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# Inside Job: The Transformation of Literature

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# CRITIQUE

# Inside Job: The Transformation of Literature

Tom Wayman

I BECAME INTERESTED IN WRITING about daily work because of a moment in my own past. When I attended the University of British Columbia in the mid-1960s, those of us who were studying creative writing were expected to give a graduating recital of our literary efforts. As I looked through my material to prepare for this, I realized that the subjects of my poems were entirely different than the concerns of my ordinary waking hours. This was a revelation. I had assumed until then that the poems which I had spent many hours creating and nurturing would, when viewed together, represent an accurate depiction of my life. After all, this was why I wanted to be a writer: to share with other people what I noticed about the condition of being alive.

Since I had failed in my poems to live up to my aim, I vowed that at least a majority of any future writing would concern itself with what I found most important about my daily existence. Thus, when I finished school and began to work, I wrote some poems about the people and conditions I met at the various blue-collar and white-collar jobs I held.

In the early 1970s it became important for me to compare my poems about work with those by other people. In my formal studies of writing I had learned the benefits of a careful reading of other authors who had grappled with and solved certain artistic problems I might be having — problems such as getting another voice to "speak" in a poem, or strategies for ending a poem, and so on. I had a vague sense that the portrayal of work in poetry was a subject all to itself and I began to search for contemporary poems by others about working.

Eventually I gathered a file of these, and in 1974 NeWest Press of Edmonton published the first small anthology of work poems I assembled, *Beaton Abbot's Got The Contract*. The title comes from a poem by a Newfoundland high school student about his hope of driving truck for a living after graduation.

Once *Beaton Abbot's Got The Contract* appeared, friends and acquaintances began to locate more poems about contemporary work and point them out

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to me. These poems are found throughout the usual literary life of our times — in volumes by individual authors, literary periodicals, and anthologies. Because people were aware of my interest in the topic, they would show me unpublished material by themselves or people they knew, as well. I quickly had enough work poems for a second, larger anthology, which MacLeod Books in Vancouver published in 1976. It was called *A Government Job At Last*, the title phrase taken from a poem by a Mountie about his occupation.

By this time I was living in Windsor, Ontario, where I met Artem Lozynsky. Lozynsky had graduated with a Ph.D. in English from Wayne State University in Detroit, and out of an interest in the French mystic Simone Weil's writings about her employment Lozynsky read much of *A Government Job At Last* in manuscript. Lozynsky was the first person who saw the work poems as worthy of critical study. I had already concluded that the *Beaton Abbot* collection was not entirely satisfying because it contains poems about contemporary work both as seen from the outside (someone watching somebody else work) and as seen from the inside (someone writing about a job they have done themselves or otherwise know intimately). I had decided to limit *A Government Job* and any subsequent anthologies to work poems written from the insider's perspective, as these to me are the most accurate, honest, and successful. But Lozynsky had thought further about what the contemporary work poems considered as a whole might demonstrate. I found his ability to look beyond the surface of these poems to be extremely stimulating.

Thus inspired, I wrote an essay called "The Limits of Realism" which was published in *This Magazine* in 1977. "The Limits of Realism" considers the dominant mode of the new industrial writing — realism. It looks at some reasons why realism can be considered high art in the visual arts but low art when found in literature. It also examines the differences between what I call the old External Realism (including socialist realism) and the new Internal Realism (as evidenced in contemporary work poetry).

Subsequently I wrote a longer piece called "Regional Culture, National Culture, Industrial Culture," the first portion of which appeared in *This Magazine* in 1981 and the rest in the literary journal *Event* (Surrey, B.C.) in 1982. This essay discusses in whose interests the fine arts culture of a region or the nation presently functions. Then the piece explores the cultural world a majority of Canadians inhabit, using "cultural" now in its broader definition. "Regional Culture" argues that much of our lives are spent in an industrial culture created by the current methods of organizing the production of society's goods and services. And that very little of our literature comes out of or is addressed to the culture in which a majority of us live. The new industrial literature is seen as the first consciously artistic productions of the contemporary industrial culture.

