

Addressing the Machine: Victorian Working-Class Poetry and Industrial Machinery

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of machinery by industrial workers in the Victorian period, and argues that their writings have a qualitatively different literary approach to machinery than that found in the work of established Victorian authors. It uses little-known poems by Scottish and Northern working-class writers to investigate how they use language and form to reflect upon the place of machinery in their working lives.

KEYWORDS: Victorian, machine, industry, industrial, working-class, poetry

In 1862 the Dundee and local press reported a case brought by a Mr Thomas Donald on behalf of his son, William, by then aged 11, who ‘was employed at a hackling machine in Logie Works, and who had his arm so torn by being drawn into the machine, that it was necessary to amputate it’. Logie Works was a substantial spinning mill in Dundee. William Donald’s evidence blamed his accident on two particular circumstances: firstly, the materials (Irish flax, ‘which is tougher and more difficult to deal with’), and secondly and primarily, the machine to which he had been assigned:

The machine No. 15 was more difficult than the ones I had before been at. The tow box in No. 15 always shook, and was not properly fixed. My duty was to keep the tow from the hackles, and not let it go round . . . The machine No. 15 had no duffer to clean the hackle teeth. No. 15 was also nearer the ground . . . my fingers had previously been caught with that machine. We thought it more dangerous than the others.¹

Donald’s testimony about No. 15 was backed up by 15-year-old John Mackintosh, a fellow worker:

No. 15 machine has no duffer. I have wrought at it. The box of No. 15 was loose. No. 15 was lower than the other machines. I found great difficulty working that machine because I did not like it so well . . . Most of us were afraid to work at the machine. I was afraid.²

The case was won by the Donalds and damages were awarded. This was surprising, which is why the Dundee papers reported it under the heading ‘Important for Millowners’. Like

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¹ ‘Important to Millowners – Action for Alleged Unfenced Machinery. Damages Laid at £300’, *Dundee Advertiser*, 21 February 1862, p. 1.

² ‘Important to Millowners’, p. 2.

many such cases, throughout the Victorian period, it hinged on the question of whether workers' carelessness, or millowners' negligence, was the cause of horrifying industrial accidents. What is striking about this testimony, however, is that it is not about conditions in the works in general, or even about the lack of safety precautions in relation to the job – invariably assigned to children – of 'tow-lifting'. It is about hackling machine No. 15 and its specific problems and peculiarities. Clearly, the young workers in this mill had definite opinions, and definite negative feelings, about working with No. 15 as opposed to any other hackling machine on the floor. It was not the nature of the job or the machinery per se that William Donald blamed for his injury. It was *this specific machine* and its problems, problems that all the workers knew about, but that the foremen, masters and millowners had done nothing to fix.

This article argues that literature by industrial workers (usually in the form of poetry, since this was by far the most popular genre for Victorian workers to produce) can help us to rethink assumptions about literature and machinery in the Victorian period, precisely by highlighting the individuality and specificity of the relationship between human and machine. I investigate a body of unknown writings that constituted a subgenre within working-class literature of the period: first-person poems in which the worker describes or addresses a machine with which they work on a daily basis. Some of these, as in Donald's testimony, are about one particular machine, but for comparison I also consider a subset of poems that are about the same *kind* of machine: 'Billy Fairplay', a new weighing machine in the mining industry. Though not every poem here can be firmly dated, they generally span the period from the 1850s to the early 1900s, showing the persistence of poems about machinery across this timeframe, and in a period when working with increasingly sophisticated machines became the norm, not the exception, for industrial workers. The poems I examine are all by male writers, not because women did not work in industry, but because female industrial poets, at least until late in the century, were less likely to produce poems directly about their experiences at work, due to the weight of conventional expectations about suitable topics for women writers.³ Such poems by women, which doubtless do exist, are most likely largely pseudonymous and still awaiting recovery from the newspaper poetry columns, as, unquestionably, are many poems in the same genre by male poets.

Studies of Victorian machinery and literature have tended to focus on an outsider rather than an insider perspective. That is, they consider what middle-class authors and observers saw when they looked at a factory floor full of machinery running at full speed, not what Donald and Mackintosh saw from a child's-eye view of hackling machine No. 15 in Logie Works, Arbroath. This includes such famous authors and observers as Andrew Ure and Karl Marx, as well as 'canonical' authors such as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens. Herbert Sussman's classic 1968 study, and more recently Tamara Ketabgian's excellent *The Lives of Machinery*, have amply explored 'an industrial imaginary that is undoubtedly middle-class in character' and investigated the ways in which machinery

³ I discuss this at more length in *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 15–17. The only woman poet yet identified via 'Piston, Pen & Press' research who writes about work on the factory floor is Sarah Ann Robinson (1865–1938), a Padiham weaver. Robinson's poems do discuss technical issues in weaving, but they do not focus on the machines themselves. For more information on her life and works, see Kirstie Blair, 'Sarah Ann Robinson, Working-Class Women's Poetry, and the *Yorkshire Factory Times*', *History Workshop Online*, 10 February 2020 <<https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/sarah-ann-robinson-working-class-womens-poetry-and-the-yorkshire-factory-times/>> [accessed 31 May 2022].

