

Afterword

John Lennon & Magnus Nilsson

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this collection is to give a broad and rich picture of the many-faceted phenomenon of working-class literature(s), to disrupt narrow understandings of the concept and phenomenon, and to identify and discuss some of the most important theoretical and historical questions brought to the fore by the study of this literature. Doing so, we argue, makes possible the forging of a more robust, politically useful and theoretically elaborate understanding of this phenomenon. Below follows a discussion of how the collected essays have contributed to fulfilling this aim.

The Hetero- and Homogeneities of Working-Class Literature(s)

The essays collected here demonstrate clearly that there are real and important differences between works and traditions that have been or could be conceptualized as working-class literature. This is brought to the fore by comparisons between working-class literatures from different countries. The 1930s, for example, may have been a golden age for proletarian literature in many countries, but the literature produced during this decade by working-class writers in countries, such as Sweden, The Soviet Union, and the U.S., is highly diverse. Historical accounts also make visible this heterogeneity. In Russia/The Soviet Union, the history of proletarian literature contains poems by self-educated workers, documentary sketches

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from factories, and novels by communist intellectuals. Mexican working-class literature encompasses both proletarian novels and testimonios. And in Britain, Chartist fiction, as well as Kitchen Sink realism, belong to the tradition of working-class writing.

This heterogeneity is, of course, a result of differences in context. Chartist fiction and Kitchen Sink realism belong to different epochs and are products of different social, political, and aesthetic conditions. The Whites' victory in the Finnish civil war led to the destruction of the institutionally autonomous field of working-class culture, thereby fundamentally changing the course of the history of the country's working-class literature. Despite 1930s proletarian literature in the U.S. being influenced by the literary debates in the Soviet Union at the time, the major social and political differences between the two countries helped produce radically different types of literature. It is, however, important to realize that this heterogeneity is not only a result of differences between countries and historical epochs, but that it also exists within any given historical situation. The period following (and, to some extent, preceding) the Russian revolution, for example, saw a plethora of proletarian literary organizations that promoted aesthetically different kinds of literature, and in the 1930s, Swedish working-class writers published realistic novels as well as modernist poetry and documentary works.

Parallel to these differences and heterogeneities, there are also marked and important similarities between working-class literatures from different countries and epochs. Some of these can be attributed to similarities of context. The emergence of working-class poetry within the labor movements in Russia, Sweden, and Finland during the last decades of the nineteenth century, for example, is probably a result of similar material conditions. For workers lacking formal education, economic resources, and leisure time, poetry was a more accessible genre than the novel. Poetry could also easily be distributed within the labor movement – published in newspapers, printed on leaflets, read at rallies. In the U.S, for example, the I.W.W.'s *Little Red Songbook* and the plethora of songs and poetry produced by Woody Guthrie are testament to the orality of literature for working-class audiences.

Other similarities were the results of international influence. The most prominent example of this is the influence of the Bolshevik

Revolution upon the way writers from a number of countries wrote and thought about literature. As Eugenio Di Stefano points out in his contribution to this collection, the USSR was “a point of reference during the 1920s and 1930s in Mexico, especially for proletarian writers who sought to create a truly revolutionary literature.” As evidenced in several of the other essays, this was also true in other countries, including the U.S. and Finland.

What all of the texts in this collection gesture toward in different degrees is the push and pull of international influences upon national literatures. In his essay about U.S. working-class literature, Benjamin Balthaser highlights how “discussions of working-class U.S. literature run within two parallel if not necessarily connected trajectories”: one that “responds to the call for a global ‘proletarian literature,’” and one that is autochthonous. This conceptualization of U.S. working-class literature, which recognizes both its national specificity and its international connections, frames a central concern of this collection, and the essays help qualify and place this frame in greater focus. Each essay, in essence, is also highlighting the parallel (though not necessarily connected) trajectories of national and international influences upon the literature from their particular country and showing how difficult it is to pin down a universal definition of working-class literature.

Taken as a whole, the collection helps tease out some of these similarities and differences between various working-class literatures. It is a complicated process with numerous facets, some of which are:

1. The responses to the “call for a global ‘proletarian literature’” have always been conditioned by national circumstances. A comparison between Balthaser and Di Stefano’s accounts of the histories of U.S. and Mexican working-class literatures, for example, shows that the answers to the call for an international proletarian literature in these two countries were in no way identical. And, whereas these responses were relatively strong in the U.S., they were – as can be seen in Nilsson’s essay – not so in Sweden. One probable

reason for this is that in the U.S., the development of proletarian literature was closely connected to the cultural policy of the Communist Party, and thus to the discussions about proletarian literature within the international communist movement. In Sweden in the 1930s, on the other hand, working-class writers had stronger anchorage in the field of literary production than in that of party politics.