Both these essays of mine, no less than the publishing of the anthologies, resulted in a generally favourable response from the reading public but a mixed response from practising writers. Some of the loudest objections to the ideas

implied by the emergence of the new work literature have come from other authors. It is as though these people sense that the appearance of the new writing indicates a major change in attitude to literature as we have known it. Traditionally, the three main subjects of imaginative writing in English have been love, death, and nature. To these, the contemporary industrial literature introduces a fourth major subject: work. More than this, the new writing about the job demonstrates how a person's attitudes to love, death, and nature are in large part shaped by the kind of daily work he or she does. Our employment obviously determines our personal standard of living — how well and where we live off the job. Our employment is responsible, too, for how much mental and physical energy we have when we return home, and indeed how much time off we receive. So the amount of money, energy, and time available to us to pursue romance or appreciate nature is a direct result of the conditions of our work. And how we regard and respond to a wide range of matters, including death and nature and the opposite sex, is strongly influenced by whether we interact with these daily at the job and what this interaction or lack of interaction leads us to conclude about them. Any literature, then, which omits this governing experience of daily life is a literature with an enormous hole in the middle of it. Just as a taboo once surrounded the presentation of sex in literature, so a detailed examination of daily work and its effects on people has up to the present been omitted from most of our imaginative writing.

The response of some writers to these observations is to claim that these concepts must lead to authors being *told* what they have to write. I don't believe this is true. The emerging women's movement, for example, showed that in much of what is published women appear in negative, passive, and restricted roles. Subsequently, feminist critics have been able to point to and discuss sexism in literature, whether such sexism is blatantly or implicitly portrayed in a literary work. But such criticism has not stopped authors from writing whatever they want. If a writer chooses to be sexist, he or she is free to do so. Yet the women's movement reserves the right to continue to identify sexism in literature wherever it appears and to demonstrate the harmful effects on human beings such sexism has.

I feel exactly the same standards apply to a discussion of the absence of daily work in our literature to date. While writing is a solitary and personal act, writing for publication is a social act. A published poem, play, or story appears in a particular society at a specific time. And whether or not the author likes to think about it, the published work has certain effects in that society.

Today most of our cultural productions — and I refer here to the fine art and popular culture of books, paintings, music, television, movies — have the effect of leading people away from the affairs of our everyday life into another world. Put charitably, most good writing can enable people to forget their own troubles for a little while.

Looked at another way, though, this writing is part of a larger culture industry that, in all its branches, does not encourage us to examine our daily

lives, to understand the sources of our problems, and to act individually or collectively to improve our existence. The negative term for these products of our culture industry is that they are escapist. And as long as our literature overwhelmingly leads us into the bondage of beautiful dreams, or into following the imaginary problems of impossible people, our inevitable return to daily reality will be a disappointment.

Much of our cultural world, then, seems to me to function as a narcotic. It numbs people so they can withdraw for a short time into the illusion of an impossible but apparently-more-interesting world. This is where money, success, and fame are to be found now in the field of culture.

Yet I believe there is another role for the writer than that of narcotics pedlar. Writers might ask *why* there is such a demand for escape from everyday life in our society — escape through drugs, TV, alcohol, or attending most literary and other cultural events. What is the failure at the core of our daily lives that leads so many of us to seek solace in another, illusory place?

For the flaw in cultural escapism is that the escapist *does not* escape. What we term escape literature is actually status quo literature. It in no way leads to any change in the conditions of our daily existence that led us to want to escape. Hence, the reader immediately needs another fix. That is why people who defend this direction in modern culture on the grounds that "it gives people what they want" are wrong. What people appear to want desperately, in enormous numbers, is to *live* in a space that is better than this one. And this they do not get from their hit of culture.

I believe school is where we learn to regard literature as though it is insulated from the everyday. In a typical high school English class, the students may be worried about family breakdown, drugs, sex, careers, and so on. But at the front of the classroom, an English teacher is earnestly insisting that Hamlet's or Macbeth's problems are universal, and so very relevant now. And therefore the class should pay attention to them, especially if the students want to pass.

The irrelevancy of most *contemporary* imaginative writing we are introduced to in high school affects our attitude toward literature as well. This writing also mostly asks readers to put aside their pressing personal and social concerns and go chasing after the writer's rainbows. And by directing readers away from any familiar context, how can such writing let the reader judge for himself or herself the veracity of anything the author is saying? Thus we learn to regard good literature more or less as science fiction. It is an interesting or boring diversion about unlikely solutions to imaginary difficulties that are literally light-years away from our own daily lives. Put another way, we learn that serious literature consists of overwritten escape books.