was represented and deployed, symbolically, in Victorian literature and culture.⁴ What they do not consider are the ways in which workers themselves represented machinery. This is important, because the fantasy of machinery as discussed by canonical authors, in which, in Marx's terms, the machine 'makes use' of the worker, and is itself 'a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage', looks different from the perspective of that workman.⁵ Marx writes of machines, as do all the Victorian authors named above, as though they are interchangeable and the same, stating that through his life, a worker will serve 'one *and the same* machine' (my emphasis).⁶ But this implicitly assumes that a worker, such as a powerloom weaver, was working with an equivalent machine in the 1840s and the 1870s. Yet millowners, obviously, had a choice of which machines to buy, and machines were replaced as technology developed and older mechanisms became obsolete. Even if a powerloom weaver worked in exactly the same mill, in the same town, weaving the same kind of cloth for 30 years, they would not be using the same machine throughout that time. And every new machine made new requirements of the worker, from minor adjustments to the movements and rhythms of individual labour, to major adjustments to a whole different way of working.

Scholars of working-class writing (including myself) have given some consideration to the way in which, for instance, Chartist Edwin Mead represents the ruthless 'iron arm' of machinery in 'The Steam-King' (published in the *Northern Star* in 1843 and reprinted by Engels), or how Alexander Anderson wrote about engine-driving in *Songs of the Rail* (1878), or James Geddes's depiction of factory machinery in his extraordinary 'Man and the Engine' (1886).⁷ But Anderson, though he worked as a railway labourer, was not an engine-driver, and Geddes was not a factory worker. While questions of authenticity and realism are always problematic in relation to working-class literary production, what I want to consider here are the linguistic and formal strategies deployed by poets writing about the particularities of the machines they knew intimately, in poems that, due to the local context of their production and publication, would have been read as 'authentic' by contemporaries. I also want to argue that these poems are important historical sources for studies of industrial accidents, disability, and collective discontent (or content) with technological change. They add a new dimension to recent work by Sarah F. Rose and others on the ways in which attitudes towards workers' bodies altered throughout the long nineteenth century, as employers 'began to demand workers with intact, fully functional bodies: namely, standardized workers who could themselves serve as interchangeable parts'.⁸ And part of what they add is the understanding that attitudes towards *machines* also altered during the century. The quirks and peculiarities of an individual machine, understood by the person who worked with it, were perceived as markers of age, obsolescence, and danger. Poems which reflect upon these peculiarities, either

⁴ Herbert Sussman, *The Victorians and the Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); Tamara Ketabgian, *The Lives of Machines: The Industrial Imaginary in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, extracted in *Factory Production in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Elaine Freedgood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 113–21, p. 117.

⁶ Marx, *Capital*, p. 117.

⁷ On Anderson and Geddes' engine-poems, see Blair, *Working Verse*, pp. 164–73, and Valentina Bold, *James Hogg: A Bard of Nature's Making* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 285–98.

⁸ Sarah F. Rose, *No Right to be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s–1930s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), p. 111. See also Jamie L. Bronstein, *Caught in the Machinery: Workplace Accidents and Injured Workers in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press, 2008) and David M. Turner and Daniel Blackie, *Disability in the Industrial Revolution: Physical Impairment in British Coalmining 1780–1880* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

celebrating, lamenting, or expressing dismay about them, are reflections on, and often rejections of, the ‘interchangeability’ of both bodies and machines.

Within the genre of poems addressing the machine, there appears to have been a subgenre specifically about the change from handlooms to powerlooms, replacing cottage industry with work on the factory floor. As the century progressed and the speed and technology of powerlooms developed, factory weavers were also expected to ‘mind’ multiple looms at once, so that a relationship with one loom was harder to develop. In an undated poem that first appeared in the *Border Advertiser*, probably in the 1860s, mill poet Thomas Sanderson, a warper in Galashiels, produced ‘The Weaver’s Address to His Auld Loom’, a farewell to his handloom as the Galashiels mills moved to powerlooms:

Auld frien’, your weaving days are done,
The age o’ steam is now begun;
Nae mair your shuttles swiftly run
 Athort your race;
Steam looms, I trow, the day hae won,
 An ta’en your place.