2. Even if the two trajectories identified by Balthaser are relatively distinct, they are also intertwined. The specific answers in the U.S. to the call for an international proletarian literature have, of course, become integrated into the domestic tradition. And the same goes for those answers formulated in Finland, Mexico, or any other country. Thus, while the distinction between the call for an international proletarian literature and more homegrown traditions of working-class literature does have analytical value as a means for conceptualizing the conditions under which working-class literatures have emerged, it should not be taken to imply that it would be possible to distinguish domestic and foreign components within those literatures.
3. While writers in other countries have certainly been influenced by the understanding of proletarian literature within the Soviet Union, this understanding was, in fact, far from univocal. As demonstrated by Clark in this volume, the debates about proletarian literature in Russia and the Soviet Union during the first decades of the twentieth century were heated and heterogeneous. Furthermore, they were not self-contained. As Clark points out, Gorky's thinking about proletarian literature may, for example, very well have been inspired by that of the American publisher and politician Hamilton Holt. And the very fact that large parts of the communist intelligentsia in the Soviet Union had spent years in exile makes it reasonable to assume that their ideas about literature were influenced by discussions in other countries.
4. Even if discussions within the Soviet Union have been an important point of reference for working-class writers in other countries, none of the contributors to this volume have identified any substantial impact from the perhaps

most important literary doctrine emerging there—namely that of socialist realism. Nilsson points out that, according to Ivar Lo-Johansson, Mikhail Sholokhov – whose *Tikhiy Don* [*And Quiet Flows the Don/Quietly Flows the Don*] is one of the most important examples of socialist realism – was popular among Swedish working-class writers in the 1930s. However, many of these writers were in fact very critical of socialist realism. After having visited the Union of Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, for example, the later Nobel laureate Harry Martinson (1940, pp. 11, 17–18) pitied Sholokhov (who also would receive the Nobel Prize) for being forced by the government to “write about tractors.” He described Gorky – who in the 1930s propagated the doctrine of socialist realism – as “a burned-out and sick writer” who, because of his loyalty to the communist state, spoke against his own literary ideals. Furthermore, in several of his novels, another prominent Swedish working-class writer – Ivar Lo-Johansson – entered into a highly critical dialogue with socialist realist works. In *Bara en mor* [*Only a Mother*] (1938), for example, he “inverts” the story told in Gorky's *Mat'* [*The Mother*] (1906) (Nilsson, 2003, p. 150). In Gorky's novel, a poor and ignorant woman's maternal love leads her to embrace socialism. Lo-Johansson instead describes a woman who, because of her poverty, ignorance, and commitment to being a loving mother, is alienated from the labor movement. In the novel *Traktorn* [*The Tractor*] (1943), Lo-Johansson tells a story that is very similar to the one told in Sholokhov's *Podnyataja Tselina* [*Vigin Soil Upturned*] (1935), while negating the mythic/utopian ideology which, as has been demonstrated by Clark (1981), is a central feature of socialist realism.

5. The call for an international proletarian literature is far from the only form of external influence on national working-class literatures. Hyttinen and Launis, for example, show that both Swedish working-class literature and discussions in Sweden about this literature received a fair amount of attention in the Finnish labor-movement press, and thus influenced the development of Finnish

working-class literature. And working-class literatures have, of course, also been influenced by more general literary trends. Examples of this can be found in Di Stefano's and Nilsson's essays, which demonstrate, to take only one example, that, in the 1970s, both Mexican and Swedish working-class writers experimented with documentary forms.

These insights constitute a good foundation for the exploration of one of the central themes in this collection of texts about working-class literatures: that these literatures display both similarities and differences, that they are connected but distinct, and that they constitute a class of literature that is fundamentally heterogeneous.

Working-Class Literature(s) – Under Construction

While it is important for us to recognize and explore the similarities and differences between working-class texts from various countries, it is equally important to examine how different working-class literatures have been conceptualized. Clark and Nilsson make this their main object of study by tracking the meanings given to the term “proletarian” in debates about literature in Russia and the Soviet Union and by analyzing how Swedish working-class literature has been conceptualized in different ways at different times and in different contexts. Simon Lee highlights how, in Britain, the notion of working-class literature “resists formal consummation” and is “subject to continual renovation,” whereas Hyttinen and Launis describe the history of Finnish working-class literature as “a history of definitions and counter-definitions” and thus – much like Nilsson – argue that the history of this literature cannot be told in isolation from that of how it has been conceptualized.

Hyttinen and Launis also stress that the conceptual history of working-class literature is marked by *conflict*, not the least through their memorable anecdote about a working-class writer hiding in the bathroom during a heated debate among critics about whether or not she is truly worthy of that title. However, as demonstrated by Nilsson and Clark, as well as by Hyttinen and Launis, not all working-class authors have been hiding. Rather,

many have actively taken part in the struggles over how the phenomenon of working-class literature should be defined and understood. These struggles have also involved critics, academics, and political activists. And they have often been deeply political, especially when they – as often has been the case – have concerned not what working-class literature is, but what it *should be*. Gorky's ideas about a proletarian literature by workers through which communist intellectuals could come into contact with new ideas, for example, express a different political ideology than does the organization "October's" promotion of a proletarian literature, whose primary aim was to agitate for party commitment among workers, or the doctrine of socialist realism. As Clark demonstrates, the latter focuses more on literature's connections to communist doctrine than on its thematizing of working-class experience. And the conceptualization by some Swedish critics of working-class literature as a valuable contribution to the country's national literary history has different political implications than other critics' understanding of it as a means for the political liberation of the working class.

