machine that could reputedly compose Latin hexameter verses at the rate of a minute per line (7). The reporter describes the machine as “resemble[ing] in size and shape a small bureau book-case; in the frontispiece of which, through an aperture, the verses appear in succession as they are composed” (7). The reporter notes that the verses composed in his presence, verses such as “Horrida sponsa reis promittunt tempora densa” [“Frightful promises promise harsh times for affairs”] and “Sontia tela bonis causabunt agmina crebra” [“Criminal spears will bring about crowded crowds for good men”] are grammatically and prosodically identical and therefore of a “mechanical nature” (7).⁷ While these lines are grammatically similar and prosodically closely parallel, like the Machine Poetry they are fairly nonsensical and foreground their repetitive quality, as seen in the constructions “promises promise” and “crowded crowds.”

⁷ Thanks to Sarah Miller Esposito of the UNC Classics Dept. for translating these lines.

And yet, in spite of the redundancy of the lines' content, the machine's inventor, John Clark, is quoted explaining that the lines of poetry can combine and recombine letters and words, creating new lines ad infinitum:

The machine contains letters in alphabetical arrangement. Out of these, through the medium of numbers, rendered tangible by being expressed by indentures on wheelwork, the instrument selects such as are requisite to form the verse conceived; the components of words suited to form hexameters being alone previously calculated, the harmonious combination of which will be found to be practically interminable. (8)

In his explanation of his invention, Clark applies mathematics and technology to the production of poetry. That this was an unsettling application can be seen in the different responses to the machine and the way in which *Littell's Living Age* structures the cluster of articles on the machine. This cluster contains 5 short pieces: two reports on the machine, which was displayed in London's Egyptian Hall; one letter to the editor in response to reporting on the machine; an editor's note responding to the letter; and finally, a letter from the machine's inventor defending his creation. The first four pieces all seek to undercut the machine's achievement. One claims that the idea of "artificial versifying" is an old one, first described in 1712, and another gives the newspaper readers instructions for recreating this mechanical composition of Latin verses at home by writing on and shuffling scraps of paper (7-8).

The anxiety in these responses to the thought of a machine writing poetry is palpable. They are united by the desire to reassure the reader that the machine is a simple product of human ingenuity and that it cannot replace humans in the writing of verse – one of the correspondents defensively states "For school-boys and Latin students, it may be a very curious and instructive amusement – but nothing more" (7). Indeed, the inventor himself states that the machine's chief object is not to write poetry, but to settle a debate over whether "the process of composition" has its source in fully formed words or in individual letters (8). And yet, there's a lingering

discomfort with the fact that the machine composes poetry rather than prose. As one of the reporters observes:

The rules of verse, Mr. Clark tells me, the measured syllables and the measured time of dactyls, spondees, trochees, &c., which act as fetters of confinement to the writers of verses and much increase their difficulties, have an opposite effect when applied to a machine; -- it being much more practicable to construct one for composing verse than for composing prose. (7)

In other words, there is something mechanical about poetry, and because of that machines take to it as naturally, if not even more easily, than humans. That something mechanical is the focus on the sound, or “measured syllables,” and “measured time,” or meter, in poetry that prose does not have to the same extent. Even when the articles’ authors make the claim that Latin school-boys can do exactly what the machine can do, they have to acknowledge that the machine has a greater facility for combination and novel recombination than human poets, for “since its completion it has never, I understand, repeated the same [lines]; and, being capable of several millions of changes, such an occurrence is not likely to happen.” In a culture suffused with Romantic ideas about poetry as a revelatory individual vision, the idea that “the poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold,” this competing awareness of verse’s impersonality and rote reproducibility was a source of fascination and anxiety, especially as industrialization was on the rise (Emerson “The Poet” 7).

For further insight into how machine poetry conveyed the anxiety as well as the humor of the notion that machines might write poetry, we turn to the first extant machine poem that also features the most sustained focus on the poem-machine and its operative: “William Williams, alias Black Bill: My Crank Man.” This poem, which appeared in the lavishly illustrated Christmas edition of the *New York Sunday Mercury*, was accompanied by a large illustration of an African-American man, dressed in a suit, holding the crank of what is presumably the poem-

machine (Figure 3.1). Before reading the poem, the newspaper audience sees an image of an African-American man smiling and leaning on the machine, conveying confidence in his stance and prosperity through his dress, an authoritative image that forms a sharp contrast to the mocking poem to follow.

The poem relates the tale of William Williams and how he came to operate the poem-machine and “assist” Spoons, O.G. in his “rhyming toils,” beginning:

I ’pose the world would like to know
About the genius, who,
Assists me in my rhyming toils,
When he is not too *blue*;
Whose frolics and whose fits, of late,
Are ‘few and far between’—
Nor swears, nor sweats, nor grunts, nor groans,
While turning my Machine.

A genius and a scholar’s he—
Can cypher, read, and write;
And, though he owns his skin is black,
He vows his heart is white;--
Can quote from all who ever wrote
In either prose or rhyme;
Spout Hamlet, Richard, or Macbeth,
And none can ‘beat his time.’ (lines 1-16)

Reminiscent of Richard Elliott’s “The Song of the Editor” analyzed in Chapter 1, this poem is explicitly about labor in the print-shop. Specifically, it addresses the power dynamic between the editor, who, based on the other poems, can be presumed to be Spoons, O.G., and William Williams, the hand-worker who assists him in “turning my Machine.” The confident image of William Williams contrasts with the speaker, Spoons’, damning praise of him as someone who assists him when he’s not too “blue,” that is, too drunk, and whose “frolics and fits,” or emotional outbursts, are supposedly “‘few and far between,’” though the single quotes around that phrase cast doubt on it as either Williams’ unreliable testimony or Spoons’ insinuation that

Williams is quite unstable. By setting this low bar for hand-workers in the print-shop, Spoons implies that they are generally unreliable, an assertion that justifies his managerial authority over them and the condescending tone he adopts towards Williams in this poem, which is also suffused with racist assumptions about Williams' capacity for self-control and intelligence.

These racist assumptions lead Spoons to conflate Williams with the machine, similar to the way gendered assumptions about women's intelligence and capacity for self-determination led male observers to portray industrial labor as especially dangerous for women (Eisler 183). William Williams' repetitive name, as well as his alliterative nickname "Black Bill," calls attention to his facility for duplication, which is also one of the hallmarks of industrial production, which seeks to produce large amounts of uniform, if not identical, commodities. Spoons twice sarcastically describes Williams as a "genius," who "[c]an quote from all who ever wrote / In either prose or rhyme; / Spout Hamlet, Richard, or Macbeth, / And none can 'beat his time'" (lines 13-16). The line "And none can 'beat his time'" implies that Williams' recitation is chiefly remarkable for its speed and regularity, rather than its emotion or thoughtful delivery. Reminiscent of the Eureka machine churning out lines of metrically identical but fairly meaningless Latin verses, Williams' literary production seems to share the quantity-over-quality logic of industrial production. Furthermore, the verb "spout" implies that Williams' recitation is rote and unthinking, resembling the way the poem-machine spouted Goldsmith in "My Aunt KT" and popular songs in "Autumnal Musings" with equal and uncritical facility. The poem-machine's jarring shifts from serious and elevated to homely and comic poetry is mirrored by the juxtaposition Spoons sets up between the unheroic Williams and the famously eloquent Hamlet, Macbeth, and Richard III. These tragic figures foreshadow the mock-tragic tale of Williams' rise and fall that will be described in the next three stanzas of the poem, which relate how Williams

received a windfall of a mysterious fortune and immediately surrounded himself with the visible signs of wealth as “A horse and carriage then he kept, / And a mistress too” (25-26). This conspicuous consumption raised his social standing “among the colored crew” until he was undone by his profligate spending and became “No longer ‘Mr. Williams’ now-- / No, nothing but ‘Black Bill!’” (30, 39-40). Financially ruined, Williams came to work for Spoons, where “Now the printing office is / His house, his home, his all” (41-42). Williams, like the machine he operates, is a fixture in the office, and his whole identity is now centered there, rather than a part of affluent African-American society in “Baltimore” (29). Spoons closes the poem with a mock sympathetic address to Bill, proclaiming:

