

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Coal, correspondence, and Nineteenth-Century poetry:

Joseph Skipsey and the problems of social class

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the life and work of the poet and coal miner Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903) by examining his correspondence with some of the most notable cultural figures of the late-Victorian period. This work is, as far as I am aware, the first modern single-author study of a working-class writer who was a coal miner, the first full modern examination of a nineteenth-century working-class poet from North-East England, and one of the first detailed analyses of a working-class writer's correspondence. Through archival discovery, close readings, and examinations of the reception of Skipsey's poetry, this thesis argues that the writing of working-class individuals is shaped by their social class, and what Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) describes as cultural and social capital. These forms of capital determine the reception working-class writers receive within literary culture and, in turn, reinforce the authority of middle-class writings about working-class lives that allows them to become unchallenged orthodoxies. This thesis reveals previously unknown areas of Skipsey's life and work, challenging and destabilising previously held beliefs, questioning assumptions regarding patronage, and, ultimately, revealing Skipsey a more active agent in the construction of his career than previously supposed. The thesis examines Skipsey as not just a representative of his class and industry, but as an individual writing poetry from personal, instead of communal, experience.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	5
Abbreviations Used	6
Chapter One: Introduction.....	8
1.1 Old King Coal and Victorian society.....	13
1.2 Locating the (coal)field	16
1.3 The industrial writer: dislocating class and culture	34
1.4 Hegemony and cultural capital.....	37
Chapter Two: The Pitman and the Poet	
2.1 Fear and sympathy: affect and the coal miner.....	43
2.2 A life less ordinary: a biographical sketch	56
Chapter Three: Biography and Mining the Archives	
3.1 The fallibility of the biography.....	68
3.2 Violence and silence in the archive	75
3.3 Skipsey's letters: an archive dispersed	82
3.4 Robert Spence Watson: a myth of patronage?	86
Chapter Four: Poetic Beginnings	
4.1 The epistolary birth of a poet	91
4.2 "J.S., A Coal Miner": a mask of anonymity	99
4.3 The divided self as coping strategy.....	109
4.4 James Clephan	116
Chapter Five: The Influence of Thomas Dixon	
5.1 A new beginning	122
5.2 Thomas Dixon: Sunderland cork-cutter.....	130
5.3 Thomas Dixon: cultural attaché.....	134
5.4 Thomas Dixon's social capital	139
Chapter Six: Exchanging Capital	
6.1 Dear sirs: Mr Dixon, Mr Rossetti, Mr Skipsey	145
6.2 An <i>Athenæum</i> review	161
Chapter Seven: Biographical Silence and Control	
7.1 Skipsey and the 'influence' of William Blake	172
7.2 Personal writing and affectivity in Skipsey's poetry	188
Chapter Eight: Joseph Skipsey and London, <i>the</i> Cultural Capital	
8.1 The cheap train to London	201
8.2 A "few days liberty" in the "Great City"	209

8.3 The return home	218
Chapter Nine: The uses of social capital	
9.1 “‘Get Up!’”: the poet as subject	231
9.2 A network of influence	245
9.3 Dig the new breed: the extending influence of Joseph Skipsey	255
Chapter Ten: Conclusion.....	270
Appendix One: ‘A Patriotic Invocation’	281
Appendix Two: Lines Read at Christmas, 1861.....	282
Appendix Three: ‘Skipsey in his Working Clothes’	283
Appendix Four: Ralph Hedley Sketch of Skipsey	284
Appendix Five: “‘Get Up!’”, Alfred Dixon.....	285
Appendix Six: Unpublished Letter from Dante Rossetti.....	286
Appendix Seven: Unpublished Letter from Dante Rossetti.....	287
Appendix Eight: Envelope Containing Letter from W.B. Yeats to Skipsey.....	288
Bibliography	
Primary Texts	289
Archival Material	291
Collected Letters.....	301
Newspapers and Periodicals.....	302
Secondary Texts.....	306

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ABBREVIATIONS USED

Joseph Skipsey's volumes:

<i>BL1881</i>	<i>A Book of Lyrics, Songs, Ballads, and Chants</i> (1881)
<i>CftCF1886</i>	<i>Carols from the Coalfields</i> (1886)
<i>CSB1888</i>	<i>Carols, Songs, and Ballads</i> (1888)
<i>L1858</i>	<i>Lyrics, by J.S., A Coal Miner</i> (1858)
<i>L1859</i>	<i>Lyrics</i> (1859)
<i>ML1878</i>	<i>A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics</i> (1878)
<i>P1871</i>	<i>Poems</i> (1871)
<i>PS&B1862</i>	<i>Poems, Songs, and Ballads</i> (1862)
<i>PSS</i>	<i>The Poet as Seer and Singer</i> (1890)
<i>S&L1892</i>	<i>Songs and Lyrics</i> (1892)
<i>TCL1864</i>	<i>The Collier Lad and other Songs and Ballads</i> (1864)

Other abbreviations:

<i>PGCPS</i>	Preston Grange County Primary School (1975) <i>Joe Skipsey, pitman poet of Percy Main.</i>
<i>PMG</i>	'A Poet from the Mines: An interview with Joseph Skipsey', <i>The Pall Mall Gazette</i> , 11 th July, 1889.
<i>RKRTB</i>	R. K. R. Thornton (2014) 'Biographical Notes', <i>Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems.</i>
<i>RSWB</i>	Robert Spence Watson (1909) <i>Joseph Skipsey: His Life and Work.</i>
<i>TCDGR</i>	William E. Fredeman (ed) <i>The correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti</i>

Where a specific volume is referred to it is indicated in parentheses following the abbreviation, *TCDGR* (v9). Otherwise, the abbreviation refers to the whole collection.

The Lit & Phil	Newcastle-Upon-Tyne Literary & Philosophical Society.
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Where I use a published letter, unless it differs from the original, I refer to the published source.

To avoid bibliographic confusion, where I have texts and letters written by the same author in the same year (primarily by Joseph Skipsey), I have identified in-text references to letters with "(l)". For example, when Skipsey writes to Dante Rossetti on 14th November, 1878, the in-text reference reads: (Skipsey (l), 1878e: 1).

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903) was a coal miner who, through his commitment to self-education, managed to raise himself from the obscurity and harshness of a Victorian mining community to become, arguably, the most prominent working-class poet of the second half of the nineteenth century and, without doubt, the most notable coal-mining poet. Being able to utilise a series of influential gatekeepers, Skipsey made connections with some of the most eminent cultural figures of the period to such an extent he was ultimately able to use his own influence to become a gatekeeper himself to aid the careers of a number of younger poets and writers at the end of the century. Skipsey's poetry is, at its best, broad and ambitious with an emotional intensity that has the power to, as W.B. Yeats attested, "bring the people [he] describe[s] before ^{^one^} in a minute" (Yeats, 1889: 3); at its worst it is turgid, awkward, and plain. This thesis will argue that Skipsey was an author who aspired to go beyond the adjectival limitations of his industrial designation: Pitman Poet, a label ascribed to him by a reviewer at the beginning of his writing career. It argues that, despite his stated desire to produce poetry that would be accepted and appreciated by his nation, social power structures repeatedly and insistently forced him to remain within this label. Furthermore, it is argued that the same power structures that kept him a coal miner, physically, most of his life and, metaphorically, the whole of his life, persist beyond his lifetime. Underpinning the following chapters are the complementary theories of cultural and social capital formulated by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), and the theory of archival power propounded by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995). Using this theoretical framework, it is argued that the literary careers of working-class authors and their critical reception, during their lifetimes and posthumously, are determined by the positions they occupy within the cultural hierarchy or, in Gramscian terms, hegemony (Gramsci, 1999: 145).

In turn, the dictates of a middle-class audience and literary industry become unchallenged orthodoxies based, because of a lack of information, on assumed dominant/subordinate power differentials. In applying this model to the life, career, and reception of Skipsey, this thesis, through the examination of correspondence to, from, and about him, challenges previously held assumptions, destabilising orthodoxies surrounding him, in particular, and working-class writers more generally.

Although Skipsey has been afforded some critical attention in recent years, his life and poetry remain largely unexplored; his reputation in literary studies is largely constrained within a few phrases written in letters by the artist-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82). This thesis is based on extensive research on correspondence to and from such noteworthy individuals as Dante Rossetti, William Rossetti (1829-1919), Bram Stoker (1847-1912), William Bell Scott (1811-90), William Morris (1834-96), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98), Edmund Gosse (1849-1928), Ernest Radford (1857-1919), William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), and Basil Bunting (1900-85), alongside less noted individuals such as Skipsey's friend and biographer Robert Spence Watson (1837-1911), the Sunderland cork-cutter Thomas Dixon (1831-80), and the painter Alfred Dixon (1842-1919). This thesis uses significant archival discoveries to overturn a number of misconceptions about Skipsey and it becomes apparent, through this process, that both the biography and the understanding of his poems have been distorted along power-relational lines that favour middle-class interpretations of working-class culture. These interpretations feed what I envisage as a middle-class saviour narrative. Aligned with the cultural trope of the white-saviour narrative, "the genre in which a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class [...] nonwhite character from a sad fate" (Hughey, 2014: 1), the middle-class saviour is an individual who alone has the power and influence to improve the life of the working class. This narrative becomes a stereotype that holds such sway that absences in knowledge are filled by assumptions of

assistance provided. The middle class becomes the saviour of working-class aspirants, curators and guarantors of reputations, which ultimately denies agency to their working-class subordinates.

Rather than showing Skipsey through the eyes of other more prominent individuals, this study will bring to the fore an aspirational individual who, in spite of the disadvantages he faced throughout his life, became representative of his class and industry. This thesis reveals a poet who was an active agent in the development of his own writing career, and the networks to which he became attached, rather than an abject recipient of middle-class philanthropy. This research is the first large-scale academic study to focus on Skipsey's work and, as far as I am aware, the first modern single-author study of a working-class writer who was a coal miner, the first full modern examination of a nineteenth-century working-class poet from North-East England, and one of the first detailed analyses of a working-class writer's correspondence. Throughout the thesis, new biographical knowledge is revealed and new critical appraisals of his literary works are made, establishing a framework within which to read and interpret his poetry that enlightens and undermines, often simultaneously, existing understanding of Skipsey's life and work. This thesis discovers a volume of Skipsey's poetry hitherto presumed to have been lost. This research reveals previously unrecognised contacts Skipsey made, discloses previously unknown details regarding a painting closely associated with Skipsey (*"Get Up!"*, Appendix Five), discovers two previously unpublished letters from Dante Rossetti, one written in 1878 and the other in 1880 (Appendices Six and Seven), and presents a deeper insight into the relationship between Rossetti, Thomas Dixon, and Skipsey. Carried out at a time when class is increasingly important and divisive in cultural and political debate, this work acts as a reminder of the potential of the working classes. Ultimately, this thesis reveals that Skipsey is a writer worthy of far greater consideration than has hitherto been afforded him, bringing a figure marginalised by his class, occupation, and geographical location, out of the mine and closer to the warmth of the coal fire at the centre of Victorian society.

The chronological approach taken in the thesis establishes in careful detail the ways in which the events in Skipsey's life as a miner and a poet, his interactions with other writers, all influenced and shaped his writing. This first introductory chapter sketches out the importance of coal mining to North-East England's image of itself and how the 'black stuff', mined in The Great Northern Coalfield, was vital to the development and expansion of the British Empire. This chapter places my research on Skipsey within the macro-context of existing research into working-class poetry, and how the study of literature from the region has been side-lined by the emphasis placed on its oral song-based culture. The chapter concludes, using Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital, by examining how working-class writers are alienated from their communities while, simultaneously, being excluded from the world of letters and literature. The second chapter examines the polarised reception of coal miners, which, Janus-like, veers between fearful loathing and ennobling sympathy depending upon the industrial context. In this polarized framework Skipsey's life can easily be romanticized, appearing abject, pitiable, and isolated, Chapter Two closes with new biographical information, provided for the first time, that positions Skipsey within his region's literary heritage.

Chapter Three examines Skipsey's relationship with Robert Spence Watson and challenges, for the first time, the widespread belief that he was Skipsey's patron. This chapter shows how the biography, *Joseph Skipsey: His Life and Work* (1909), forms part of Skipsey's archival corpus, with its own conscious and unconsciously created silences. These silences are, as Pierre Macherey (1938-) argues of texts more generally in his *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), devices that hide, divert attention, and express "the image of 'dissimulation'" (Macherey, 2006: 98). In respect of Skipsey, as there are many silences in the biography, *RSWB* becomes a "trap [...] its positiveness which makes it into a truly active insistence" (Macherey, 2006: 100) and an unchallenged orthodoxy. This chapter questions this orthodoxy and examines the archival power structures that deny working-class individuals the appearance of agency within their own lives. Describing the processes and findings of the archival research carried out for this thesis, this chapter begins the destabilisation of the

biography upon which the foundations of knowledge surrounding Skipsey have been laid. Chapter Four examines an extant copy of Skipsey's first volume of poetry I found at Durham University and explores the earliest known letter from him, sent to newspaper editor James Clephan (1804-88), in which Skipsey effectively accepts the title of 'Pitman Poet'.¹ The remainder of Chapter Four explores how and why Skipsey compartmentalised the pitman and the poet, and how tensions between the two are consequently reconstructed in the reception of his poetry. The contradiction Skipsey felt, between the ephemeral nature of art and the tangibility of industry, is something that has affected artists from the industrial North East for centuries and this chapter compares his experience to some of his twentieth-century successors. Chapter Four concludes with a discussion on how Skipsey's critical reception is itself compartmentalised, with the majority of his poetry overlooked in favour of those that describe the social interactions within mining communities.

In examining the relationship between Skipsey and Thomas Dixon, Chapter Five acts as a fulcrum for the whole thesis. When Skipsey made contact with Dixon's network of connections, which included the art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900), William Morris, and the Rossetti family among others, his reputation was transformed as he received the appreciation of some of the most culturally-influential Victorian individuals. This chapter argues that, without meeting Dixon, Skipsey would not have gained the prominence he did toward the end of the century and, consequently, his current position within the study of working-class literature. Chapter Six explores other individuals, other than Dixon, from whose influence Skipsey benefitted and in particular Dante Rossetti. Barring a few exceptions, Skipsey has only previously been mentioned briefly or cursorily in literary studies and in association with a few phrases from Rossetti's letters. This chapter instead looks, for the first time, at both sides of their correspondence to uncover a more equal relationship than previously

¹ The extant copy of Skipsey's first volume of poetry, *Lyrics, by J. S. a coal miner*, is located within the Palace Green Library's Local Collection. The letter was published by Jim Skipsey, a descendant of Joseph's, in an article in the *Northumberland & Durham Family History Journal* (1999).

understood; the chapter also reveals Rossetti's influence over an *Athenæum* review of Skipsey's poetry and the extent to which he disseminated Skipsey's work.

Using revelations in correspondence from Thomas Dixon, Chapter Seven explores the personal nature of Skipsey's poetry that further undermines *RSWB* and reveals an affective intensity in his poetry. In doing so, the chapter aims to transform Skipsey from being representative of his trade or class, into someone using poetry to rationalise the world surrounding him and as a release-valve for the pressures and dangers of a mining community. Chapter Eight concentrates on events in June 1880 when Skipsey travelled to London and met Dante Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and others. While these meetings have been commented on, few details are ever given beyond the fact they happened. This chapter extends and challenges what little information exists surrounding these encounters and analyses, for the first time, Burne-Jones' and Rossetti's impressions of Skipsey. Chapter Nine concentrates on the final period of Skipsey's life, when he left mining and had amassed sufficient cultural and social capital to be able to utilise it on the behalf of others; where Skipsey, once reliant on gatekeepers for access to new cultural circles, himself became a conduit for the improvement of opportunities for others. Rather than being solely identified with the Pre-Raphaelites Dante Rossetti and Burne-Jones, this chapter reveals how Skipsey engaged with a new generation of writers, some of whom would have a significant impact on twentieth-century literary culture.

1.1 Old King Coal and Victorian society

The eminent Northumbrian railway engineer George Stephenson (1781-1848) once commented that the British economy relied so heavily on its coal production that, when presiding over debates at the House of Lords, the Lord Chancellor should abandon sitting on a woolsack for a sack of coals (Smiles, 2009: 276). Where wool had once been the foundation of the nation's prosperity, coal fuelled the Industrial Revolution and, when combined with iron, forged the expansion of the British Empire. Coal production, and the need for increasingly efficient methods of

extraction and distribution, drove industrial technology and was largely responsible for the development of the nation's rail network. Previously only used on the household fire, the bakery, or malting furnace, coal became central to the British economy to such an extent Tony Hall, in his work on the importance of the industry *King Coal* (1981), labelled his first chapter, with both physical and metaphorical accuracy: 'An Island Built on Coal'.

Although used since Roman times when soldiers dug Northumbria's coal to fuel their fires while patrolling Hadrian's Wall, coal came to prominence when the rising cost of wood, during the sixteenth century, drove demand for an alternative fuel. Coal usage rose dramatically in the years, decades, and centuries that followed, but it was during the Industrial Revolution it exploded. During the course of the long nineteenth century, coal production and employment in the industry rose with staggering rapidity. Production rose from 11 million tonnes annually in 1800 to a peak of 292 million in 1913, and, in a labour-intensive industry, employment numbers followed this trend closely: in 1800, 40,000 were employed in coal mining rising to 1,107,000 in 1913, and peaking at 1,191,000 in 1920 (Benson, 1981: 7; Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2017). Following these peaks, and despite nationalisation in 1947, the industry declined steadily over the remainder of the twentieth century with two clear periods during which it shrank alarmingly. Firstly, in the 1960s when, although production dropped by approximately 25%, employee numbers fell almost 50% and, secondly, in the 1980s when, following the 1984/5 miners' strike, the industry was run down to almost insignificance.² In 1993, the last remaining deep coalmine in North-East England, Sunderland's Wearmouth Colliery, ceased production and the last in the UK, Kellingley Colliery near Doncaster, closed on 18th December 2015.³

² In 1960, production was 189 million tonnes with 607,000 employees and, in 1969, fell to 156 million tonnes with 306,000 employees; in 1980, output stood at 130 million tonnes with 237,000 employees and, in 1989, 100 million tonnes of coal were produced by just 56,000 employees (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2017). In 2016 just 1,000 people were employed in the UK coal industry, working largely in opencast sites.

³ In 2001 UK coal imports exceeded home-based production for the first time and, barring 2002, has done every year since. On 21st April 2017, Great Britain's electricity demand was met for the first time without using coal (Brown, 2017).

Coal was, as a column in *Punch* indicates, the “most precious jewel in the crown of England [...] from the treasury of KING COAL – dug from his mines in Newcastle” (Our Little Bird, 1849: 173). Central to the Victorian economy, coal also became a symbol for the stable and respectable household. In a lecture concerning gender roles in society, published as ‘Sesame and Lilies’ in 1865, John Ruskin envisaged the home at the centre of British society. It was man’s refuge from “his rough work in [the] open world” (Ruskin, 1977: 59) at the centre of Empire, he describes it thus:

Within his [a man’s] house [...] need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home – it is the place of Peace; the shelter, [...] a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods. (Ruskin, 1977: 59)

Not only was the country and Empire built on the foundations of the coal industry, the centre of an Englishman’s home was the sacrosanct hearth. Coal would also be used by Dickens as an indication of Scrooge’s transformation in *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Juxtaposed against his nephew Fred’s natural warmth, from “rapid walking in the fog and frost” (Dickens, 2003: 41), Scrooge’s frugality is measured in his use of coal, he himself had a “very small fire, but the clerk’s fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn’t replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal-box in his own room” (Dickens, 2003: 41). Scrooge’s metamorphosis is pronounced with a vigorous “merry Christmas Bob” and the instruction to “make up the fires, and buy another coal-scuttle before you dot another i, Bob Cratchit” (Dickens, 2003: 13). A coal-scuttle filled and a hearth fuelled largely by deposits extracted from the nation’s largest coalfield, which stretched across the counties of Northumberland and Durham: the Great Northern Coalfield.

While other cities and regions claim to be the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, the Great Northern Coalfield kept its fires burning and furnaces glowing. As a result the region prospered, its economic, technological, and industrial developments made it, as County Durham-born writer and former miner Sid Chaplin (1916-86) stated, “the model and matrix of the modern

world. It [was...], if not all-exclusively, the 'brain-tank' of the nation during a great period of flowering which lasted roughly from 1800 to the early 1900s" (cited in Smith, 1995: 118). Alongside the hyper-masculine industries of "shipping, shipbuilding, iron production and heavy engineering" (Knox, 1992: 92), coalmining became "a very powerful symbol around which to build a sense of belonging" (Wrightson, 2007: 149). Ultimately, as the poet Thomas Wilson (1773-1858) described in his preface to *The Pitman's Pay and Other Poems* (1843), Newcastle and, by extension, North-East England owed "every thing to her coal-mines. Coal [was] the staple article of her trade – the source of her wealth and foundation of her greatness" (Wilson, 1843: v).⁴ To an anonymous writer, coal was foundational to the region's prosperity:

I tell the truth you may depend:
In Durham or Northumberland
No trade in them could ever stand
If it were not for the coal trade. (cited in Benson, 1980: 12)

When J.B. Priestley (1894-1984) headed 'To the Tyne' on his *English Journey* (1939) in 1933, he arrived to find the region itself "might have been carved out of coal" (Priestley, 1949: 291); in a sense, it was. The heavy industry that flourished in the North East transformed the region into an "industrial hellhole" (Byrne, 1992: 37), but it bred a self-confident and organised working class – the most recognisable of whom was the coal miner. This was the birthplace of Joseph Skipsey a man who belonged to that most recognisable class of worker who, despite the absolute necessity of their economic role, was regularly misrepresented, misunderstood, and demonised.

1.2 Locating the (coal)field

In order to understand the complexity of reading Skipsey's poetry in the twenty-first century, the cultural and historical context of the mining industry needs to be mapped. In this sense, Skipsey's poetry must be located in the (coal)field. In the post-World War II rebuilding of Great

⁴ Thomas Wilson worked in the mines as a child but, through self-education, managed to escape them. He eventually became an alderman of Gateshead.

Britain there was a shift in the emphasis of political and economic power. The founding of the Welfare State acknowledged the iniquities that lay at the heart of British society and, if a repeat of the post-World War I economic crises was to be avoided, there was a recognition of the urgent need for social development and greater equality. As a result, the influence and importance of the British working class grew. The study of working-class literature and culture opened up as a direct result of Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958), Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1958), E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and the founding of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964. These studies focussed on and challenged the conventional view of history and culture, allowing both to be read from the bottom of society up rather than from the traditional top down perspective, blurring the previously fixed notions of 'high' and 'low' culture. 'Minority' voices that had previously been unheard started to become audible as post-war feminism grew and European empires collapsed; the lives of women, the working class, ethnic minorities, were discovered and appraised; 'new literatures' were found and scrutinised.

While the respectability, political influence, and economic power of the working class has waned in recent decades due to the curbing of "union power, [the] sell off [of] state-owned industries and a return to nineteenth-century principles of laissez-faire capitalism" (Jones, 2011: 45), the study of the lower classes throughout history has not. Despite this, much of the research on the working class has been carried out through sociological or historical lenses and only so much can be gleaned from assessments of the processes and structures of industry that surrounded their lived lives. In terms of the mining industry, numerous studies have been carried out, as industrial archaeologist Robert Young flippantly establishes, in determining "the number of indoor water taps or toilets per row of miners' cottages" (Young, 2002: 13). As a result, while the working practices, labour politics, and economic systems of UK coal mining are well researched, a meaningful understanding of the workers and families who lived in the miners' cottages is unobtainable, as "[r]eal people never appear other than in photographs" (Young, 2002: 12). These 'real people'

become traces existing only in the shadows of supposedly more important, over-arching considerations, becoming little more than cogs in the industrial process. In the literary output of working-class authors, however, one finds their social and economic interactions, their self-image, their aspirations, and, indeed, their struggles to survive.

As recently as 1974, discussions and studies of literature written by members of the working class were rare; it had been “tacitly assumed that the working class had no literature beyond the vaguely defined parameters of popular culture” (Vicus, 1974: 1) and working-class literature had been ignored. Three main texts found the overturning of this assumption. Firstly, Martha Vicinus’ *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth Century British Working-Class Literature* (1974) began the process of uncovering literary works written by, as novelist Thomas Lister (1800-42) labelled working-class authors in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1831, “persons in humble life and of defective education” (cited in Vicinus, 1974: 1).⁵ In developing six case studies concentrating on street ballads, the propaganda of coal miners’ unions, Chartist poetry, self-educated poets, dialect literature, and the music hall, Vicinus paints a general picture of a haphazard, non-linear, development of writing amongst the nineteenth-century British working classes. In doing so, however, Vicinus perpetuates many of the myths of working-class culture, particularly that it is only necessary and vital during times of political, economic, and social strife; as a result those writers who fail to engage in an overtly political discourse, Skipsey among them, are consequently criticised for not doing so. Secondly, in *The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working-Class Writing* (1985), the scope is widened as H. Gustav Klaus covers many literary forms with which mineworkers engaged including speeches, pamphlets, and letters, alongside more literary forms: the verse tale, songs and ballads, autobiographies, and “documentarism [sic]” (Klaus, 1985: 76); but here again lies an assumption

⁵ Vicinus lists just three “studies of the literature written for the poorly educated” (Vicus, 1974: 1) prior to hers: Richard D. Altick’s *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (1957); Margaret Dalziel’s *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago* (1957); and Louis James’ *Fiction for the Working Man 1830-1850* (1963).

that working-class writers are socialist by political persuasion and committed by degree. Thirdly, in his anthology *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (1987) Brian Maidment moves away, slightly, from the political aspects of the previous texts to look at the literariness of self-made poets:

their sense of literary tradition, their obsessive allusions to other poems from other cultural locations, their sense of formal possibility, [finding] their confusion (or often creative tension) between subject and manner [...Maidment deems] a major source of their interest. (Maidment, 1987: 13)

Maidment neatly divides his selection of poetry into three overarching areas: 'Chartists and Radicals', 'The Parnassians', and 'Lowly Bards and Homely Writers'; the anthology also provides prose selections on the 'Metropolitan Response to Self-taught Writing', estimations of 'The Difficulties of Appearing in Print', and various 'Defence[s] of the [use of] Dialect'. Although these first three categories are useful for classification and demarcation purposes, the most successful poets included, as John Goodridge maintains when examining 'Some Rhetorical Strategies in Later Nineteenth-Century Laboring-Class Poetry', resist these constraints and cross those boundaries. In organising the anthology in this manner, Maidment successfully reveals the range and ambition of some of the most prominent Victorian working-class writers.