Literary scholars – including those of us who have contributed to this collection – are generally less interested in what working-class literature should be than in what it is and has been. Thus, it might appear to be at least somewhat problematic that our definitions are often highly divergent. To some extent this can be explained by the fact that they are constructed as responses to different aspects of that highly diverse phenomenon that is working-class literature(s). The study of U.S. working-class literature will generate other understandings of the concept of working-class literature than the study of working-class writing in the U.K., and scholars focusing on contemporary working-class literatures will develop different conceptual apparatuses than those of their colleagues researching proletarian writing from the 1930s. But literary scholarship is never purely responsive; it also actively contributes to the construction of its objects of study. And thus, it is political. But whereas the politics of the conceptualization of working-class literature has often concerned itself with what it *should be*, the politics of scholarly debates often focus (or should focus) more on what it *could be*.

The most general political implication of working-class literature (and the academic study of it) is that it brings to the fore questions about class, class injustice, and class politics. However, class is a historical, ever-changing process. The class injustices suffered by workers in nineteenth-century Britain are not the same as those to which working-class communities in Mexico or Finland are subjected today. Similarly, the political situations in which various kinds of working-class literature have emerged have been different, which has resulted in the development of different aesthetical-political strategies. Thus, reified working-class literature(s) and reified understandings of this literature will obscure rather than highlight class. By using a comparative – and, perhaps, even a speculative – approach, we, as literary scholars, can avoid this danger.

This volume contains several explicit challenges to accepted understandings of the phenomenon of working-class literature, the implications of which are not only academic in a narrow sense, but also political. One of these is Balthaser's reading of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) as "one of the most important U.S. working class novels of the 20th century," which self-consciously challenges "ideas of both working-class literary tradition as well as the political meaning of its genealogy." Examples of less explicit revisions of the canon and concept of working-class literature include Lee's incorporation of George Eliot and Ken Loach in his overview of British working-class writing and Di Stefano's analysis of the genre of testimonio within the context of Mexican working-class literature. These inclusions will certainly cause some scholars to disagree with the authors' conceptual formulations; we hope this will spur a continued healthy and vibrant debate.

Another important aspect of the presentation of working-class literature(s) in this collection, which some might consider revisionist, is the lack of discussion of its/their relationship to socialist realism. The main reason for this is that (as has been pointed out above) the doctrine of socialist realism does not seem to have played any important role for the development of the working-class literature(s) in the countries discussed here (with the exception,

obviously, of the Soviet Union). This is hardly surprising. As Clark demonstrates in her essay, the proclamation of socialist realism as an official literary ideology marked a move away from understanding “proletarian” literature as a literature connected to the working class and toward an emphasis on its ties to the communist party. Thus, it was not necessarily appealing to authors and critics committed to *working-class* literature. And thus, it does not necessarily belong to the *category* of working-class literature(s), even when this literature – as is the case in this collection – is defined as a fundamentally heterogeneous phenomenon.

Balthaser legitimizes his expansion of the field of U.S. working-class literature through the inclusion of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by arguing that it represents “not a rupture so much as a fulfillment of 20th century traditions of self-conscious working class writing.” We, however, view his revisionist attitude as rather radical and read his analysis as a *reconfiguration* of both the concept and tradition of U.S. working-class literature and of Malcolm X’s autobiography. By reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as working-class literature, Balthaser makes visible its relationship not only to race, but also to class, while simultaneously highlighting that U.S. working-class literature has always been about the production of class identities through modes of racial looking. Through similar maneuvers, Hyttinen and Launis show how Finnish working-class literature relates not only to class, but also to questions about gender. Thus, the innovative revisionist analyses of working-class literature presented in this collection not only bring questions about class to the fore, but also make visible how class is overdetermined by phenomena such as race and gender. This is a good illustration of the fact that research on working-class literature has the potential to make valuable contributions to contemporary academic and political discussions. This is certainly needed. In our current historical moment, right wing and alt-right candidates have strengthened their positions or even swept into power, riding the nationalist momentum that has exploited the large chasms between the classes. In the U.S., Donald Trump, a billionaire who literally lives in a penthouse that is partially gold-encrusted, convinced a large number of working-class

voters that he is going to be their champion. In Sweden, a right-wing party with roots in National Socialism has become a strong political force among workers. It is clear that class, and the disparity between the classes, has been ignored or misconstrued in political discussions. The election results are one outcome of this. Examining and comparing working-class literature(s) from around the globe—literature by and about the working-class—is one tactic (of many) to help combat the ways that class has been marginalized or miscomprehended in both academia and political discussions.

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John Lennon and Magnus Nilsson

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