Poor Bill! I know you carry more
Philosophy than fleas;
So, there’s a sixpence—go and buy
Some crackers and some cheese;
And, though the world on you may frown,
There’s honor left you still:--
You turn the crank to my Machine,
And grind out verse *to kill!* (49-54)

This address shows Spoons’ denigration of Williams even as he acknowledges that Williams is the power behind his poem “Machine.” Spoons commands Williams like he is an animal rather than a person and an equal, sending him to fetch food and even noting that he has fleas. In the last lines of the poem, Spoons adopts a very patronizing tone, telling Bill that though he may not have social value, he still has the noble purpose of helping Spoons produce verse to amuse readers. The final words neatly express the humor and anxiety evident in these poems: on one hand the Machine-Poem verses are meant “to kill” that is, to be hilariously funny to the paper’s readership, but moving poetic production into machine production powered by unskilled laborers like Williams also threatens “to kill” off the jobs of skilled head-workers like Spoons, O.G., much as it has begun “to kill” off the jobs of skilled hand-workers such as compositors.

Machines that write poetry, and poems that sound like machinery, testify to the anxiety in all parts of society about industrialization and the power of machines. The fear included worries that machines found in the textile mills could make the workers less than human, as well as the tongue-in-cheek fear, expressing a real anxiety, that machines would become more human than mankind, and take over the writing of poetry. The deep, widespread familiarity with poetry in the nineteenth-century allowed it to play many roles: as a salve to help assert one's humanity, a warning of the dangers facing society, and, even, a call to arms to help combat the harm brought by machines. Perhaps the person best able to explore all aspects of her society's fascination with poetry and the dangers of industrialization is Lucy Larcom. As a woman who spent ten years in a factory and began writing and publishing poetry there, and later became a published, popular, and professional writer, she both lived through and thought deeply about these issues. The next chapter will look at Lucy Larcom's 1875 epic poem, *An Idyl of Work*, and explore in depth what her work three decades later reveals about the struggles of the 1840s.

Figure 3.1. Image accompanying “William Williams, alias Black Bill. My Crank Man” from the *New York Sunday Mercury*, 29 Dec. 1842. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.



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CHAPTER 4: Creating a “Democratic Neighborhood” Through Poetic Exchange: Lucy Larcom’s *An Idyl of Work*

America in 1875 was a society grappling with increasing socioeconomic and ethnic heterogeneity. This tense climate reminded poet Lucy Larcom of the place that had fostered her literary beginnings: the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts during the 1840s, a time of explosive growth for that new industrial city. Here, Larcom collaborated with other working women to write and publish the literary magazine the *Lowell Offering*. This experience not only encouraged her literary ambitions, it forged a social network that helped her navigate a booming city that often felt overwhelming. Her years writing and working in Lowell convinced her that poetry could be used to create social harmony out of dissonance, and she channeled this belief into *An Idyl of Work*, her blank-verse, book-length account of the friendship of five female factory workers punctuated by an assortment of rhymed verses which the women share with each other to form a stronger community. In *Idyl*, Larcom nostalgically recreates the Lowell mill women’s community as she had experienced it in the 1840s, but rather than fetishizing the past, she aims to demonstrate its relevance to America’s increasingly class-divided society in 1875. Larcom’s ambitious project--using poetry not just to model a more egalitarian society but actually to create it--may seem audacious, even foolhardy. Yet as Michael C. Cohen has shown, nineteenth-century Americans tended to understand poetry as both socially embedded and

generically complex.⁸ Larcom's *Idyl* would be worth recovering even if it were only a vision of a cohesive and democratic society grounded in a former mill woman's experience, but it has even more to offer: historical insight into the nuanced social uses of myriad poetic genres of poetry and a bold thought-experiment in using literature not only to reflect, but to reorder the social world outside the text.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, when Larcom was a *Lowell Offering* contributor she used poetry to manage the deleterious effects of industrialization on factory workers, and while her anxieties about industrial labor changed in the postbellum era, in *Idyl* she continues to use poetry to ameliorate the harms of factory work. While working in the mills, Larcom experienced first-hand the deafening sound, furious pace, and social isolation she obliquely describes and formally captures in "To the Aeolian Harp." Thirty years later and well into her career as a professional poet and editor, the sound and pace of labor no longer seemed as threatening, but her fears about social isolation endured: Larcom saw how mill owners were now abandoning their efforts to give their immigrant workforce the same wages and access to education that she had enjoyed. Understanding the link between education and social mobility, she feared that this change in the conditions of mill labor would result in an isolated and permanent working-class that violated the American ideal of a democratic and class-fluid society. So, once again, she turned to poetry as she had in the 1840s to demonstrate to postbellum working women how poetry had fostered community and social mobility for the first generation of female factory workers in America. Furthermore, though we have seen the difference gender made in the perception of industrialization's perils and promises in the 1840s, Larcom understood that her professional

⁸ Cohen's recent history *The Social Lives of Poems* confirms that Larcom's belief that poems could "materialize new forms of sociality and social agency" and "link people into affective folds of belonging" was not unique to her but was widespread in the nineteenth-century United States (103).

career had been sustained by her friendships with powerful male and female literary tastemakers, such as James and Annie Fields and John Greenleaf Whittier. No longer writing as a part of a homosocial literary community as she had in Lowell, Larcom alludes to famous poems by men throughout *Idyl*, reconciling the gender divide that is starkly evident in the 1840s. Though the anxieties about the harms of industrial labor are different, *Idyl* epitomizes the attitude expressed by female industrial poets in the 1840s: that poetry was a humanizing resource for industrial workers.

Although Larcom's epic achieved only faint critical and commercial success in its own time, this remarkable but long-neglected poem has recently begun to attract the critical attention it deserves.⁹ Sylvia Cook has demonstrated how, by tackling the elite form of the epic and making the entry of women into the industrial workforce the subject of that epic, Larcom claims cultural authority for herself and for the women she had worked with in the textile mills of Lowell from 1836-1846 (167).¹⁰ Both Cook and Mary Loeffelholz have astutely traced *Idyl*'s engagement with a transatlantic poetic tradition, especially epics and *künstlerromans* such as *Idylls of the King*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *The Prelude*. Loeffelholz engages more fully than Cook with the poem's most unusual formal feature--the incorporation of "discrete, formally demarcated, and formally diverse shorter poems. . . within a longer narrative setting"

⁹ After Larcom's death in 1893, *Idyl* faded into obscurity along with the rest of her oeuvre. Marchalonis, whose 1989 biography helped recover Larcom as an important and popular nineteenth-century author, found little value in her epic poem about American working women and she offhandedly refers to the embedded verses as "incidental poems" (*Worlds* 200).

¹⁰ In addition to its epic form, the poem's title, *An Idyl of Work*, evokes the genre of the idyll, which typically treats pastoral subjects (Brogan and Congleton 659). Through this gesture and by portraying her protagonists not only at work in the factory but also on vacation in the New Hampshire mountains, Larcom implicitly argues that industrial workers once had access to leisure and that they should again. In a critique that demonstrates nineteenth-century readers' sensitivity to genre distinctions, *Appletons'* review of *Idyl* indignantly insists that "an idyl of work it most certainly is not, for... Miss Larcom finds herself compelled, in order to secure even the semblance of the idyllic, to ignore entirely the routine of daily labor" ("Literary" 22).