To see you idle makes me wae;
Beams, treddles, shuttles, caulm, and lay
Went busy clankin mony a day
 On guid lang wabs;
Now, sure as earthly things decay,
 You’re ga’en to stabs.⁹

‘Stabs’ in Scots means stakes or fence-posts, serving to highlight the shift from wood to metal in weaving machinery. Later in the poem, the poet’s wife Jenny suggests simply burning the old loom for firewood. Its value has gone from a specified ‘seven pounds, when new’, to ‘shillings now, a very few’, and it is taking up valuable space in the house. The affectionate opening address signals the author’s identification with the loom, and the use of the habbie stanza, strongly linked to Burns’s epistolary verse and especially to his ‘To a Mouse’, also creates a sense of familiar address. ‘Now I’m auld’, Sanderson writes, ‘And, like you, wearin out o’ date.’¹⁰ The fear in the poem is that the weaver, like the wooden loom, is not made of stern enough material to withstand a new kind of work amid the ‘clatter’ of the new looms:

Their fearfu’ price, their tear an’ wear
O’ wheels, an’ cranks, an’ endless gear;¹¹

The fact that steam looms are so expensive means, of course, that individual weavers are now employees, not self-employed. Sanderson’s list of machine parts in the second line here, and ‘endless gear’, suggests the work that goes into maintaining the rapacious power-looms, and also the old weaver’s bewilderment at these new mechanisms.

⁹ Sanderson’s poem is known because it is republished in Thomas Kennedy’s collection, with a biographical note. See Thomas Kennedy, *Poems* (Galashiels: John McQueen, 1889), p. 49.

¹⁰ Kennedy, *Poems*, pp. 49–50.

¹¹ Kennedy, *Poems*, p. 50.

Thomas Kennedy, a weaver and warper, wrote a response poem, ‘The Idle Weaver’s Address to the Power-Loom’, which, according to a note in his collection, was published in the *Border Advertiser* two weeks after Sanderson’s poem.¹² Kennedy may have known Sanderson personally. Possibly they both worked in James Sime’s Botany Mill, Galashiels (Sime is referenced in Kennedy’s poem), and the poems are an immediate local response to the installation of new machinery in that mill in 1868. Kennedy’s poem is not a riposte to Sanderson’s, as in many newspaper exchanges, but an agreement. The ‘idle weaver’ is the unemployed handloom weaver of the first poem, now angrily addressing the new looms rather than wistfully thanking the old:

Ye clank an’ clatter, jolt, jerk, rive, an’ strain,
Like some doomed monster in convulsion fits.

In doun-right terror ilka ane jouks by thee,
An’, guid preserve us! They hae cause for fears
Ae clite frae that “twal pounder” ye let fly
Wad send ane hame at once to his forbears.¹³

‘Jouk’ is to duck or dodge, with the implication of dodging a blow; ‘clite’ or ‘clyte’ is a sudden, heavy fall. ‘Twelve pounder’ probably refers to 12-pound cannons, suggesting that the factory floor offers the same level of danger as the battlefield. Kennedy’s rhythms are awkward, and the jolting, straining and jerking he describes do not give the impression of steady machine motion. The rhymes, like ‘thee’ and ‘fly’, are also more dissonant than in Sanderson’s poem, even if they would be less so with Scots pronunciation. This gives a general sense of disorder and unpredictability to the verses, the opposite of smooth-running mechanisms. The steam-looms are not addressed as inert machinery but as agents, who threaten serious bodily injury to the workers and are indifferent when the employment of younger men and women places the former handloom weavers in poverty and want.

These two poems might seem to support the argument that the shift from handloom weaving to mechanized weaving was a threat to the worker’s autonomy, health and financial security, though they certainly do not represent powerlooms as ‘lifeless mechanisms’. Powerlooms, as one of the earliest and most controversial forms of machinery introduced into factories, attracted similar critical discourse in ballads, broadsides and other poems. By the 1860s, however, there is also a strand of more positive mill poems in which workers express affection and nostalgia for factory machinery. John Hall (‘Johnnie Ha’), another worker in the Borders mills, left a manuscript poem about a carding machine, ‘A Farewell Address to a Machine in Browns Mill Selkirk, the Machine Went Under the Name of Wallace’:

1st Farewell my trusty Wallace
My worthy friend adeiu,
For by a new improvment
I’m stop’d from serving you,

¹² Kennedy, *Poems*, p. 49. The poem is designated a ‘sequel’ to Sanderson’s and published immediately after it in the collection.

¹³ Kennedy, *Poems*, p. 53.

2nd Long have we been together,
 And carded many a batch,
 Aye good agreement 'tween us was,
 I never got a scratch,

3rd But mid the tide of rolling time,
 Theres many a varied scene,
 So that there is no wonder at,
 The end of a Machine.¹⁴

Whether workers or millowners generally named their machines is unclear, but it does suggest the way in which individual machines were assumed to have personality. Naming a machine 'Wallace' also makes 'serving' it a matter of patriotic pride. The opening verses of Hall's poem are affectionate, and emphasize the mutual relationship between human and machine, in terms of trust and agreement, though they also imply how unusual it was never to 'get a scratch' from any given machine. The 'end' of Wallace is envisaged in terms recollecting the Biblical phrase, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant' (Matthew 25:21):

But you are gone your duty's done,
 Unto the full amount,
 Unlike your erring servant,
 That must give an account,