There is a social consequence of this with which I feel writers should be deeply concerned. The majority of people who continue to read after high school flock directly to romantic fiction, escape literature of the most obvious kind. For if someone has learned that reading is a means to try to escape from

daily life, why shouldn't he or she choose a book in which escape is more simply presented than in the "artistic" brand of escape literature appreciated mainly by a small number of intellectuals and their graduate students? And thus most serious collections of new poems and fiction are lucky to sell a few thousand copies.

Nevertheless, in my experience many writers resent any exploration of the effects their writing has on other human beings. These authors prefer discussions of their work's form, or use of images, and so on. Any social consequences of their art are not part of the usual critical vocabulary, either.

Not that the social effect of a literary work should be the only subject for consideration in evaluating writing. But even the currently-accepted critical standards for examining literature can be scrutinized from this point of view. For example, magic realism as derived from Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is held by many critics to be an exciting development in contemporary English-language fiction. But if magic realism in practice is defined as a bizarre and arbitrary surrealism, we might ask why this technique now enjoys such critical approval. Is it because magic realism eases the reader's flight into fantasy, especially a reader jaded with imaginative writing which employs more conventional narrative and descriptive techniques in its attempt to remove the reader temporarily from ordinary life?

Similarly, if serious literature is intended to be a diversion for a social elite, as some will argue as a defense of the present literary situation, then the rest of us still have the right to examine the literary standards such writing is supposed to uphold. We would not be surprised to discover that these standards implicitly support the concept of social hierarchies. For instance, critics will refer to an author's familiarity with Greek or other ancient myths (once held by the elite to be a sign of a truly educated person) as an illustration of that author's literary skill. Yet a case can be made that an understanding of such mythology has nothing to do with literary accomplishment. Rather, offering praise for the appearance of these myths in a literary work, at a time when knowledge of such myth has virtually disappeared from public awareness, simply maintains an elitist attitude toward education and imaginative writing.

Well-written escape literature is at times defended critically on the grounds that it provides a vision of other human possibilities, often of an ideal world or situation. But every ideal has an historical basis. To a person who today is hungry, the ideal world to aspire to is one in which everyone is fed. So we can scrutinize the basis of the ideal presented in imaginative writing. If, for instance, the literary piece in question ignores the influence that daily work has on our lives, then the vision this writing presents merely restates what most of our literature already conveys: that goods and services are somehow not produced by people living in societies organized around such production. Thus the fantasy the reader is offered is thoroughly disconnected from any possibility of attainment. Far from postulating a vision worth striving for, then, this literature offers attempted escape of the usual, impossible type. The harm it does is that,

because of the prevailing taboo, once again we are blocked from any consideration of the largest influence on our daily existence. And this includes consideration of what the ideal forms of production of our necessary goods and services might be.

The women's movement has already demonstrated the social effects of writing which ignores current realities under the guise of sketching a supposedly better alternative. For example feminist critics have detailed what occurs when, against all known realities, such literature posits marriage as the ideal state or as the culminating vision of happiness for women. Where such writing is particularly effective, and hence believed, expectations are raised which experience shows result in very painful episodes for people when these expectations are revealed to be false and unattainable. In the same way, a vision meant to inspire human beings which does not take into account the effects on them of what they must do all day to survive and/or prosper is not of much use except as a misleading and potentially hurtful dream.

Experimental writing, too, often seems remote from an exploration of the central issues of our daily lives. Yet we know from science that experiments must go on if the boundaries of what we know, of what we can do, are to be pushed back. And we also know from science that a great many experiments fail. But we can learn as much or more from a failed experiment as we can from a successful one. Experimental writing has its own social consequences, however. Formal experimentation (that is, experiments involving artistic *form*) has increased during the past three-quarters of a century to become what many artists now practising think art is supposed to be about. Formal experimentation, be it "new music" or "abstract impressionism," is art about art. And that means an end of a critique of society in art.