(“Anthology Form” 217).¹¹ Loeffelholz argues that this inclusion of rhymed poems, which are Larcom’s but which are never attributed to her, marks *Idyl* as an “a “[n]ested-anthology-poem,” a now-forgotten nineteenth-century transatlantic poetic genre that she has begun to recover (220). Besides being a commercially successful way of anthologizing an author’s previously published verses within a new verse frame, Loeffelholz argues elsewhere, this genre is an expression of nineteenth-century Anglo-American poets’ desire to “map... . . . the nineteenth-century literary field” by tracing the “production, circulation, and reception of lyric poems” within a larger narrative (“Medley-Book” 13). Loeffelholz interprets Larcom’s inclusion of the verses as a conscious strategy to demonstrate working women’s possession and dissemination of cultural capital (13). She claims that the formal diversity of the verses, which include folk forms like ballads and genteel forms such as sonnets, represents Larcom’s ideal of a democratic, socially mobile American society (28).

While Loeffelholz understands the heterogeneity of the rhymed verse in *Idyl* as a metaphor for a diverse society, I argue that for Larcom it is the means by which a diverse society can be forged into a democratic community that accommodates individual difference. In *Idyl*, different poetic genres have different emotional effects. For example, the ballad’s accentual meter and consistent rhyme scheme are soothing, while unrhymed blank verse stimulates the intellect; metrically shorter lines foster a sense of conviction, while longer lines cultivate a contemplative, thoughtful attitude in the poem’s reader or auditor. Sensitive to these effects, Larcom’s protagonists adapt the form of their poetic expression to the emotional needs of their

¹¹ Since the poem’s initial critical reception, reviewers have struggled to define the relation of the embedded verses to the larger poem. Initial reviewers generally appreciated these short lyrics but regarded them as separate from the action of the poem. For example, in 1875 the *Atlantic*’s critic did not mention the embedded verses until the final line of the review, when he notes, “there are several lyrical passages scattered through the story, of which those of a ballad character are the best” (“Recent Literature” 243).

audience and in so doing they put into practice the care and social harmony that *Idyl* encourages. The formal variety of the embedded poems is not the only heterogeneous element contained by the blank-verse frame: the mill women are very different from one another, and each individual struggles in her own way to learn to live in harmony with others. In the past, critics have mistakenly treated the poem's protagonists as interchangeable without clearly recognizing the differences that they learn to bridge by poetic exchange.¹² However, Cook and Loeffelholz have begun to attend to the differences among the women in their work.¹³ This essay will further explore these differences, particularly how the women use different genres of poetry to fuse disparate and resistant individuals into a community that values adaptability, selflessness, and compassion, and that prepares working women for the career and social mobility that Larcom feared was lacking in postbellum America.¹⁴

First, I will focus on how three of the protagonists--wise Esther, holy Eleanor, and pragmatic Minta--use verse to encourage their wayward friends, rebellious Isabel and depressed Ruth, away from unhealthy selfishness and toward a selflessness that will make them full members of the working women's community. Building on Cook's and Loeffelholz's insights

¹² This tendency to treat *Idyl*'s mill women heroines as a nameless group began with some of the poem's initial reviewers who vaguely described them as "three or four young ladies" ("Briefer Notices") and declared that "no one of the characters has more than the faintest shadow of personality" ("Literary" 22).

¹³ See Loeffelholz ("Medley-Book" 21) on the women's class differences and Cook on their regional and religious differences (172).

¹⁴ Evidence from Larcom's biography suggests that she may have been inspired to write *Idyl* in part by her volunteer work with immigrant seamstresses in Boston. Marchalonis notes that in the 1860s Larcom began volunteering with "clubs for working girls" and the North End Mission, an organization dedicated to assisting immigrant families in that Boston neighborhood (*Worlds* 161). In the fall of 1872, a fire ravaged the city, particularly the North End, and Larcom was "chiefly concerned" with the plight of the young Portuguese women in the decimated district who had worked in "sewing sweatshops connected with various stores" but now found themselves unemployed and homeless (188). Larcom, along with other middle- and upper-class women, threw herself into the relief effort in November and December of 1872, and by April of 1873 she was working on the epic depiction of the Lowell mills that she had long planned to write but had never found time for (192). Although not conclusive, this timing strongly suggests that Larcom's work with the North End Mission and the seamstresses she met there opened her eyes to just how far work conditions had deteriorated since she herself had been a textile worker.

that the blank-verse frame of *Idyl* is engaged in a transatlantic poetic conversation, I will then examine how two important embedded verses are infused with echoes of famous British and American male poets, and how, rather than wholly critiquing and rejecting their visions of community, Larcom highlights and expands on the themes of fellowship and solidarity in the original works. This contrasts with Loeffelholz's and Cook's readings of Larcom as more focused on developing a women's poetic tradition. I will conclude by demonstrating how Larcom emphasizes community building in her poem by nostalgically recreating the mill women's society of the 1840s as a counter to and model for 1875, in which an increasingly foreign-born workforce was being turned into a permanent underclass through isolation and ethnic segregation.¹⁵ Certainly, by focusing exclusively on a community of white, Christian women in her epic, Larcom limited its appeal and perceived relevance in a way that belies the broad inclusivity of *Idyl*'s dedication to the "sisterhood" of "working-women" (v). She consistently avoids dealing with the way racism and xenophobia brought about the mistreatment of workers in the postbellum era, attitudes exemplified by *The Advance*'s reviewer of *Idyl* who declared that "our manufacturing establishments [have] been taken possession of by coarse handed and uncultured foreigners" ("Briefer Notices"). However, in contrast to many of her contemporaries, Larcom never attributes what she called the "changed" "conditions and character of mill-labor" to the laborers themselves but rather to the pervasive elitist attitude that industrial labor must necessarily "degrade the worker" (*Idyl* viii-ix).

¹⁵ Dobson's analysis of *A New England Girlhood*, Larcom's prose autobiography written fourteen years after *Idyl*, reveals how Larcom "frequently disrupts the norms of linear narrative" in order to create a sense of "temporal collapse[, or] the coexistence of two or more modes of time," thereby demonstrating the continuing relevance she perceived between the social concerns of the 1840s and the 1870s (84, 83). When combined with Dobson's recent work, my analysis of *Idyl* suggests that Larcom had a long-standing interest in connecting past and present.

Larcom, who began working in the mills as a child, recognized the drawbacks as well as the unique advantages of Lowell.¹⁶ If she could endure the long work days and unhealthy air of the mills, a young working woman in Lowell's mills found independence, the opportunity to earn a decent wage in a respectable way, and a chance to seek higher education through mill-sponsored lending libraries, lecture series, classes at local schools, and a literary magazine (Eisler 29). Larcom credited this literary magazine, the *Lowell Offering*, and the improvement circle of women writers that formed around it, with fostering her literary beginnings (Marchalonis, *Worlds* 35). To paraphrase Herman Melville, a textile mill was Larcom's Yale College and her Harvard (123).-

At the conclusion of *Idyl*, Larcom describes the social variety that she saw as the primary "advantage" of Lowell:

Mill-work meant then a fresh society
Of eager, active youth, long held apart
In rustic hamlets; that, like flint and steel,
Meeting, struck light from faculties unknown. (178-79)

This "meeting" sparked questions as well as opportunities: how would women from all over New England, coming from a wide variety of cultural, religious, and family backgrounds, be able to live together harmoniously?¹⁷ To twenty-first-century readers, this group of white,

¹⁶ After Larcom's father died and left the family impoverished, her mother moved several of her nine children, including Lucy, from the coastal town of Beverly, Massachusetts, to the textile mill town of Lowell (Loeffelholz, "Medley-Book" 7). Larcom helped her mother manage a boardinghouse for the female employees of Lowell, and by the time she was eleven, she had begun working as a bobbin doffer to help support her family, continuing to work in the mills until she was twenty-two, in 1846 (Marchalonis, "A Model" 96-97).

¹⁷ By sharing knowledge gained from different backgrounds, the women of *Idyl* educate themselves without relying on the income or institutions that industrial workers would not have had access to in 1875. This accessible educational model is put into practice in *Idyl*'s first embedded poem, in which women debate the modern meaning of the word "lady." The mill women of *Idyl* are steeped not only in the literature of the nineteenth century but also in the cultural and scientific debates of the day over the efficacy of strikes, the legitimacy of phrenology, and the virtue of communes such as Fourier's phalansteries and Brook Farm (which Minta, Eleanor, and Esther all dismiss as belated upper-class dabbings in what working women have known for years--that community eases the burden of living and working for all of its members).