More recently, John Goodridge's collaborative Recovering Labouring Class and Radical Writing Project (RLCRWP), at Nottingham Trent University, has led the study of literature written by working men and women between 1700 and 1900. The project, which ran formally between 2001 and 2008, collated "information compiled by a group of scholars over [...a period of] 21 years" (Goodridge, 2008), and had a profound effect on the study of working-class literature. As the project's impact study revealed: the RLCRWP had a "significant and sustained impact [...causing] a major shift in public understanding and appreciation for labouring class writers" (Scott, 2013: 3). The project identified self-taught poets who could be classified as belonging to a labouring-class

tradition, who published a volume of poetry, or were included in periodical publications, in either the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Although the project has formally ended, the *Database of British and Irish Labouring-Class Poets & Poetry: 1700-1900* is updated monthly by Goodridge and made available through academia.edu.

The database itself lists 2,055 poets who meet the identified criteria.⁶ My own interrogation of the database has identified that 110 of those listed, over 5% of the total, are described as miners, pitmen, or colliers for at least part of their lives.⁷ Of the 110 mineworker poets, Joseph Skipsey was by far the most prolific with fourteen published volumes (ten during his lifetime, and four posthumously); the next most prolific is Cornishman John Harris (1820-84) who published six works during his lifetime.⁸ On occasion, the identification of these poets as miners is tenuous as is the case with the earliest publication of a collection of poems by a miner listed on the database: *A New and Correct Set of Godly Poems* (1782) by David Love (1750-1827).⁹ Love was a:

pedlar poet, a miner who lost his job following an arm injury and began hawking books; published single sheets and chapbooks; settled in Nottingham where most of his books were published, including *A New and Correct Set of Godly Poems* (1782), *David Love's Journey to*

⁶ As of 1st May, 2018.

⁷ By contrast, there are 125 shoemaker poets listed and 435 involved in the textile industry (Goodridge, 2018: 41). As the database makes no specific distinction, the figure of 110 does not relate entirely to coal miners and includes miners of all ores and minerals.

⁸ The John Harris Society state Harris "had fifteen volumes and an autobiography published" (John Harris Society, n.d.) during his lifetime, but do not list them, while the *ODNB* records just one volume of poetry and the autobiography (Stephan, 2004), for consistency I have used Goodridge's records.

⁹ There is an earlier publication on the database (added January 2018), "a single sheet publication" (Goodridge, 2018: 104) by Hugh Boyd of Darnall Colliery, Sheffield. This publication is a single twelve quatrain poem and is Boyd's personal account of his surviving a mining accident: 'The Submissive Petit[i]on of the Distressed Hugh Boyd, late Collier in Darnel, near Sheffield, in the West-Riding of Yorkshire. Who was confined Six days and fourteen hours under Ground, with six more, by reason of the Roof falling upon them, by which Accident he lost two of his Fingers, which renders him incapable o[f] gaining his Family Bread, which consists of four Mother-less Orphans, she dying soon after he was delivered from the Pit, which happened the second of September, 1777' (c.1777). Love's book, however, remains the earliest poetry collection published by a miner.

London and his Return to Nottingham (1800), *The Life, Adventures, and Experiences of David Love* (Nottingham, 1823-4).¹⁰ (Goodridge, 2018: 305)

The database lists 155 works by mineworkers, Love's first work is one of two eighteenth-century entries, and there are 106 entries in the nineteenth century, 41 in the twentieth, and six in the twenty-first century.¹¹ The poets included are, reflecting the geographical locations of the nation's coalfields, predominantly from the north of the UK with 35 from Scotland, 33 from Northumberland and Durham, ten from Yorkshire, and four from Lancashire; there are also 16 poets listed from Wales, three from Ireland, six from Cornwall, two from the East Midlands, and one from the West Midlands.

A direct product of the RLCRWP has been two three-volume anthologies of poetry, the aim of which is to represent writers:

who have had some critical recognition [...] who remain obscure, but deserve further attention [...or] lesser figures [...] who are not by any means great poets, but whose work gives a sense of the broader mass of activity going on in labouring-class poetry during the period. (Goodridge, 2005: xv)

These collections provide an important resource by consolidating the lives and writing of many authors who have been largely ignored in literary studies but had to display "extraordinary resourcefulness, [in] finding modes of expression that could both convey what they wanted to say, and find readerships, despite meagre resources" (Goodridge, 2005: xxii-xxiii). This project currently provides the definitive resource for the study of many writers who have passed unconsidered elsewhere and an opportunity to raise out of obscurity individuals whose work highlights the

¹⁰ Taking up writing as a means of earning a living, following an industrial accident, is a common theme among working-class authors and both Thomas Wilson and J.P. Robson, discussed in this thesis, wrote poetry after their industrial careers were ended by injury.

¹¹ The numbers of publications outside the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be accounted for in a number of ways: firstly, the project remit was to identify writers who lived part of their lives in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, as such some of those listed were born in, but published out of, period; secondly, as the project expanded the number of contributors increased, the specialties of whom, widened the scope, and the number of writers 'out of period' has increased; thirdly, the database includes posthumous publications.

importance of literature as a means of self-expression, self-discovery, self-improvement, introspection, freedom, escapism, politicization, and, most notably, joy. Goodridge's projects have given important recognition to many writers, but further investigative work is needed to gain a fuller understanding of the individuals themselves, the standing they had within their communities, how they considered themselves as writers, and to what extent they were recognised and rewarded, or restricted and limited, by their peers and patrons.

While represented prominently within the RLCRWP, Skipsey remains in the shadow of other labouring-class writers such as, most notably, John Clare (1793-1864), Stephen Duck (1705-56), Ebenezer Elliott (1781-1849), Gerald Massey (1828-1907), Ann Yearsley (1753-1806), and Thomas Cooper (1805-92). Despite being prominent within the RLCRWP and the leading nineteenth-century mineworker poet, Skipsey is absent from three recent essay collections on the subject of working-class literature: *The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Aruna Krishnamurty (ed), 2009), *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1780-1900* (Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji (eds), 2013), and *A History of British Working Class Literature* (John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (eds), 2017). Moreover, within these essay collections the amount of research carried out on authors working, like Skipsey, between the collapse of Chartism and the beginning of the twentieth century is significantly reduced, a disparity that corresponds with an apparent lack of wholesale worker agitation. Similarly, while there has been, as Bridget Keegan points out in an essay on lead-miner poets Thomas Blackah (1828-95) and Richard Watson (1833-91), research published on several industry-specific fields of writing, "servant poets, agricultural poets, and shoemaker poets" (Keegan, 2011: 178), the writing lives of miners have remained underground. In fact, widespread critical discussions surrounding artistic representations of coal and those who risk their lives to recover it are rare.¹²

¹² There was recently a collaborative project studying how disability in British coalfields affected the cultural lives of those communities. 'Disability and Industrial Society: A Comparative Cultural History of British

The study and collection of writing by, or about, miners has been sporadic at best. Vicinus makes their political and propagandist writings, of the first half of the nineteenth century, an integral part of *The Industrial Muse* and Klaus, in *The Literature of Labour*, calls for his chapter on 'Forms of Miners' Literature in the Nineteenth Century', itself "a first mapping of the field [of...] the literary expressions of [...] coalminers themselves", to stimulate "further research and extended critical enquiry" (Klaus, 1985: 62). Yet, this work has stalled. Bridget Keegan's essay and my own research on Skipsey's life and poetry, seeks to revitalise it. Despite the importance and dominance of the coal industry there have been few collections of coalmining writing upon which scholars can base their study; I have found just two modern anthologies: *Coal: an anthology of mining* (Tony Curtis (ed), 1997) and *A Pitman's Anthology* (William Maurice (ed), 2004).¹³ These texts present examples of prose and poetry written by 90 different individuals, including notable figures: Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), George Orwell (1903-50), Philip Larkin (1922-85), D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), Émile Zola (1840-1902), and Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967). Of the 90 writers included, less than a third (23) were coal miners and six more had miners (usually fathers) in their families.¹⁴ Yet, it is clear, as Klaus outlines, miners did write. The suspicion is that there remains a conviction that coal miners were only worth what they dug out of the earth, their interests stereotyped as "lurcher-loving collier[s]" ('Twelve Poems, II', Auden, 2018: l.1); no longer Fynes' "terrible and savage pitman" (Fynes, 1873: 19) but savage nonetheless in their cultural tastes: a noble savage.¹⁵

Coalfields 1780-1948' was a Wellcome Trust project based at Swansea University in partnership with Aberystwyth, Northumbria, Glasgow Caledonian, and Strathclyde Universities, exploring literature "including parliamentary papers, official reports, medical texts, records from mining companies, trade unions, charities and the poor law, newspapers, diaries, and novels" (Disability and Industrial Society, 2017) surrounding coal-industry related disability. The project's first book, *Disability in the Industrial Revolution: Physical impairment in British coalmining, 1780-1880* (2018), has just been published.

¹³ There are, however, several collections that explore coalmining songs alongside poetry, this is discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁴ Six writers appear in both anthologies: Joseph Skipsey; novelist D.H. Lawrence; coal miner, poet, and playwright Joe Corrie (1894-1968); coal miner and novelist Harold Heslop (1898-1983); miner, politician, poet, and playwright Jack Jones (1884-1970); and journalist H.V. Morton (1892-1979).

¹⁵ For an excellent contemporary account of the history of mining in the region, refer to Richard Fynes, *The miners of Northumberland and Durham, a history of their social and political progress* (1873).

In what remains the only book length study of art and the coal industry I have located, the essay collection *Caverns of Night: Coal Mines in Art, Literature, and Film* (2000), editor William Thesing speculates artistic representations are rare because “coal mining represents an anti-aesthetic abyss, an impossible challenge to conventional notions of beauty and art” (Thesing, 2000: xiii); aesthetically coal represents a uniform, unsophisticated blackness absorbing and draining colour from the surrounding world. Coal is underground, out of sight, dangerous and dirty, its only value calorific and the people digging it from the bowels of the earth are, as Skipsey wrote in ‘The Hartley Calamity’, stained as “black as the coal they hew” (*CftCF1886*: 21-5, l.16); both substance and people lacking the nuanced complexities necessary to create interesting and revealing art. Yet, artists who have taken on this challenge have prospered, as demonstrated in 1982 when the Arts Council in conjunction with the National Coal Board (NCB) organised an exhibition of mining art including over 150 artefacts from artists as divergent as John Constable (1776-1837) and Henry Moore (1898-1986).¹⁶ As a result of such artistic endeavours, *The Caverns of Night* brings together essays that discuss the paintings of J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and Sidney Sime (1865-1941); the journalism of Richard Hengist Horne (1802-84) and G.W.M. Reynolds (1814-79); the fiction of Zola and Lawrence; the poetry of W.H. Auden (1907-73) and Tony Harrison (1937-). There is, however, a distinct absence of miners themselves barring one exception: Joseph Skipsey.¹⁷

Even in a book devoted to artistic representations of coal in art, however, the miner’s voice is marginalised, swept to the periphery by considerations that are more important. The essay on ‘Poetry, Politics, and Coal Mines in Victorian England’, by Thesing and Ted Wojtasik, visits three responses to death within the industry: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘The Cry of the Children’ (a reaction to The Children’s Employment Commission (Mines), 1842), and two poems written

¹⁶ This exhibition is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Nine.

¹⁷ Sidney Sime spent five years working in Yorkshire mines as a child; I have not classified him a miner in this context, however, because he was not a working miner while an artist.

following an accident at New Hartley in 1862: Skipsey's 'The Hartley Calamity' and Thomas Llewelyn Thomas' 'Coal-Mines'.¹⁸ Although the essay purports to explore how three writers from very different backgrounds (Browning an upper middle-class woman, Skipsey a working miner, and Thomas an Oxford undergraduate) gave "'voice' to the coal miner and to the coal-mining class" (Wojtasik, 2000: 33), it instead appears to be a vehicle to print the full text of Thomas' "virtually unavailable" (Wojtasik, 2000: 40) Newdigate prize winning poem of 1863, which the authors "happened to notice [...] in the catalogue of a London rare book dealer" (Wojtasik, 2000: 47). Of the seventeen pages to which the essay extends, two are given over to the bibliography, two to illustrations, and five are dedicated to a full reprint of Thomas' poem. The section of the essay dealing with Skipsey's 'The Hartley Calamity' stretches to a single paragraph in which the authors give brief biographical details of Skipsey and second-hand accounts of his performances of the poem. While it is noble to bring to the fore a poem that, unlike Skipsey's, "sank into oblivion" (Wojtasik, 2000: 37), it appears a missed opportunity to have afforded such little space to the only coal miner in the book.

Where Joseph Skipsey has been noticed in criticism, it has usually only been done so briefly and with a pitying fascination for his biography, as Ifor Evans in *English Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century* (1933) and Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft in *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century* (1936) found:

written in the scant leisure of a life of manual labor, [Skipsey's poems] display a genuine lyrical gift. Though they are not free from traces of his lack of education, they are no mere curiosities, but testify to the thwarting of a genuine talent by the economic conditions of the poet's life. (Kunitz, 1936: 564).

In hoping to prove the poet's 'authenticity' through a scrupulous connection to his industrial heritage, Evans finds Skipsey in a dilemma in which the acquisition of the "technical skill" (Evans,

¹⁸ This report is discussed in Chapter Three; Skipsey's poem is discussed in Chapter Two.

1933: 324) to write poetry can only be achieved in being removed from “the centres of suggestion which made his poetry possible” (Evans, 1933: 324). This belief that Skipsey, and others like him, can only draw inspiration from his immediate environment is a recurring theme. As is Evans’ proclamation that Skipsey’s poetry was “remarkable verse for a miner entirely self-educated to have written, but it is not remarkable, absolutely, as poetry” (Evans, 1933: 323). This is an opinion with which Rodney Pybus concurs in his 1966 survey ‘Writing: North-East’ for *Strand* magazine, as does W.E. Parkinson in his 1972 survey of ‘Poetry in the North East’. Both Parkinson and Pybus place Skipsey, rightly, on a continuum of poetry from the region concerning itself with coalmining. Following on from Thomas Wilson, Parkinson and Pybus see Skipsey as exceptional within his region, Parkinson numbers him among the “dribs and drabs of comparative [literary] success” (1972: 109) and Pybus argues, Skipsey was the “second exception to the uninspired level of literature in the region in the 19th century” (Pybus, 1966: 20). While Parkinson finds only “a small number of [Skipsey’s poems...] passable” (Parkinson, 1972: 109-10), Pybus is more generous in suggesting that, although “severely limited [...] by his background” (Pybus, 1966: 21), Skipsey established himself as a “minor poet with a distinctive place in the late 19th century” (Pybus, 1966: 21). This ‘distinctive place’ was achieved and secured through Skipsey’s association with the Pre-Raphaelites. Kathrine Jackson, in her PhD thesis *Pre-Raphaelite and Working-Class poetry, 1850-1900* (2014), explores the assistance Skipsey received from the Pre-Raphaelite circle in what she envisions as an “implicit” (Jackson, 2014: 33) aesthetic alliance that formed between this group and various working-class poets, I discuss this relationship in Chapter Six.

Martha Vicinus, in *The Industrial Muse*, is the first critic to quote from a letter from Rossetti (29th October, 1879) in which he praised Skipsey’s poetry, and is the first to portray Skipsey as representative of his trade and his class when suggesting that, in the nineteenth century, “reading Skipsey implied a recognition of the English working man and his place in society” (Vicinus, 1974: 60). Although not free from errors, Vicinus’ study is the first meaningful scholarly engagement with

Skipsey's poetry, concentrating in particular on how "for Skipsey nature reflects society" (Vicinus, 1974: 151), and is the first to recognise his desire to break free from the strictures of "society's definition of him as a pit-poet, [instead] attempting to fashion his own self-definition" (Vicinus, 1974: 158). Both of these arguments are supported by Gustav Klaus (1985: 76) in his survey of miners' literature in *The Literature of Labour*. Somewhat problematic within Vicinus' investigation, however, is the recognition given to Robert Spence Watson as Skipsey's patron, which I discuss in Chapter Three.

The publication of Basil Bunting's *Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems* (1976) and two editions of Kelsey Thornton et al's *Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems* (2012, 2014), both referred to throughout this thesis, recognise the enduring interest in Skipsey's poetry as does his inclusion in Brian Maidment's *The Poorhouse Fugitives*. Maidment includes a selection of Skipsey's poems, throughout the broad classifications described above, finding them "reticent, pointed, [and] poignant" (Maidment, 1992: 188). Maidment too notes the influence of nature on Skipsey's poetry but, somewhat confusingly, suggests he suffered "humiliation from his acquaintance with Dante Gabriel Rossetti" (Maidment, 1992: 85). Maidment further argues that, through his association with Rossetti, Skipsey had been influenced into "appropriating [William] Blake for his poetical model" (Maidment, 1992: 85), a supposed influence I discuss extensively in Chapter Seven. Shirley Dent in her PhD thesis on the reception of Blake from the 1860s to the 1880s, *Iniquitous Symmetries* (2000), explores Skipsey's editorship of *The Poems, with Specimens of the Prose Writings, of William Blake* (1884) but makes no claim that Blake influenced Skipsey. Dent provides an excellent account of Skipsey's mysticism and his "individual vision [set...] against the brute beauty of the Northumbrian coalfield" (Dent, 2000: 156), a necessarily solitary position that turns his poetic eye inwards to become a representative of his class.

The establishment of John Goodridge's RLCRWP has served as a reminder of the possibilities of working-class poets and, although Skipsey has yet to be the sole focus of a published academic

article, has led to further critical examinations of his poetry. Goodridge himself has noted, in his article 'Some Rhetorical Strategies in Later Nineteenth-Century Laboring-Class Poets', that where Skipsey appears in anthologies his inclusion has been restricted to shorter poems of domestic life such as 'Mother Wept' or "'Get Up!'" (Goodridge, 2005: 541). Bridget Keegan, in her article "'Incessant toil and hands innumerable": Mining and Poetry in the Northeast of England', follows Vicinus' implication that Skipsey's poetry was a continuation of the propagandist writings of coal mining unions in the first half of the nineteenth century, arguing that "no one did more than coal miner Joseph Skipsey [...] to challenge popular misconceptions about miners [by...] creating sympathy and understanding for the miners' plight and depicting the sorrows and losses of the miner's life" (Keegan, 2011: 184). A co-authored article by Keegan and Goodridge (2013), 'Modes and Methods in Three Nineteenth-Century Mineworker Poets', placed Skipsey alongside his fellow North-East coal-miner poet Alexander Barrass (c.1856-1929) and the Cornish tin-miner John Harris. In this article Skipsey is found to be both atypical of working-class poets, part of an "awkward squad" (Keegan, 2013: 239) who resists categorization, but typical of mineworker poets of his region in his efforts for self-education and his affinity with the regional oral and song-based culture. This resistance to categorization is something Isobel Armstrong seemingly recognises in her brief section on Skipsey, in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, poetics, and politics* (1993). In the introduction to 'Part III: Another Culture? Another Poetics?', Armstrong describes Skipsey's poetry as "unprecedented" (Armstrong, 1993: 400) and the poet himself as "one of the last flowerings of working-class poetry in the century" (Armstrong, 1993: 401), as after Skipsey, Armstrong argues, the middle-class began increasingly to 'speak' for the working classes.

While it may be difficult to categorise Skipsey as a poet, as Keegan and Goodridge argue, it is easier to place him within what can be seen as a nineteenth-century continuum of North-East poetry of miners and mining. In a progression that excludes working-class writers who, although they did write poetry, wrote primarily for the music hall or were songwriters first, Skipsey fits

between Thomas Wilson and Alexander Barrass in a succession of individuals whose writing careers end as another begins. Although writers have engaged, usually negatively, with mining for centuries, it is widely accepted that Edward Chicken's *The Collier's Wedding* (c.1729) is the earliest recorded literary rendition of a North-East mining community.¹⁹ Throughout the long satirical poem, Chicken presents a bacchanalian picture of the miners' courtship rituals that adheres to the image of the pitman as a lawless barbarian. In the nineteenth century, Thomas Wilson announces, in the 'Preface' to his *The Pitman's Pay and Other Poems*, that there had been no further poetry written on mining "since the publication of CHICKEN'S 'COLLIER'S WEDDING'" (Wilson, 1843: vii) and in the intervening century the "pitman's character has undergone considerable amelioration" (Wilson, 1843: vii). This long poem is presented largely in dialect and focusses on the social interactions of the members of a mining community in an ale house on "PAY NIGHT" (Wilson, 1843: 1) and gives an interesting insight into mining lives at the turn of the nineteenth century.²⁰ Wilson declares:

I sing not here of warriors bold,
Of battles lost or victories won,
Of cities sack'd or nations sold,
Or cruel deeds by tyrants done.

I sing the pitmen's plagues and cares,
Their labour hard and lowly lot,
Their homely joys and humble fares,
Their pay-night o'er a foaming pot. (Wilson, 1843: 2, ll. 1-8)

Wilson shows, despite the alehouse setting, that miners are more respectable than had been thought. Wilson died in 1858, almost as if handing on a torch, the year in which Skipsey published his first volume of poetry. Following Skipsey on this continuum is Alexander Barrass.²¹ Joseph

¹⁹ Little is known about Edward Chicken (1698–1746) other than he wrote *The Collier's Wedding* and he is said to have been a "weaver, schoolmaster, and clerk" (Keegan, 2011: 181) as well as a poet.

²⁰ The first section of *The Pitman's Pay* was published in 1826, with subsequent sections published in 1828 and 1830. 'Pay night' was the fortnightly day on which miners received their wages.

²¹ Basil Bunting might have argued that he should be placed on this continuum, Bunting's position is discussed in Chapter Nine.

Skipsey published his final volume of poetry in 1892 and five years later friends of Alexander Barrass published his *The Pitman's Social Neet* (1897).²² This long dialect poem, again set in a public house, is broken down into alternating 'songs' and 'interludes' that are performed, almost like a coal-mining version of *The Canterbury Tales*, by various different speakers, all of whom have a connection to the mining industry. There has been little critical attention paid to these poets engaging in a "celebratory communitarian tradition" (Keegan, 2013: 243), and, in examining the life and work of Joseph Skipsey, this thesis aims to be a starting point from which other mineworker poets can be studied and recognised.

One area of research in which the cultural lives of miners is not underrepresented is the study of folk song, and in North-East England this is a particularly rich seam. While Skipsey is somewhat anomalous to this tradition, in that he wrote with a view to publish poetry rather than songs, he was certainly informed and influenced by it as can be seen in the titles given to each of his collections, all of which refer to a musical form. Foundational to the modern study of the songs of miners is A.L. Lloyd's *Come All Ye Bold Miners* (1952), a text published at the behest of the newly formed NCB. *Come All Ye Bold Miners* was compiled as part of the NCB's contribution to the 1951 Festival of Britain celebration and had a tripartite purpose. Firstly, to "make a collection of coalfield songs before they disappeared" (Lloyd, 1978: 11); secondly, to show, in the "rough songs, mostly made by rough men" (Lloyd, 1978: 13), communities with a cultural life belying the image of miners "as a strange race, dirty, savage, prodigal and drunken, not worthy of education nor of any better conditions than the mine-owners chose to grant them" (Lloyd, 1978: 14); thirdly, to display the 'strange race' working underground worthy of a central place in the newly privatised coal industry, contributing to the nation's wealth. In compiling the collection, Lloyd ran a competition inviting miners to submit songs relating to their lives in and around the pits; the result was dominated by

²² Barrass suffered a mental breakdown in the mid-1890s and was institutionalised; he remained in Sedgfield Asylum (Keegan, 2013: 243) until his death in 1929.

folksong from North-East England. As if to anticipate Thesing's assertion that coalmining represented an 'anti-aesthetic abyss', one reviewer found in Lloyd's selection:

songs from a different world. Songs fit for a black, scarred landscape, peopled by a black repressed but proud independent and militant close-knit community – the miners. Slag-heaps replaced banks of sweet primroses, and disasters and industrial struggle were the order of the day. (Arthur, 1979: 488)

These were black songs for black people, where the natural beauty of primroses is replaced by the man-made constructions of slag-heaps and industrial struggle. Despite this, the collection displays, as Martha Vicinus has acknowledged, a long-standing tradition of North-Eastern miners composing songs (Vicinus, 1974: 61). Yet the interest in song writing cannot be seen in isolation from poetry. As Goodridge has made clear, the line between song and poetry among working-class individuals in the North East is unclear at best (Goodridge, 2006: xx), and much of this is due to the rich oral culture of the region as one pitman described:

Making rhymes and songs used to run through the pits like a fever. Some of them used to gan daft thinking of verses. Even us young lads used to answer back in rhyme. (cited in Parkinson, 1972: 109)

The pitman here sees rhymes, songs, and verse as interchangeable, but it is a form of verbal culture that, W.E. Parkinson argues in his 1972 survey of 'Poetry in the North East', prevented the development of a regional literature. Parkinson believed the creative energies required to form a literary tradition were instead invested in an oral tradition of versifying and storytelling. As a result, to studies such as Robert Colls' *The Collier's Rant: Song and Culture in the Industrial Village* (1977) or David Harker's *Song and Verse of the North-East Pitmen, c. 1780-1844* (1999), songs and poetry are almost interchangeable. To consider Skipsey's career, however, also illustrates the marginalisation of poetry in favour of song, as it does the extent to which song and music percolated through mining communities and the wider region.