Why should the absence of this critique matter? It matters because the literary arts today are one of the last potentially free spaces in modern industrial society. Journalism and entertainment writing are closely controlled by, or in the interests of, the business corporations. These are organizations whose primary goal is not to improve the life of the human race, but to make money. It is in the interests of these corporations, and with their encouragement, that the arts are directed to be self-obsessed. Not *what* is said or thought is to be debated, but instead *how* it is expressed. Do not ask if the knife can cut, but consider its shape, its formal novelties, its weight, its surface texture. With the blocking of art as a critique of society, the circle of control is virtually complete. Who is left to question how daily life is organized, or the wisdom of the self-appointed managers of our destiny? When voices of protest or opposition do arise, who is skilled enough at critical thinking to prevent these voices from being co-opted, perverted, led back into the paths the corporations choose for them to go?

The moment an author puts pen to paper is the same significant instant experienced by everyone in this society who works. Our contemporary society continues in its present form not because a collection of "elected represent-

atives" sits at city hall or in a building in the national capital. Society continues in its accustomed patterns because through our work each day we reproduce all the component parts and relationships that were in effect yesterday. There can be no meaningful social change until in our daily working lives we rebuild the world into freer, less exploitative patterns than we did formerly.

Any human-made object in the world — including a typewriter or electronic word processor — contains a past, present, and various possible futures. The past is concerned with the human lives that went into gathering all the components of the object, and with the lives that were involved in the conception and production of the object itself. In the present, now, that object — whether a hammer to be used in the construction of a house, or the lever of a drill press — is held poised by someone who is going to put it to use. As the object is held, alternative futures are grasped too. Will the object be used as it has been in daily life up to now? Or, will the object be used in a new way: will it be part of a rebuilding of daily life in a different, preferably more humane and democratic manner? The brain functions, the hand moves, and the world is created again from this tiniest and most significant of actions.

So with a writer, good or bad. As the pen touches paper, the writer can either help keep the world going in its old oppressive patterns, or begin through what he or she writes to help bring about a better world. Naturally, words by themselves will not create any improvement in our common lives. Yet by demystifying and making clearer the past, by bringing forth what is hidden in our present society, and by suggesting other potential futures than those the people over us in society's hierarchies have planned for us, an author can take part in the construction of a happier planet. But this starts for a writer each day at the tip of the pen he or she lifts. Will he or she refuse to produce more of what deludes and deceives, however prettily or fashionably done?

What we need, I feel, is imaginative writing which seeks to fearlessly examine the current state of affairs, and which aims to assist us in discovering solutions to our urgent social and personal problems. To me, the new industrial writing is the beginning of such a literature. Another recent manifestation was the first upsurge of feminist writing. This broke away from the literary and social traditions of depicting women, and spoke directly about the contemporary situation of half the human race and about the need for major change to improve the situation. But such writing is not the mainstream of our culture. That mainstream, when it does deal with everyday existence, continues to present contemporary lives as trivialized, romanticized, or mythologized beyond belief.

Meanwhile, a further response by some authors to the new industrial literature concerns the question: isn't literary composition work? Writers know they often put in long hours at their desks, and so they ask why, say, a poem about the act of writing isn't a work poem. Of course there is a sense in which such a poem is, but in my anthologies of contemporary work poetry I have not included these. For one thing, there is nothing new about this kind of writing;

authors have described and used as a metaphor the act of literary composition for a long time. There even already exist anthologies of poems about poetry. More importantly, though, the conditions under which authors create are vastly different than the conditions under which contemporary wage labour occurs. Most creative writers can set their own hours; most do not feel the constant pressure of direction from a supervisor; all can leave the place of work on a whim; most do not depend on their creative work for their economic survival; and so on. In short, this is work that writers have *chosen* to do under conditions they ordinarily establish *themselves*.

Some authors will protest that they "work hard" when they write, and of course they do. But the question is surely *what* does someone work hard at? Strenuous effort in a pointless or destructive cause obviously is no virtue. My observation is that many writers duly put in hours and hours at the desk, but don't want to do the hard work necessary to understand the economic and social lives of themselves or their fellow citizens. They prefer to emote and fantasize on paper in the hope that they are thus contributing to culture.