Christian women might not seem diverse, but for women previously living in isolated, like-minded communities, it was an awakening (Cook 187). Judith Ranta has recently complicated our “standard view of 1830s and 1840s Lowell. . . [as] a rather bland, homogenous community of young Euro-American farm girls” by researching the life and assembling the writings of Betsey Guppy Chamberlain, an older woman of Native American and English heritage who like Larcom was a popular contributor to the *Lowell Offering* (xiii). Ranta’s work recovers a sense of Lowell as it would have seemed to Larcom: “a town far larger, livelier, and noisier than anything she had previously experienced. . . [with] sidewalks crowded with people of all descriptions. . . [and] factory women. . . pouring into the streets, thousands of them” (xi).

In *Idyl*, each woman struggles to live in harmony with the others; even Esther, the most adept at communal living, wrestles with feelings of jealousy over Eleanor’s friendship with Miriam Willoughby, a middle-class woman whom the mill women meet and befriend mid-way through the poem. Miriam in turn has to learn to overcome her feelings of pity for the working-women and learn to regard them as equals, which she does by discussing and exchanging poems with Eleanor and Esther. The difficulty of living in harmony with others was something that Larcom understood intimately; while living and teaching at a boarding school in 1857, she wrote to a friend about another teacher whom she tried to “esteem and admire, but against whose presence and manners something in me always rebels; she can hardly speak without my feeling it like a declaration of war. I don’t allow myself to answer, very often; but swallowing volcanoes isn’t good for the soul’s digestive organs, I find” (Letter to Esther Humiston, 18 Nov. 1857). In another letter to the same friend, Larcom trenchantly expresses the difficulty of communal living: “It is the great struggle of my life ‘to love people.’--I do not of course mean my own, to whom my heart at once answers with a bound of recognition,--but the many people we must live

with every day. So many cold, dismal hours as I have had, shivering in the midst of a multitude, and all because I would not come out of myself and be one with them!” (Letter to Esther Humiston, 5 March 1857). As someone who never had a permanent home of her own and always had to live among friends, family, or co-workers, Larcom had practical as well as ethical reasons for seeking to live harmoniously with others.

For Larcom, poetry was the answer. In her autobiography, she describes her life-long need for poetry and how to her all good things in life, especially friendship, became grouped under its broad umbrella: “As I grew up and lived on, friendship became to me the deepest and sweetest ideal of poetry. To live in other lives, to take their power and beauty into our own, that is poetry *experienced*, the most inspiring of all” (*New England Girlhood* 10-11). By linking verse and friendship, Larcom highlights poetry’s transcendent, intersubjective quality and credits it with the power of creating social harmony out of dissonance. This understanding of poetry as the most effective means of transferring sympathies, or “enter[ing] into the lives of others,” identifies Larcom as a sentimental poet (*New England Girlhood* 178). Sentimental poetry and prose, derived from the moral philosophy of David Hume and Adam Smith, among others, was concerned with the development of “[b]enevolent social relations” (Richards 1293). These philosophers concluded that reason alone would not produce community and that literature could be used to encourage the subordination of “selfish feelings to emotions such as sympathy and pity,” which would lead to positive social action, such as “caring for and helping others” (Richards 1293). In *Idyl*, the lyrics the women recite to themselves and others are the vehicle for cultivating right feeling, not only in the way they promote community-oriented values such as empathy and selflessness but also in the way they critique self-absorption and self-pity. Indeed, Larcom makes it clear that poetry and the community it fosters both improved the lives of the

mill women in the 1840s and could renew the “democratic heart” of “our national life” in the 1870s (*Idyl* 169, ix).

Throughout her life Larcom was keenly aware of the relationship between education, class, and social mobility, and her sense of her own class status was conflicted. In *Idyl*, she hoped to model a classless America for women, an America in which social mobility for women was guaranteed by their own earnings and their communal acquisition and transmission of cultural capital. Larcom calls this a “world-wide human board” at which intelligence is valued over property, a vision that is international in scope and inclusive of immigrants and of women, who faced many barriers to property ownership throughout the nineteenth-century (35). In her prose memoirs of Lowell, Larcom is more conservative, claiming that she never considered herself “poor” or simply a hand-worker (*New England Girlhood* 118). However, in her letters, she is more candid about the class status of her family and how her own class standing was changed by her own acquisition of cultural capital at Lowell. She begins the letter by speaking of her brother, with whom she “love[s] dearly to talk, he is so original, and so deep a thinker” (Letter to Esther Humiston, 5 August 1860). However, she feels that “with him, as with all the rest here, when you come to certain limits, there is no further understanding; the doors will not open.” She attributes these limits to their education and especially their limited reading, which mostly consists of “the new story-books,” a vague term which could mean dime novels or penny papers, and these “are about all their outlet into the ideal, and that is often false and flimsy enough.” She is frustrated by how her family, and indeed, “everybody” in Beverly “mak[es] the shallowest part of life the principal thing.” By contrast, Larcom presents herself as the better-educated and hence upwardly mobile sister who “cannot take those about [her]” into more intellectual realms. Longing for some company in these realms, she tells her friend that she is

glad that Charlie, her nephew, is going to college because “it can scarcely be worse for him than here; because there he will be expected to think, and here his mind could never attain the highest vigor of manhood.” Her feeling of estrangement from her family and hometown is compounded by the fact that Larcom is still proud of them and of her own class origins, which she calls “the common-sense life, with which I gratefully acknowledge myself to be endowed [and which] I share with them.” With good humor, she acknowledges that her family perceives her as critically as she does them: she knows her learning can make her seem pretentious and “looks a little foolish to some of them.” Furthermore, the difference that Larcom perceives between herself and her brother, and perhaps the rest of her family, seems to be political as well as educational. She says that her brother’s “head is full of crochets; he is quite opposed to the established order of things, and some things that seem great to him look very small to me.” Perhaps Larcom’s brother possessed a more radical, class-conscious politics than she did.

Although Larcom emphasizes the community-building process in *Idyl*, her goal was not to achieve complete homogeneity, or the disappearance of the individual within the community. This becomes clear when we examine the examples of “bad” or failed communities that Larcom includes in *Idyl*. As the narrator remarks, all the women except Ruth, a Catholic, and Minta, a Methodist:

. . . were from childhood bred
On the tough meat of Calvin's doctrines; food
For logical digestion, given to babes
By Pilgrim nursing-fathers. (69)

During a discussion in their boarding-house room, Esther critiques the faith community they grew up in for being inflexible, particularly in terms of pedagogy: she faults the “Pilgrim nursing-fathers” for being unable to adapt the form of their message to the needs of the children

in their audience. The Puritan model of transmitting community-building messages is the polar opposite of the mill women's community; Esther recalls how:

In the tall pulpit rose the minister,
And talked of dispensations and decrees,
Of covenants, purposes, and ordinances,
Saints' perseverance, the church-militant,
Till to my vague child-thought the way to heaven
Seemed somehow built of sounding sentences
That went up through the roof, and shaped themselves
Like rafters, beams, and rafters, endlessly. (73)

Puritan pedagogy, built on sounding sentences rather than comprehension, is one-way, not dialogic like the mill women's community. The contrast between their methods is thrown into even greater relief by the image Esther creates of a ladder made of language that recalls the Tower of Babel stretching towards heaven. Just as it is in the working women's community, command of language leads to greater mobility and has the capacity to spiritually or socially elevate the speaker, but the child listening to the minister's "dispensations and decrees" does not imagine that she could ever attain his spiritual or even physical elevation in the "tall pulpit."