Although Skipsey uses musical terminology in the titles of his collections, the liberal scatterings of musicality, the occasional instruction that a poem should be read to an 'air' (cf. *P1871*, 'The Toper's Song', 54), or the ease with which his poetry can be set to music, he seems never to have caught the public imagination on Tyneside as much as music-hall songwriters such as Robert Nunn (1808-53), Joseph Philip Robson (1808-70), Ned Corvan (1829-65), George Ridley (1835-64), or Joe Wilson (1841-75).²³ Despite the crossover between poetry and song-writing, "first the free-and-easy taverns, then the concert halls and finally by the late 1860s, the music hall" (Ashton, 1999: 14) dominated the cultural lives of the region's working class, a point reinforced by an overview of J.P. Robson's career.

Although coming from an educated family, when orphaned at the age of eight Robson became an apprentice planemaker and when a work-place injury forced him into alternative employment he became a schoolmaster, like his father before him. Robson began writing poetry to supplement his schoolmaster income and his first volume, *Blossoms of Poesy* (1831), was written in Standard English. Robson only found real success, however, when persuaded to write a song using Tyneside dialect. The song in question, 'The Pitmin Milisha', found such success that Robson abandoned Standard English to continue "scribbling in the same lingo" (cited in Hermeston, 2009: 65).²⁴ Prolific as a dialect poet, Robson gained himself a respected reputation and even received a

²³ Californian musician Albert Israel Elkus (1864-1962) adapted 'The Merry Bee' for voice and piano in 1906. The Albert Israel Elkus Papers (University of California, Berkley) contains an item described as "The Merry Bee, 'A golden bee acometh', for voice and piano. Poem of John Skipsey. [...] Signed: October, 1906" (Stetson, 2000: 16). The attribution to John Skipsey is, presumably, incorrect as the opening line given matches that of Joseph Skipsey's 'The Merry Bee' (*S&L*: 105). Skipsey's great grandson Chris Harrison has arranged many of his forebear's poems to music.

²⁴ This song was first performed by Bob Sessford at a Marine Association Annual Dinner and later at Balambra's, a venue ingrained into Tyneside folklore as the starting point for the bus in George Ridley's 'The Blaydon Races':

Aa went to Blaydon Races, 'twas on the ninth of Joon,
Eiteen hundred an' sixty-two, on a summer's afternoon;
Aa tyuk the 'bus frae Balmbra's, an' she wis heavy laden,
Away we went 'lang Collin'wood Street, that's on the road to Blaydon.

(Allan, 1972: 451)

'The Blaydon Races' was first performed in 1862 at Balambra's.

commission from Prince Lucien Bonaparte (1813-91) to translate 'The Song of Solomon' into Tyneside dialect. Although successful locally when writing in dialect, Robson found it brought its own difficulties when it came to establishing a wider readership.

Writing in a dialect often considered almost impenetrable to 'outsiders', Robson wrote local poems for local people that were ignored by a national middle class. This was a position he clearly found himself in when after an application, to the Royal Literary Fund (RLF), for financial support was rejected. Robson wrote, in a letter dated 16th October 1860, questioning the committee's judgement:

Can you understand the major portion of my compositions written in the peculiar dialect of the Tyne? And not being able to comprehend them, have you not cast them aside in disgust, as books useless, trashy and valueless? Gentlemen, I am persuaded that with all your classical attainments you are incapable of reading a single page of my songs in the veritable vernacular of the Tyne; and on these compositions rest my long established popularity in the north. How then, I ask you, can you sit as judges in case of its merits you are completely ignorant. (cited in Ashton, 1999: 22)

Although the tone of Robson's complaint was unlikely to garner favour for further applications, this letter reveals some of the interpretative issues dialect writers faced when presenting their work to external audiences.²⁵ Robson undoubtedly had a 'long established popularity in the north', but in their failure to 'comprehend' his 'compositions' is a reflection of the response of a wider audience who also 'cast them aside' out of ignorance of 'the peculiar dialect of the Tyne'. Thus, the region's dialect writers, whose work was less transferable across the nation, found the regional music hall more accepting of their work; to many, judging by Joe Wilson's comments, regional success brought contentment:

²⁵ Robson was rejected again when applying to the RLF for a fourth and final time.

Sang-writing, [...] had lang been me hobby, an' at sivinteen me forst beuk wes published.

Since that time it's been me aim to hev a place i' the hearts o' Tyneside people, wi written bits o' hyemly sangs aw think they'll sing. (cited in Brockie, 1888: 72)

In this manner, the dialect writer finds fame locally but paradoxically, is trapped in the impenetrable dialect. This is not, however, a one-way process. While Robson was, seemingly, dismissed for using dialect, Skipsey is, conversely, criticised for not and instead “seiz[ing] on the traditional aristocratic and bourgeois language of poetry” (Richards, 1988: 59-60); one poet disadvantaged in using his dialect, the other criticised for not.

1.3 The industrial writer: dislocating class and culture

The criticism Skipsey receives here from a critical audience is not, however, the only difficulty with which he has to contend. In acquiring and applying the ‘soft skills’ associated with poetic composition, Skipsey puts himself into opposition with the hard, hyper-masculine world in which he labours. A place where, as William Thesing argues, “coal miners and coal mining are real, authentic, even manly, whereas the aesthetic is artificial, fabricated, even effeminate” (Thesing, 2000: xxi-xxii). As such, the skills required to create poetry tend not to be those prized by mining or other working-class communities. As a result, the working-class writer is both a part of and apart from the community about which they write. In writing poetry, working-class writers instantaneously and simultaneously reject the community to which they are inextricably linked. In her study of working-class autobiography Nan Hackett argues this process begins not the moment an individual is published, but, instead, once they decide to develop those ‘soft skills’ when they:

chose to teach themselves to read or to learn Latin on Sundays or to study mathematics [...] rather than to a tavern in the evenings. [In this moment t]hey were estranged from their coworkers, neighbors, earlier friends and even family members. (Hackett, 1989: 210)

As a result, the working-class writer leads a 'doubled' life; their verse a luxurious passion removed from the struggles of daily existence. To the communities in which Skipsey lived and wrote to hew coal is real, authentic, and manly, a necessity; to consider the aesthetic of that reality is to be artificial, fabricated, and, replete with the derogatory connotations, effeminate, intellectually removed from his society. The very term itself, 'working-class writer', therefore, becomes oxymoronic: at once, the writer is removed from the class and society about which they write; one can only be one or the other but not both simultaneously.

As the working-class writer becomes dislocated from their community in this manner, they are equally tied to it by the intransigence of social hierarchy and the label attributed to them. In *The Pall Mall Gazette* review of Skipsey's *Carols from the Coalfields*, Oscar Wilde wrote that the "conditions [preceding...] artistic production are so constantly treated as qualities of the work of art itself, that one is tempted to wish that all art were anonymous" (Wilde, 1887: 5); Wilde, however, does not allow Skipsey this indulgence, instead declaring:

certain forms of art [are] so individual in their utterance, so purely personal in their expression, that for a full appreciation of their style and manner some knowledge of the artist's life is necessary [....because] the life and the literature are too indissolubly wedded to be ever really separated. (Wilde, 1887: 5)

For Skipsey, and others, this indissoluble wedding of life and literature gives initial recognition but comes with a constraining label that effectively denies access to a wider range of poetic subjects. Therefore, Skipsey becomes 'The Pitman Poet', Ellen Johnston (c. 1835-73) 'The Factory Girl', John Clare (limited by geography *and* class) becomes the 'Northamptonshire Peasant Poet', and Ebenezer Elliott, by political movement, becomes 'The Corn Law Rhymer'. Although the bestowal of the title brings to the aspiring writer distinction, the title restrains and constrains the subject range the poet is permitted to address. They are instead:

expected to continue providing literary evidence of [their] origins — rather than, say, write poetry about the music of the spheres, as Skipsey does in ‘The Mystic Lyre’. Once one had written oneself into the tradition of labouring-class poetry, perhaps by declaring one’s origins on a title-page or in a preface, it was hard to escape the literary expectations that came with the territory: that one’s poetry should be popular in style and method and should substantially address one’s social origins and one’s ‘own’ culture. (Goodridge, 2006: xxi)

Exploring the wide range of human thought and feeling may be the poet’s purpose, but not one for those encumbered with the prefix of an industrial label or the heft of the ‘working-class’ identifier; instead the writer is subordinated to their industry or class, burdened with the expectation that they must prove and re-prove their authentic working-class credentials. This is a frustration the Scottish miner, poet, novelist, trade unionist, and MP James Welsh (1880-1954) noted in the preface to his *Songs of a Miner* (1918):

I rather dislike the fact that there is a tendency already in some quarters to dub me a “miner poet.” Miner I am, poet I may be; but let the world not think there is virtue in the combination. “Ploughman poets,” “navvy poets,” “miner poets” appeal only to the superficialities of life. The poet aims at its elementals. (Welsh, 1918: 11)

While Skipsey was, in the first instance, happy to accept the label of ‘Pitman Poet’ bestowed upon him in his first review, it is clear in his correspondence that he was frustrated by the lack of recognition given to those poems that did not concern everyday pit-village life. Instead, Skipsey strove to reach beyond the superficiality of his label but found himself perpetually constrained within it.

This constraint of a working-class poet’s identity and the corpus of their work is not, however, just applicable during their lifetimes. Without real revision and study the working-class writer, if recognised at all, remains contained within the few poems the anthologist deems representative of the relevant label. Thus, Skipsey remains the ‘Pitman Poet’, not a poet who

happened to be a pitman, and his more ambitious poetry attracts the criticism of Basil Bunting where he dismisses poems in which Skipsey “abandons the life he knew [and...] tries to be clever” (Bunting, 1976: 14). Bunting’s edited collection, referred to above, is valuable for keeping Skipsey’s poetry alive, introducing it to another generation of readers, and it is interesting to read the views of a poet who had a distinct Northumbrian identity. Bunting’s ‘Preface’, however, appears rushed, makes basic factual errors, and, as Silvia Bigliazzi highlights, he “felt obliged to find fault before he could praise” (Bigliazzi, 2006: 65). In his selection, Bunting takes “the liberty of excising a needless word [and occasionally...] straighten[ing] out a few inversions” (Bunting, 1976: 14), often applying anachronistic methods to ‘improve’ Skipsey’s poems. Bunting validates the alterations he makes in stating his “selection is meant to be read for pleasure only” (Bunting, 1976: 14), warding “off the scholars” (Bunting, 1976: 14) and discouraging serious study. In doing so, Bunting effectively damns the poems as unworthy of deeper academic consideration, actively reinforcing the boundaries within which Skipsey must remain. In this warding off, Bunting effectively places Skipsey in a box labelled ‘inadequate’ or ‘unworthy’; yet he also acts as a protector.

1.4 Hegemony and cultural capital

As Tony Bennett argues, in his essay ‘Popular Culture and the “Turn to Gramsci”’, middle-class domination of culture is not achieved through the “obliteration of working class culture [,] but via its *articulation* to bourgeois culture and ideology” (Bennett, 2006: 95); working-class culture is effectively altered as it is negotiated into a position that mimics bourgeois forms. Bunting’s dissuasion of scholarly consideration protects Skipsey’s authenticity and purity by averting the gaze of the bourgeois mechanisms that ensure the subordinate culture is “expressed in the forms of” (Bennett, 2006: 1995) the dominant class. Despite the seemingly obvious alignment of Marxist criticism with working-class literature, there is no real unifying critical theory utilised by scholars of working-class literature. In the introduction to the third volume of *Nineteenth-Century English*

Labouring Class Poets 1800-1900 (2006), Goodridge hints at a possible critical approach to the study of working-class writers. When arguing that labouring-class poets were regularly 'encouraged' to write works that validated, represented, and authenticated their social existence Goodridge hints at the writing on hegemony by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). Although Gramsci gives no single and precise definition, he does state hegemony can be identified as:

the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (Gramsci, 1999: 145)

In this instance, the spontaneous consent given by working-class writers is in the symbolic and real act of taking up a pen. In doing so they agree to submit to the power and influence inherent in the dominant group that has stratified, over numerous generations, a powerful set of expectations of the limitations and zones of working-class life, as Gramsci points out: a general direction imposed on social life. While the act of writing would seem to threaten transgressing an imposed general direction, the 'guidance' and 'encouragement' offered is a coercion that endorses and limits. The universal subject of poetry, a humanistic perspective on life, is offered to working-class writers but is done so on the understanding that they reinforce and, as Marxist historian David Harker argues in relation to Joe Wilson's nineteenth-century Tyneside music hall songs, "popularize the values, attitudes and ideas espoused by the bourgeoisie and by those who aspire [...] to that status" (Harker, 1986: 127). The dominant group is not interested in the subordinate's self-identity, instead dominance equals the privilege to project upon the subordinate its expectations, stereotypes, and limitations. Thus a circularity is arrived at, whereby the working-class writer succumbs and submits to the coercive 'encouragement' and recognition accompanied by the constant requirement to validate and represent their social origins and their 'own' culture.

The constant need for working-class writers to reassert their authenticity, while being distinctly 'othered' from the community they are encouraged to represent, creates a tension between authorial aspiration and hegemonic expectation. This tension is focussed on what Pierre Bourdieu termed "cultural and social capital" (Bourdieu, 1986). In the essay 'The Forms of Capital' (1986), Bourdieu identifies the existence of three different types of capital. The simplest of these forms is economic capital, which exists in the shape of cash and material assets. The second is cultural capital that, Bourdieu argues, exists in three states: the *embodied* state ("long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu, 1986), acquired through self-improvement); the *objectified* state ("cultural goods" such as "pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines" (Bourdieu, 1986)); and the *institutionalized* state ("academically sanctioned [...] legally guaranteed qualifications" (Bourdieu, 1986)).²⁶ The acquisition of these different types of cultural capital can be seen as a staged process. One first acquires embodied capital through education and a way of life, an internalization process Bourdieu terms the "*habitus*" (Bourdieu, 1986), the physical embodiment of one's life experiences. Bourdieu argues that cultural tastes are dictated by this process and, as such, middle and upper-class individuals are more predisposed to appreciate fine art and other aspects of 'high' culture because their cultural 'training' has taught them to do so. Once embodied, this capital shapes the types of objectified capital (the books, paintings, and machines) an individual might acquire or be interested in obtaining. Finally, the combination of embodied and objectified capital an individual possesses dictates the type of institutionalized cultural capital, socially sanctioned and objectively measured credentials or qualifications, one seeks. The final form Bourdieu identifies is social capital, a "durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986), denoting membership of a group conferring upon its members a collective and shared reputation. Although it would seem cultural

²⁶ Bourdieu defines 'self-improvement' widely, including any activity which involves "an effort that presupposes a personal cost" (Bourdieu, 1986).

and social capital exists in bourgeois circles only, partly due to the examples Bourdieu gives, all three forms exist in any societal or hierarchical structure, and it is “the distribution of the types and subtypes [...] represent [...] the immanent structure of the social world” (Bourdieu, 1986). To Bourdieu, the nature of the capital from which a society is constructed defines that society’s potential and a “set of constraints” (Bourdieu, 1986) placed upon it; the existent capital is a direct reflection and embodiment of that society.

Bourdieu’s argument here resembles that of Karl Marx (1818-83) and his description of how a society’s mode of production shapes the society itself: “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1977). Bourdieu examines Marx’s term, social existence, in terms of capital. This social existence and the capital mix thereof is, however, a personal and individual experience and, while Bourdieu measures a social community by this capital mix, how an individual engages with their society’s expectations shapes the individual and responses to them. In these terms, a working-class writer is shaped not only by their social existence and the capital they choose to acquire, but also by the constraints of that society and the constraints of hegemonic expectation. As Spence Watson illustrates in *Joseph Skipsey: His Life and Work*, Skipsey’s social existence was shaped by the need for economic capital in order to provide basic physiological needs for human survival:

When Skipsey returned home after the weary day's work was over he not infrequently heard from his good mother, “Joe, hinney, thou'll just gan out and gether a gud handful o' nettles and aa'l meyk th' a sup broth wi' breed in't.” She was a good, hard-working woman, but few of the working classes in that day knew what it was to have regular meals or sufficient quantity to eat. The marvel is that any of the children grew up as strong men and women as they did. (RSWB: 18)

With its turn to dialect, its ideal of the working-class family living in harmony with its environment, its marvelling at the stoic, 'good, hard-working woman', this passage is clearly open to accusations of romanticizing working-class poverty but it does show that economic capital was paramount in order to meet the most basic of the Skipsey family's needs. Joseph not only had to work underground, he also had to work further in order to eat.

What this passage also exemplifies, in the struggle to find food, is middle-class expectations and subsequent constraints placed on that community. Upon initial inspection, the immediate need for economic capital would seem to obviate the need for either cultural or social capital for Skipsey as he told *The Pall Mall Gazette*: "even such [a] little weekly sum I could earn was of importance to a family like ours" (PMG: 1), he had "no means of education to speak of" (PMG: 1) and chose not to access religious education at a Sunday school because his "mother was too poor to buy Sunday clothes and [he] didn't like to go out without them" (PMG: 2). While Skipsey's social existence clearly provided him with cultural and social capital, in the know-how and community support required to dig coal, the types of capital associated with an industrial background are subordinate to the education and cultural artefacts valued by the dominant middle class, what Bourdieu would recognise as 'legitimate culture'. Instead, the cultural capital Spence Watson highlights is the hardiness, the interaction with nature, and the physical prowess of the working-class family, and in defining these types of capital in opposition to Bourdieu's term, what can be recognised as 'illegitimate culture'. In bourgeois terms, Skipsey's poverty is not of economic capital it is, as Gertrude Himmelfarb argues in terms of Victorian poverty as a social problem, "a cultural rather than economic condition" (Himmelfarb, 1985: 366), he is in a position of cultural and social capital deprivation, in possession of illegitimate forms of culture.

As Thesing notes "coal miners and coal mining are real, authentic, even manly" (Thesing, 2000: xxi-xxii), as such the embodied and the objectified capital required to remain within that community proves antithetical to the aesthetic. To consider the acquisition of cultural capital

different from that which is expected and respected within one's immediate environment is to make oneself 'other' to that environment, defying class solidarity and transgressing the boundaries of their community. In a mining community that relies on social cohesion and the striving toward a common objective, the pursuit of capital antithetical to that common objective can lead to the estrangement Nan Hackett describes above. Whether Skipsey felt it a form of *libido sciendi*, a fundamental desire to acquire knowledge, or simply an opportunity to stave off the "stupefying, brutalizing tedium of doing nothing" (Engels, 1993: 251) working as a trapper boy, he chose to acquire cultural capital that would mark him out as 'other' within his community. Bourdieu is careful to note that, given the right conditions, both cultural and social capital is transformable into economic capital as, to paraphrase literary and art critic Walter Pater (1839-94), 'all capital constantly aspires to the condition of economic'.²⁷ When *Lyrics, by J.S., A Coal Miner* (1858), was published, Skipsey was able, for the first time, to transform his cultural capital as a poet into economic capital. This thesis explores Skipsey's career and poetry through the prism of cultural capital, demonstrating how, using correspondence to, from, and about him, the hegemony privileges certain forms of capital that ensures a working-class writer, like Skipsey, is kept within his industrial designation despite efforts to shake himself free from the coal dust.

²⁷ Pater, in his essay 'The School of Giorgioni', argues that music is the only art-form in which subject and form are indistinguishable from one another and that this is the ultimate purpose of art, he famously declared "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" (Pater, 1877: 528).

CHAPTER TWO

The Pitman and the Poet

2.1 Fear and sympathy: affect and the coal miner

Despite their importance to national economies around the world, the work of miners was largely ignored. As long as trade continued, fires were fuelled, and furnaces glowed, coal miners went unheeded, the coal on the fire disassociated from the labourer who won it. As George Orwell (1903-50) described, in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), it was only with conscious effort that the worker and the coal could be considered alongside one another:

It is only very rarely, when I make a definite mental effort, that I connect [...] coal with that far-off labour in the mines [....] You could quite easily drive a car right across the north of England and never once remember that hundreds of feet below [...] miners are hacking at the coal. (Orwell, 1958: 29-30)

Although the centre of the British Empire, London, depended upon coal it was only when production was interrupted that consumers contemplated the existence of miners. There were two main reasons for extended disruptions to coal production, a disaster or industrial action, and each elicited its own particular response from the wider public. Each situation produced a particular affect, an emotional response to a particular stimulus, accidents prompting sympathy and strikes animosity.²⁸ Faced with the stimulus of a mining tragedy whole nations could be overwhelmed with grief and governments moved to constructive, benevolent action, but, as H.F. Bulman's study *Coal Mining and the Coal Miner* (1920) reveals, the miner was usually considered, of "all classes of labour, [...] the most grasping and the most combative, the sturdiest fighter in the industrial field, always asking

²⁸ I use affect in a wide sense here, how stimuli provoke an emotional response in wide populations; literary affect is discussed in more detail below.

for more” (Bulman, 1920: 2-3). Among wider communities, with an imperfect understanding of this most combative class of worker, the fact that miners were perceived to always want more bred mistrust and fear. This chapter considers twenty-first and nineteenth-century incidents that reveal the polarised public response to miners in the throes of a disaster or in the midst of a strike. This then feeds into a single incident that had a profound effect on the life of Joseph Skipsey and then into a retelling of the poet’s biography; a biography Bridget Keegan describes as “one of the most heroic in the annals of autodidactism” (Keegan, 2006: 211). In terms of cultural capital, the positioning of Skipsey as an autodidact, indicating his self-motivated pursuit of legitimate culture, puts him in a specific subordinate location that values his drive for self-improvement. Subordination, however, that also invites an “abrupt and early exclusion” (Bourdieu, 2003: 84) from legitimate culture, in the autodidact or ‘pitman-poet’ label, that restricts the range of poetry he is ‘allowed’ to write, these restrictions are discussed further in Chapter Four.

Recent incidents in Chile and South Africa are indicative of the dual affect that mineworkers provoke among the wider public, and illustrate that these responses have been universal across time and geography. On 5th August 2010, a roof collapse at the San José copper–gold mine near Copiapó, Chile, trapped 33 miners 700m underground. The response of friends and family of the men was typical as news of the incident spread, as journalist Jonathan Franklin described, “dozens of relatives staked out what they call Camp Hope near the mouth of the mine [...] in hope that rescue efforts would arrive in time to save the men” (Franklin, 2010). While rescue efforts began, the men underground headed toward a ventilation shaft and freedom only to find the escape ladder unusable (Alozie, 2012: 464); they were trapped.²⁹ Seventeen days later, an exploratory drill came back to the surface with a note attached: “Estamos Bien En EL Refugio los 33” [...] “All 33 of us are

²⁹ The trapped miner had access to emergency supplies underground, but they were only intended to last two days.

well inside the shelter” (Franklin, 2010).³⁰ On 13th October, 69 days after becoming trapped, Luis Urzúa the leader of ‘Los 33’, as the miners became known, received a joyous welcome as he was brought to safety (Alozie, 2012: 466) while an estimated global audience of a billion people watched (Carroll, 2010). After their rescue, the men became minor celebrities and some travelled the world telling their story. Carlos Barrios Contrera and Carlos Bugueno Alfara visited the 127th Durham Miners’ Gala (2011) where Alfara, introduced as “number 23” (BBC News, 2011), spoke to the gathering. The miners’ ordeal was described by, Pulitzer Prize winner, Héctor Tobar in *Deep Down Dark: The Untold Stories of 33 Men Buried in a Chilean Mine, and the Miracle That Set Them Free* (2014) and a film of the miners’ experience, *The 33* (2015), starring Antonio Banderas and Juliette Binoche was also made; ‘Los 33’ became heroes.