The poem uses the obsolete machine as a means to reflect on the coming obsolescence of the worker, and his consequent need to consider his standing in Christian terms. Hall's poems were well-known in local circles, and because this poem ends with a line wishing prosperity to Brown's firm, it was probably circulated at least within that firm, potentially performed at a works' occasion or event (such as a Christmas dinner or summer holiday outing), and also might have appeared in the local press. Hall himself was a well-known character in Selkirk. The contextual knowledge for local readers, therefore, potentially included their awareness that Hall was disabled (he describes this as an impairment on one side of his body) and had been since a child, making it difficult for him to maintain a steady job. As Rose, Turner and Blackie have noted, disability was not a barrier to employment in the mid-nineteenth century: many industrial workers 'occupied a liminal space between unimpaired physical wholeness and "total" disablement'.¹⁵ In relation to this particular poem, knowing that Hall was one of these 'liminal' workers matters both because tending a machine was possible for him, in ways that other forms of manual labour might not have been, and because it again emphasizes the fear that the worker, like the machine, is likely to be replaced by a younger and improved version.

This is also true in Francis Barnard's 'To My Engine', a poem I have discussed briefly elsewhere, in which, as an older and disabled surface worker in the mines, Barnard connects himself with the fate of the steam engine driving the mining machinery.¹⁶ Surface work was widely

¹⁴ MS notebook, *Poems by Johnnie Ha*, n.d., pp. 43–44. Hawick Heritage Hub. Spelling and punctuation reproduced as in the original.

¹⁵ Turner and Blackie, *Disability in the Industrial Revolution*, p. 15.

¹⁶ See Blair, *Working Verse*, pp. 164–65.

regarded as more appropriate for boys, women, and old and disabled men, so moving to this work from underground labour as a collier was sometimes perceived as shameful. Barnard's engine is represented as a woman and their partnership as equivalent to marriage. She is 'stiff and wheezie', 'puffed for breath', and 'no sae clifty' as she was before rougher engine-keepers mistreated her. Her future is uncertain:

But proper food wad they but gae,
Ye'd aiblins rally yet a wee:
I dinna ken – we'll maybe see –
'Tis useless grievin'¹⁷

'They', presumed to be the bosses, do not care enough about an old and failing engine to treat it or feed it properly. Barnard is the only one who will grieve for her, even as he recognizes that this grief, like that for superannuated workers, is 'useless'. Both this poem and Hall's are important because they suggest that workers know their machines better than the authorities, and are the ones who are best able to judge whether a machine is obsolete. They additionally indicate the reluctance of workers to engage with new technologies when they are accustomed to trusting something familiar. Wanlockhead lead miner Thomas Grierson Gracie's 'Emergency Pump, Level no. 4', written in the 1910s, also highlights this stance:

In 1908 we set ye up,
A mechanism fine;
We a' admired ye as ye lashed
The water frae the mine.

Noo that anither's taen yer place
Ye're reckoned second-rate,
An' dark an' silent there ye stan'
Until there comes a spate.

Gracie wants to stress that the pump is still 'keen' and capable of working just as well:

When oiled an' greased an' packit weel,
An' steady hauds the steam,
Ye gang as smooth as ony clock
Or ony poet's dream.¹⁸

As in the weavers' poems above, this suggests that age, in a machine as in a worker, does not correlate with a loss of performance. Describing the pump as a 'poet's dream' is both sardonic, since none of these machines (or, indeed, machinery in general) were considered especially suitable poetic topics, and serious, in that the smooth running of the machine echoes the smoothness in rhyme and rhythm that local poets sought to create, as a marker of literary skill.

A final example of a positive machine poem, again from the mills, is Walter Hargreaves' late-century Lancashire dialect poem, 'Th'Owd Weyver's Farewell to His Looms'. Hargreaves

¹⁷ Francis Barnard, *Chirps Frae the Engine Lum* (Bathgate: L. Gilbertson, 1889), p. 147.

¹⁸ Thomas Grierson Gracie, *Songs and Rhymes of a Lead Miner* (Dumfries: Courier and Herald Press, 1921), pp. 50–51. According to the preface many of these poems first appeared in the *Dumfries and Galloway Courier*.

was born around 1867 in Bacup, Lancashire. Not a great deal is yet known about his life and works, though he does appear in the 1881 census as a young ‘cotton weaver’, and in newspaper reports about classes at Burnley Mechanics’ Institute. He published in the local press as ‘Shepster’. This poem was reprinted in the *Burnley Express* in 1937 and subsequently in a local anthology. The *Express* writer describes it as ‘probably the best poem ever written in the doric about Loom Land’. Likely dating to the end of the nineteenth century or start of the twentieth, the poem looks back, nostalgically, over a 50-year career in the factory. As a late-century powerloom weaver, the poem’s narrator minded four looms:

Heaw aw’ve warked, an’ worried, an’ slaved on these four looms o’ mine,
To get a livin’ for us all, so’s we could sup an’ dine.
An’ buy a to thri Sunday clooas for th’wife an’ childer three,
Aw didn’t care abeawt misel’, plain fustian did for me.