Unlike the didactic methods of the Puritan sermon, Esther develops her critique of the faith in dialogue with her friends. It was inspired by a Lyceum lecture that she and Minta attended during which the male speaker asserted that there was no use in prayer. Shocked by this, Minta asked Esther to "Tell us, next Sunday, what you think of this" (70). After attending church, the women gather in Esther, Eleanor, and Isabel's bedroom to hear what they've seen Esther working on in the factory and "scribbling... all the week / On torn leaves, wrappings,--- here, there, everywhere!" (71). Esther's meditation on religion differs from the one-way, male-dominated genres of the lyceum lecture and the sermon and reflects the form of *Idyl* itself – like *Idyl*, Esther's critique is inspired by men's composition but grounded in working women's experience, it is the result of conversation between women rather than the product of an isolated

male genius, and its fragmentary nature, composed on “torn leaves, wrappings,” is emphasized rather than hidden because it was composed on the factory-floor and in the boardinghouse during scant moments of leisure. Unlike the women’s community, the Puritan community of Esther’s childhood was built on “sounding sentences” but not comprehension, and it failed its members by not fostering mobility (73).

This failure is captured in metaphors that emphasize mobility and transcendence, or lack thereof – the preacher’s “sounding sentences” seemed to Esther to be forming another Tower of Babel that “The men and women, with grown minds, could climb” but that a child could not (73). Though the sermon was ineffective, Esther recalled how some hymns had the power to “lif[t] up my baby-soul,” demonstrating the efficacy of certain genres over others for different types of people (74). This is the primary failure of the Puritan community in Esther’s critique – its inability to recognize and accommodate difference in its members, something that Esther’s community strives to do. As an adult, she wonders whether:

“The men and women standing up so straight,
With set, unwinking eyes, perhaps their thoughts
Stumbled like mine, sometimes. How could they go,
Step after measured step, as they were led,
Shaping their asking to the preacher’s plan,
Without a side-flight of their own?” (74).

As Esther, Eleanor, and Minta seek to form closer bonds with Isabel and Ruth, their ability to understand and accommodate difference and to shape the form of their message to their listener’s needs will be crucial.

When the mill women first meet Ruth, she is heartbroken over her beau’s desertion of her for a younger woman and is on the verge of a nervous collapse. Eleanor and Isabel discover her and take her to Esther, who, pitying Ruth, protects her from the uncharitable questioning of other mill women who “pick and pry at sorrow’s keyless lock” (31). Ruth is a poet; she can “sing

herself, with pen and ink,” and, to a community that is animated by poetry, Ruth is a valuable addition (85). Her poetic voice is distinctive in that her poems are all lyrics spoken by the figure of the poet in the first person. Even when Ruth becomes a full member of the community, she still composes poetry in the first person, a signal that Larcom is not criticizing the lyric form itself. Instead, Larcom is interested in tracking Ruth’s change of heart, so she allows her to recite verse in a way that offers insight into her subjectivity.

However, at first Ruth’s verse is not an appropriate vehicle for community sentiment; it is too private, too self-indulgent, and too self-pitying, which Loeffelholz notes in her analysis of Ruth’s character. Loeffelholz argues persuasively that the problem with Ruth is how she has received culture; she was educated by men, first her father and then her beau, and meeting the mill women shows her that culture can be shared among women in a more equal, less emotionally fraught way (“Medley-Book” 21). While this is true, Larcom identifies another important problem with Ruth that must be overcome through poetry: her reluctance to be part of the community and her desire to isolate herself from the other women. In the crowded factory boardinghouse, Ruth covets her rare moments of solitude, and uses her privacy to write maudlin verses like the embedded poem that begins:

Can you do without me?
Is the summer just as sweet
With its grass untroubled
By my once familiar feet? (*Idyl* 86)

Ultimately, Ruth is using poetry to “soothe... . . . her heartaches,” a selfish use that is reflected in the way she “hid[es] her old portfolio of verse” from the other women (85).

In order to become a valuable member of the community, Ruth must trade her selfish, individual focus for a communal one, a change that is marked through the shifts in her poetry. After Esther reads Ruth “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage,” a ballad that, as will be discussed later,

expands on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Ruth feels empathy for the sufferings of Peggy Bligh, and she demonstrates more self-restraint in the next poem she writes. While it is still addressed to her beloved, she concludes: "I have learned, / At last, to do without you" (98). In this verse, Ruth shows she is beginning to learn the narrator's lesson that preceded the poem: "God made not any human life to rest / Only upon another human life: / Love means some better thing than that" (97). Ruth's final poem in *Idyl* proves she has learned to appreciate the value and healing power of community, with couplets such as this: "No trouble alone is the trouble of one, / But each has a share in all" (176). Although she still speaks her verse in the first person, Ruth has begun to share the community sentiment expressed in one of Esther's personal poems. While "unburdening" her heart on the subject of "City Lights," Esther imagines that "no ray is shining for itself alone," but, in an eschatological vision of community, "[b]roken rays shall mingle, earth and heaven be one" (154, 155). Like "City Lights," Ruth's final poem is an unspoken, interior lyric, and the narrator states that: "her heart / Kept time to this inaudible undertone," an embodied example of poetry's power to cultivate right feeling through rhythm (175).

Through Ruth's interior poems, so closely aligned with the "heart," Larcom makes an important point about the power of poetry's unique formal qualities to shape sentiment and form community. The "inaudible undertone" of the poem's rhythm is guiding Ruth's heart, even dictating the "time," or measure to be "kept" with her heartbeats. No longer using "pen and ink" to fruitlessly to plumb the depths of "her heart's crypt," Ruth has had a change of heart that is reflected in the changes in her poetry (85). At the end of her final embedded verse, Ruth's "democratic heart" beats in concert with her sisterhood of working women (169). Before she leaves to become a governess in Europe at the end of *Idyl*, Ruth tells her mill friends that her

new, egalitarian, and truly American consciousness will protect her from the taint of Old World snobbery.

Ruth is not the only one of the women whose change in attitude towards poetry reflects a change in social outlook. While at first Ruth writes only self-indulgent poetry, Isabel writes none at all. When Isabel joins her friends after church one Sunday, Esther gently chastises her: “Oh, where have you been? / The sermon was like poetry” (67). Isabel responds by exclaiming, “I’m glad I did not hear it, then; I like / Plain prose much better!” (67). Ironically, Isabel speaks this rejection of poetry in blank verse. Larcom uses this irony to call attention to the unrecognized ways that poetry shapes the lives of all of these women, including Isabel. When Isabel links poetry to sermons and expresses her dislike of both, she neatly summarizes her separation from community, not only the mill women’s community, but also the community of the Christian faithful.

Isabel’s reading preferences again demonstrate Larcom’s underlying argument in *Idyl* that poetry is preferable to prose in fostering interpersonal bonds. Isabel prefers prose and fairy-tales to homilies and psalms. She longs for a “fairy prince,” and she attracts a beau by inventing a fairy-tale persona (24). As she later explains to Esther:

He believed
I was an orphan seamstress, who was born
To wealth and luxury. Of my factory life
I never hinted, thinking by and by
To be his lady-bride, and, far away,
Lose every memory of my working days (159).

Isabel’s ne’er-do-well suitor entices her to run away with him, and when the mill women discover her elopement, they follow her to Boston, where they discover her, penitent, abandoned by her lover, but still “innocent” (160). Isabel begs forgiveness from her friends and is accepted back into the fold, where “so beautiful / She grew, self-conquering, strangers, seeing her, /

Wondered about her, as at fairy tales” (162). The allusion to “fairy tales” here reminds the reader of Isabel’s former affection for fairy tales and demonstrates the extent of her reclamation: within her community, Isabel has become a better, more disciplined version of a fairy-tale princess and will serve as a model for other mill women. The fullness of Isabel’s reclamation is indicated when the other women overhear her singing a bit of verse; Isabel has now internalized poetry to the same depth as her friends, and, like Eleanor’s characteristic verse, it takes the shape of a song. The little ditty she sings is a love song, but the object of her affection now is a humble, Christ-like carpenter, rather than a rake who promises her “grand estates” and other trappings of aristocracy (159). Through Isabel, Larcom shows the reader that it is by virtue, not by royal birth, that a modern woman can command admiration.