The importance of the new industrial literature, I believe, lies rather in its ability to accurately express the conditions of daily life of a majority of the population. But since that majority traditionally has almost no contact with contemporary imaginative writing, people will sometimes ask how representative of their fellow employees the new work writers are. The questioner will point to the advanced educational level, generally youthful age, and comparatively short period of employment at particular jobs of many of these authors.

But biographical details are not the issue with work writers, any more than they are with any other author. No critic would insist that a war poet, for instance, be a career soldier with many years experience in combat. What is important to us as readers is the effectiveness and accuracy of the literature created by the war writer. Similarly, we do not ask of the writer of a love poem that he or she be widely experienced, and/or remain in love with the specific individual about whom the poem was written, in order for that poem to continue to be regarded as an accurate and moving description of being in love under a certain set of conditions. Rather than consider the biography of the author, we ask ourselves: is the poem convincing to us? And especially: is it convincing based on our own experiences of being in love.

The enthusiastic reception the new work poems have received from those working at the jobs depicted — irrespective of the poet's background, or how long the poet has been employed, or whether the poet still works there — is testimony to the truth and power of these poems, I feel. The only way biography seems to enter into consideration is that personal participation by the poet in the situation described allows the poet to select and portray detail only an *insider* could know. This is detail that helps give the poem authenticity to an audience knowledgeable about the job. Similarly, a veteran will have a different response to a poem written by someone who has evidently been in combat than to a poem written by someone describing war in more general terms,

someone who seems to lack detailed knowledge of the actual experiences involved.

Overall, too, authors are seldom typical of the milieu their writings depict. The very act of close observation, with the intent of incorporating what is observed into art, separates a writer or any artist from the people around him or her. These other people also reflect on events. But they usually express the conclusions such reflection leads them to in other ways than by struggling to put words on paper. Margaret Atwood's biography and lifestyle, for example, hardly makes her a "typical" or "representative" woman or Canadian. Yet feminist or nationalist critics find much in her writing that seems to them correct and effective portrayals of women's or Canadian issues.

Because the new industrial literature has been so warmly accepted by those employed with the writers at the jobs — allowing, of course, for the usual variations in response to *any* experience found among any group of human beings — I feel confident in making the claims that I do about this writing. Robert Pring-Mill, in an essay entitled "The Redemption of Reality Through Documentary Poetry," looks at the Nicaraguan poet-priest-politician Ernesto Cardenal's writings and draws conclusions similar to my view of the new industrial literature (from Cardenal's *Zero Hour* [New York: New Directions 1980]):

> These poems demand more than just an alert response, because the poet wishes to prod us beyond thought and into action: his texts are never just concerned to document and understand reality, but also to help change it. . . . But the data have to be recorded before reality can be reshaped, and the reshaping lies beyond the poems themselves. . . .

This triple concern — to document reality, to do so in order to help alter reality for the better, and to do so in the form of imaginative writing — lies at the heart of what I see happening in the work writing. A younger Canadian poet and critic, John Lent, has already found in the work poems what he considers to be a new literary technique. In his essay, "The Lyric As Documentary" (in *Contemporary Verse Two* [Winnipeg], August 1982), Lent contrasts the long documentary poem on various topics with the usually-shorter contemporary work poem:

> In so many of the . . . poems the objective, sometimes raw facts of work are counterpointed with and transfigured by the subjective view of those facts. The result is the lyrical poem as documentary. The worlds documented are as widely separated as the hilariously detailed universe of the kitchen in a fast-food hamburger joint, or the stainless steel surfaces of a hospital delivery room.

Lent sees this new technique of lyrical documentary as an extension of William Carlos Williams' poetics.

> It is an experiment in which the very raw facts of ordinary life are subjected to the shifting, layered lenses of consciousness and emotion, and then allowed to revolve, suspended in its two fields of concrete and abstract light, shining, as in some of the best poems of William Carlos Williams. It was, after all, an experiment Williams insisted upon and pursued throughout his long career.