While the Chilean miners were fêted for their survival, the reception striking South African platinum miners received is more typical of the affect the stimulus of miners organising themselves has. The Marikana mine, near Rustenburg, and the conditions in which its miners existed are not dissimilar to those experienced by nineteenth-century British coal miners:

The Lonmin smelter stands like a cathedral of commerce over a bleak landscape, its chimney reaching for heaven, its conveyor belt shuffling a fortune in unrefined platinum.³¹ The miners live in its shadow. Their homes are one-room shacks. Some of them are built of breeze blocks; most are patchworks of rusting corrugated iron tacked onto frames of timber torn from local trees. (Davies, 2015)

Although nineteenth-century pit cottages were more substantial than the shacks described here, the conditions in which the miners lived and worked are comparable.³² Working two centuries apart,

³⁰ The borehole became a lifeline that was used to send food and water to the men, it was also used to provide a phone and video-link to the men. More than 2,000 journalists arrived in the region to cover the event.

³¹ The Marikana mine is owned by the British platinum producer Lonmin.

³² John Benson argues that, although describing a typical miner’s cottage is difficult, “most colliery houses were small, badly designed and not very well maintained, they were often lacking [...] the most basic amenities necessary for good health. Many tenants never had access to a reliable supply of good quality water” (Benson, 1980: 98).

both sets of workers found themselves carrying out arduous and dangerous work in appalling conditions. Yet the rewards reaped from the stripping of the earth's resources are received elsewhere, 'shuffling' away from those risking their lives, to be distributed instead among those who only risk economic capital. When organising to protect their rights or improve working conditions, the response is seemingly universal: state-backed violence.

In the midst of national strikes of mineworkers, a demonstration at Marikana on 16th August, 2012, was met by the South African Police Service (SAPS). When the SAPS, who were working closely with the mine owners, tried to disperse the protest with tear gas and rubber bullets a group of strikers charged, the police opened fire killing 34 and wounding 78 others. While the strikers were not without blame for the incident, many were armed, an investigation by the Bench Marks Foundation criticized the mine owners for creating the conditions that caused the dispute:³³

The benefits of mining are not reaching the workers or the surrounding communities. Lack of employment opportunities for local youth, squalid living conditions, unemployment and growing inequalities contribute to this mess. (South African Press Association, 2012)

When miners try to organise themselves or unionize, the State's response often involves violence with worker's leaders singled out for especially vindictive treatment. The Farlam Inquiry into the events heard that Mgcineni Naki, a strike leader, was found dead with 14 bullets in his face, neck, and legs. In these two twenty-first-century incidents are echoes that resound throughout the centuries. There is the affective sympathy resulting from miners being trapped underground, counterpoised by fear and panic caused when miners organise themselves against more powerful mine-owners. The Great Northern Coalfield had many of its own examples of such polarising occurrences, two of which were to have a significant impact upon Joseph Skipsey.

³³ The Bench Marks Foundation is an independent organisation tracking the social responsibilities of South African companies.

As eight men travelled up the shaft at Hester Pit in the Northumberland village of New Hartley on 16th January, 1862, an incident began to unfold that Skipsey dramatized in his ballad ‘The Hartley Calamity’ (*TCL*1864: 33-8).³⁴ In the pit the morning shift change was taking place amid the “din and strife of human life” (l. 21). As the cage carrying the men neared the surface, the cast-iron beam holding the pumping engine used to draw water from the pit, snapped and 43 tonnes of debris plunged into the pit’s single shaft: “a shock [...] felt/ As the shock of a dread earthquake” (l. 23).³⁵ The eight men were engulfed, three were killed instantaneously, two were pulled out but died from their injuries, and three miraculously survived. Although an accurate account of the events underground is impossible, Skipsey’s poem presents itself as a melodramatic retelling of the miners’ experience; he describes the reactions to the falling debris as it blocked their escape:

[...] to feet start old and young,
And away to the shaft they sweep.

By two, by three, to the shaft they flee,

[....]

“Are we entombed?” they seem to ask,
For the shaft is closed, and no
Escape have they to the blessed day
From the dismal night below. (ll. 27-9, ll. 33-6)

For six days and nights rescuers worked tirelessly to reach the 199 men and boys trapped underground. The national press followed events closely, initially using local journalists but as the catastrophe unfolded London staff were despatched. On the Saturday, it was reported that the “buried men have been distinctly heard to-night [Friday] working [...] to clear [...] the obstruction

³⁴ Although not published until 1864, it is assumed that Skipsey wrote ‘The Hartley Calamity’ in 1862 as a direct response to the accident. This is due to *RSWB* stating that “Skipsey was called upon to read [his poem at...] meetings [...] held for the purpose of obtaining relief for the survivors” (*RSWB*: 43). References to the poem in this chapter are all from *TCL*1864.

³⁵ Historically, the mine at Hartley suffered from flooding as water from the North Sea percolated through the rock; the pit was abandoned in 1844. The rich coal reserves there, however, meant the Hester Pit was sunk, further inland, in 1846. The village of New Hartley sprung up around a colliery that was the height of modernity and most of the village’s male population was employed there.

from below" (*The Examiner*: 1862: 46), the ballad metre that Skipsey employs pushes the reader on in the hope that the men might find their own way out:

[...] with courage stout
They 'gin the shaft to clear,
And the swing and the ring of the mall is felt,
And felt their hearts to cheers.

And hark! to the blow o' the mall below
Does a sound about reply?
Hurrah! hurrah! For the Hartley men,
For their salvation's nigh. (ll. 45-52)

As with 'Los 33' in Chile, "the wives and sisters of the men [gathered...] at the pit's mouth, in the bitter cold, [...] and great numbers of people [...] gathered together at the bank" (*The Times*, 1862a: 10):

[...] fathers, and mothers – and sisters, and brothers –
The lover, and the new-made bride –
A Vigil kept [...]
From eve till morning tide. (ll. 101-4)

As those above ground waited, 'chokedamp' passed through the mine, an unseen terror creeping slowly, menacingly, and remorselessly, extinguishing the lights as it approaches its helpless victims:³⁶

But lo! yon light, erewhile so bright,
No longer lights the scene!
Ah! a cloud of mist yon light hath kist,
And shorn it of its sheen.

And the cloud o' mist that yon light hath kist,
See how along it steals,
Till one but one the lights are smit,
And a horrid gloom prevails. (ll. 73-80)

³⁶ Chokedamp "was air with a deficiency of oxygen" (Griffiths, 2007: 237). The term usually referred to Carbon Dioxide (CO₂), but was also a coverall for various gases including Carbon Monoxide and Methane. The term derives from the German for fog: 'dampf', and the effect the gas had in depriving mines of oxygen thus choking, or suffocating, pitmen. CO₂, when present in air, reduces the oxygen content and when "oxygen falls below about 17% a flame lamp would be extinguished; [...] distress will [...] be experienced when the oxygen content goes below 14%, and if the oxygen falls much further suffocation can result" (Griffiths, 2007: 237).

As the gas visibly consumes the flames, Skipsey embraces the melodrama that, as John Goodridge argues, was typically employed by “by many labouring-class poets as an effective means of conveying strength of feeling and [...] intense experiences” (Goodridge, 2006 xvii). Skipsey shows sons dying in the arms of their fathers, brothers fighting the urge to sleep before succumbing, and, in a touching recreation of a child’s bedtime, an orphan dying alone watched over by the spirit of his dead mother:

“O, mother dear!” wert, wert thou near
 Whilst I sleep!” – And the orphan slept –
And all night long, by the black pit-heap
 The mother a dumb watch kept. (ll. 97-100)

When the breakthrough came, on 22nd January, only the miners’ bodies were found and the Hartley Calamity was confirmed as the single largest loss of life in the Great Northern Coalfield.³⁷

The deaths of 204 men and boys generated a huge outpouring of grief nationwide, grief Queen Victoria herself felt with the accident coming just over a month after the death of her husband Prince Albert; she recorded in her journal, on 23rd January 1862, the “accounts of the colliery accident are terrible, - such awful misery” (Victoria, 1862a). The Queen’s grief took public voice in a telegram, “read by the clergyman of the parish”:

in the midst of her own overwhelming grief, [the Queen] has taken the deepest interest in the dreadful accident at Hartley, and up to the last had hoped that at least a considerable number of the poor people might have been recovered alive. The appalling news since received [that all had died] has affected the Queen very much.

Her majesty commands me to say that her tenderest sympathy is with the poor widows and mothers, and that her own misery only makes her feel the more for them.

³⁷ Goodridge advises that when the pit shaft was finally opened the “men and boys were found lying in rows, as if asleep. Sons were found resting their heads on their fathers’ shoulders, and one man was found with his arms around his brother’s neck” (Goodridge, 2006: 417).

Her majesty hopes that everything will be done as far as possible to alleviate their distress, and Her Majesty will feel a sad satisfaction in assisting in such matters. (*The Times*, 1862b: 9)

The 'sad satisfaction' Victoria felt stretched to a £200 donation to the relief fund. The unifying nature of grief crossed social boundaries and the Queen's kindness was repaid in some small part when, following Albert's burial in December 1862, she was presented "with a handsome Bible, [...] given [...] and subscribed for by 'many Widows' [...] 80 of the Hartley Colliery Widows, amongst them" (Victoria, 1862b).

Disasters such as this were all too frequent and, in their aftermath, poems and songs were often written, largely anonymously, as a form of catharsis expressing personal and communal sorrow.³⁸ Some of these poems would be printed and sold as penny ballads to aid the bereaved families. Although there is no record of 'The Hartley Calamity' being sold in this manner, Skipsey gave public readings to raise money for the relief fund, and:

in reading his own ballad he entered so evidently into the spirit of the thing and brought out the terrible, tragic nature of the slow death creeping over father and son, carrying away brothers side by side and told by broken words scratched upon some of the tins, that it was impossible to listen without being greatly affected.³⁹ The scenes in certain of the places where he read it were almost too painful. (*RSWB*: 43)

Queen Victoria's affected response and Spence Watson's description of the reaction Skipsey's readings elicited are indicative of the sympathy a mining tragedy produces; presumably, both would have been effective in encouraging greater donations from the audience.

³⁸ In an article on poetry as therapy, Robert Carroll notes that following the World Trade Center attacks in 2001 poetry was used as a coping mechanism as the *New York Times* recorded: "In the weeks since the terrorist attacks, people have been consoling themselves—and one another—with poetry [...] improvised memorials often conceived around poems sprang up all over the city" (cited in Carroll, 2005: 162).

³⁹ In their last moments some miners scratched messages to their families on their tin flasks; one miner left the simple message: "Friday afternoon. My Dear Sarah, – I leave you" (*The Illustrated London News*, 1862: 107).

Spence Watson's description of the impact of Skipsey's performance is curious. His emotional response is not just derived from Skipsey's own performance but also from the 'scenes' his readings created among his audience. The emotional response is removed from the poem itself, relocated in the performance and its effect. While I have argued the affect miners had on the wider populace has been twofold, provoking sympathy or fear depending on the industrial context, this response to Skipsey's poetry is an example of literary affect. When W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley denounced, in an influential 1949 essay, what they called 'The Affective Fallacy', criticism based on the emotional response literature causes, they introduced a split between critical objectivity and human subjectivity that effectively broke down a literary work into "what it *is* and what it *does*" (emphasis in original, Wimsatt, 1949: 31). While Wimsatt and Beardsley sought to concentrate criticism on what a poem is, not what it does, in recent decades there has been an increasing interest in the emotions created by literary works and 'affect theory'. Literary affect can be identified, as Kirstie Blair does in *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (2006), as "the power to convey feeling and emotion from poet to reader through the medium of the text" (Blair, 2006: 13). This definition is valuable in that it acknowledges that a relationship, and an investment in that relationship, between poet and reader exists; a relationship based on understanding and sympathy. Relating this to the affective poems Skipsey wrote, the real or fictional people in his poetry, as Bridget Keegan recognises, "poignantly and directly reveal the emotional toll of mining on families and powerfully show the affective depths of those family connections" (Keegan, 2011: 184) that co-opts the reader into that family unit.⁴⁰ 'The Hartley Calamity' is particularly relevant here in that the deaths of the "Hartley men" (l. 1) are presented through their familial relations, sons are looked over by fathers, brothers fall asleep alongside one another, as "fathers, and mothers – and sisters, and brothers –/The lover, and the new-made bride" (ll. 101-2) are joined, metaphorically, by the

⁴⁰ I argue, particularly in Chapter Seven, that many of the individuals in Skipsey's poetry were 'real' people and, often, included Skipsey himself.

reader as they all wait helplessly at the pit-head. The affective nature of Skipsey's poetry creates, as Bridget Keegan argues, "sympathy and understanding for the miners' plight" (Keegan, 2011: 184), which produces an emotional bond between the reader, the miner, and his family. This connection relates Skipsey's poetry to the propagandist writing of coal-mining unions produced in the first half of the nineteenth century, which Martha Vicinus identifies, that humanised and softened the miners' image to such an extent he "was no longer looked upon as a lawless barbarian" (Vicinus, 1974: 60). A major accident brought the real human cost of mining into sharp focus.

Numerous writers and poets responded to the incident at New Hartley with works that evoked sympathy, vented anger, raised awareness, or raised funds to support the bereaved families. The reaction to Hartley was widespread and many poems memorialized the dead. Thomas Llewelyn Thomas' 'Coal-Mines' (Thesing, 2000: 40-5) bemoaned "that dark day when mingled tears were shed/For England's noblest and for Hartley's dead" (ll. 203-4) and various working-class poets and songwriters, "Janet Hamilton, Joe Wilson, and Matthew Tate, the popular Liverpool-born Newcastle songwriter Ned Corvan, and [...] John Harris" (Keegan, 2003: 241), also responded. Many poems ennobled the victims but stopped short of apportioning blame. The Irish poet James Henry (1798-1876), however, was direct in his accusation:

Two hundred men and eighteen killed
For want of a second door!
Ay, for with two doors, each ton coal
Had cost one penny more.

And what is it else makes England great
At home, by land, by sea,
But her cheap coal, and eye's tail turned
Toward strict economy?

[....]

And should it occur – which God forbid! –
And stifle every soul,
Remember well, good Christians all,
Not one whit worse the coal.

(‘Two hundred men and eighteen killed’, Henry, 2005: 492-4, ll. 1-8, 78-81)

Henry’s accusation that the ‘strict economy’ associated with keeping the cost of coal down was to blame for the deaths is clear.⁴¹ With owners and suppliers bringing to the market a largely homogenous product, there was little other than price through which goods could be differentiated; coal producers, therefore, drove down costs relentlessly to reduce the market price. Henry’s accusations are targeted as much, if not more so, at the end user of England’s ‘cheap coal’, ‘good Christians all’, as they are at coal owners. Skipsey, whose livelihood depended on the continuation of the coal industry, was in a difficult position and, without the detachment that allowed Henry to write openly and accusatorily, ‘The Hartley Calamity’ pronounces “The Hartley men are noble” (l. 1), accentuating miners’ industry, stoicism, and unity, and, by extension, the wider working community. Ultimately, an accident on this scale forced change and Parliament passed legislation before the end of 1862 requiring new mines to have at least two shafts and all existing collieries by the end of 1864.⁴²

While accidents raised sympathy, the use of violence borne out of fear is a more typical response to miners. One such instance had a profound impact upon Joseph Skipsey’s life. In a lecture delivered to The Lit & Phil, entitled ‘The Poet as Seer and Singer’ (1890), Skipsey mused on the nature of poetry and the poet, he speculated that although a poet is “born with a golden bell in his

⁴¹ The idea of ‘strict economy’ being applied by coal owners has many manifestations and revelations, one such being the value of pit ponies compared to miners. Richard Fynes reports that, at a mass meeting of miners in 1844, one attendee (Mr. Thomas Pratt) told the gathering that “the masters set more value on one of [...their pit] ponies, than [they] did on the life of the miners” (Fynes, 1873: 60). In doing so, Pratt gave an example of an incident where one miner, found culpable in the death of a pony, was fined £10, whereas a miner killed by a horse resulted in a fine of only £5 for the man charged with its control, to which Pratt concluded “a pony was of more value than a poor collier” (Fynes, 1873: 60).

⁴² The dangers associated with having one shaft in a pit had been known for centuries; petitions were raised by miners in 1662 and again in 1676 to force investigations into the causes of pit explosions. In 1676, Lord Keeper North concluded, “sinking another pit [so] that the air may not stagnate is an infallible remedy” (Fynes, 1873: 10) to preventing explosions. While North sought to reduce the number of pit explosions, had a second shaft been introduced it would have saved lives.

soul, he may not be born with a silver spoon in his mouth” (PSS: 22).⁴³ In doing so, he could have been referring to himself. Born on St. Patrick’s Day 1832, at Percy Main, near Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Joseph was the eighth child of Cuthbert and Isabella Skipsey. The period of Joseph’s birth was tumultuous in the region as pitmen sought to improve their working conditions by unionising. A major strike of pitmen in 1831, led by Wesleyan lay preacher Thomas Hepburn (c.1795-1864), had taken coal owners by surprise and won some concessions; emboldened by success, the region’s miners struck again in spring 1832. The owners, however, were not unprepared this time. When the pitmen left work in March, coal reserves had been built to withstand the anticipated break in production; colliery owners were united in their conviction that hunger would drive the men back to work before stocks were exhausted. As the summer progressed, and with Hepburn’s union in a state of disarray, the men gradually returned to work and by the beginning of September the strike was defeated. As miners would discover repeatedly, the depth of the pockets of the owners of production far exceeded that of their stomachs and those of their families. Despite this, in his last public address before the strike ended, Hepburn showed remarkable optimism:

If we have not been successful, at least we, as a body of miners, have been able to bring our grievances before the public; and the time will come when the golden chain which binds the tyrants together, will be snapped, when men will be properly organized, when coal owners will be like ordinary men, and will have to sigh for days gone by. It only needs time to bring this about. (cited in Fynes, 1873: 36)

Rich in its allusions to the slave trade, Hepburn raises the prospect of having recorded one victory in defeat; the miners had ‘been able to bring their grievances before the public’. The public, however, has always been inured to such complaints from workers and strikes generally only serve

⁴³ While this lecture is variously reported as having taken place at The Lit & Phil, it is not noted as such in *RSWB* neither is it recorded in Spence Watson’s “complete list of the lectures” (Spence Watson, 1897: 339) delivered to the organisation in his *The History of the Literary and Philosophical Society, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1793-1896)*.

to reinforce the image of miners as “always asking for more” (Bulman, 1920: 2-3). Bringing the miners’ grievances before the public proves a pyrrhic victory, as Alan Plater satirically identified, in *Close the Coalhouse Door* (1968), when using the refrain “And the conscience of the nation was stirred, never forget that” (Plater, 2000: 17, cf. 54, 56). Hepburn’s prediction, that time would bring a point at which coal owners would be like ordinary men, was realised when the coal industry was nationalised in January 1947. Plater also satirised this in that, although nationalisation meant coal owners were now ordinary people, nothing changed:

WILL JOBLING: Utopia, they telled me, bloody Utopia, and I comes in, first day at work after nationalisation... and what do I see?
[...]
The same gaffers, I’m telling ye, there’s Alfie Robson standin’ there, same as he has done for twenty-odd years... five foot nowt and nasty with it.
(Plater, 2000: 63)

Where the only power labour has is to withdraw itself from the marketplace, however, the state is always ready to utilise all of the tools at its disposal and, in 1832, it was no different.

As the strike of 1832 progressed, numerous under-prepared, armed special constables were employed to protect colliery property and non-striking pitmen. On July 8th, a group of special constables were trying to prevent a “man, seemingly tipsy, sitting on his hat” from obstructing workers getting to a colliery; the man, who was heard to shout that “never a blacked-legged b—r should go past”, had been arrested when a “number of pitmen came out of Dobson’s public-house [...to] rescue the prisoner” (Newcastle Courant, 1832: 4). In the ensuing disturbance, special constable George Weddell became involved in an altercation with one pitman when, Joseph’s father, Cuthbert Skipsey stepped in.⁴⁴ In the ensuing fracas Weddell fired his pistol into Cuthbert,

⁴⁴ Cuthbert was an overman at Percy Main Colliery. An overman was “the third in rank of the officers of the mine. He has the constant charge of everything underground [...] and keeps an account of all proceedings underground” (The Coalmining History Resource Centre, n.d.), and, as such, a man of authority and influence within the community.

killing him. The subsequent inquest heard distinctly partisan witness statements. Special constable Matthew Raine told the coroners' court he saw:

Weddell and the deceased struggling for the possession of [...Weddell's] pistol [...Raine] struck [the] deceased over the hand with his stick, and induced him to leave go, and fall back. [The] Deceased appeared to be coming up to renew the attack, when Weddell fired, and the man staggered away, and soon fell. (Newcastle Courant, 1832: 2)

Joseph Taylor, pitman and union member, testified to the contrary:

On the night in question he saw the deceased, Skipsey, go up to the police. He laid his hand upon his shoulder and said, "My canny man, gan away, and let's have peace and quietness." The police replied, "Stand back you b—r," and instantly shot him. There was no scuffling [...] for the pistol. (Newcastle Courant, 1832: 4)

Whatever the circumstances, Weddell was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to six months imprisonment with hard labour (Fynes, 1873: 33) while the Skipsey family were, as Joseph would write to Thomas Dixon, "by this sad event plunged into the direst poverty" (Skipsey (I), 1878b: 2). Joseph Skipsey may well have been born with a 'golden bell in his soul' but the spoon in his mouth was most definitely not silver, and, although Keegan suggests the spoon might have been made from coal (Keegan, 2006: 211), there is no doubt it soon turned to ashes.

2.2 A life less ordinary: a biographical sketch

Biographical information regarding the life of Joseph Skipsey is reliant on four main published sources. Firstly, the biography *Joseph Skipsey: His Life and Work*, by Robert Spence Watson, contains the majority of the information upon which subsequent writings are based. This text was written largely from Spence Watson's personal experience of Skipsey, using a small amount of correspondence alongside Spence Watson's visitors books, and the personal testimony of "Mrs. [Elizabeth] Harrison [...Skipsey's] eldest living child" (RSWB: 22), as such the biography is often vague

and, in proclaiming he had “never known a greater man” (*RSWB*, 11), verges on hagiography. Secondly, in 1889 Skipsey gave an interview to *The Pall Mall Gazette* in which the “well-built, kindly-looking, grave-eyed man, with a head reminding one first of Tennyson and then of Dante Rossetti” (*PMG*, 1) gave a brief biographical account and the circumstances that led him to become a poet. This short piece, given on his appointment as custodian of Shakespeare’s Birthplace, is the only time Skipsey was represented in this manner on a national stage and is important for being the closest we have to a personal account of his life.⁴⁵ Thirdly, is the introduction to Basil Bunting’s edited collection *Selected Poems of Joseph Skipsey*, which gives a poet’s reception to Skipsey’s poems and life. Bunting gives an insight into the regional reception of Skipsey’s poetry, but, in this, attempts to appropriate Skipsey’s working-class identity as a validation of his own Northumbrianism, this is discussed further in Chapter Seven. Fourthly, and most recently, are the two editions of *Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems* (2012, 2014) in which R.K.R. Thornton et al provide a scholarly account of “a man who could hold his own among the guests at the dinner table of Robert Spence Watson just as well as he could hew a seam” (*RKRTB*, 11). Thornton’s ‘Biographical Notes’ clarifies some of Spence Watson’s claims, uncovers a great deal of new information and, from a position of hindsight and greater academic rigour, explores a wider range of primary and secondary sources. In reproducing Skipsey’s address book, Thornton’s work has been an invaluable starting point for reconstructing Skipsey’s network and tracing some of the archival materials uncovered during this research.

As Richard Burton suggests, in his biography of Basil Bunting, “the way to interest people in the work of a neglected poet is to tell his story, not to harangue them” (Burton, 2013: 3). Consequently, it is necessary to tell the story of Skipsey’s life to, not only, pique interest but to rectify clear misconceptions and errors in the current narrative. Overall, Joseph Skipsey’s biography is both typical and atypical of a young boy in a nineteenth-century mining community.

⁴⁵ Skipsey wrote a biographical preface to *ML1878*, which is reproduced almost exactly in *BL1881*.