These looms an’ me we geet quite friends,
Aw knew the’r whims an’ ways,
Aw’ve coaxed ’em an aw’ve humor’d em – aw’ve swung for heawrs on t’ sleys –
A’ monny a mile o’ stuff aw’ve woven – ther’s lots o’ floats gone throo,
An’ fun their way to th’ whearheawse – an’ cracks an’ oil spots, too.¹⁹

Hargreaves expresses the possessiveness long-term workers on the same floor might feel for ‘their’ looms, and the distinctiveness of their ‘whims and ways’. Like Barnard, he implies that he ‘coaxes’ the looms as he might a wife or child, in a familial and loving relationship. Though the looms sometimes caused problems (such as oil spots on the cloth), Hargreaves represents, like Hall, a personal connection through which worker and machine understand each other’s ‘ways’. The work itself is not necessarily represented as positive – it is exhausting and involves ‘slaving’ – but in this poem, and in Hall and others’ poems, *both* man and machine are subject to this exhaustion. In effect they have an alliance to do their best in the face of unrelenting demands for faster labour.

Such friendly relationships with a powerloom could, of course, go wrong, though textile workers’ poetic ire tends to be more directed at bad warps, inferior quality cotton, and minor parts of the machinery which break and cause damage to the cloth, rather than towards a particular machine as an entity. In the late century workers’ newspapers of the north, such as the *Cotton Factory Times* and the *Yorkshire Factory Times*, poems could be very specific on such problems, because they knew the audience understood their technical language. ‘Bill and His Trap’, for instance, relates a disastrous ‘shuttle trap’ (the flying shuttle is stuck, causing the ends of the thread to break and become twisted up and creating serious flaws in the cloth). Bill identifies the problem as a faulty spring:

At length poor Billy found the thing
Which made his trap, it was the spring
That works beneath the shuttle box,
To regulate the flying cops

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¹⁹ ‘The Weaver’s Bard’, *Burnley Express*, 18 December 1937, p. 17.

Bill snatched the spring from off the loom,
 And kicked it up and down the room,
 And, lucky job it had no feeling,
 For many a time it kissed the ceiling.²⁰

Though the broken spring is inanimate, Bill treats it as a culprit deserving punishment, and the use of the anthropomorphic 'kissed' does humanize this broken part. The poem's purpose is as a comic narrative of disaster and recovery, as Bill's skill in making lightning repairs to his threads ('His fingers, like an organist, | Began to play amongst the twist') draws admiration from all around. Headnote and signature date this poem to 1856, and say that its author, R. Astin of Padiham, was a weaver in Burnley. Its republication in 1885 is designed to show that the problems faced by weavers have not materially changed in three decades: no matter how great their skill and experience, they are at the mercy of mechanical failures. Because weavers were paid piece-rates, each of these failures results in a direct loss of income.

Loss of income was a key issue in the poetic relationships between workers and a particular piece of machinery in another core industry, coal mining, in relation to the 'Billy Fairplay' dispute of the 1860s and 1870s. The dispute centred on a weighing system and especially on the size of its screens. When coal was brought up to the surface, it was screened for size, and smaller coals ran off into the 'billy' and were weighed; if the weight exceeded a designated amount, deductions were made from the miners' load of larger coal. Miners were not paid for this small coal, even though it was still used. 'Billy' introduced a mechanized, regular, and therefore apparently more reliable system of weighing, and encouraged miners to hew larger 'round' coals, which was welcomed as a positive change by some miners, and by the majority of mineowners.²¹ But there were many claims that 'Billy Fairplay's' screens were unfairly wide, so that larger coals were falling through them, depriving the miners of income. A furious letter to *The Miner* in 1862, for example, when Billy was first introduced in Wales, described it as 'a diabolical machine', aimed to defraud workers and cause untold suffering.²² 'Billy Fairplay' was widely deployed in Wales in the 1860s, but was not introduced in the North East until 1876, on the basis that without it the North East coalfields could no longer compete with the Welsh. The consequence was bitter disputes, internal disagreements among miners and mining unions, and some strikes. On Christmas Day in 1876, for instance, miners held a mass demonstration at Horton 'To take into consideration the adoption of Billy Fairplay': the overwhelming opinion of the hundreds of miners present was against this innovative machine.²³

A number of collier-poets from the North East contributed to the debate, and the fact that this particular machine was commonly recognized by a name enabled them to humanize (or demonize) 'Billy' in their verse. Of particular interest is the way in which Billy is represented

²⁰ 'Bill and His Trap', *Cotton Factory Times*, 27 February 1885, p. 2. The poem is mentioned as being recited by Astin at a meeting of the Habergham Mutual Improvement Society ('Mutual Improvement Society', *Burnley Advertiser*, 26 April 1862, p. 2).