But to me, the critical significance of the new work writing is that it constitutes a transformation of literature itself. Historically, the absence of the subject of daily work in literature is probably due to the privileged background and/or position of the majority of writers and readers. But the increased access to post-secondary education since World War II, plus the growing awareness of some professionals that their work world shares aspects in common with many other types of employees, has resulted in the emergence of writers able to depict actual daily work in our society and the effects this work has on the range of human activities and attitudes on and off the job. The contemporary industrial literature thus presents far more accurately than what has previously been written how most people in our society actually experience reality.

Once the implications of this become evident to a reader, a certain impatience with much contemporary writing develops. Because the central experience of daily life is still almost everywhere missing, the literature which forms the basis of our literary culture appears shallow and hollow. We may look at love stories, adventure tales, surreal and intentionally absurd accounts of individuals in the past, present, or future. But in few cases is daily work a concern of the characters whose interaction makes up the events chronicled in this writing.

An appreciation of the centrality of work to most people's existence can also change how we regard the literature of the past. In Shakespeare's plays, for instance, the characters whose actions shape history are the nobility. Ordinary people are clowns, buffoons who do not even speak in verse the way the important figures of Shakespeare's plots do. We know, however, that it was the work of farmers, artisans, housewives, soldiers, and other ordinary folk that produced the wealth and power arrangements which allowed the nobility the leisure to squabble with each other over the spoils or to meditate on the meaning of life. So Shakespeare's plays seem propaganda for the point of view which asserts that the wealthy are the significant individuals in a society and those who work for a living are comic and/or prosaic but basically unimportant. This is a similar message to that conveyed by the flood of contemporary books, movies, and television productions which insists it is the rich, or at least those people who do not have to work for money each day for a living, whose activities are the most significant in society and hence the most worthy of presentation.

By observing the inclusion or absence of a depiction of daily work and its effects in any imaginative writing — historical or contemporary — we obtain a critical tool which can assist us to sort out what an author is telling us in addition to the obvious content. We might agree, for example, that Shakespeare is a skillful writer, able to bring to life the personalities of rich Elizabethans and to elaborate intricate and absorbing plots. But at the same time we can conclude that his message regarding the position of working people in society is odious.

I believe such an awareness of the subject of work will transform our appreciation of the literature of the past while it transforms the literature pro-

duced in the future. Work, though, will not become a major subject because some writer is forced to consider its effects on his or her characters. Rather, like the slow ending of sexist portrayals of women in imaginative writing, the realistic portrayal of daily work will be adopted by authors because it is a vital step forward in the human race's ability to tell a story. As in the depiction of women, we move from a flawed, limited description of human life to a fuller, more accurate one. Most writers I have met, except those irretrievably lost to pandering to the status quo for fame or money, are interested in extending the powers of the written word to depict human existence. So I feel a widespread acceptance of work as a central subject in imaginative writing is inevitable.

Further, I am convinced the new working poems and other industrial literature are part of the first emergence on this planet of a truly adult literature. The imaginative writing we have had up to now has largely been unequal to the task of honestly presenting the experiences of the men and women who constitute a majority of our population. Just as a child or adolescent often does not understand work or money, so our literature mostly has ignored these and focussed instead on the unlikely lives of those whose day-to-day existence apparently is not governed by concerns of work or money: the rich, killers, outlaws, or fantastic representations of people doing certain real jobs (doctors, cowboys, policemen, and so on).

The new work writing takes up the challenge of portraying the world an adult sees and attempts to understand and/or change. A grown person who constantly evades having to cope with reality, who lives in a world of dreams however beautiful, we consider immature if not mentally ill. The contemporary industrial writing provides maturity and a healthy balance to literature.

It is perhaps appropriate that poetry should be at the forefront of this development. To most people, thanks in large part to high school English curricula, the words "poetic" and "romantic" are considered synonymous. And Romantic poetry as introduced to us in school is an archetype of escape from reality in art. So poetry is widely understood to be that property found in the writings of a small group of mainly upper-class Englishmen who, at the start of the nineteenth century, turned their faces away from the horrors of the Industrial Revolution occurring around them and wrote about sweet fantasies, daffodils, nightingales.