The verses that Ruth and Isabel write, sing, or speak to themselves are powerful examples of the way poetry can cultivate right feeling and foster integration into the community of working women, and these self-directed songs and poems make up half of the eighteen embedded verses in *Idyl*. The rest of the embedded verses are exchanged between the women, often to advise or console each other, and they, like the self-directed poems, reflect and encourage community-friendly values. The two most significant scenes of poetic exchange occur at moments when the women’s community is most threatened by male characters: in the first scene, Ruth is still struggling with the painful secret that she has been abandoned by her lover, and in the second scene, Isabel is on the verge of running away with a seducer while Minta is considering marrying a suitor who “scoff[s] at her taste for books” (117). And yet “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage” and “Her Choice,” the two poems exchanged between the women in these scenes, are the embedded poems most heavily inflected with the echoes of well-known male poets, including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Greenleaf Whittier.

This seems counterintuitive and suggests that if, as Cook claims, Larcom was “especially alert to the development of a female literary tradition,” she was equally influenced by a masculine one (163).¹⁸ In *Idyl*, the work of male poets becomes a common ground through which the women may exchange advice and consolation. Larcom’s own career had shown her the value of being able to work effectively with male poets, especially her mentor Whittier. Although she began her literary career in a homosocial community, by the time she wrote *Idyl* she had forged a remarkable literary career for herself, partly through long-standing friendships with male and female literary tastemakers such as James and Annie Fields (Marchalonis, *Worlds* 139). Both “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage” and “Her Choice,” important embedded advice poems about female solidarity, are infused with echoes of Coleridge’s “Rime” and Whittier’s “The Yankee Girl.” In these two poems, Larcom deeply engages with the work of male poets to highlight and expand on themes of fellowship and solidarity in the original works and occasionally to revise features of the original poems that she views as undemocratic, such as the gender politics and over-investment in authorship she perceives in “Rime.” Furthermore, examining Larcom’s poetic responses to “Rime” and “The Yankee Girl” demonstrates how she modified the form of the original poems and reveals her attitudes toward the different emotional impacts that poetic forms could have.

The emotional effects of poetic genres, especially when read aloud, are brought to the fore when Esther tries to use poetry to both soothe Ruth’s heartbreak and help her see the value of female community. Before reading “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage” to Ruth, Esther reads her “Laodamia,” Wordsworth’s verse drama rendition of a Greek myth. The poem relates the tale of a grieving wife who is momentarily reunited with her husband’s ghost. As Loeffelholz points

¹⁸ Although Loeffelholz does not go quite so far as Cook, she does assert that throughout *Idyl* Larcom critiques masculine poetic ideals such as the “Wordsworthian egotistical sublime” (“Medley-Book” 24).

out, the poem, which critiques “women’s excessive mourning,” is intellectually perfectly suited to Ruth’s situation (“Medley-Book” 20). However, upon hearing Wordsworth’s line, “Learn by a mortal yearning to ascend, / Seeking a higher object,” Ruth cries out in pain, begging Esther to stop because it is “too hard, too hard!” (*Idyl* 35). While Loeffelholz asserts that the line’s message is too painful, Ruth’s plea for a different poetic form such as “a song, a ballad, anything!” rather than a different topic indicates that it is the form of Wordsworth’s verse drama (six-line stanzas of rhymed iambic pentameter) that is too much for Ruth to bear (35).¹⁹ Indeed, “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage” is also a tale of a woman’s suffering at the hands of men, although Esther claims to have chosen it for its hypnotic rhythm rather than its content, telling Ruth, “you need not try / To hear it; let it croon you off to sleep” (36). The perceptive adaptability Esther demonstrates here--responding to Ruth’s needs while still conveying her message of female solidarity--is an important one. For Larcom, an ideal democratic community was not only based on values of compassion and empathy; it was adaptable and fluid, and its members were prepared to speak in equally valuable high and low poetic registers. In his influential “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties,” John Stuart Mill opines that “ballads. . . are mostly narrative”; “[c]onsidered as poetry, they are of the lowest and most elementary kind” (66). Esther and Ruth seem to share his opinion by deeming ballads, with their more accommodating accentual tetrameter rhythm (more accommodating because the beats, not the syllables, in the line are

¹⁹ The lines that prompt Ruth to cry out are a small but forceful departure from the iambic pentameter of the rest of the poem. “Learn by” is a trochee, a jolting shift that befits the line’s tone of stern command, and just when it seems that the form has settled back into iambic regularity with “ascend,” the next line opens with another trochaic command, “Seeking” (*Idyl* 35). Ruth’s pained reaction to these small but meaningful disruptions in meter and her subsequent plea for a different poetic form rather than a different topic indicates that the formal difficulty of the poem’s six-line stanzas of rhymed iambic pentameter required too much mental energy from Ruth in her weakened state; seeing this, Esther chooses a poem with an easier form but thematically similar content (*Idyl* 35).

counted) and generally narrative subject matter, a highly digestible form.²⁰

In “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage,” Larcom alludes to Coleridge’s “Rime” to highlight and expand on the themes of fellowship and solidarity in that poem. First and foremost, both poems concern a senselessly cruel act and its punishment. An older woman suspected of witchcraft and having an “evil eye,” Peggy Bligh sails on a passenger ship from Salem to Boston piloted by Skipper Nash and filled with her Salem townsmen. Without provocation, Skipper Nash and the crew and passengers conspire to “give the old crone the slip” by leaving an hour earlier than the planned departure time, effectively abandoning Peggy Bligh in Boston (*Idyl* 39). On the return journey, however, “a monstrous gull” (who, in language that deliberately echoes “Rime,” “one of the sailors averred” is Peggy Bligh transformed) alights on the mast, and the ship is soon becalmed in a fog (40). When the delayed ship finally returns to Salem, the passengers find that Peggy Bligh, miraculously, is already there, “milking her cow with indifferent mien” (41). From that day on, a series of tragedies befalls the devious Skipper Nash: he “lost his schooner, his children died, / And his wife; and his cattle and sheep beside” (41). Skipper Nash’s story echoes the tale of the Ancient Mariner, who shot an albatross without provocation and suffered for it. The crew and passengers of the vessels in each poem represent failed communities who, unlike the factory women, lack shared values of compassion. Without this moral compass, the mariner’s crew is unable to interpret his action, wavering between “averr[ing he] had killed the bird / That made the breeze to blow” and praising his action: “’Twas right, said they, such birds to slay, / That bring the fog and mist” (“Rime” lines 93-494, 101-2). In “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage,” the Salem townsmen are equally spineless: only after taking part in Skipper Nash’s prank do the

²⁰ Not every scholar agrees that ballad meter is accentual – some think it is accentual-syllabic and that the number of syllables per line is what’s important, not the number of stresses (Dugaw 120). However, the ballad meter in Larcom’s poem is accentual, so I will be using that definition.

ship's passengers belatedly wonder, "For what has the poor old beldam done / . . . Worse than. . . speaking her mind when she chose to?" (*Idyl* 39). Both poems end by affirming the value of community that the Ancient Mariner preaches:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (Lines 614-17)

Similarly, the narrator of "Peggy Bligh's Voyage" appends a warning against anti-social behavior: "His own heart is the curse of a man unkind" (*Idyl* 42).