²¹ For an example of a positive account of 'Billy's' effect on productivity, see 'Trade of the Tyne', *Jarrow Express*, 18 August 1877, p. 3, which reported that at Dudley there had been a 9% increase in round coal production under the new system.

²² 'Billy Fairplay', letter signed Glowr, Aberdare, *The Miner*, 7 March 1863, p. 4.

²³ 'Miners' Demonstration at Horton', *Morpeth Herald*, 30 December 1876, p. 2. For another account of some of the disputes between miners in different parts of the North East over Billy Fairplay, see 'Durham and Northumberland Miners', *Shields Daily Gazette*, 3 January 1877, p. 2.

as an unwanted Welsh immigrant, interfering in the way things are done in the North. In one pro-Billy newspaper letter, for instance, 'Admirer' said that he had interviewed Billy and found him 'upright, honest, truthful' and upset at being misrepresented: 'I told him to be calm and console himself, as all Foreigners were looked upon with suspicion, until they got settled down in their new quarters.'²⁴ The issue of being a 'stranger' in the North East is also a focus of James Anderson's newspaper poem, 'Billy Playfair':

They say that he's myed up of just weights and scales,
And he comes frae some outlandish place they ca' Wales
He's com'd for to stand atween maister and man,
To lyeuk oot and catch all the small coals he can.²⁵

Hard-working miners, as James Anderson implied in this poem, will see their money 'gan to that chap they ca' Billy Fairplay'. Thomas Swanson of Old Hartley reiterated this in 'The Deil Imang the Geordies':

Billy Fairplay hes cum at last,
But mind aw think wor silly,
For having onything ti de
Wi' such a rogue as Billy.
Aw's sure if he hed stopped at Wales,
Aw'd gien him off maw hordies,
For oh, aw doot he'll prove to be,
A deil imang the Geordies.
Thor'll be ne gud iboot the pits,
Thor'll be ne gud at aw,
Thor'll be ne gud iboot thi pits,
Ti Bill gans awa.²⁶

Swanson writes of Billy as an unwelcome fellow worker, similar to a strike-breaking 'scab', who should be beaten and starved out – 'When ye see him on thi heep | Be sure an' break his nose' – until his voluntary or involuntary return to Wales. Using North-East dialect, as in the Scots and Lancashire weavers' poems, identifies the author with the Geordie working-class speaker. Swanson is a pedlar by the time he appears for the first time in the English census, aged 40 in 1881, but it seems likely from the number of mining-related poems in his collection that he had previously worked in the industry. He writes of having to take up poetry selling when he lost his 'regular work' due to the 'terrible slackness which has prevailed in this and other districts' during the depression of the 1870s.²⁷ Readers would have recognized that 'The Deil Imang the Geordies' leans in its form, and in the language and rhymes in the chorus, on the popular Scottish song 'There's no luck about the house', so that it could have been sung to this tune.

²⁴ 'Billy Fairplay in Northumberland', *Morpeth Herald*, 9 December 1876, p. 4.

²⁵ 'Robin Goodfellow', 'Billy Playfair', *Newcastle Chronicle*. Reprinted with headnote identifying Anderson, 'Billy Fairplay', *Jarrow Express*, 25 November 1876, p. 2.

²⁶ Thomas Swanson, 'The Deil Imang the Geordies', *Select Poems* (North Shields: J. Philipson, 1878), pp. 26–29 (p. 26).

²⁷ Swanson, *Select Poems*, prefatory note, n.p.

A contrary view was taken by miner Marshall Cresswell, whose two ‘Billy’ poems are positive. ‘The Fall at Dudley’, subtitled ‘Written when the alteration took place, to prepare at Dudley Colliery for ‘Billy Fairplay,’ on March 21st, 1877’ laments the destruction of the old set-up at the pithead to make way for the new machine:

The banksmen’s nice cabin an’ weigh-hoose fell doon,
An’ the shed ower the heap was all wreck an’ room,
An’ Bob’s bit nice pick shop upon the grund lay,
Awl throo this queer customer ‘Billy Fairplay.’

The speaker is horrified by the changes he witnessed at the colliery, yet he still assures the readers or listeners that Billy’s introduction will be positive:

But we’ll keep up wor harts as she’ll s’yun start ag’yen,
An’ they say ‘Billey’s better for maistors an’ men.
If that be the case we may all bliss the day
That we welcomed the stranger called ‘Billy Fairplay.’²⁸