Joseph trod the familiar path of entering the pit early to work six days a week, for up to sixteen hours a day (*RSWB*: 17), but it is in the way he spent what little leisure time he could snatch that differentiates him from those surrounding him. Like most Northumbrian boys, Skipsey started work aged seven as a trapper, a role employing boys to sit in complete darkness opening and closing a door to allow tubs of coal (*corves*) to pass through the mine. Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81) compared the role, in his 'condition of England' novel *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845), to solitary confinement, punishment criminals would rather be put to death than endure:

Their labour indeed is not severe, for that would be impossible, but it is passed in darkness and in solitude. They endure that punishment which philosophical philanthropy has invented for the direst criminals, and which those criminals deem more terrible than the death for which it is substituted. (Disraeli, 2008: 140)

In the midst of this unforgiving world, Skipsey taught himself to read and write by copying playbills, in the light of donated candle ends, onto his door. By the age of fifteen, he had learned many local ballads from those sung and recited by older pit boys, but had read little. Fortunately, an uncle had a few books and loaned him a copy Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a text he took as "as a narrative of fact" (*PMG*, 2); he was "entranced by it" (*PMG*, 2). Pope's translation of Homer's 'Iliad' followed, as did Linley Murray's *English Grammar adapted to the different Classes of Learners* (1805). At seventeen, a Newcastle bookseller introduced Skipsey to the complete works of Shakespeare, for which, in an example of the self-sacrifice Bourdieu deems necessary to obtain embodied cultural capital, he had to save for ten weeks. Shakespeare "altered the aspect" (*PMG*, 2) of Skipsey's world. The range of Skipsey's reading increased and, according to Spence Watson, Burns, Goethe, and Heine were next to exert an "extraordinary influence" over him (*RSWB*: 19, 20). Skipsey had a full knowledge of the canon of Northumbrian balladry, he could recite the poetry of Clarence Mangan (1803-49) with great affect, and was considered by others to be an authority on the history of English Literature

from the Renaissance onwards.⁴⁶

In his biographical piece in *CftCF*1886, Spence Watson notes Skipsey “was another proof of the truth of Matthew Prior’s axiom, ‘Who often reads will sometimes want to write’” (Spence Watson, 1886: ii), and so it was. Joseph Skipsey began writing poetry. The poet himself ascribed the genesis of his versifying to the influence of older pit boys who would:

sing snatches of ballads and songs at their work, and these fastened themselves in my memory. Their incompleteness dissatisfied me [...so] I used to fill them out here and there, and piece the fragments together, and so give them a completeness of my own. This patching of old ballads was my first effort at verse-making. (*PMG*, 2)

From this weaving together of incomplete songs came the putting of his own words to old tunes, then the creation of his own verses, and it was in “the lilt of the[se] old ballads” he found “whatever music [his] verse may be supposed to possess” (*PMG*, 2). The influence of balladry was not just an influence or inspiration for Skipsey, he actively used them and engaged with them as living pieces of art. In an article commemorating the 150th anniversary of the death of, ‘The Cumberland Bard’, Robert Anderson (1770-1833), Keith Gregson illustrates how Skipsey engaged with his regional heritage, advising that Anderson’s:

influence has been strangely pervasive. His 'Barbary Bell' [...] was not only collected by Vaughan Williams, [Lucy] Broadwood, and [Ann] Gilchrist but was also used [...by] Joseph Skipsey, as the basis of his 'Barbara Bell – a new song to an old tune'. In Skipsey's area, the tune 'Barbary Bell' was one of the most frequently used ballad tunes throughout the century. (Gregson, 1983: 346)

Anderson’s songs were popular on both sides of the Pennines and they appeared in Tyneside-produced collections throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and were so widespread

⁴⁶ *RSWB* states Skipsey “wrote continually at a History of Æstheticism” (*RSWB*: 101), which, according to Skipsey’s original *Dictionary of National Biography* (1912) entry, “proved beyond his powers” (Hooper, 1912).

that, in 1854, the *British Minstrel* described 'Barbary Bell' as "one of those [love songs...] sung in all corners of the world where the English tongue prevails" (cited in Gregson, 1983: 346).

Both Anderson's 'Barbary Bell' and Skipsey's 'Barbara Bell' are written from a first-person perspective, but where Anderson describes the speaker's troubles, competition, and obsession involved in courting Barbary Bell, Skipsey's narrator is detached from the process, a part of the "picnic at Ryton" ('Barbara Bell', *CftCF1886*: 184, l. 1) but also apart from it. In finding out the charms of Nan Harley, "her locks in the sun/ Did sparkle and burn" (ll. 9-10), Meg Wilson, "eyes black as jet" (l. 17), and Kell Dowey, "dimples adorned, / The rose of the roses" (l. 25-6), Skipsey exemplifies a composite northern female in an Elizabethan-blazon style, where her physical features are described with hyperbolic exuberance, but satirises this as the composite pales in comparison:

[...] many were bonny and many were gay
But sweetest of all was Barbara Bell.

As sweet as a cherry was Barbara Bell,
Both tricky and merry was Barbara Bell;
Tho' others that day were bonny and gay—
The Queen of the charmers was Barbara Bell. (ll. 3-4, Chorus)

It is uncertain if Skipsey's narrator is actively engaged in the day, actually attached to, or pursuing a courtship with Barbara Bell, but what his reader is objectively presented with is a playful panoply of female virtue, undercut by the persistent repetition of comparison to 'the Queen of the charmers'. Conversely, Anderson's speaker pursues Barbary Bell as "a serious thing" ('Barbary Bell', l. 1, cited in Gregson, 1983: 348-9) and the beginning of "monie waes" (l. 2). This pursuit has such a profound impact he wishes he had been "hung on our codlen tree,/ The verra furst time I seed Barbary Bell" (ll. 7-8):

'I's turn'd a gayshen awt' neybors say,
'I sit like a sumph, nae mair mysel',
'And up or a bed, at heame or away,
'I think o' nought but Barbary Bell.' (ll. 13-16)

In the comparison of the source and Skipsey's adaptation, one can see both Skipsey's utilisation of

his oral culture to produce his own poetry as well as the commodification of that culture. In Skipsey's 'Barbara Bell', however, there is also the transmigration of the dialect into Standard English that allows it to be sold to a wider audience. This process of solidifying, or standardising, a previously evolving oral culture was underway on Tyneside in the nineteenth century as song collectors gathered together the region's song-based heritage transforming them into commodities to be purchased. This was furthered in Richard Heslop's two volume *Northumberland Words* (1893-4) in what could be considered the first Geordie dictionary; as the oral culture becomes written down, and repeatable, audiences develop expectations and songs become fixed in place.⁴⁷

Not yet having reached the stage where he saw poetry as a route out of the pits, Skipsey did escape them, at the age of twenty, and travelled to London. Leaving his native Northumberland, he wanted "to see something more of the world" (*RSWB*: 23) and walked most of the way to the capital to work on its rapidly expanding rail network. No information exists outside Spence Watson's account of Skipsey's time in London, and what he does give is little more than his journey south and that he returned to mining in Northumberland via mining near Glasgow and schoolmastering in a colliery village. Spence Watson does add that, while in London, Skipsey "lived at a boarding-house kept by an East Anglian lady who became his wife in the year 1854" (*RSWB*: 23). The landlady was Sarah Ann Fendley (c.1829-1902) and, despite Spence Watson's claim, a marriage certificate obtained by, descendant, Roger Skipsey, shows Joseph and Sarah married on 21st December, 1868 (gerald-massey.org.uk).⁴⁸ By this time the couple had had five children: Cuthbert (born 1855), William (1857), Elizabeth (1860), and Emma (1867), only one of whom, Elizabeth, survived beyond 1868. William Skipsey was killed in an accident on 7th September 1860 when:

the waggons from Tyne Main Colliery [...] were proceeding down, held by a brake, and going

⁴⁷ Richard Heslop (1842-1916), steel-merchant, lexicologist, and dialectician, started publishing a column of Northumbrian words in the *Newcastle Chronicle* on 8th October, 1887 (Heslop, 1892: xxv). The column proved popular and his work was expanded into the two-volume, 800 page, *Northumberland Words* (1892 and 1893-4).

⁴⁸ The *ODNB* incorrectly records Sarah's maiden name as "Hendley".

at a very slow pace, a little boy, about three years old, named William Skipsey (son of Joseph Skipsey, the "pitman poet"), attempted to get on to the waggon to ride, when he was crushed by the wheel. (Newcastle Courant, 1860: 8)

This tragedy was followed by the death of James who "died 'from a severe cold' on 16 January 1866" (RKRTB: 30) and, in a tragic fortnight in October 1868, Cuthbert (16th), Emma (24th), and Harriet (30th) all died; Skipsey painfully recorded in the family bible that the:

children died from Scarlatina.⁴⁹ Let me here say three more lovely and affectionate were never born in this world. Whose loss has bowed their Parents [*sic*] heads down into the dust, and upon reflection it is my belief that the jewels were wrongly treated. (cited in RKRTB: 22)

The death of three children in such rapid succession, Thornton speculates, was the catalyst for Joseph and Sarah finally marrying.

Following Joseph's return to the North East, barring four years working as a storekeeper at Hawks, Crawshay & Co., a Gateshead engineering company, and a brief period as sub-librarian at The Lit & Phil, he worked in mining until 1882. As the physical demands of coal mining took their toll friends "sought some place for him where he might have more ease" (RSWB: 71) and caretaking positions at a new Board School, the Bentinck School in Newcastle, were found for Joseph and Sarah. As the size of the school grew, however, the physicality of the role also grew and within a few years the work became too much. In September 1888, Joseph was appointed porter at the Durham College of Physical Science.⁵⁰ Again, this employment proved unsuitable and when the custodianship of Shakespeare's Birthplace at Stratford became vacant Skipsey applied. Supported by some of the most important cultural figures of the day Skipsey and his wife, somewhat

⁴⁹ More commonly known as scarlet fever.

⁵⁰ Durham College of Physical Science, a Newcastle-based extension of Durham University, was renamed Armstrong College in 1904, after industrialist Sir William Armstrong (1810-1900). In 1963, Armstrong College gained independence from Durham to become Newcastle University.

OH, what is Life? A magic night
 In which we still to phantoms yield;
 And what is Death, if not the light
 By which the real truth's reveal'd? ('Life and Death', *S&L*: 122)

⁵¹ While Skipsey has generally been defined, as I do here, by the various employments in which he was engaged, there has been no investigation into the leisure time he had. Spence Watson advises that Joseph and Sarah Skipsey visited the Lake District with Robert and his wife “for a week or ten days” (*RSWB*: 79) in 1886. Skipsey drew great poetic inspiration from the Lake District and in particular its association with Wordsworth, which I discuss in Chapter Nine. In 1893, Skipsey sailed to Norway in the company of an Australian couple, Mr and Mrs Wood, where he visited the boatyard in which the Arctic exploring ship *Fram* was being built for Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930); I have found no further information about his journey.

⁵³ I have located obituaries published in regional presses as far apart as the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* and *Portsmouth Evening News*, nationally in *The Times*, *The Athenaeum*, and *The Speaker*, and internationally in the *Barrier Miner* (Australia), the *New York Times* (United States), and the *Otago Daily Times* (New Zealand).

Page 63 of 334

It was not until his early twenties that Skipsey began to commit his poetry to paper and it appears that publishing them was not an ambition, he “never wrote anything with a view to publication, [...he] made verses because it seemed a natural and was a delightful thing to do” (PMG, 2). In writing his poems down, however, it was perhaps inevitable they would one day be published. This came when Skipsey showed his work to friend, artist, and fellow miner, Willie Reay (c.1831-1903) who took them to “Archdeacon Prest, at Gateshead” (PMG, 2).⁵⁵ Reverend Edward Prest (1824-82) was evidently struck with what he read and asked Reay to meet the author. Introduced to Reverend Prest, Skipsey was impressed by the first educated man he had met (PMG, 2), and it appears Prest encouraged Skipsey to publish. It was previously thought Skipsey’s first volume of poetry had been published in 1859, followed by a second edition in the same year. Thornton, however, uncovered a *Newcastle Courant* review (17th September, 1858) of a “very small book” (*Newcastle Courant*, 1858: 3) entitled *Lyrics*, “By J.S., a Coal Miner” (RKRTB, 17) published by George Procter, Durham. That Skipsey was the author of this book is confirmed in a letter to the editor of the *Gateshead Observer*, James Clephan (1804-88). This significant letter, addressed from “Your obliged servant, Joseph Skipsey, Gilesgate Moor, Durham, 14th July 1858” (Skipsey, 1999: 24), is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

It was presumed that the first edition of Skipsey’s poetry had been lost, but Thornton’s discovery that the title differed from that of the second edition, *Lyrics*, enabled me to discover an extant copy of *Lyrics by J.S., A Coal Miner* (1858).⁵⁶ The book, held at Durham University Library, has a dark brown card cover, is 36 pages in length, and includes 28 poems. The title page has a woodcut of Durham Cathedral on it, thus placing the text geographically, socially, and culturally, there is also a pencil note, in what could be Skipsey’s hand, identifying ‘J.S.’ as “Joseph Skipsey”. There is

⁵⁵ Skipsey misremembers here as Edward Prest was chaplain at Sherburn Hospital, Durham, from 1852 and 1857 until he became curate at St. Mary’s, Gateshead, in 1861. Prest became Archdeacon of Durham in 1863.

⁵⁶ The original *Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Skipsey states that no copy of this volume remains extant (Hooper, 1912).

evidence the volume was prepared by an inexperienced printer, or one for whom speed was a priority. The layout of the poems is inconsistent throughout and, in the early pages, some are printed too close to the gutter edge; as such, the opening three lines of 'The Lad O' Bebside' (8) and the opening two stanzas of 'The Lass of Willington Dene' (12) have letters missing. Only one of the 28 poems included, the sabre-rattling 'A Patriotic Invocation' (Appendix One), does not appear in any other volume and 18 are included in *Lyrics* (1859). No single poem Skipsey published appears in every volume, but six from 1858 ('My Merry Bird', 'Hey Robin', 'Annie Lee', 'The Lad of Bebside', 'Stanzas', and 'The Violet and the Rose') appear in his final collection *Songs and Lyrics*. The second edition appeared through Thomas Pigg & Co., Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in 1859; Skipsey's subsequent publications are as follows: *Poems, Songs, and Ballads* (1862); *The Collier Lad and other Songs and Ballads* (1864); *Poems* (1871); *A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics* (1878); *A Book of Lyrics, Songs, Ballads, and Chants* (1881); *Carols from the Coalfields* (1886); *Carols, Songs, and Ballads* (1888); *Songs and Lyrics* (1892).⁵⁷ Based on the following notice in the end papers of *TCL*1864: "Opinions of the Press on The Reign of Gold, and other songs and ballads", Thornton also lists *The Reign of Gold* (c.1863) as one of Skipsey's publications. Although I have not found conclusive evidence of its publication, I cannot conclusively state the volume did not exist. It is possible, however, the opinions expressed refer instead to Skipsey's poem of the same name.⁵⁸

In 1878, the publication of *A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics* brought Skipsey to prominence through its introduction to Dante Rossetti, the connection to whom has guaranteed Skipsey is remembered. The conduit for this introduction was Thomas Dixon. Dixon, a voracious letter writer, had already corresponded extensively with "Professor Max Muller [*sic*, 1823-1900], Charles Kingsley [1819-75], F.D. Maurice [1805-72], John Stewart [*sic*] Mill [1806-73], Thomas Carlisle [*sic*, 1795-1881]" (*RSWB*, 106), William and Dante Rossetti, W.B. Scott, Charles Dickens (1812-70), Alfred

⁵⁷ *Carols, Songs, and Ballads* is, effectively, a second edition of *Carols from the Coalfields*.

⁵⁸ Skipsey's poem 'The Reign of Gold' was published for the first time in *PS&B*1862.

Tennyson (1809-92), Walt Whitman (1819-92), John Everett Millais (1829-96), and Italian politician Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-72), and, upon meeting Skipsey, Dixon opened his social capital to him. Dixon, as “the first English discoverer of Walt Whitman” (Patterson, 1911: 9), already had experience of introducing a poet to influential circles. Upon obtaining a copy of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855) in 1856, Dixon sent a copy to W.B. Scott:

Thomas Dixon, my constant friend, a perceptive man and a public-spirited [*sic*], though then only a working corkcutter, sent the book to me as a curiosity. Instantly I perceived the advent of a new poet, a new Americanism, and a new teacher, and I invested in several copies. The one I sent to W.M.R. was the cause of his editing the English edition, which raised Whitman into a celebrity.⁵⁹ (Scott, 1892: 32)

Scott was not the only person to whom Dixon introduced Whitman’s poems, and the effort he put into utilizing his social capital for Whitman’s benefit is remarkable in its social breadth:

Your Books still are out on Loan they [...] go from hand to hand here in my town and in the district amongst all sorts of people—Unitarian Ministers, Joiners, Carpenters, Ship Carvers, Watchmakers, Potters, [illegible] latters, Shipwrights, Boiler Makers, Blacksmiths and others, even amongst Quakers in Manchester too has your Books now become Known [...]

⁵⁹ An anonymous article, possibly by Ernest Rhys (1859-1946), in *The Bookman* adds more colour: The true original introducer [of Whitman] was Thomas Dixon, of Sunderland. He picked up a copy of the Brooklyn ‘Leaves of Grass’ from a Yankee pedlar and auctioneer, and then sent it to Mr. W.B. Scott [...who] procured more copies [...]and sent one to Mr. W.M. Rossetti, whose selection first made Whitman known to the English public.

This was as far back as in 1856. The pedlar, [James] Grindrod [...] fought through the American War side by side with Whitman [...]and] thereafter he resumed his trade of travelling auctioneer or Cheap Jack in England, and finally lost his life in a railway accident. Several copies of Whitman’s ‘Leaves of Grass’ were in his pack in 1856, partly, perhaps, because he admired the poet, but partly also because they were unsaleable and therefore cheap in America. He sold them in Sunderland [...].

Thomas Dixon, who thus made acquaintance with Whitman’s poems, was himself a man of mark, and later on was the means of introducing another poet to the public, Skipsey, the pitman. He was a corkcutter by trade, but his energy and public spirit gave him great influence, and it was mainly through him that a Free Library, a School of Art, and a Picture Gallery were secured for Sunderland (*The Bookman*: 1892: 38-9). While members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle were receptive to Whitman, Thomas Carlyle was less enthusiastic. He wrote to Dixon (23rd May, 1872) that Whitman was “probably the loudest roaring blockhead in all America. [...] I had a thing of him which he called ‘Leaves of Grass’ and reckoned to be Poetry [...]. I want to hear no more of Walt or his philosophies” (cited in Milburn, 1981: 8).

all love you simply because you seem to *love all*. (emphases in original, Dixon, 1869: 4-5)

Although Dixon was not solely or wholly responsible for the popularization of Whitman's poetry, he was a catalyst in his introduction. The instrumental role Dixon had in introducing Whitman to William Rossetti, whether directly or indirectly, effectively ensured his poetry received recognition a great deal sooner than might otherwise have been the case, Rossetti:

was so much struck by the rugged strength and power of the poem that he never rested until he succeeded in getting an English edition published, and then spared no pains in obtaining reviews, and so made Whitman known in England. Then, and only then, did the Americans realize that they has an unrecognised poet of their own, and so Whitman became known on both sides of the Atlantic. (Patterson, 1911: 9)

It was not just Whitman, however, whom Dixon introduced to the Rossettis and it was to Dante that he sent a copy of *A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics* in 1878 and, through this introduction, Skipsey gained access to many of the nineteenth-century's most influential cultural figures.

CHAPTER THREE

Biography and Mining the Archives

3.1 The fallibility of the biography

In the work of John Goodridge's Recovering Laboring Class and Radical Writing Project, one can see a glimpse of the number of working-class people who took up a pen to write poetry; 2055 ordinary people who sought to express themselves in verse. Resultantly, one can only imagine how many working-class individuals aspired to be writers. Studies by Michael Sanders, who examines over 350 contributors to the poetry column of the *Northern Star* (1838-52), or Owen Ashton and Stephen Roberts, who record the complaint of William Howitt (1792-1879) after receiving almost 200 submissions of readers' poems for his *Howitt's Journal*: "It is now an ascertained fact [...] that a majority of the public have ceased to read and become writers" (cited in Ashton & Roberts, 1999: 1-2), point to further individuals whose lives will never be recovered, their voices silenced forever. Although he left no personal memoir, in his friendship with Robert Spence Watson, Joseph Skipsey was more fortunate than most. Irrespective of what would result from his relationship with Thomas Dixon and the Rossetti brothers, it seems plausible that, without a record of his life outside of his published work, Skipsey might well have slipped into oblivion like so many other working-class voices.

As is often the case, those marginalised by society, whether by class, gender, race, sexuality, or geography, only become visible when they interact with official institutions such as courts, workhouses, or the police, or with individuals who are culturally powerful, those in possession of legitimate cultural and social capital. It is only at this point of intersection that traces of hidden lives become visible and 'lost' voices become heard – it is at one such intersection, the creation of the biography, that Skipsey is found. While there has to be an essence of hero worship in a biography,

Spence Watson approaches his subject with the purpose of establishing a legacy, he is “not content that [Skipsey] should become a mere memory without giving those of his countrymen who may care to learn about him the opportunity of knowing who he was and what he did” (*RSWB*: 7). On the whole Spence Watson was successful.

The biographer’s account is impressive: the tale of Skipsey surviving the privations of a mid-nineteenth mining community where, at times, he would have nothing more to eat than nettle soup; the violent death of his father when Joseph was three months old; or the working 16 hours a day in the pit from the age of seven, is affective and inspiring. Yet the legacy that has developed from this text is, arguably, not what Spence Watson had desired. Instead of remaining in the background and bringing Skipsey to the fore, in the hundred or so years since both men died, Spence Watson’s legacy has, seemingly, been magnified and Skipsey’s altered. Endorsed by the imbalance in Spence Watson’s and Skipsey’s verifiably acceptable cultural and social capital, the biography itself is, among the researchers who have mentioned Skipsey, unchallenged.

Written just two years before Spence Watson died, it is as if he wanted to fix the memory of Skipsey in place while still able. Even from the frontispiece, in supplying his title “Rt Hon”, Spence Watson provides the credentials and institutionalised cultural capital that legitimizes his account as authoritative. Crucially, this accreditation also confirms Spence Watson’s superior societal position over Skipsey and, in doing so, the authorial voice becomes one of unquestioned orthodoxy; the biography becomes a site of social control where power structures exist in perpetuity. As with any biography, however, omissions are made, either consciously or unconsciously, and my research has revealed numerous errors in Spence Watson’s account. Although errors or some omissions can be understood as the consequences of lapses in, or conflation of, memory, there also appears to be a deliberate attempt to fashion Skipsey into an archetype of the ‘acceptable’, worthy working class. In *RSWB*, Spence Watson produces a portrait of Skipsey as a self-improving member of the working class, accepting his lot in life, happily deferring to the hierarchical nature of Victorian society and,

as W.B. Scott affirms in his *Autobiographical notes* (1892), “contented with his fate, [...] happy with his crowd of children and the mild appreciation of a few friends more cultivated than himself” (Scott, 1892: 271). In this fashioning of Skipsey, Spence Watson has created, seemingly wilfully, absences from the narrative. While some absences or silences, definable spaces from which something has been removed, are to be expected, letters in the Spence Watson family archive reveal significant omissions. The imbalance in cultural and social capital has allowed the biography to become totemic and the silences have allowed distortions to spread as assumptions are made to fill an information vacuum. Much of the subsequent work in this thesis repositions and realigns the relationship between subject and biographer.

Joseph Skipsey’s biography seems to have served two affective purposes. Firstly, it beguiled a Victorian aspirational sensibility that valued self-help, achieved through drive, determination, and industry. Worthy characteristics in anyone, but traits that comforted those higher in the social and cultural hierarchy that all the industrial poor needed to do to improve their situation was to “arise and wash [...] their] faces and do [...] their] gregarious work”, leaving behind those unprepared to help themselves with “the idiot and the palsied to sit blinking in the corner” (Dickens, 2009: 344). If an uneducated boy could rise from a mining community to become a poet, albeit “extremely unequal” (Wilde, 1887: 5) in ability, then all that was required was application to raise the poor out of their desperation. As a result, Skipsey becomes an archetype, a specific recognisable character type that is repeated across generations, and a prototype for the possibilities of the lower classes. Through his poetry and the comments of ‘gentlemen’ such as Dante Rossetti, he comes to embody the middle-class ideal of a respectable working class whose qualities mimic their own aspirations for “sobriety, religious belief, self-help, family ideology, and striving for an education” (Hermeston, 2009: 14); he is simultaneously (as Rossetti found him to be) “a stalwart son of toil and every inch a gentleman” (Rossetti, 2010: 214), but also a stick to beat those not trying hard enough.

Secondly, it affected a comfortable middle-class sensibility not accustomed to the hardships

suffered by those exposed to the ravages of capitalism; as Patrick Brantlinger argues: “many thoughtful Victorians [...were] ardent in their desire to believe in material progress but baffled by revelations of poverty, ignorance, and filth” (Brantlinger, 1972: 329) and the quiet complicity consumers had in the exploitation of those extracting coal. This complicity was exposed on a national stage when Lord Ashley’s Children’s Employment Commission (Mines) report was published in May 1842.⁶⁰ Ashley’s commission, ordered by Queen Victoria in response to the drowning of 26 children (11 girls and 15 boys, aged between 8 and 16) at Huskar Colliery near Barnsley on 4th July 1838, was charged with investigating working conditions in the nation’s mines and, when the findings were published, it was with a reliance on sensationalism. Ashley had stated, prior to the commission, his purpose was to “exhibit the [...] evils [...] of children’s employment underground, [...to] terrify even the most sluggish and the most reluctant into some attempt at amendment” (cited in Heesom, 1981: 70). To this end, the report focussed in particular on the role of females, the “mothers of England!” (Disraeli, 2008: 140). The nation was shocked by testimonies such as that given by Patience Kershaw, aged seventeen, from Halifax:

I hurry in the clothes I have now got on – trousers and ragged jacket; the bald place upon my head is made by thrusting the corves; [...] I hurry the corves a mile and more underground and back; they weigh 3 cwt.; I hurry 11 a-day; I wear a belt and chain at the workings to get the corves out; the getters that I work for are naked except their caps; they pull off all their clothes; I see them at work when I go up; sometimes they beat me, if I am not quick enough [...]; the boys take liberties with me sometimes they pull me about; I am the only girl in the pit; there are about 20 boys and 15 men; all the men are naked; I would rather work in mill than in coal-pit.⁶¹ (Tooke, 1842: 80-1)

⁶⁰ Anthony Ashley Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury (1801-85), politician, philanthropist, and social reformer.

