

## Berman on Waithe and White, editors (2018)

Waithe, Marcus, and Claire White, editors. *The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830-1910: Authorial Work Ethics*. Palgrave, 2018, pp. xv + 268, ISBN 978-1-137-55252-5

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This volume deftly combines scholarship on nineteenth-century French and British literature, with a focus on literary writing as labor. Its title is inspired by *The Literature of Labour* (1851), a set of biographical sketches featuring British poets who were also manual laborers, identified by their craft or trade. Inverting this title, the editors propose that “the ‘literature of labour’ more often than not returns us, in overdetermined fashion, to the writerly work that produces it, inviting us to contemplate the viability, or illegitimacy, of its own analogies” (15). To dissect these analogies, the editors assemble contributions by thirteen scholars, mostly from the UK, with strong expertise in this area, while contributing their own chapters on Walter Pater and George Sand, respectively.

The collection makes an impressive case for reading across typical nineteenth-century divides, tracing through-lines in French and British literature encompassing Realism, Naturalism, and Modernism in both poetry and prose. The contributions appear in roughly chronological order, toggling between English and French—grouping Flaubert with Ruskin, Browning, and Eliot, and Baudelaire with Decadents from Huysmans to Wilde. It is less convincing, however, in its central conceit, since some of the richness of representations of labor in literature is lost in the shift to self-reflexive comments in the authors’ diaries and letters. An emphasis on private writing risks banality; yes, writers struggling to describe their work *as* work may call it crushing, but how does this differ from what writers of any period might say?

The finest essays in the collection address this problem head-on. In an essay on Émile Zola’s letters, Susan Harrow takes an unusual tack. Though a photo on the book cover of Zola at his desk, head in hand, appears to embody literary agony, this chapter reveals instead how the novelist of exploitative wage labor ironically strove to achieve a pleasant writing lifestyle, punctuating his own regular labor by playing dominoes. Edmund Birch, conversely, opens his reading of George Gissing’s 1891 novel *New Grub Street* as a response to Honoré de Balzac’s *Illusions perdues* (1837–43) by considering how such novels presage the “precarity” of our own economic lives (188). Nicholas White turns to fiction for reflections on “women’s role and status in the realm of cultural labour” in works extending from Zola’s “Madame Sourdis” to Maupassant’s *Bel-Ami*, Marcelle Tinayre’s *La Rebelle*, and Colette’s *La Vagabonde* (225).

In an incisive chapter on “Flaubert’s *Cailloux*,” Patrick Bray takes up the author’s well-known claim to be a “*casseur de cailloux*” with a reading of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. If the metaphor draws attention to “the materiality of the words he writes and the trite formulas he set out to ‘break,’” Bray asks, “what are we to make of the product of all this hard labour, the broken stones and other debris that litter his fiction?” (97, 98). Following the words “caillou” and “pierre” throughout the novel, Bray unearths an array of meanings drawn from—or blocked by—“stones” in the trajectory of the protagonists from copyists to farmers (building roads) to paleontologists, derided by the villagers as “farceurs” eternally “à la recherche des cailloux” (106). For Bray, “the studiousness of the author induces a form of stupidity on the part of the scholar,” who “cannot help but resemble Bouvard and Pécuchet” (107). But there is a final twist: while academic writers “engage in the backbreaking drudgery of archival work and surrender our copyright to corporate presses, we might do well to take inspiration from Bouvard and Pécuchet, who observe the beauty to be found in the debris of literary language” (108).

As this reflection suggests, the field of literary studies is confronting its own problem of value: why would anyone invest time in this endeavor today? It is perhaps not only the market value of both literature and the study of literature that is imperiled by the abundance of free copies (legal or otherwise) and corporate pricing structures for the no-longer-material products of “immaterial labour,” a concept introduced in a Coda on Beckett’s reading of Proust by Morag Shiach. The editors address this concern in a thoughtful epilogue, which links the question of the labor of literature to current debates about the humanities “against a background of cuts to public spending, cuts that often understand scholarship and letters as luxury goods” (254).

The question of establishing the value of literature in an industrial age through copyright law haunts the volume without quite coming to the fore. The extensive thematization of the labor of art in fiction (as in Balzac’s *La Cousine Bette*) and Sainte-Beuve’s pronouncements on “la démocratie littéraire” as a synonym for “la littérature industrielle” also go unnoticed. What we have here is, nonetheless, a suggestive excavation of a complex field, where each essay, however fragmentary, produces its own beautiful stones.

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