‘She’ is used generically to refer to the pit here, as pits (like ships) are generally referred to by feminine pronouns. Cresswell’s second poem, in standard English, ‘The Wonderful Change at Dudley’ was written immediately after the new machinery was installed. Its broadside-like opening ‘You people of Dudley give ear for a while’ and celebration of the new pithead and machine (‘Billy Fairplay’s considered an excellent plan, | And justice will render ’tween master and man’) suggests that it might have been written for a public occasion on the unveiling of the new machine.²⁹ Its description of how Billy Fairplay will operate seems designed to reassure and to impress miners by emphasizing how innovative the new technology is, with its speaking tubes, ‘large powerful engine’, ‘huge pullies’ and so on. ‘The Fall at Dudley’ may have a similar role as propaganda. Cresswell may have genuinely believed in ‘Billy Fairplay’, but he certainly knew that its value was disputed, and these poems do read as though they may have been commissioned, overtly or tacitly, by better-off patrons. Such use of poetry and song about Billy Fairplay to advance either a pro-Billy or anti-Billy agenda indicates that these genres were considered valuable ways of spreading information about new machinery and its effects to a collective of listeners or readers, the miners of the North East. The focus here is not on the individual’s relationship to this machine, but on the ‘Geordies’ as a group.

As several of the poems above attest, machinery, and especially steam-powered machinery, was always dangerous, both because it threatened the workers’ wages, and because it threatened their lives. Recent studies have examined workers’ own accounts of accidents, but without a specific focus on literary texts which describe the emotional impact of working with machines which have either killed and injured your fellow workers, or have injured you. The Gothic image of the monstrous machine, common in Victorian discourse, is also present in workers’ poetry, though here it again takes on more specificity. A remarkably dark poem by ‘Roving’ in the 1895 *Yorkshire Factory Times*, for instance, imagines the beam-engine’s parts as living because ‘yesterday they kilt awr Jim’:

²⁸ Marshall Cresswell, ‘The Fall at Dudley’, *Local and Other Songs, Recitations, Etc.*, 2nd edn (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: J. W. Chater, 1883), p. 79.

²⁹ Cresswell, *Local and Other Songs*, p. 80.

An' na the drums and pulleys seem
 To scowl an' frown like hell an' sin;
 They groan his groan, an' sigh his sigh,
 An' sometimes th' rowler-beam turns o'er,
 An' th' carriage gives a smothert cry,
 An' th' blood comes back through th' nicks o' th' floor.³⁰

This poem is titled 'The Cleaning Question', both because it wants to raise a literal question about who cleans the blood from the machinery and the painful labour involved in this, and because it is angry about the way in which verdicts such as 'accidental death' clean up the brutality of workers' deaths. 'They kilt' gives the engine-wheels direct agency. Their absorption and reiteration of Jim's cries is deeply sinister, as is the immediacy of 'yesterday'. This is an activist poem: the *Yorkshire Factory Times* was pro-union and pro-Labour. 'Roving', though unidentified, contributed across more than one workers' newspaper, and the chosen pseudonym suggests that he or she had been a factory worker.

Sawmill worker William Lawson, of Burnup's Steam Saw Mills in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, produced an especially interesting pair of accident poems. In 'The Circular Saw', a poem written in Scots and in the habbie stanza (whether Lawson was Scottish, or just a fan of Burns, is unclear) Lawson laments the saw's cruelty. The headnote states that the poem was 'Composed shortly after an accident by which the author got one of his hands severely injured while working at the circular saw in Burnup's Mill':

I've sawn wi' ye for mony a day,
 And mony a plank shov'd through your way;
 I'm deiv'd to hear ye ramp an' brae
 As round ye're flyin';
 Now ye did seize me for your prey,
 Like some fierce lion.

I ne'er did tak' ye for a foe,
 Though men o' knowledge warned me so –
 That to your teeth I should not go,
 For there was danger,
 And that nae mercy ye would show,
 To freen or stranger.³¹

Here, Lawson suggests that the intimate relationship he thought he had with the machine – like the friendship between John Hall and his 'Wallace' – should have protected him, since the saw should have recognized him as friend, not stranger. The poet is forced to realize that the amicable relationship he thought he had with the saw is unreciprocated. But in the poem, this doubt is not expressed by indicating that the machine is incapable of relationships or has no human feelings; rather, it has the *wrong* feelings: it is 'cruel', it has a heart 'of hardened steel', it has 'nae dread' of the suffering it causes. Lawson is also the only poet yet found who gives the machine itself a chance to reply and defend its actions:

³⁰ 'Roving', 'The Cleaning Question', *Yorkshire Factory Times*, 23 August 1895, p. 2.

³¹ William Lawson, *Whittle Dene and Other Poems* (Newcastle, 1869), p. 45.