⁶¹ ‘Hurrying’ was the hauling of corves through the mine. Those carrying out the task were called ‘hurriers’ and were usually women who would wear a leather belt that passed between their legs that was then chained to the corf. Hurriers would be accompanied by ‘thrusters’ who pushed the corf with their hands and heads;

Patience's testimony was supplemented with a physical description, given by a "Sub-Commissioner":

This girl is an ignorant, filthy, ragged, and deplorable-looking object, and such a one as the uncivilized natives of the prairies would be shocked to look upon. (Tooke, 1842: 80-1)

With its examples of physical violence, passages blatantly suggestive of sexual abuse, and stark images of females on hands and knees pulling coals, the report was deeply affecting. One poetic response came in 'The Cry of the Children' by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61):

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers, —
And that cannot stop their tears.
The young lambs are bleating in the meadows;
The young birds are chirping in the nest;
The young fawns are playing with the shadows;
The young flowers are blowing toward the west—
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly!
They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free.

[...]

"How long," they say, "how long, O cruel nation,
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart,—
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
Our blood splashes upward, O our tyrants,
And your purple shews your path;
But the child's sob curseth deeper in the silence
Than the strong man in his wrath!" (Barrett Browning, 2015)

Barrett Browning's questioning of the reader asking if they can hear 'the children weeping' is a direct accusation of complicity in child exploitation. The bitter irony that, in the world's most economically

women and children were used in these roles because they were able to pass through the smallest passageways. A 'getter' (or 'hewer') was the man actually digging the coal. Patience's statement was rearranged by song-writer Frank Higgins into a powerful folk song: 'The Testimony of Patience Kershaw' (1969).

advanced nation children do not have the same freedoms for 'playtime' that animals are afforded is a powerful accusation of innocence forcibly removed. The pitying questioning of the child and the oppressive imagery of a 'mailed heel' in the final stanza indict the whole 'cruel nation', up to the 'throne' itself, in the tyrannical corruption of childhood. Barrett Browning clearly implicates readers as the 'blood splashes' from the economic base 'upward', staining the hands of the consumers of the coal dug from the bowels of the earth at a massive human cost, where the 'sobs' of children speak louder than the most strident of curses bellowed by 'the strong man in his wrath'. As a direct response to the tragedy and Ashley's commission, the Mines Act of 1842 was passed forbidding all females and boys under the age of ten from working underground.

Joseph Skipsey was one of Barrett Browning's weeping children, exposed to the pitilessness of capital in a community where "a man may meet his end in so many diverse ways" (Engels, 1993: 255).⁶² As such, despite the sympathy of the poet and ultimately the government, the circumstances of his childhood and upbringing were far from unique. The prevalence of pit accidents and the ravages of diseases such as cholera meant that he, like many others, was left without one or both of his parents at a young age, nor was he alone in enduring the economic necessity of entering the pit at the age of seven. Where Skipsey stands apart from his community, or what makes his life worthy of remembrance, is his determination to become a poet. What separates him from most other working-class poets is that he was "one of the few working men taken up by a literary circle" (Vicus, 1974: 169) and the lasting impression he left on those with whom he came into contact.

Yet, there is a sense of space in the biography Spence Watson provides and an enduring impression that what is being presented is an incomplete picture of Skipsey's life. As John Updike commented on Peter Ackroyd's biography of *T. S. Eliot* (1984), written despite being prohibited from quoting the poet: "but for a few phrases from his letters or the odd line or two of his verse the poet

⁶² Skipsey was six at the time of the Huskar Colliery tragedy and entered the pit at the age of seven; assuming he started working immediately upon turning seven, he was just eight months away from going to the pit at the time of the accident.

walks gagged through his own biography” (Updike, 1985: 120). Spence Watson’s work seems much the same. Admittedly, *RSWB* includes more than ‘a few phrases’ from Skipsey’s letters and more than ‘the odd line or two of his verse’, but it seems more of an *aide-mémoire* as Spence Watson, by his own admission, provides “an inadequate idea of his infinite resources” (*RSWB*: 8). As the foundational text for studying *Joseph Skipsey: His Life and Work*, however, the biography seems fragmentary and prone to “the slipperiness of memory” (Summerfield, 2009: 51), described by Penny Summerfield, that so troubled Eric Hobsbawm in relation to oral history. Perhaps this is, ultimately, what *RSWB* is: a piece of oral history, written down to prevent the story of a friend from being lost. In this process, however, Spence Watson’s account has been fixed in place, cemented by his cultural capital, and supported by the authority of the text.

The fragmentary picture Spence Watson paints represents Skipsey as an abject figure, benefitting from and indebted to those with an elevated sense of philanthropic obligation; in doing so, the text reinforces social stratification and the impression of Skipsey’s willingness to remain within its confines. This, coupled with the capital imbalance, produces an adverse inference that Skipsey was merely a sum of the famous contacts he made. The process of archival research, recovery, and discovery, however, begins to undermine this image and what emerges is a figure with greater agency in creating, developing, and sustaining his writing career. This chapter begins this process by examining the power structures that force working-class writers into a passive and subordinate position. Rather than Skipsey being seen as a passive recipient of middle-class philanthropy, he can be viewed as profiting instead, like any writer of any class, from the enabling actions of various gatekeepers prepared to share with him their cultural and social capital. As a result, the impression of Spence Watson as an overarching patron is lessened and Skipsey is brought out of the shadows.

3.2 Violence and silence in the archive

In the nineteenth century, letter-writing was the principal method of communication between people who were at a distance and it was integral to Joseph Skipsey's literary career; it was in correspondence that Skipsey first took ownership of the role of poet and it is where his association with Dante Rossetti is most relatable. As a result, it could be argued Skipsey's correspondence is as vital to an understanding of his life and work as his poems. The foundation of this research lies in archival recovery and, logically, the starting point was Newcastle University's *Spence Watson Papers*. Within this collection are 26 letters in which Skipsey was a correspondent, to and from various individuals, but, although Robert Spence Watson advises that "a month seldom passed without [their] meeting [...] and few events occurred to either of [them...] which were not made known to the other" (RSWB: 7), there are only eleven letters in which he corresponded with Skipsey, with Spence Watson the recipient in every case. Just eleven letters from Skipsey to Spence Watson from a forty-year friendship seems a meagre return and an uncertain foundation for further exploration. Despite this, an archival presence for Skipsey can be built from investigating the archives of some of the network of his contacts.

This research has, through the discoveries made, been shaped by correspondence. Although important letters became known in the course of my research before its discovery, Skipsey's address book has proved central. Contained within Skipsey's cuttings book held at Newcastle Central Library, *Literary Works* (Volume 2), the address book was published in *Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems* (2012: 69-70). The list comprises 62 individuals, over a third of whom have London addresses (25) and five are located in the United States. It includes members of both the Pre-Raphaelite movement, such as Edward Burne-Jones and Algernon Swinburne as well as William and Christina Rossetti (1830-94), and the Decadents, such as Oscar Wilde. In reconstructing Skipsey's network of contacts, this is augmented by adding thirteen individuals absent from the address book but listed as referees for

Skipsey's application for the curatorship of Shakespeare's Birthplace (*RSWB*: 72).⁶³ As my research progressed more individuals with whom Skipsey did correspond, or who are likely to have done so, have been identified and the number of connections stands at 134.

In identifying archival repositories for Skipsey's contacts, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*ODNB*) listings were relied upon. Of the 134 contacts, 59 individuals have *ODNB* entries, 75 do not; where there is no *ODNB* entry for the named individuals, online databases such as The National Archives, WorldCat, and ArchiveGrid have been utilised. A combination of this process yielded 73 individuals with archival presences; in total, 777 archival entries were identified. This list was then reduced to a selection of the most important contacts. This narrowing was somewhat self-generating, achieved primarily through using those individuals I have established had corresponded with Skipsey, through comments in letters, mentions in *RSWB*, or as findings of ongoing research. These 'important' contacts number 45, yet, even with five of those individuals without any identified archival repositories, there remained 469 locations. The resources available to complete this research dictated that only a relatively small number of these collections have been interrogated and targeting has been relatively arbitrary, based on best guesses as to where items may exist. Yet, even this is less than satisfactory. Few of the catalogues and/or archivists I consulted include Skipsey in their collections and it would appear that few of his correspondents deemed their relationship with Skipsey important enough to retain his letters. Other working-class writers, such as those who had patrons with a commercial eye or those who came into contact with 'official' bodies such as the courts or the RLF, are perhaps more fortunate in this regard.

In their work investigating the cultural and social existence of *The Victorian Working-Class Writer*, Owen Ashton and Stephen Roberts rely largely on the archives of the RLF for the biographical sketches of the writers covered.⁶⁴ In their 'Introduction', the authors correctly assert this archive is

⁶³ The list of individuals who supported Skipsey's application is discussed further in Chapter Nine.

⁶⁴ Skipsey is not listed as an applicant to the RLF.

a repository of:

basic factual information about birth and family ties which is unavailable elsewhere, these forms [RLF applications] are invaluable. It is in the letters from applicants and testimonials from their supporters, however, that the true richness of these archives becomes apparent. The often heartfelt letters detailing the lifelong struggles of Thomas Miller [1807-74] to make ends meet tell his story more vividly than any autobiography he could have written. (Ashton, 1999: 4)

While this archive is undoubtedly an invaluable source of basic information, to rely on it for anything more is problematic. The assertion of true richness and vivid autobiographical accounts contained therein reveals a weakness of archival research in that researchers can become captivated with discoveries, particularly when hard won. It seems an incontestable fact that Miller, 'The Basket Maker' of Gainsborough, faced terrible difficulties in making ends meet but to rely on his testimony, and those of his supporters, as an absolute account of the writer's situation suggests a romanticization of archival discovery. One can see in the emotive language used to describe Miller's letters their initial affective purpose; the response to these letters, however, fails to acknowledge the possible distortions implicit in their original rationale of gaining financial support. After all, it seems unlikely the RLF would financially support secure writers. To fail to consider the possible exaggerations and embellishments of these resources, is to misunderstand their value as cultural artefacts and it is easy to observe how researchers can become enamoured of archival artefacts for extrinsic significances, rather than appraising intrinsic worth. In the creation of an archive such as the RLF's, or a biography written by a close friend, an archive is created that is both artificial and false, whose contents are distorted by the very reason for its existence.

Although this is an example of how working-class writers can actively distort and create an archival presence, it is just one example. It is more often the case that those from poorer backgrounds, in terms of economic, cultural, or social capital, are passive in this process. In his 1994

lecture *Mal d'Archive: une impression freudienne* (published in English in 1995 as *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*), Jacques Derrida described archives as powerful places, simultaneously revolutionary and conservative, where individuals or artefacts can be expunged from the collective memory due to nuances in the political *zeitgeist* and overriding meta-narratives. Derrida referred to this exercising of power within an archival space, where the voices of those possessing forms of capital deemed less worthy are removed from cultural memory, as the “violence of the archive” (Derrida, 1995: 7). The result of this violence is an emptiness that has become known as the ‘silence of the archive’. The existence of these silent archival spaces is particularly well known in relation to feminist and post-colonial studies, but there seems less recognition of the process surrounding class. Wherever the silence is observed, however, it is not an indicator that these voices, people, or lives never existed, but instead an indicator of absence. As Carolyn Steedman argues, Derrida maintains that “an absence is not *nothing*, but is rather the space left by what has gone” (emphasis in original, Steedman, 2001: 11). The silence of the archive, therefore, is not a sign there was never a voice raised; it is instead a trace of what has been, an echo of a voice long since disappeared. These silences are only broken only when the working-class collides with the influential middle classes, as in the case of the RLF or *RSWB*.

In this research, I have encountered this silence and incidences of it having been broken. In 1867 John Ruskin published a collection of “twenty-five letters to a working man of Sunderland” (Ruskin, 2010: iv) entitled *Time and Tide, by Weare and Tyne*; the working man of Sunderland being Thomas Dixon. Prompted by the Queen’s Speech to Parliament announcing that enfranchisement was to be extended to some working-class men, Ruskin and Dixon’s correspondence (between 7th February and 22nd April 1867) discussed the role of the working class in society.⁶⁵ Although Dixon is

⁶⁵ Following their correspondence, it appears that Dixon thought Ruskin had awarded him copyright (Milburn, 1984: 34) of the letters and Dixon published many of them in newspapers: the *Manchester Examiner*, the *Leeds Mercury*, and *The Scotsman* (Patterson, 1911: 6). Ruskin, however, opposed this course of action when he decided to publish the letters.

named in the Preface to *Time and Tide*, Ruskin deemed it unnecessary to include his replies. Instead, Ruskin extracted portions of Dixon's responses that were "well deserving of attention" (Ruskin, 2010: x) and segregated them to an appendix; a highly visible example of middle-class mediation, shaping, and silencing of a working-class voice.

A close friend of Skipsey, Dixon was a remarkably energetic networker who made full use of his association with W.B. Scott to contact many of the literati of the day and was influential in the foundation of much of Sunderland's cultural infrastructure. Yet it is as the recipient of Ruskin's letters for which he is generally known. Dixon is, like Skipsey in his relationship with Dante Rossetti, portrayed in criticism of Ruskin as passive in this contact, an unequal association created through the imbalances in their respective types and volumes of capital; Dixon's letters remain unpublished and, possibly, lost. In this, is seen the silence of the archive. Not only were Ruskin's letters published, there are collections of his papers throughout the world. Dixon, however, remains the cork-cutter to whom Ruskin wrote, named briefly and selectively excerpted according to middle-class sensibilities, silent but not absent. While the original exchanges will, presumably, have acted as a dialogue, once Dixon's input is removed Ruskin's letters take on a didactic tone, preaching "the possible comforts and wholesome laws, of familiar household life, and the share which a laboring nation may attain in the skill, and the treasures, of the higher arts" (Ruskin, 2010: ix). As such, *Time and Tide* becomes dislocated from its original conversational sense and structure.

Furthermore, where the silence of the archive is broken and the working-class writer has an archival presence he or she remains a potential victim of Derrida's violent archival world. Dixon is again a relevant example. Although there remains a collection of his papers at Tyne & Wear archives & museums, what has survived his death within the central repository for his hometown is incomplete:

His collection of letters, written to him by his famous contacts, was put up for auction [at Sotheby's] in 1970 and sold [...] to various purchasers. The present collection was bought by

Sunderland Museum and Art Gallery and deposited in Tyne & Wear Archives in 1975. *Letters from the most significant correspondents were not secured.*⁶⁶ (my emphasis, Tyne & Wear Archives Service, 2006)

Despite having had an archival corpus, as a working-class letter writer Dixon is subjected to the same societal power structures that kept him a Sunderland cork-cutter all his life. As Dixon's correspondents included Dickens, Whitman, Carlyle, W.B. Scott, and Dante Rossetti among others, and in spite of his wish that "all the drawing. books. pictures &c. &c. etchings [...] would come to the town [Sunderland] 'when he was gone'" (Dixon, A, 1880d: 1), Dixon's archival body has been dismembered. Even after death, the constituent parts of Dixon's correspondence have been strewn across the archival cosmos, a victim of the power of economic capital, 'superior' forms of cultural and greater volumes of social capital. With the town authority unable, or perhaps unwilling, to secure those letters from 'the most significant correspondents', Dixon's archival existence has been subsumed into the collections of his 'famous contacts' whose more powerful archives are deemed to have greater worth. This dismemberment is a self-perpetuating manifestation of the social pressures that keep the marginal in their place during their lifetime; maintaining the hierarchical nature of society as, even in death, they are denied access to the archives and the nation's cultural memory on their own terms.

While Dixon's archival afterlife has been subjected to this level of trauma, Skipsey was not so fortunate to have had an independent archival presence. To attribute the blame for this to an imagined perfidious archivist injudiciously casting aside the marginal, would be to misrepresent further the circumstances of a working-class writer. In Skipsey's case, artefacts were undoubtedly lost, and any possible archive thus depleted, as a direct result of the circumstances of his life. Unlike Dixon, owner of a business, and many of the middle-class contacts Skipsey made, Skipsey's life was

⁶⁶ At the sale, the lots included 23 letters from Charles Kingsley; 11 from Max Müller; 6 from Giuseppe Mazzini; 6 from John Millais; 17 from Dante Rossetti; 84 from William Rossetti; 14 from Ruskin and 47 from W.B. Scott.

not one of constants and stability. By the very nature of his trade, the miner and his family were necessarily itinerant, moving from pit to pit and home to home. As a result, with each move, a rationalisation of portable property must have taken place, and all that was not immediately necessary must have been vulnerable in this process. The ephemerality of cultural artefacts, letters, and books, in a society that values the concrete and disregards the indeterminate, makes them vulnerable to destruction or loss. After Skipsey's first contact with the Pre-Raphaelites in 1878, the Skipsey family resided at thirteen different addresses, at least, and with each address change there is the opportunity for loss, breakage, or destruction of unnecessary items.

The silence of the archive can exist for numerous reasons, but in relation to researching the life and work of a working-class writer it can lead to a loss of appreciation of the purpose of archival research, which involves the uncovering of basic factual information. The archival presence can be so rare, one can become so infatuated with a discovery that one loses sight of why the silence of the archive has been disrupted. Skipsey's legacy has been shaped entirely by the biography written by Spence Watson, a single-source that has remained unchallenged since its publication. The biography is simultaneously revolutionary and conservative, it is, as Derrida argues of archives, "a power [...] which at once posits and conserves the law" (Derrida, 1995: 7). This has given rise to numerous misassumptions about the relationship between the two men, often unsupported by the text itself. Despite the inaccuracies, unfillable spaces, or wilfully created absences in the story of Skipsey's life, *RSWB* is an admirable and valuable introduction to a man who might well have been forgotten had Spence Watson not committed his experience to print. The biography, however, is a single-source recollection of the life of a friend and, as such, should not be held as totemic.

As with Dixon, known for his association with Ruskin, it is undoubtedly for his connection to the Pre-Raphaelites that Skipsey is best known and in particular his friendship with Dante Rossetti. The involvement Skipsey had with the Pre-Raphaelites, however, has promulgated the image of him as a passive recipient of the assistance of a cultural avant-garde whose elevated philanthropic

sensibility took pity on a working man from northern England who happened to be a poet. Although it is possible that had Skipsey not come to the attention of Rossetti his work might never have been read outside of his family, his immediate circle of friends, or his local community, it has been an unfairness that he has come to be known for this one relationship. A sense of abjection has developed around Skipsey allowing critics to dismiss him with condescension. In his *English Poetry of the Victorian Period* (1988), Bernard Richards disparagingly characterised Skipsey's contact with Dante Rossetti as "hob-nobbing with the Pre-Raphaelites" (Richards, 1988: 59); Florence Boos, in her notice of the publication of *TCDGR* (v9), writes pityingly that it was to Rossetti's "credit [that he...] befriended the working-class poet Joseph Skipsey" (Boos, 2011: 399); and Richard Altick, when calling for "the worst ever [lines of poetry] written in the Victorian period" in *The Victorian News Letter* (Spring 1954), scathingly dismissed Skipsey as a worker who "courted the music when he should have been tending his machinery" (Altick, 1954: 9). Because of these perceptions, Skipsey has become defined by and contained within the brief contact he had with the Pre-Raphaelites, and has become, implicitly, the passive recipient of middle-class altruism, rather than a poet who had had a 22-year writing career before being introduced to Rossetti. Without the connection to Pre-Raphaelitism, however, Joseph Skipsey would surely have been consumed by the silence and ended his days little more than 'a mere memory' destined to fade.

3.3 Skipsey's letters: an archive dispersed

The hegemonic power structures that kept Skipsey from removing himself, either physically or imaginatively, from his working-class background, from within his *habitus*, also exist in the silence of the archive. As mentioned above, working-class individuals only become visible when engaging with those in authority or important individuals with superior forms of cultural capital, or legitimate culture. This leads to what E. P. Thompson described as "the enormous condescension of posterity" (Thompson, 1963: 12), which dictates in this context that the cultural lives of those in possession of

social power are examined to the detriment of others divested, dislocated, or just remote (geographically, culturally, or socially) from the centre of power. While significant efforts have been made since Thompson denounced this attitude, it remains. This gives rise to the suspicion that, as Adrienne Rich describes in her poem 'Cartographies of Silence': the "Silence may be a plan/ rigorously executed" (Rich, 1978: 17). The silences that exist surrounding Skipsey are exposed when looking beyond the few phrases of Dante Rossetti within which he is contained. To do so a reconstruction of his life before and after the time during which he had contact with Rossetti (1878-1882) is necessary. Skipsey's extant letters, however, have been spread far and wide, incorporated into the archives of more culturally significant individuals. Some investigation of Skipsey's correspondence has been done: Martha Vicinus' *The Industrial Muse* references one letter (dated 29th October, 1878) Skipsey received from Dante Rossetti (as quoted in S&L1892), and from another Skipsey sent to Thomas Dixon (dated 10th December, 1878), but Vicinus' wide-ranging work has neither the space nor the purpose to comprehensively examine this correspondence; an examination of the letters from Skipsey to Dixon has been carried out in Thornton et al's *Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems* (2014), but the discussion is limited to biographical revelations.⁶⁷ Until I was allowed to consult them, Skipsey-related letters have been largely unexamined and where they have it has been done so superficially. In examining his correspondence, what emerges is an idea of a working-class writer's self-image, aspirations, and struggles to achieve a reputation as a poet. In this process is the sense of a (re)creation of Joseph Skipsey where previous assumptions are both reinforced and undermined, where the importance of letter-writing is revealed, and Skipsey emerges as a man *of* letters as well as a man *in* letters.

⁶⁷ The one letter from Rossetti to Skipsey included in *RSWB* is incomplete but is not acknowledged as such; the implications of this are discussed in Chapter Seven. The letters from Skipsey to Dixon (21 in total) were bought, at the 1970 Sotheby's auction of Dixon's letters, by Tilly Marshall, owner of Tyneside art gallery The Stone Gallery who specialised in Pre-Raphaelite works. The gallery subsequently relocated to Oxfordshire, where it is run by Tilly's son Simon, his wife Veral, and their son Tom. They remain owners of Skipsey's letters to Dixon. Vicinus quotes from the 10th December letter Skipsey sent to Dixon to illustrate his isolation as a writer; Basil Bunting states he was "not allowed to consult them" (Bunting, 1976: 10).

In the course of my research I have uncovered 190 letters relating to Joseph Skipsey; the existence of approximately half of these was previously unknown. Of these 190 letters, Skipsey was a correspondent in 109 (writing 85 and receiving 24), while the remaining 81 refer directly to him, or give further contextual details surrounding his network of contacts. Of the 190 letters located, 65 have been published in the collected letters of Dante Rossetti (39), Mary Gladstone (5), Oscar Wilde (3), or Walt Whitman (4), in *RSWB* (2), in newspapers and journals (2) and on-line (8). There were also eight letters published as part of a project carried out at Preston Grange County Primary School.⁶⁸ The earliest extant letter from Skipsey was written in 1858 and the latest 1900; in addition, I have located two letters from Basil Bunting, one from 1950 the other 1978, in which he refers directly to Skipsey. The majority of the 190 letters are dated between 1878 and 1882 (98), there are 14 letters dated before 1878 (nine of which have no relevance to Skipsey, but involve Thomas Dixon), and after 1882 I have located 65 letters, there are also nine letters to which I have been unable to attribute a specific year. As a result of this breakdown, the correspondence can be seen to exist in three distinct periods: a pre-Dixon and Rossetti period (1858-78), the Dixon and Rossetti period (1878-82), and the period following the deaths of Dixon and Rossetti (1882-1900). As with Dixon's dismembered archival presence, Skipsey's letters can be found both near to and far from his former home. I have uncovered letters in the United Kingdom at Newcastle Central Library and the University of Newcastle, as well as further afield at Durham University, Leeds University, University College London, The British Library, and in Oxfordshire. Skipsey's letters can also be found at the Folger Library and the Library of Congress in Washington DC, the New York Public Library, Princeton University, The Harry Ransom Center at Austin, Texas, and the University of British Columbia. In each of these locations, excepting Newcastle Central Library, Joseph Skipsey's archival

⁶⁸ Preston Grange is in North Shields, Tyne and Wear of which Percy Main, Skipsey's birthplace, is now part. The school project took place in the academic years 1973-4 and 1974-5 and the booklet is most notable for printing letters, from Oscar Wilde, Edward Burne-Jones, Thomas Burt, and Lord Ravensworth, supporting his application to the curatorship at Shakespeare's Birthplace.

presence is subordinate to others.

From this basic statistical and geographical breakdown of the correspondence, one gets the distinct impression there are more letters to be found. There must be caution, however, as it is easy to become entranced by a “Freudian romance [...] of finding all the lost things and names, whatever they may be: things gone astray, mislaid, squandered, wasted” (Steedman, 2009: 18), an infection Derrida characterises as an *Archive Fever*. According to Carolyn Steedman, in trying to uncover new items, the archival researcher is bound up in an Arthurian quest for a Holy Grail, seeking out “beginnings, origins, starting points” (Steedman, 2009: 18) that remain perpetually out of reach. This process is observable in considering passages concerning gifts Skipsey received from Edward Burne-Jones. When Spence Watson writes that in Skipsey’s home “you would be greeted by a beautifully framed platinotype of ‘The Golden Stairs’ [...dedicated] ‘To his dear friend Joseph Skipsey, from his friend E. Burne-Jones’” (RSWB: 52), a trace is created. Pairing this with a letter in which Skipsey writes, to an unknown recipient, that he received “a Christmas gift [of] *another* little picture from Mr Burne-Jones [...] a pencil Drawing & framed” (my emphasis, Skipsey, 1882: 2), the traces become more vivid. These passages constitute a breaking of the archival silence in the coming together of the middle and working classes and create the hope that the traces can be followed, artefacts found, and discoveries made. This, in turn, gives rise to a determination to locate them and, ultimately, frustration when unable to discover the solid artefacts. What remains is a whisper and a shadow of uncertainty haunting the researcher. Furthermore, in the seemingly blasé manner in which Skipsey receives ‘another little picture’, there lurks the creation of further traces. In the archival repositories for Edward Burne-Jones, however, I have yet to locate a single item with Skipsey-related provenance.