Each poem, by virtue of its ballad form, imagines itself taking part in a popular tradition. As Cohen notes, several important cultural aspects of the ballad form fascinated nineteenth-century poets. Like the language it employs, a ballad is not idiosyncratic or "author-centered"; it is a folk form that speaks in a shared language ("Peddlers" 13). Understandably, this democratic quality would have appealed to Larcom's interest in the ability of poetry to foster community, and Larcom goes a step beyond Coleridge's ballad, disguising her authorship of the poem to further the impression that it is a product of the "folk." The advertisement to the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* notes that the "Rime of the Ancyent Marinere was professedly written in imitation of the style, as well as of the spirit of the elder poets" (Wordsworth 22). Therefore, it was always clear that "Rime" was a literary ballad, an idiosyncratic take on the folk form, and as the poem became Coleridge's most famous, it was always attached to his name (Richey and Robinson 6). This known authorship estranges "Rime" from the oral and communal tradition of the ballad, and aligns it more with the lyric tradition of an originating author or speaker. However, "Peggy Bligh's Voyage" was not published prior to *Idyl*, and, as such, would not have been recognizably Larcom's; when Esther attributes the ballad to an anonymous "someone," a reader might reasonably assume that the poem belongs to no one, and is thus the property of

everyone (*Idyl* 36). By disguising the authorship of her poems, Larcom may be emulating what Meredith McGill calls a mid-nineteenth-century “system in which literature circulated and was read without reliable recourse to the author as originator or principle of coherence” (144). The author of these poems becomes insignificant, and so, in turn, the author loses ownership of them; when poetry is imbued with a pedagogical purpose and is used as a means of circulating knowledge and cementing creative community, aggressively staking ownership of a poem becomes undemocratic.

Larcom emphasizes this shared ownership of poetry by drawing on one of her favorite symbols of a democratic society: the sea. Not only is the anonymously authored “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage” pasted into “an old log-book, relic of the sea,” the recitation of the ballad lulls Ruth into a “gentle, wave-like trance [in which] she sank and rose”; for Larcom, the sea was a symbol of the class fluidity of an ideal democratic society (*Idyl* 36, 42). As the narrator asserts near the poem’s conclusion:

Like ocean-waves
Work-populations change. No rich, no poor,
No learned, and no ignorant class or caste
The true republic tolerates; interfused,
Like the sea’s salt, the life of each through all. (178)

Awaking from her submersion in the ballad, Ruth says, “Poor old Peggy Bligh! / Is it a woman’s fault not to be young? / To be left lonely?” (43-44). Ruth’s first emotional exclamation as she comes out of the mesmeric trance of listening to the ballad is an expression of concern for another, an indication of the beginnings of empathy. Carefully attuned to the powerful influence verse can have on the emotions, Esther recognized that Ruth was still too distraught to listen calmly to “Laodamia,” Wordsworth’s rumination on the excesses of personal grief. By judiciously selecting a poetic form that would appeal to Ruth, Esther successfully taught the

lesson she began in “Laodamia,” and by highlighting the community-friendly aspects of male poets, Esther not only begins the interpolation of Ruth into the mill women’s community, she directs Ruth into a more collegial, less tortured relationship with men that will enable her to interact with them on more equal ground.

In “Her Choice,” another advice poem that is prominently located at a crucial juncture in the narrative, Larcom engages with and expands on the work of a male poet who was her life-long friend and colleague: John Greenleaf Whittier. Whittier thought of himself as a public bard, a poet of the people who, like Larcom, believed in the social and political power of poetry, so perhaps it is less surprising that Larcom engages with “The Yankee Girl” than with the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. However, this engagement probably carried higher stakes for Larcom because Whittier was Larcom’s mentor and friend. Drawing on her own memories of the literary culture of Lowell, Larcom includes a reference to him immediately before “Her Choice,” when Esther is describing the factory town to her new friend Miriam: Whittier is “The minstrel of the Merrimack, who sings / For freedom, and is every toiler’s friend: / He walks our streets sometimes, and we all know his ‘Yankee Girl’” (129). Published in 1835, Whittier’s “The Yankee Girl” was a popular abolitionist poem that depicts a New England working woman’s rejection of a wealthy Southern planter’s offer of marriage. Confident that she will accept him and happily leave behind her life of labor, the planter is stunned when she adamantly refuses to exchange her labor at the “loom or the [spinning] wheel” for a life of leisure that, as she points out, is supported by the “crack of the whip” and the labor of slaves (“Yankee Girl” lines 15, 36). This poem was especially popular among the mill women during Larcom’s time there; as Marchalonis notes, the majority of antebellum Lowell mill women were indignant that “southern politicians [would] declare that slaves were better off than mill workers,” and Larcom especially

shared the anti-slavery sentiments Whittier expresses in the poem (*Worlds* 38).

In “Her Choice,” Larcom updates Whittier’s abolitionist antebellum message for a postbellum America rife with tension over labor and class. Like “The Yankee Girl,” Larcom’s poem relates the tale of a woman standing in a cottage door considering issues of equality and labor. However, “Her Choice” focuses on the dangers of class prejudice rather than racial prejudice, as the female speaker reflects on how she nearly made a disastrous marriage to an upper-class man who expressed an undemocratic “contempt for the boors who till the land” (131). Like “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage,” “Her Choice” is unattributed and is recited by Esther; Eleanor requests it, and the poem’s intended audience is Miriam and Isabel, as well as Minta, who has just rejected a suitor. Eleanor explains to Miriam that the poem is told from the perspective of a woman who had once “looked down . . . / On working-men” and that “somehow it vexed our Isabel [but Esther] would make her listen” (*Idyl* 130).

“Her Choice” adapts the form of Whittier’s poem to the needs of this particular audience. Given the pedagogical purpose of “Her Choice,” one might expect that it would take a form that lends itself to easy memorization, such as “The Yankee Girl”’s ballad tetrameter lines that are almost singsong in their iamb, anapest, anapest, anapest regularity. However, though “Her Choice” employs the same couplet rhyme scheme as “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage” and “The Yankee Girl” and has the same accentual meter, a characteristic ballad rhythm that relies on beats rather than syllables, it is written in unusually long hexameter lines, as if Larcom added two extra beats to a typical ballad line. The extra beats give the poem a meandering, thoughtful quality, expressed in lines such as “Strange, strange to herself it seemed for a moment’s time,---no more,--” and this quality appeals to the older, intellectual Miriam as well as the usually energetic but currently anxious and uncertain Minta (*Idyl* 130). Therefore, while the form of “The Yankee

Girl” conveys a sense of youthful conviction, of a world divided into black and white, “Her Choice” adapts Whittier’s form to suit a mature woman’s reflection on a near-mistake from her girlhood in a way that gently advises and avoids the moral didacticism of Whittier’s abolitionist poem.

The contemplative meter of “Her Choice” may initially seem ill-suited to the flighty Isabel, but just as the poem anticipates the trouble that Isabel’s aristocratic fantasies and her scorn for working-class men will bring her, its form anticipates an older, wiser Isabel. It is not difficult to imagine this version of Isabel as the protagonist of “Her Choice,” who recalls with embarrassment her girlhood affection for a dandy, a “butterfly . . . amid scentless and useless bloom” who has a “weak mouth” that bears “a town-bred curl of contempt for the boors who till the land” (*Idyl* 134, 131). She reflects gratefully on her rejection of the dandy in favor of marriage to a farmer who “toiled for his daily bread” (134). Likewise, the eponymous “Yankee Girl” rejects an offer of marriage from a “great Southern planter”; as she sits in her doorway spinning, he urges her to leave her work and “Let those Yankee fools spin, / Who would pass for our slaves with a change of their skin” (lines 13-14). However, the Yankee girl scorns his offer, throwing back her head and declaring: “Go back, haughty Southron! thy treasures of gold / Are dim with the blood of the hearts thou hast sold” (lines 33-34). As the women’s rejections demonstrate, both poems insist on the moral value of work and human community.

Both poems condemn those who imagine that they are above both labor and another group of human beings. In Whittier’s poem, the Yankee girl scorns the Southern planter and emphasizes her solidarity with all who labor: “know that the Yankee girl sooner would be / In fetters with [your slaves], than in freedom with thee!” (lines 43-44). This is a risky rhetorical move, given the tendency of anti-abolitionists to align mill labor with slavery; however, Whittier

dodges this alignment through yet another risky implication: marriage (at least to a Southern planter) rather than labor is true slavery for a woman.