But the Romantics at least shook their art free from the sterile and rigid order of preceding poetries. And now the new work poetry leads in breaking the remaining shackles of Romanticism in art — obscurity, escape — in order to help us learn more about the everyday world we inhabit. Hence, another way of viewing the new work writing's transformation of literature is that this writing brings to a close the Romantic movement. With the new writing, we end the Romantic conception of the artist as solitary, dreamy, irrational, divinely inspired, extravagant in creating personal images and other artistic puzzles that require a corps of elite critical specialists to decipher and make available for consumption in schools or the market place. In science, as

Thomas S. Kuhn has shown (in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1962], research repeatedly returns to pivotal historical moments when one course of studies was abandoned in favour of another which subsequently has led to a dead end. When the previously-abandoned line of thought is resumed, breakthroughs in solving certain problems are sometimes made — breakthroughs occasionally major enough to be called scientific revolutions. I believe that in the same way the new work writing takes literature back to the moment when the Romantics recoiled from the beginnings of our industrial civilization. Moving forward from this point, along the path of an honest exploration of our industrial life, literature enters a new era.

Imagine art that presents not just what this person or that claims is hidden in his or her unconscious, but instead depicts what is suppressed in our society. For what is more mysterious, concealed, than the myriad technologies and economic and social relationships, the millions of human lives, that in a complex civilization such as ours are necessary to bring us the simplest of objects we use in our daily life? Also, obscured by widespread acceptance, at the core of daily work is a profoundly undemocratic structure by means of which production is currently organized. But there is nothing mythological or divine about what is secret here. Just human work, and the lives, loves, deaths, and natural and urban environments that work affects.

As with any new human endeavour, though, the development of industrial literature will not be a triumphal march along a route marked out in advance. As part of the youthful vigour and confusion of any artistic movement in its earliest stages, various debatable issues and possible alternate directions to be followed have already emerged. Some of these questions concern the imaginative writing that has been produced, and some involve the work writers themselves.

For example, to date most of the new work writing has adopted the anecdotal mode: recounting incidents from the working life as experienced by the author or his or her fellow employees. These anecdotes often have been repeated in conversation a number of times before they ever are written down. So when they appear on paper, they have the considerable force of any retold story from which inessential detail has been pruned and where the point or substance has been refined or embellished. But can these anecdotes be used as *images* are now? That is, could a series of related anecdotes be used in a poem, say, in such a manner that their power is further enhanced? This would be parallel to the manner in which images can gain strength and effectiveness in imaginative writing by their placement within the work and their relationship to each other. Also: a good anecdote contains its own message, whether directly or indirectly stated. We see this clearly in the short, sharp work poems that basically consist of one strong anecdote. Similarly, an image needs no commentary; indeed, comment or explanation would detract from the power of an image. But could anecdotal material be used in a longer piece, as images are now, to create general

conclusions in the reader's mind about some theme without the direct intervention of the author in the form of commentary?

Another issue arising from the new industrial writing considers an author's use of experience versus imagination. In "The Limits of Realism" I distinguish between the new Internal and the older External Realism, praising the contemporary work writers for drawing on their personal, insider's experience of jobs to describe what happens there. Obviously, an enormous amount could be written about a particular plant employing hundreds of men and women. It is even presumably possible for an author to base a great quantity of material on one suitable industrial experience, much as James Joyce took the city of Dublin at a certain period as the setting of story after story, book after book. But we are dealing here with *imaginative* writing. Stephen Crane has related how he interviewed American Civil War veterans, listened closely to their tales of combat, and then added his own responses to participating in organized team sports in order to write *The Red Badge of Courage*. This novel was praised by veterans as an accurate account of battle's effect on Civil War-era soldiers. In a similar manner, it would seem possible for one of the new work writers to combine his or her own experiences as an employee with formal and informal research to create a literary offering dealing with a work situation which appears correct to those employed at that job, even though the author has not personally worked there.

Two examples of matters affecting the work writers themselves are the degree of literary skill they possess and the existence of two distinct types of "worker-writers."

As mentioned above, how skilled an author is considered to be depends on a set of criteria greatly influenced by *who* is doing the assessing. Yet each of us finds some writings more effective than others. By "effective" we can mean anything from "emotionally moving" to "politically correct," factors which can say as much about whoever is making the judgement as they do about the writing itself. We are taught in high school that certain literary works are "good." But the class we are in might almost unanimously find these works boring and irrelevant, and the teacher might be unable to explain what makes this writing "good" other than that it is included in the official curriculum. Nevertheless, we learn to make such assessments of what we read. We want to classify our reading, even if only to identify what we might want to read again or otherwise refer back to. But I feel we must each be aware of the *origins* of our values and inclinations, and thus be able to explain specifically *why* we rank a literary work as we do.