3.4 Robert Spence Watson: a myth of patronage?

With sparse information available to the critic of working-class writers, it is perhaps inevitable gaps and silences are filled with assumption, but this displays a hegemonic condescension that prizes self-validation above that of evidence provided, reinforced by the institutionalized cultural capital of the academy. The same process of assumptions being made based on slight evidence is at work in accepting *RSWB* as an absolute statement of fact, which creates a self-propheying myth of biographer equalling patron. This myth, a widespread story or belief with little or no basis in fact, is not, however, one Spence Watson himself creates. It is a systemic necessity in the perpetuation of the implied power structure that demands the relationship between worker and the prevailing middle-class is deferential on one side and benevolent on the other and, as Martha Vicinus argues, “in the nineteenth century [...] it became socially necessary to foster working men who accepted middle-class superiority” (Vicinus, 1974: 168). While working-class cultural capital remains to be deemed inferior, or illegitimate, then the deference and benevolence binary remains in place. The working-class writer can, as a result, only ever be subjected to examination from above, as the hegemony dictates. The dominant culture, “the holders of the monopoly of manipulation” (Bourdieu, 2003: 85), shapes the interrelationships between the classes dictating the grounds upon, and lens through which, information is disseminated and understood.

In bourgeois terms, Spence Watson possesses impeccable embodied and institutionalized capital. He was born into a well-respected Quaker family, attended Bootham School in York and University College, London. In his working life, he became a solicitor, educationalist, active member of the Liberal party, and member of the Privy Council. Spence Watson was a Freemason and a prominent member of The Lit & Phil, an organisation he would eventually preside over. Because of this cultural capital, his legitimate culture, Spence Watson’s voice in *RSWB* has become one of unquestioned authority. Furthermore, in his reputation as a man who strove to ameliorate the conditions of his region’s poor, particularly in his work with the Black Shoe Brigade and the Ragged

and Industrial Schools, there is the implication of a natural inclination to be active in improving Skipsey's opportunities. As evidenced in Skipsey's letters and his dedications of work to him, Spence Watson was undoubtedly an important figure in Skipsey's life. Spence Watson's influence, however, seems inflated by his reputation, his standing within his community, and the fact he wrote the poet's biography. The cultural and social capital Spence Watson possessed fits the image of a patron and, endorsed by a middle-class saviour narrative, is thus assumed true.

As Skipsey found "incompleteness" (*PMG*: 2) in the singing of older pit boys then the silences in his biography have been "fill[ed] out here and there [...] the fragments [pieced] together [to give them...] a completeness" (*PMG*: 2), assumptions have been made to flesh out the tale and, more often than not, elevate the role of more culturally powerful individuals. Establishing facts based on evidence, however, begins to destabilise, in particular, the myth of patronage surrounding Spence Watson and Skipsey. It has long been assumed that Skipsey met Spence Watson around the time of the disaster at New Hartley, where Skipsey, it is said, recited his 'The Hartley Calamity' "for the purpose of obtaining relief for the survivors" (*RSWB*: 43). To some, Spence Watson's account of Skipsey reading 'The Hartley Calamity', "it was impossible to listen [to Skipsey's performance] without being greatly affected" (*RSWB*: 43), has become interlinked with the opening statement in *RSWB* that for "forty years [they] were close friends" (*RSWB*: 7) and, despite Spence Watson making no such claim, assumed the pair met in the Hartley aftermath. It is an assumption based on a loose interpretation of mathematics. As Skipsey died in 1903, forty years prior to this would be 1863, close enough to the date of the accident for assumption to become fact. Even a source such as the *ODNB* makes the leap, stating that Spence Watson had been greatly "moved at one of these readings, [and...] became a lifelong supporter of Skipsey, obtaining for him the job of assistant librarian to the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society in 1863" (Langton, 2014), Thornton further states, albeit more circumspectly, that: "it may well have been at one of the fund-raising occasions [...] they first met" (*RKRTB*: 27). Others are less specific but still make assumptions unsupported by *RSWB*.

For instance, Basil Bunting tells us that Spence Watson “found a place for Skipsey as sub-librarian” (Bunting, 1976: 10) at The Lit & Phil, and Vicinus, in a section entitled ‘The Writer and his Patron’, advises:

Skipsey wrote in complete isolation, except for his friend Robert Spence Watson, a manufacturer and one-time president of Armstrong College. From 1859 Watson attempted to find more congenial employment for him than mining, but each job was short-lived. (Vicinus, 1974: 169)

These assumptions are made on limited evidence. Spence Watson does not reveal when he first met Skipsey and only claims that Skipsey’s “friends” (*RSWB*: 48) had him appointed as sub-librarian at The Lit & Phil; furthermore, Spence Watson is exact in stating that it was James Clephan who, in 1859, “obtain[ed for Skipsey] the place of under-store-keeper at Messrs. Hawks, Crawshay & Co.’s” (*RSWB*: 48). While Spence Watson may be speaking euphemistically about his assisting Skipsey to the position at The Lit & Phil, not wanting to inflate his own importance, the case is not unequivocally made. Skipsey, however, makes it more explicit in his ‘Preface’ to *ML1878*:

after making repeated efforts and in vain to get a suitable situation out of the mines, [he] printed a batch of lyrics, which earned him the respect of several eminent persons in the North of England. Through the kindness of one of these he was placed into the office of sub-store-keeper at The Gateshead Iron Works [...in 1863] he was placed, on the commendation of the same kind friend, as sub-librarian to the Literary and Philosophical Society. (*ML1878*: viii)

Despite the detachment of the third-person narration, Skipsey is clear in telling the reader it was the same active agent working in his favour in both instances: thus, it was James Clephan. This information is in a primary source yet appears hidden in plain sight. The paucity of information surrounding the working-class writer and the ‘authority’ of the dominant culture conspires to transform supposition into fact based on the evidence of one secondary source, while ignoring

primary material. Skipsey's biography is subcontracted in the first instance to Spence Watson and subsequently to others who make assumptions based on an overreliance on, and with a misplaced trust in, the hierarchical authority of class difference.

It is inevitable, however, in the absence of personal papers such as diaries or journals, that Skipsey's life will be co-opted in this manner. It seems unlikely it will be possible to make a definitive statement on much of Skipsey's life beyond the parameters of *RSWB*, but attempting to establish the circumstances of the first meeting of the friends for forty years shifts the totemic position of that work. In establishing the where and when, it is the inaccuracy of the maths that is troubling. Spence Watson is specific in stating Skipsey was his friend for forty years, not over forty, not almost forty. Thus, Spence Watson suggests he met Skipsey in 1863; this assertion is reinforced when considering Spence Watson's memoir, privately published by the Spence Watson family, which states: "One of my earliest visitors was Joseph Skipsey, who came to see me in October, 1863, and he was from that time [...] a constant visitor" (Spence Watson, 1969: 28). It seems unlikely it would have taken Skipsey almost two years from the accident at New Hartley (January, 1862) to visit Spence Watson, and it seems probable it was while Skipsey was working at The Lit & Phil, where Spence Watson was secretary, that the pair met. It is a small, but important, step in establishing these factual details as it dispels misinformation surrounding Skipsey. In the process of uncovering and presenting this information, I begin a process that alters the formulation of working-class deference and disrupts the middle-class saviour narrative.

In Skipsey's case, the image of Spence Watson acting as his patron seems erroneous and their relationship being included in Vicinus' section entitled 'The writer and his patron' misleading. The doubts are created by Spence Watson. In exploring Skipsey's appreciation of Goethe's *Faust*, Spence Watson recounts an inadvertent encounter Skipsey had with, Icelandic scholar, Eiríkr Magnússon (1833-1913):

I shall never forget how, on one occasion in 1870, Mr. Eiríkr Magnússon [sic] was staying with me, and Skipsey turned up accidentally to dine [....] He was still and grave, and took little part in the conversation. Mr. Magnússon, on the other hand, was a brilliant conversationalist, but he happened to say something about Goethe and 'Faust.' He was surprised when, from the other side of the table, a deep, thoughtful voice said, "I deny that," and he at once engaged in an argument with Skipsey which was exceedingly brilliant and exceedingly amusing, but in which Skipsey held his own in a very remarkable way [....] Mr. Magnússon whispered to me, "Who is this fellow?" and I told him, and said, "You must make much of him, for in half an hour's time he will be going away to the pit [...]" He went up at once and took him by the arms and said, "My dear fellow, you must not continue to live here; it is no place for you; you must come and live in London." "Not if I can exercise any influence with him," was my reply. (RSWB: 22-3)

The revelation of such erudition from an unlikely source and the ability Skipsey possessed in meeting an educated man on an equal footing was greeted with obvious enthusiasm by Magnússon. Although living in London would not necessarily have been a panacea for Skipsey, Magnússon's apparent readiness to believe it was the best forum for his adversary's intellectual ability is acknowledgement in itself of the potential Skipsey had for advancement in fields beyond manual labour. Other than Magnússon, Spence Watson was acquainted with many leading Victorian figures and many visited him in Gateshead, yet it was not until he met Thomas Dixon that Skipsey's work began to be distributed among the leading lights in nineteenth-century cultural circles.⁶⁹ Rather than Spence Watson being seen as Skipsey's primary patron, as Martha Vicinus suggests, his curt response to Magnússon exposes him as an active agent in limiting, rather than promoting, Skipsey's literary career.

⁶⁹ An *Evening Chronicle* article lists various politicians (including three Prime Ministers: Henry Bannerman, William Gladstone, and Herbert Asquith), authors (including William Morris), artists (including Dante Rossetti), explorers, and social reformers who visited Spence Watson's Gateshead home (Henderson, 2015).

CHAPTER FOUR

Poetic Beginnings

4.1 The epistolary birth of a poet

In the basic statistical analysis of Joseph Skipsey's correspondence, given in Chapter Three, the silence of the archive can be witnessed in absolute clarity. This, it could be argued, can be seen to be the result of relative volumes of capital. Prior to Joseph Skipsey's contact with the Pre-Raphaelites, in 1878, I have uncovered only five letters in which he was a correspondent. The majority of Skipsey's acquaintances prior to 1878 seem to have possessed insufficient volumes of cultural and social capital to have their letters collected in archival repositories. Yet, however sparse the quantity of evidence, when augmented by and considered alongside other materials such as the poems themselves and reviews, a richness and vitality in the material becomes evident. While Derrida suggests that archive fever is an "irrepressible desire to return to the origin, [...] the most archaic place of absolute commencement" (Derrida, 1995: 91), in Skipsey's case the moment of his becoming a poet, in public at least, is apparent. This chapter will explore how Skipsey's earliest extant letter and reviews of his work formed expectations within his readership and how, in turn, these expectations then forced restrictions upon the poetry he was 'allowed' to write. Furthermore, the chapter will also show how this had a deep and lasting effect on how Skipsey was compelled to divide the poet from the worker and exist in two distinctly separate spheres.

In the *Gateshead Observer* dated 10th July 1858 there appeared, under the title "The Pitman-Poet" (RKRTB: 17), an extensive review of a "little Book [...] the production of a Working Man" (L1858: 3).⁷⁰ The review of *Lyrics by J.S., a Coal Miner*, written by editor James Clephan, is fulsome

⁷⁰ Thornton (2014) reproduces the review in full (RKRTB: 17-21).

and encouraging, carrying within it a sense of humour as well as the hallmarks of a good education.⁷¹

The piece ends abruptly and is immediately followed by a contrasting review of Lord Ravensworth's translation of *The Odes of Horace* (1858), a weighty tome in comparison to Skipsey's slim volume'.⁷²

The contrast here is not just the size of the text, the education displayed, nor the different social circles from which the two authors write, but the way in which the reviews approach the two authors. In the review of 1858, Skipsey's profession takes precedence as the pitman repeatedly comes before the poet and the poetry. In the review's title Skipsey is a pitman before he is poet, in the introduction he is "a pitman [who...] wrote verses" (RKRTB: 17), and, once more, Clephan "found the pitman to be a true poet" (RKRTB: 18). Conversely, in the review of *The Odes of Horace* the title announces the work of a "Poet-Peer" (RKRTB: 21). The difference is subtle, but it is telling. Skipsey's review is approached through his employment, he is a pitman first and a poet second, his social designation given pre-eminence over the poetry and the poet; Lord Ravensworth, however, is presented as a poet before he is a peer. The adjectival use of pitman for Skipsey qualifies, defines, and ultimately limits Skipsey's possibilities as a poet. This is further compounded when the review of 1858 ends with the final stanza of Skipsey's 'Fame':

Who knows that, by dint
Of hard labour and toil,
By the battling with sorrow
And ridicule's smile,
Is the laurel obtain'd
That encrowneth the brow,
And marketh the children
Of Genius below. (RKRTB: 21)

⁷¹ The review is unattributed, but Thornton assumes it was written by Clephan (RKRTB: 16). As the writing in the review resembles Clephan's "lively style and delight in the oddities of human behaviour" (Stokes, 2006: 431), and for ease of reference, I have assumed Thornton is correct.

⁷² The review of *The Odes of Horace* by Lord Ravensworth, Henry Thomas Liddell (1797-1878), is also unattributed. The review is written in a similar style to that of the 1858 review and was, presumably, also written by Clephan. Thornton includes the opening paragraphs of this review (RKRTB: 21-22).

The reviewer notes their “copy” was “a ‘proof’” (RKRTB: 20) and this differs from what was published:

Oh! yes! but by dint
Of hard labour and toil—
By the battling with sorrow
And ridicule's [*sic*] smile,
Is the laurel obtained
That encrowneth the brow
And marketh the children
Of genius below. (L1858: 14, ll. 17-24)

Despite ‘Fame’ containing the only allusions to mining in the text, the review bookends L1858 between the ‘Pitman-Poet’ and ‘the children of genius ‘below’ as Skipsey’s poetry is effectively constrained within these parentheses. Skipsey, “so diffident as to bar refusal” (RKRTB: 17), is not without complicity in this process, however, as he himself underpins these limitations and restrictions in emphasising his industrial background over his poetry. By withdrawing full authorial attribution, the first attributable label is: ‘A Coal Miner’. As such, Skipsey himself prevents his reader from seeing the poet before the coal, the pit, and the associated preconceptions. Without this self-identification, it would not be possible to have identified ‘J.S.’ as a coal miner from his poetry alone.

In authoring his first text in this manner, Skipsey is caught in a trap that has ensnared many working-class writers. In identifying his vocation, as Goodridge argues (2006: xxi), Skipsey invokes a series of expectations and authenticities within which he is not only, from this point onward, required to remain but required to continually reinforce. The first step in this process is precisely what Skipsey does in his ‘Preface’ when introducing himself “To the Public”:

This little Book is the production of a Working Man, a Miner. It is his first flight into the fields of Poesy. As the mother bird gently guards the early essays of her callow brood, and where they are weak and fluttering, lends them the support of her own stronger wing, so they, who have the strength, which a liberal Education supplies, are entreated to use it, not to crush, but to sustain, a new adventurer in his first timid and uncertain essay. (L1858: 3)

In introducing the text as 'the production of a Working Man, A Miner', Skipsey exemplifies the kind of self-identification described by Pierre Bourdieu: "the cultural alienation of old-style autodidacts [that, in] their readiness to offer proof of their culture *even when it is not asked for*, betray[s] their exclusion by their eagerness to prove their membership" (my emphasis, Bourdieu, 1984: 84). Skipsey disbars himself from being purely considered a poet by revealing his industrial credentials. Skipsey's introduction not only identifies the author as a miner, it accentuates his inexperience and his deficient embodied cultural capital resulting from a lack of 'a liberal Education'. In doing so, Skipsey gives the reader reason to dismiss the work as ineffectual and inadequate. Clephan dismisses Skipsey's uncertainty as unjustified but in the "pass[ing] over [of] 'A Patriotic Invocation'" (RKRTB: 18), a poem condemning Britain's inaction regarding Russian oppression in Hungary, he introduces a censorious attitude that requires Skipsey to remain within certain bounds.⁷³

Although Skipsey was tentative in taking his first steps as a published poet, this first review of his poetry was encouraging. Because of this extensive appraisal and positive reception, the starting point of Skipsey as poet is clearly observed when he takes ownership of the role of 'The Pitman-Poet'. Following the review, Skipsey revealed his identity in a letter to the editor of the *Gateshead Observer*:

Dear Sir, Since the publication, through Mr Proctor of Durham of my little book, entitled '*Lyrics by J.S., a Coal Miner*', I have been blamed by certain gentlemen (yourself among the number) for not attaching my name in full to it, and fully convinced of the error of judgement I have committed, I embrace the first opportunity to make known to the public, by your kind indulgence, that the name of the 'Pitman Poet' in full is Joseph Skipsey, son of Cuthbert Skipsey who was shot dead by a special constable during the great pitmen's strike of 1832, at Chirton near North Shields, leaving a wife and eight little ones, the youngest of

⁷³ 'A Patriotic Invocation' was possibly Skipsey's response to the 1851 visit to Tyneside of Hungarian political fugitive Lajos Kossuth (1802-94).

whom was, Your obliged servant, Joseph Skipsey, Gilesgate Moor, Durham, July 14th 1858.

(cited in Skipsey, 1999: 24)

In this instant, Skipsey's anonymity is cast aside. 'The Pitman Poet' is not only named but also identified, as if to prove the absolute credibility of his industrial lineage, as the son of a pitman who had died in tragic circumstances during industrial action.

Most importantly, however, is the ready acceptance of the label 'Pitman Poet' and the definite article. The review is entitled "*The Pitman-Poet*" (my emphasis, RKRTB: 17) and in receiving the title, not only is Skipsey revealed to the world, he unwittingly accepts the definite article identifying him as the *only* pitman-poet, the *one* representing all pitman, and the *one* restricting the opportunity of other miner poets. Rather than being an individual voice among many, in the definite article, Skipsey comes to be "made to speak *for*, or *on behalf of*, other workers" (Harker, 1999: 1, emphasis in original). With this acceptance, a trap is closed. The worker-poet, eager to be identified beyond their industrial label, is tempted into a gilded-cage of being recognised as a writer, the signifier of his recognition by a wider cultural community. This gilding, however, comes with the price of being permanently identified through the lens of the industrial adjective; the trap is closed in the acceptance of the title. The worker-poet is able to dwell in the superficial luxury of being identified as a writer, but is ensnared and restricted within the cage of their industrial designation, trapped within their specific cultural capital and their *habitus*, not allowed to venture beyond the bars for fear of being damned as overreaching or, as Basil Bunting accused Skipsey, trying "to be clever" (Bunting, 1976: 14). In accepting the Pitman Poet title, Skipsey is, although "anxious to be done with hewing" (RKRTB: 17), consigned to remain a miner-poet throughout his life. Furthermore, with some critics incorrectly asserting he "ended his days as he had begun them, a Northumberland coal miner" (Vicinus, 1988: 494), Skipsey remains a pitman in his literary afterlife.

As Donna Landry argues, in *A History of British Working Class Literature* (2017), "aesthetics and politics can never be entirely divorced from one another" (Landry, 2017: xix) when studying

working-class literature. In Skipsey's case, however, the overtly political writer is seemingly absent. There are no explicit calls to overthrow oppression or demands to ameliorate the suffering of his own class; he is not radical in that sense. Skipsey does, however, condemn Russian persecution in Hungary and "high-hearted Poland" ('A Cry for Poland', P1871: 105-6, l.27), but these are naively nationalistic calls for British action as Imperial superpower, not clarion calls to fellow workers that they are no longer "to drag the chains of slavery, to bear the yokes of bondage and toil in the bowels of the earth" (Fynes, 1873: 57). The "pass[ing] over" (RKRTB: 16) of the expression of his political views, as happens when 'A Patriotic Invocation' is overlooked, shapes his poetry as the overtly political is removed from the corpus of his work. In the second edition of *Lyrics*, L1859, Skipsey responds to the *Gateshead Observer* review by omitting this poem altogether and does not include it in any other volume. Two further poems in a similar vein, on the Crimean War, included in L1858 appear in only one other volume: 'Once More Shall Our Standard Unfurl'd' (railing against "the harpy-bred hordes of the North" (L1858: 6, l.4)) in L1859 and 'On the Downfall of Sebastopol' in P1871. Clephan clearly held influence over Skipsey.

Despite Clephan's omissions, this form of censorious response was not consistent. While the Whiggish *Gateshead Observer*, evidently, objected to Skipsey's sabre-rattling call for "The Protectress of Freedom and Justice [to be] heard" ('A Patriotic Invocation', l. 6), when reviewed nationally, in *The National Magazine* or *The Spectator*, 'A Patriotic Invocation', 'Once More Shall Our Standard Unfurl'd', or 'On the Downfall of Sebastopol' are not passed over.⁷⁴ Reviews here, instead, note Skipsey's poems "are strongly tinctured with political feeling" (*The Spectator*, 1858: 1183) and in writing "in favour of suffering nationalities [...] in detestation of mighty tyrannies like Russia and Austria" he shows the "right spirit, and demonstrat[es] how sound is the heart of England in the body of the people" (*National Magazine*, 1859: 326), and from a sociological perspective, "as showing in what manner the 'art of poetry' is cultivated among working men in Northumberland"

⁷⁴ Although appearing after L1859 was published, *The National Magazine* review is of L1858.

(*The Spectator*, 1858: 1183). These reviews in national journals imply that to read Skipsey is to understand the creative possibilities of *all* working men in Northumberland, establishing the nobility of the wider English working class as devout followers of the path of Empire. Skipsey, therefore, comes to embody not only working men in his region but the whole of the English working class, as the dominant culture, with admirable efficiency, packages them all in the one poet. To read one is to understand all.

Instead of encouraging further exploration of this political vein or a widening of Skipsey's poetic subjects, however, most reviews force or, more charitably, guide his poetry to limit itself to explorations of the human interactions in the pit villages from which he hails. Kirstie Blair recognises, in an article concentrating on the correspondence columns of Scottish newspapers and journals, this guidance was common throughout "the Victorian era, [as] critics and patrons commented on what working-class poets could and should write in reviews and introductions to published volumes" (Blair, 2014: 189). Like most poets, however, Skipsey possesses greater ambition and a range that extends beyond his locale and while his poems do reveal his community's existence, they also explore his own imagined life, tell of kings and queens, take on philosophically challenging subjects, exploring his own spiritualism, and illustrate a deep faith in eternal salvation. The seeming absence of political radicalism and propagandising, however, results in the accusation that Skipsey perpetuates a "do-nothing sentimentality" (Vicus, 1974: 85) that prevents social reform and preserves his own oppression. Yet this is one side of a dichotomous critical response that expects working-class writers to be iconoclastic and seek to alter the fabric of their society. It is a perspective, however, that quotes selectively and ignores poems such as 'Reign of Gold', which archly criticises the economic subjection and exploitation of working communities by the power of economic capital, where "crimes manifold/ [are] Cemented by specious ovations" (*P1862*: 46-8, ll. 14-5), or 'The Downfall of Mammon' which imagines the rapacious pursuit of economic capital ending:

The baleful Era of King Gold is vanished,
And men disgusted with the part they played,
From out the temple of the heart are banished
The idols that debased the soul they swayed.

(ML1878: 140, ll. 1-4)

This selectivity effectively shapes Skipsey's poetry into a non-threatening, acceptable, and comfortable product to be consumed by the dominant hegemony. Packaged as such, the vicarious thrill of working-class life can be experienced by the middle-class consumer without the dirt, danger, and death associated with the Victorian mining industry; and, in purchasing Skipsey's poetry, a philanthropic rush in having helped the English working class to break free from their tawdry existence in exchange for their "white saxpence [*sic*]" (RKRTB: 19) is experienced. From this critical perspective, Skipsey is not polemical or political enough to be an efficacious representative of his class.

When considering Skipsey's poetry, however, a politicization of his message emanates from the representation of a population divested of political influence and representation, and a body of workers whose *raison d'être* is dependent upon an industry that could extinguish their existence at any moment. Skipsey's political message exists in "the deep pathos" (Rossetti, 1878a: 2) or the "direct and quiet pathetic force" (Rossetti, 1878a: 4) Rossetti found in 'Bereaved' and "'Get Up!'" respectively. Skipsey's political savagery comes in the fact that the subjects of haunting poems such as these have little opportunity to escape their likely fate in the mines, little influence in improving their working conditions, and the inescapable paradox that the reason for the existence of their community will, in all likelihood, be the cause of their destruction. Skipsey shares the helplessness of his subjects in his inability to effect change. By contrast, Basil Bunting explained in a letter to the poet Peter Russell (1921-2003) that he found Skipsey a welcome antidote to a polemic working class: "Nowadays when all worker poets are expected to be bitter & political [...Skipsey] was as cheerful as is reasonable about going down the pit & the pitman's life in general" (Bunting, 1950: 4). Although a clandestine politicization of his poetry can be observed, Skipsey is merely trying to write poetry

that would “constitute a legacy worthy of the acceptance of [his] country” (Skipsey (I), 1871: 7-8). The *Gateshead Observer* review and the subsequent letter mark the becoming of the poet, his self-creation, and his acceptance of the ‘Pitman-Poet’ label.