“Her Choice” affirms working women’s solidarity by expanding on Whittier’s sentiment that a bad marriage for a woman is something akin to slavery. This point is made clear in the way the poem is framed in the larger verse narrative--although it is presented as a warning to Isabel, it is also a vindication of Minta and Miriam’s choice to remain unmarried. Minta had been considering marriage to “a farmer’s son,” seemingly the ideal man described by “Her Choice,” only Minta’s suitor, Solon, does not fit the poem’s criteria for a suitable partner (*Idyl* 116). He must think as well as work, valuing “the ring of a truth, and the shape of a royal thought” over property, flatly described as “cattle and acres and crops” (134, 133). Solon “scoff[s] at her taste for books, / Which spoilt her for a housewife,” and this boorish dismissal convinces Minta that he “[w]ould be the one most uninteresting book / To take for life-long conning” (117, 118). She rejects him and, immediately after hearing the poem, resolves, “I will ask no man’s help or blessing . . . / . . . I am bound to be / A scholar or a writer, if I can!” a resolution she still holds at the poem’s end (139).

Within *Idyl*, “Her Choice” serves a three-fold purpose: to introduce Miriam to the working-women’s values, to fortify Minta’s resolution that an intellectual single life is better than a restricted married existence, and to bring wayward Isabel back into the society of her friends. For Larcom’s 1875 postbellum audience, who, like Larcom, was grappling with issues of labor, class, and equality, it would have had a different resonance. Emancipation and the Fourteenth Amendment demonstrated that people may not be stripped of their humanity and reduced only to the value of their labor, but the last quarter of the nineteenth century also saw the end of Reconstruction and the rise of racist systems of segregation and violence. By using “Her

Choice” to consider prejudice based solely on class rather than updating the racial issues Whittier explored in “The Yankee Girl,” Larcom substitutes a consideration of class for a consideration of race, implying that class is the more pressing concern in 1875. By ignoring the persistence of racism against African-Americans and immigrants in the postbellum era, Larcom limits her vision of the tolerant democracy America could become through poetic exchange and that she hoped to create through *Idyl*.

As Larcom notes in the preface to *Idyl*, she considered the postbellum era’s “morbid desire for wealth, show, and luxury” to be the greatest threat to American democracy (ix). She attributes the changes in Lowell, which she remembered as “a moment of pure potentiality” despite its hardships, to this consumerist greed (Dobson 91). In the 1850s, competition within the textile industry had led to lay-offs, decreased pay, and increased hours for the mill women. Then, after the increase in demand for cloth caused by the Civil War, Lowell and other mill towns throughout New England began hiring the immigrant labor arriving in America, first from Ireland, then Greece, Quebec, and Poland. Mill owners paid these immigrant women and men less than a living wage and gradually abandoned their earlier efforts to give their workers access to education. The communal culture of the boardinghouses faded into memory as “workers and their families were herded into ethnic ghettos” (Eisler 215). Larcom viewed this change with horror as the introduction of a caste system in a supposedly classless America. Larcom’s motivation to write *Idyl* was not lost on *Appletons*’s perceptive critic, who noted that “It is plain . . . that the book was written. . . to protest against the tendency of the change which has come over the conditions and character of mill-labor” (“Literary” 22). This change is the result of a failure of fellowship and empathy that has created “the rapidly-widening rift between the interests of employer and employed” (22). To combat this, *Appletons*’s critic notes that Larcom

is trying to “prov[e] by illustration that even the most exhaustive and monotonous labor cannot of itself deprive one of all opportunity for high mental culture and noble living” (22). However, this critic lacks Larcom’s optimism about poetry’s applicability to industrial workers, asserting that their lives are “essentially prosaic” and thereby evoking the generic distinction between prose and verse to imply that poetry is inaccessible to laborers and isolated from their concerns (22).²¹

The conclusion of *Idyl* makes clear the pedagogical and larger social purposes of Larcom’s representation of the antebellum mill women’s community of Lowell. Alexis de Tocqueville neatly identified Larcom’s hopes and fears--and through a weaving metaphor, no less--when he observed that “[a]mong democratic peoples new families continually rise from nothing while others fall, and nobody’s position is quite stable. The woof of time is ever being broken and the track of past generations lost. . . . All a man’s interests are limited to those near himself” (qtd. in Kete 52). A truly democratic American society, particularly for women, must include the promise of mobility and must avoid the danger of isolation. At the conclusion of *Idyl*, Larcom recounts Esther’s departure for the frontier and Ruth’s sojourn to Europe, as well as the departure of other mill women to become “mission-teacher[s] / . . . among the Cherokees,” artists who “carve, at Rome / faces in marble,” “faithful” teachers, or “happy wives, in thrifty homes” (*Idyl* 177). Although tinged with sadness, this dissolution of the mill women’s community is not a true separation, for through the bonds of poetry the mill women have “dr[awn] their hearts / Indissolubly close” (182). Therefore, Larcom depicts this parting not tragically, but positively, reasoning that “work-populations [must] ebb and flow,” for if “mill-folk settle to a stagnant

²¹ The manuscript notes for her Nov. 1881 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, “Among Lowell Mill Girls,” give us Larcom’s account of why *Idyl*, her “versified narrative,” failed to sell, which she attributes partly to the poem’s epic form that she realized was no longer suited to her prose-loving audience in 1875: “a great many people do not care to read a story in that form... because one can write with so much more fullness and exactness, in prose” (Notes 50).

class, / As in old civilizations, then farewell / To the Republic's hope!" (178). Mobility, especially for working women, was for Larcom a prerequisite of a true democracy.

The working women of Larcom's poem are prepared for mobility because they have learned how to bridge personal differences through poetic exchange. By way of the rhymed poems embedded in *Idyl*, they teach each other to value adaptability, selflessness, and compassion. Larcom enlists the power of sentimental poetry to help establish this community. On a personal level, her characters use poetry to cultivate right feeling and discipline selfish emotions. On an interpersonal level, the mill women speak to each other in the common language they learned from famous poems by men, and they use this language to teach each other lessons of solidarity and equality. Like a "true republic" with a heterogeneous population, Larcom's epic includes a host of different protagonists fluent in a wide variety of verse forms that they can tailor to each other's needs in order to create a more perfect social union (*Idyl* 178). Ultimately, by portraying an idealized community of the past in *An Idyl of Work*, Larcom hopes to bring the past into the future, ensuring that "the woof of time" will not be broken. Through her epic poem, Larcom tried to ensure that the strength of community experienced by past generations of mill women would not be lost to their turn-of-the-century inheritors, the future members of the sisterhood of working women.

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CONCLUSION

Because poetry was such a culturally important form for nineteenth-century Americans, they turned to it to represent and manage what they perceived to be the damaging effects of industrialization: the new noise, pace, and social relations it produced. Putting poetry in its occupational context reveals the various innovative formal ways that poets captured, represented, and sought to ameliorate the damage caused by the new and frightening aspects of labor brought about by industrialization. Many of these poets, especially Lucy Larcom and A.J.H. Duganne, shared a faith that poetry could affect the social world and create political and social change. By incorporating under- or un-examined archival sources into this project, I hope to contribute to the ongoing recovery of nineteenth-century poetry and the central role it played in the life and work of nineteenth-century Americans.

My findings support the work of literary critics such as Eliza Richards, Mary Loeffelholz, and Michael Cohen in demonstrating that poetry was a tremendously important form for nineteenth-century Americans of all classes who had a rich understanding of the nuances of prosody and the social and cultural resonances of genre. In focusing on the formal ways poetry captures the new sounds and pace of industrial work, I build on the insights of sound and temporality studies and demonstrate how analyzing the formal as well as thematic features of literature can provide historical insight into the lived experience of nineteenth-century Americans. Furthermore, this project meshes well with the work of historians such as David Zonderman and

Stephen Rice who have analyzed the difference that gender and occupation made in the positive or negative perception of industrialization. Building on the insights of these scholars, I have sought to demonstrate how antebellum Americans' optimistic or pessimistic attitudes extended to and were shaped by poetry and their attitudes towards and what it offered to workers.