My own belief is that writing is a human skill like talking or making kites or auto repair. I do not think there is such a thing as innate talent, but rather the more one practices a skill the better one becomes at it. By "better" I mean that a broader range of abilities are mastered, an increasing number of problems to do with the activity can be solved, and that the practitioner can start to add to humanity's collective knowledge about the skill and not just repeat techniques

that have already been discovered. When the skill is the transfer of a repeatedly orally-expressed account (such as a personal experience or anecdote) onto paper, sometimes a person who has no particular facility with writing can be dazzling in what he or she produces. But if this person wishes to tackle a broader range of material, he or she must practise writing skills (which include reading and thinking about other writers' efforts) in order to achieve a sustained high level of literary accomplishment. This is no different than how someone interested in developing carpentry skills has to practise these (including studying building codes and other manuals and observing and assessing the work of other carpenters). Some people may appear to have a "natural" talent for writing, but I believe at some point in their background — at school, at home or among peers — they were rewarded socially for their use of words. Thus they have since practised this skill until they have reached their present level of competence in writing.

Obviously some people have or make more opportunity to practise writing than others. Since literature generally comes out of a consideration of one's experiences, and out of time available to set down on paper some results of such consideration, those individuals in society with more leisure time have in the past dominated the production of literature. Among contemporary authors, however, two types of new work writers are currently visible.

One group, which includes most publishing North American work writers, are people employed at various jobs who write about their work but who are also interested or involved in the ordinary literary life of the age: publishing their writing in literary journals, small press collections, and so on. These authors may be very committed to the concept of work writing, or not. And like all work writers of whatever variety they also write about other topics.

The second group are individuals who for a variety of reasons, from self-expression to participation in adult education programs, have tried their hand at writing about their working lives. Publication or partial self-definition as a writer is not a factor in their interest in writing. This second group is closer to the British model, where the new coalition of groups called the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers emphasizes, besides community creative writing workshops, ventures such as adult basic literacy classes, preparation and publication of literacy texts based on work experiences, preparation and publication of personal and community oral histories, and so on. Participants in this second group, although they are unquestionably also workers who write, more often choose themes for their imaginative writing drawn from the prevailing literary subjects of love, nature, and death considered separately from the job and its effects on these and most other aspects of daily life.

The two classifications of work writers are not necessarily static, though. For instance, faced with a literary climate presently not very receptive to imaginative writing about jobs, an aspiring author may give up his or her search for publication and be content with self-expression or sharing his or her writing with friends. Or, a member of the second group of work writers may gain

enough self-confidence to seek publication in the more standard literary outlets. In addition, as the work writing movement develops, whatever boundaries that now exist between these two categories may well disappear.

But however contemporary industrial literature evolves, the new writing has already started to pull away the veil which so far has cloaked the conditions of our daily work. We pride ourselves on being citizens of a democracy. And yet for the eight hours each day we are employed there is virtually no democracy for us with respect to either management or (in many cases) the union, and precious few rights and privileges. These hours on the job are the ones in which all the nation's goods and services, and hence its wealth and might and standard of living, are created. Yet those of us who are employed have little or no control over the usefulness or uselessness of the product or service we make, nor the uses to which the product may be put, nor the effect our place of work has on the environment. At the job, our participation in decision-making is reduced to the lowest possible level consistent with completion of the tasks assigned to us. And we are paid only a portion of the value of what we produce, according to a highly arbitrary system. Our length of employment, the duration or quality of our education or training, our position in an externally-determined management hierarchy, or how militant the present or former work force in this plant or in this trade has been can determine whether wer receive more or less pay than the person working beside us.

Yet the job is the centre of our civilization and of our personal lives. So I am convinced work will one day become and be considered a major subject in our literature. When this happens, the work writing movement can be said to have achieved a partial success. If the new industrial literature is ever entirely successful, I feel, daily work will be recognized as *the* central concern in our literature, as in life.