Oh! Willie Lawson, here I'm to be seen,
 I am a piece of metal, sharp and clean;
 For, mind, I was not formed by Nature's plan,
 But was constructed by the art of man,
 With feelings hard, like some sharp gangers here.³²

The saw blames its ability to injure on its construction. Men, not the circular saw itself, are responsible for its actions. Moreover, those actions are not inhuman, because the saw's supposed cruelty is equivalent to that of other human overseers ('gangers') in the sawmill. This constitutes one line of defence in the saw's attempt to deny responsibility for Lawson's injury. The second, especially interesting in relation to newspaper reports of court cases about accidents, is that Lawson himself made a mistake:

In your address you did me sair defame,
 No fault in me, yourself was in the blame;
 My steam was up, my belt upon the sheeve,
 My brake was off – you did yourself deceive.³³

It is noticeable that Lawson first represents the saw's response in more formal standard English (and in a 'standard' English form, iambic pentameter couplets) than in his own poem, which is coded as Scottish in language and form. This is intriguing, since it might suggest an opposition or tension between the English, Anglophone machine and the Scottish, Scots-speaking worker. But when the saw's voice becomes more pleading; Scots enters the poem in 'sair defame', as it slips into the same linguistic register as Lawson's 'The Circular Saw'. This is the last word, because Lawson did not publish another riposte. The reader of these two poems is therefore left to presume that the saw may be correct, and that Lawson blamed the machine unfairly for his own human error: the poem implicitly acknowledges responsibility.

Lawson's poems are also significant because they focus on an injury to the hand; the hand that writes, as well as the hand that works. Indeed, when Lawson is taken to the doctor's in his poem, he describes himself as 'a wounded bard'. Similarly, John Fraser, a Paisley shoemaker who also worked for a time in the factory, detailed a gruesome machine injury that threatened his ability *both* to work, and to write:

A spin'le held me by the boot,
 I hung doun ower a frame;
 The sharp steel run into my foot
 An' pierc'd and made me lame.

My arm dislock'd, my skull twice broke,
 An' twisted neck an wrist,
 An' a' my body's bones were shook –
 How strange that death was miss'd.

**

³² Lawson, *Whittle Dene*, p. 47.

³³ Lawson, *Whittle Dene*.

If I sit down and try to work,
 Say, twa days at a time,
 This hapless arm it's sure to Burke,
 Or if I dare to rhyme,

To lift the pen into my hand,
 'Twill loose my shooter cup,
 An' gies mair pain than ane can stand,
 Sae man, I'll gie it up.³⁴

Fraser has not given up poetry, though, because he is writing this verse epistle to his friend. Nor does the saw's damage to Lawson's hand stop him from being able to write a poem about his injury. Both poems emphasize that writers had another skill – indeed, though few made any money from poems, another *profession* – besides that of industrial labour.

When Carlyle wrote of the 'Age of Machinery' in 'Signs of the Times' (1829), he defined its central characteristic as 'Nothing now is done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance'.³⁵ The existence of these poems shows industrial workers doing something 'directly' and 'by hand', because they foreground the act of writing. But it is crucial that they do not necessarily represent it as qualitatively different to the act of working with an industrial machine. Indeed, with the exception of Hall's MS poem, which may or may not have been published, all the printed poems here testify to the new steam-powered printing machinery that could mass-produce them, and that made print culture affordable for working-class writers. Addresses to machines written by people who worked with machines make it clear that the distinction that many Victorian writers play with, between the inanimate, indistinguishable mass of machinery, and the feeling human body and mind of the worker, is more complex than it might appear. In *Hard Times*, for instance, Dickens famously compares the millworkers to the mill machinery:

So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power. It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants, with the composed faces and the regulated actions.³⁶

Reading this well-known passage in the light of writings by these millworkers calls Dickens's central point, about what we 'know' about machines, into question. His insistence on the workers' capacity for human feeling, which every poem discussed here was consciously designed to promote, would have met with strong agreement from working-class industrial poets. But his insistence that we know exactly what the mill engine will do is, these poems suggest, inaccurate.

³⁴ John Fraser, 'Epistle to Mr James McLardie, Glasgow', in *Poems and Songs from Labour's Leisure Hours* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1852), pp. 102–5 (p. 104).

³⁵ Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', in *A Carlyle Reader*, ed. by G. B. Tennyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 31–35 (p. 34).

³⁶ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. by Kate Flint (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 71.

Indeed, all the writers examined here profoundly disagree with Dickens on this, because no matter what might be said on paper about the smooth running and exact precision of a machine, Victorian industrial workers knew that machinery was unpredictable and fallible. Every mill engine was different. Every powerloom had its own character. What the masters said a coal-weighing machine would do was not what the miners saw it doing to the coal they had hewed. Individual mining pumps, carding machines, mechanical saws: they were knowable, if a worker took the time and developed the skill to understand them and to adjust to them. Sometimes they were trustworthy and reliable, sometimes not. The 'special contrast' between man and the 'crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism', as Dickens put it, is blurred in these literary works.³⁷ Yet there is of course one very special contrast: despite strong contemporary interest in the relationship between poetry and machinery, a carding machine still cannot write a poem about itself. As these literary works undo the distinctions between human and machine, and ask readers to consider more carefully the individuality of machines, they also reinforce it, showing through their existence one way in which machines are dependent on the workers, rather than vice versa.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

³⁷ Dickens, *Hard Times*, p. 71.