4.2 “J.S., A Coal Miner”: a mask of anonymity

Publishing under the pseudonym “J.S., A Coal Miner” created for Skipsey a mask that shielded his identity in a way that is, perhaps, understandable for a working-class writer. Giving partial justification for this in his ‘Preface’, Skipsey shows his anxiety at presenting this “timid and uncertain essay” (L1858: 3) in front of a, possibly, hypercritical audience eager to “crush” (L1858: 3) an inexperienced author. The anonymity spares Skipsey any embarrassment, he is easily disassociated from the text if “his first flight into poesy” (L1858: 3) is short and widely mocked. Skipsey’s timidity in releasing his “callow brood” (L1858: 3) is reflected in that it was, as Clephan revealed, “his friends [who...] persuaded him” (RKRTB: 17) to publish. Yet, these feelings of uncertainty are understandable in any writer sending out their first publication for examination by a critical readership, and what is perhaps more important to the working-class poet is the reception of his own community. As Nan Hackett argues, discussed here in Chapter One, in teaching himself to read and write Skipsey alienated himself from his community. Skipsey turns away from the physical prowess for work, sport, and leisure valued within his community and, “instead of spending his hours on the play-ground” (ML1878: vii), turns toward the, seemingly antithetical, pursuit of books and learning. He develops cultural capital not readily associated with, or necessary for, the immediate needs of his community. To Skipsey the potential for ostracization was keenly felt. In “battling with sorrow/ And ridicule’s [*sic*] smile” (‘Fame’, L1858: 14, ll. 19-20), he not only carried the woes of any aspiring writer, but also risked suffering the contempt of those among whom he lived. Publishing poetry as an identifiable creation of Joseph Skipsey, pitman of Gilesgate Moor, risked the scorn of a poetry-reading public and the derision of his own community, a community

upon which his livelihood relied. The mask of anonymity shielded Skipsey from identification and the potential of being “thrust aside and scorned and taunted/ As being a lunatic, a knave or a fool” (‘The Seer’, *BML*1878: 5-9, ll. 29-30) for his lofty ambition to be a poet, insulating him from the mockery of those around him.

Having received plaudits, however, the letter to the *Gateshead Observer* becomes not only recognition of that praise, but an attempt to bridge the gap between artist and worker. Although Clephan states “be he pitman or peer, may [he] never lift his bonnet, otherwise than in courtesy, to the proudest scholar in the land” (RKRTB: 21), Skipsey’s letter accepts the praise of his work with the deference expected of the Victorian working class when engaging with their supposed social superiors. Skipsey metaphorically ‘lifts his bonnet’ in begging the “kind indulgence” (Skipsey, 1999: 24) of the newspaper’s readership. To validate himself within and anchor himself to the mining community, as discussed in Chapter Three, he asserts and establishes his lineage within that community and proves his working-class credentials as “son of Cuthbert Skipsey [...] shot dead [...] during the great pitmen’s strike of 1832” (Skipsey, 1999: 24). In establishing and asserting the credibility of his paternal lineage, and displaying the required deference, Skipsey attempts to breach the mutual exclusivity of worker and poet.

While Skipsey sought a nervous anonymity as ‘J.S., A Coal Miner’, he obviously had ambitions for and a sense of value in his poetry from the outset. It seems odd he would approach the *Gateshead Observer*, fifteen miles from Gilesgate Moor, to review his work when the nearby city of Durham had newspapers, the *Durham Chronicle* or the *Durham Advertiser*, who might well have reviewed the poetry of a working miner.⁷⁵ This choice is further complicated when considering, having travelled that distance, his journey would have been extended only slightly by crossing the

⁷⁵ Andrew James Symington, in his biographical introduction to Skipsey in *North Country Poets* (1888), states he had been introduced to him by, poet and novelist, Isabella Banks (1821-97) “some eighteen years ago” (Symington: 1888: 62). Isabella was married to George Linnaeus Banks who was editor of the *Durham Chronicle* in the mid-1850s, it is possible they were associated with Skipsey at this time.

River Tyne to approach the *Newcastle Courant*, a newspaper with a larger circulation. The underlying confidence Skipsey had in his poetry, and the hope for its future, is revealed in his approaching the *Gateshead Observer* rather than a more local or more prestigious title. To lay the best foundation for his future in poetry a sympathetic ear to provide a good review, not just any review, was vital. The review he received in the *Gateshead Observer*, as well as the newspaper's history, reveals considerable consideration must have been given in locating the necessary sympathetic ear.

The *Gateshead Observer* was founded in 1837 by William Henry Brockett (1804-67), a businessman who had prospered through the rapid industrialisation of Tyneside, and had a radical editorial stance that stood against "oppressors lay and clerical [...and] those who wasted the fruit of national industry on corruption at home and wars abroad" (cited in Stokes, 2006: 429). The paper, the first published in Gateshead, stood for many of the issues of the Chartists: "householder suffrage, more frequent parliamentary elections, the ending of property qualifications for MPs, the secret ballot and the curtailment of the House of Lords" (Stokes, 2006: 430), a stance reinforced when in 1838 the paper appointed *The Leicester Journal's* James Clephan as editor. Stockton-born Clephan took to the role with gusto, acting as journalist, sub-editor, and editor, and, "in an age when newspapers borrowed heavily from each other, his incisive, witty, and quotable commentary brought [...the *Gateshead Observer*] a national reputation" (Webb, 2004). A committed Liberal reformer, after moving north, Clephan engaged in the region's social and cultural framework with the same energy as he approached the paper. In doing so, he became a prominent member of the Gateshead Mechanics' Institute, The Lit & Phil, the Newcastle Antiquarian Society, and Newcastle's Unitarian congregation (Webb, 2004). With its Liberal reputation and an editor with significant social capital, the *Gateshead Observer* appears to have been primed to receive the "production of a Working Man" (L1858: 3).

Twenty years after Clephan was appointed editor of the *Gateshead Observer*, Skipsey published *Lyrics* and, encouraged by Willie Reay and Edward Prest, journeyed to Gateshead to present them to the town's radical newspaper. With Clephan's reputation and his links to Tyneside's intellectual elite, in particular Newcastle's Unitarian congregation, it seems most likely it was Prest who recommended the *Gateshead Observer*. The review received confirms the decision was correct. The sympathy Clephan has for the working man, the 'true poet' and author of the text, is revealed in his enthusiasm, and in the assertion that "Nature is impartial in her gifts, conferring on prince or peasant alike" (RKRTB: 18). In doing so, Clephan alludes to the aphorism *Nascitur Poeta* (a poet is born not made) and, in comparing poets from such widely divergent social spheres, a pitman and a peer, Clephan reveals a radical perspective on the social and cultural possibilities of all classes. This radicalism is accentuated when the review for Skipsey's poetry is placed before that of Lord Ravensworth's, putting the working man before the peer. Furthermore, the review of *The Odes of Horace* makes a direct comparison between the pitman and the peer:

Nature, we have said, (in our notice of the pitman's poems,) is no respecter of persons; and we have here two notable examples of her impartiality. While the miner was turning his verses in the pit-row, the noble coalowner was similarly employed in his castle.⁷⁶ (RKRTB: 22)

A poet can be born into the most luxurious of settings or the most pitiable, and the value of the two can be equal. To Clephan and Skipsey the compulsion to versify is innate and irrepressible, regardless of the poet's economic or social background.

This perspective is, however, antithetical to life in an industrial community and more often seen as the mutual exclusivity Skipsey attempted to disrupt. This is, as Joe Sharkey discusses in

⁷⁶ This metaphorical coming together of pitman and peer appears to have also brought them together physically, as Edward Prest revealed when speaking about individuals with "talents in an opposite line to those with which sometimes commenced the business of life [...]. He told a public meeting that] the pitman poet had been invited by Lord Ravensworth to Ravensworth Castle, and sitting side by side, the noble lord had assisted the humble miner to correct his poems previous to publication" (Newcastle Daily Journal, 1865: 3).

Akenside Syndrome: Scratching the Surface of Geordie Identity (2014), a boundary many writers, musicians, and actors from North-East England have struggled to breach. In transposing the experience of the poet Mark Akenside (1721-70), who had been ashamed of his working-class background, onto a (mainly) twentieth-century context, Sharkey argues the only way those possessing artistic sensibilities can succeed in breaking free from their industrial environment is by leaving it. In this manner, more recent North-Eastern cultural figures, writers Sid Chaplin, Jack Common (1903-68), Gordon Burn (1948-2009), and Lee Hall (1966-), musicians Bryan Ferry (1945-), Brian Johnson (1947-), and Sting (1951-), actors Jimmy Nail (1954-) and Robson Green (1964-), have all felt separate and isolated from their communities and left them for fear of being, or because they were, different from what is considered normative in their community. The inability to assimilate the industrial and the artistic within these individuals creates a complex relationship between the artist and the community from which they emerge. Sharkey terms this “condition of feeling ambivalent towards Newcastle or Tyneside despite often retaining a strong emotional bond with and/or sincere affection for the area” as “Akenside Syndrome” (Sharkey, 2014: 5). Although there is no evidence to support the suggestion, it is not impossible that Skipsey’s first journey to London was, plagued by Akenside Syndrome, to break free from a stultifying industrial region and make a living as a writer.

The difficulty of an artistic temperament being born into an environment less than conducive to its development is something experienced by many: Akenside was embarrassed by his background, Skipsey felt uncertain in identifying himself as a poet, twentieth-century novelists Sid Chaplin and Jack Common both struggled to break free from an all-encompassing regional identity that left little room for their existence. Jack Common encapsulated these difficulties in his autobiographical novel *Kiddar’s Luck* (1951):

There were plenty of golden opportunities going [...the night of Kiddar’s conception]. In palace and mansion flat, in hall and manor and new central-heated ‘cottage’, the wealthy,

talented and beautiful lay coupled – welcome wombs were ten-a-penny, must have been. What do you think I pick on, me and my genes, that is? Missing lush Sussex, the Surrey soft spots, affluent Mayfair and gold-filled Golder's Green, fat Norfolk rectories, the Dukeries, and many a solid Yorkshire village, [...] I came upon the frost-rimed roofs of a working-class suburb in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and in the back-bedroom of an upstairs in a parallel with the railway line, on which a halted engine whistled to be let through the junction, I chose my future parents. There, it was done. (Common, 1951: 7)

Kiddar's fate is sealed from the outset, from the title of Chapter One, by the "Blunder by an Unborn Babe" (Common, 1951: 7) in choosing the womb of a working-class mother. There were other opportunities that night that would have provided the child with an environment more advantageous to the fostering of an aspiring writer, environments that would have provided greater opportunity in providing legitimate cultural capital, but he chose instead the difficulties of the 'frost-rimed roofs of a working-class suburb in Newcastle-upon-Tyne'. As Clephan and Skipsey suggest, and Common laments, a creative person is just as likely to be born to a meagre background as a comfortable one, the difference lies in the opportunities afforded the luxurious and the struggles to overcome for the measly. Where Kiddar strives against mass orthodoxy he is put into opposition to it, struggling to come to terms with his desire to be free from the masses while being deeply conscious of their shared heritage. The conflict between Kiddar's creative urges and the norms associated with his industrial heritage preserves the dichotomy of artist and worker, where Skipsey's anonymity attempts to overcome by incorporating both worlds in one being. Either way, Common and Skipsey are both dislocated from their communities.

Sharkey attributes this displacement to a British tendency, Tall Poppy Syndrome, to rein in, or cut down to size, those within a community whose talents and abilities raise them above their peers. Sharkey goes on to link this enforced conformity to a Scandinavian attitude toward

individuality and collectivism: Janteloven (The Law of Jante).⁷⁷ Conceived by Danish novelist Aksel Sandemose, in the novel *En flyktning krysser sitt spor* (1933; *A Fugitive Crosses his Tracks*), Janteloven is a set of satirical rules that “has become part of contemporary Scandinavian consciousness” (Mishler, 1993: 265). *A Fugitive Crosses his Tracks* is the second of two novels Sandemose wrote following Espen Arnakke, a Newfoundland lumberjack who murders a love rival. In the novels, Arnakke discovers, through a series of “childhood memories, introspection, and flashbacks” (Avant, 1993: 454), that his upbringing in the insular, isolated, small town of Jante, bred within him the capacity for murder. Sandemose’s portrayal of Jante shows a repressive community seeking to preserve social cohesion within remote rural Norway through strict observance of the Laws of Jante:

1. Thou shalt not believe that thou *art* something.
2. Thou shalt not believe that thou art as good as *us*.
3. Thou shalt not believe that thou art more than *us*.
4. Thou shalt not fancy thyself better than *us*.
5. Thou shalt not believe thou knowest more than *us*.
6. Thou shalt not believe thou art greater than *us*.
7. Thou shalt not believe that thou art a worthwhile human being.
8. Thou shalt not laugh at *us*.
9. Thou shalt not believe that anyone is concerned with thee.
10. Thou shalt not believe thou canst teach *us* anything.

(Cited in Avant, 1993: 453-4)

Deeply conservative in its aspect toward individual progress, the Law of Jante values the community (the *us*) far above the individual (the *thou*) as individual identity is preserved by being assimilated into the collective identity. Couched in this Biblical phrasing, Janteloven bears comparison with the

⁷⁷ In Series One of the Danish drama *Bedrag* (broadcast in the UK as *Follow the Money*), which focusses on financial irregularities surrounding the company Energreen, CEO Alexander Södergren uses the term “Janteloven” as an indication that any evidence of scandal will be used to prevent Energreen becoming too successful. The subtitles translate “Janteloven” as “Tall Poppy Syndrome” (Episode 5: 2016). Janteloven is a state of mind Scandinavian nations are trying to move away from. In her 1988 New Year’s Eve speech to the nation, Queen Margrethe II urged Danes to “turn the Jante Law upside down and say: ‘You must not believe that you are worth nothing’” (cited in Levisen, 2012: 145), there is also a Facebook group called ‘Fuck Janteloven’; Janteloven, however, remains significant within Scandinavian culture.

Ten Commandments in being “apparently morally commendable in their demand that the individual should show humility in relation to their fellow human beings” (Avant, 1993: 454), and it becomes a normalising framework for social unity and control. In establishing a model, like the Biblical Commandments, upon which a society can be built, that society compels citizens to abrogate their individuality for the sake of the *us*. Janteloven dictates conformity to social precepts and the personal becomes irrelevant as individuality, eccentricity, or creativity is disparaged. In fact, the foregrounding and repetition of the ‘Thou’ becomes increasingly aggressive, accusatory, and threatening as the precepts progress. As Sharkey has shown in North-East England, as in Scandinavia, “many a great artist has fled the North, in anger and exasperation” (Dahl, 1984: 103) at the strictures and conformity to the norm required to belong to, and remain within, the community.

Janteloven is not a term I have found discussed in critical studies of the concept of the North and with its many shared cultures, language, identity, place names, and even topography, the north of England has many affinities with Scandinavia and, as Peter Davidson argues in his *The Idea of North* (2005), forms a hinterland of the ‘True North’. With its Northumbrian heritage, North-East England often feels it has more in common with these “hyperborean otherworlds” (Davidson, 2016: 247) than its own national centre in the south. A nineteenth-century mining village in particular, therefore, is similar to many communities in Scandinavia and Sandemose’s Jante specifically: it can feel isolated, insular, and irrelevant, exposed to the fickle winds of economic fortune and the vagaries of the movement of economic capital. As a result, Janteloven can also be applied within these communities. In a society centred on heavy industry, the reason for the community’s existence is the industry and, as such, its pre-eminence becomes the individual’s norm. The individual, the ‘thou’, becomes little more than a cog within the industrial unit, the ‘us’, and, as in any machine, individual cogs must fit perfectly in order for the whole to function. The smallness of the community and the reason for its existence prevent any form of creative self-definition as the

individual is defined in the customs, habits, and laws of the community. The creative individual, incapable of performing their industrial duties under these preordained obligations, transgresses these rules and the society has no fixed place for them and, as Akenside himself asks, “What shall he do for life? [if] he cannot work/ With manual labour” (‘The Poet: A Rhapsody’, Akenside, 1845: 335, ll. 5-6). In transgressing Janteloven, individuals may feel a carnivalesque sense of self-fulfilment or emancipation, which raises themselves above the reason for the society’s existence. Where the carnival is an officially endorsed space in which the individual experiences liberation from the strictures of society, there is no such space within Janteloven and to transgress results in punishment. Kiddar experienced this:

By self-inflicted outlawry one can regain a world relatively innocent of the ticking clock and of the measured-out values, human and material that tick is the ready symbol of. You can fall out of step, you can question any general obedience, by no more elaborate strategy than an obstinate boldness. True, you will be punished for this, if only by powerful and heartening disapproval. You may also be rewarded, distantly and doubtfully. The point is, that for the period of your freedom, you have been an outsider to whom the contrived universe of the socially included is a curiosity. (Common, 1951: 48)

In Scandinavian society, as in North-East England, rewards for creative excellence can be given begrudgingly ‘distantly and doubtfully’, but always with the proviso that should failure come at any point it will be greeted with envious delight and a vigorous ‘I told you so’. Where Kiddar’s punishment for non-conformity in playing truant is the child’s humiliation of a ‘powerful and heartening disapproval’, for Skipsey failure is to “face the sanctions of public ridicule, or in extreme cases, ostracism” (Avant, 1993: 455) and, with little or no social safety net, to risk any form of social disapproval or expulsion is to risk the livelihood of not only himself but his family. To pick at words instead of coal is to begin to believe that thou *art* something.

Tall Poppy Syndrome or Janteloven, however, serves a dual purpose. Not only does it provide a mechanism for the preservation of community cohesion, in its conservativeness toward self-improvement, it also leads to the self-subjugation of the working classes. Furthermore, it presents an opportunity for the cultural centre to evaluate and strip away the best the regions have to offer, appropriating it for its own canon. This appropriation reduces the value of the regional and the working-class as the adjectives come to denote inferiority, parochialism, insularity, and wretchedness. In this manner, northern writers such as Wordsworth, the Brontës, Gaskell, Hughes, Auden, and others are denuded of their regional upbringing and brought into the literary canon, approved and relocated by, and within, the cultural centre; Sid Chaplin, 'stained' by the regional, left to "spit blood" (Myers, 2001: 315) in anger at the sobriquet. A concatenation of events that further exacerbates the belittlement of the regional and the working class, and, in not being awarded official sanction of either, the producer of cultural works becomes susceptible to accusations of failure, the barbed derision of the allegation of trying "to be clever" (Bunting, 1976: 14). Sid Chaplin's protagonist in 'The Thin Seam', Christopher Jack, feels this when considering his options of taking "a Research Scholarship at the Druffled Foundation" (Chaplin, 1968: 21) or going back to the pit. Having been awarded a scholarship to study economics at "a certain College for Working-men" (Chaplin, 1968: 18), Jack had obtained cultural capital external to his community's immediate needs and found himself at a crossroads:

I knew that, in a sense, all scholarship battens on the backs of the workers, and with a sense of horror I saw that although the primrose path was open to me and that no a soul would ever condemn me for taking it, just the same I knew that all the time I would be supported on the bowed, sweated shoulders of my father and brothers and other like them. I might later become a left-wing politician and 'fight' for them, but it would be from a comfortable and assured position that I would 'fight'. To take their part would in no way redeem my

position. I would still be a deserter. My people in one world, myself in another, completely and utter alien. (Chaplin, 1968: 20-21)

Having attempted to transcend the local, the working-class writer and intellectual is dislocated from the very environment that created them. The poppy that has dared to believe it is something but failed to break free finds itself marginalised by the cultural centre and then forced by that centre, as Bruce Woodcock writes of Tony Harrison: “to speak ‘on behalf of’ a group he no longer belongs to” (Woodcock, 1990: 61). ‘J.S., A Coal Miner’, Skipsey’s mask of anonymity, protects him from the negativity of criticism from a, possibly, disparaging literary public but, more importantly, insulates him from the disapproval of his community maintaining his cohesion to it and conforming to its own form of Janteloven.

4.3 The divided self as coping strategy

Where some working-class or regional writers have struggled to cope with their simultaneous marginalisation from their own as well as literary communities, Skipsey actively compartmentalised the two spheres of his existence. The mask of anonymity employed in the first instance was a coping strategy that allowed both worlds, artist and worker, to co-exist and in describing his poetry as “the production of a Working Man” (L1858: 3) Skipsey suggests the output of a working man could be found at the end of a pen as well as a pick.⁷⁸ Despite Thornton’s view that “the opposition of worker and artist is a false one” (RKRTB: 11), it is an opposition keenly felt by Skipsey and many other worker-poets; breaching this dichotomy risks expulsion from the working community thus endangering livelihoods. Nevertheless, Skipsey’s drive to write, as he reveals in ‘The Brooklet’, is a natural urge that can become destructive when coming into opposition to the stultifying nature of his community:

⁷⁸ The MacArthur Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health describes coping strategies as: “the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events” (Taylor, 1998).

A LITTLE brooklet trilled a song
 As merry as the day was long,
 At which a music-hater stung
 To frenzy said: "I'll bind thy tongue,
 And quell thy merriment:" That night,
 A dam check'd babbler's song and flight;
 But blind are ever hate and spite!
 And so it fell, the brook did swell—
 Ah, truth to say, ere dawn of day,
 Had grown a sea, unquelled would be,
 And soon with ruin, down the dell,
 Dashed with a fierce triumphant yell;
 And cried, "Ha, ha! ho, ho! oh, la!
 Where now thy skill, my voice to still?—
 Ah, dost thou find that he who'd bind
 The tongue e'en of a rillet, may
 Be doomed to hear instead, one day,
 What shall with terror seize, control,
 And wring with agony his soul?—
 In very deed then, reck the rede!"
 Thus yell'd the flood and onward swept;
 And music-hater heard and wept:
 And so weep all who'd try, or long,
 To render dumb the child of song.

(CftCF1886: 145)

Vicinus notes 'The Brooklet' is "a most unusual work" (Vicinus, 1974: 157), and, in doing so, employs Skipsey as a representative of the wider working class. His frustration at the limitations imposed by "the unnatural boundaries of society" (158), Vicinus argues, creates "a new poetic sensibility" (158) that reveals the potentially destructive power of the poet, where other working-class writers "told their readers poetry could be a force for change[,] Skipsey shows it" (158). To Vicinus, this poem suggests that real social change can come through working-class art and, in particular, poetry but it also highlights the internal tensions and contradictions of the worker-poet. 'The Brooklet', however, represents Skipsey's own desire to write poetry and 'trill a song'. His community, however, violently suppresses and silences him, binding his tongue. Like water's inclination to descend, Skipsey instinctively sings his song and to 'bind' his tongue, or attempt to 'dam' the water, is to transform a trickle into a torrent, endangering the existence of both the poet and the community. The repression

causes the poet physical pain, Skipsey's being 'wring[s] with agony', but the power builds and cannot be resisted; the brooklet transformed into a raging and destructive torrent when the dam, or repression, breaks. The 'little brooklet' of the opening line, upon releasing its devastating potential, is transformed from a personal compulsion to society's despondent weep in the penultimate line. To preserve social cohesion, however, the attitude of those attempting to 'render dumb the child of song' forces Skipsey into creating a coping strategy which constructs an internal symbiosis where the poet and the worker form a mutually beneficial, but separate, relationship.

Skipsey reveals this compartmentalisation in numerous ways but does so most explicitly in *The Pall Mall Gazette*. When asked if he read his poetry to his "mates in the pit" Skipsey replied, with a measure of pride, that when "someone asked one of the men if he had known [...Skipsey] made rhymes [...]" he said [...] he had worked beside [him for] ten years, and he knew nothing about it; but he knew [Skipsey] was a good hewer" (*PMG*: 2). In the response of Skipsey's colleague can be seen the successful divorce of writer and worker identities; *The Pall Mall Gazette* recognises the poet and Skipsey's pitman colleague recognises the skilled hewer. Where *The Pall Mall Gazette* gives pre-eminence to the poet in the interview's title: 'A Poet from the Mines', within the industrial community one cannot simultaneously be both poet and worker. A further example of this comes when Skipsey is promoted to the role of Master Shifter, the man in charge of those paid daily for shift work. As he writes to Spence Watson, although:

not a betterment of my position in a money way [...] 'it is a step in the right direction' [...]

Moreover it is a sign that [the] Masters are beginning to think that the author of the 'Hell-Broth' is something more than a mere dreamer. (Skipsey, 1872: 1)

In this compartmentalising of worker and poet roles, and the recognition from his 'Masters' he is 'something more than a dreamer', greater worth is placed on the concrete at the expense of the abstract and imagined. This creates, as Frances Wilson argues in an article on northern fiction, a "very simple morality: that work is good and that indolence is not so much deplorable or

unfortunate as evil' [...] the maxim is further simplified [in saying] physical work is good and mental work is evil" (Wilson, 2013). Skipsey realises the intransigence of these oppositions as he reveals in 'The Seer' (*BML1878*: 5-9). To engage in mental work and be labelled "a lunatic, a knave or a fool" (l. 30) is to put oneself in an antithetical and antagonistic position to what is normative, definable, and therefore valuable in this community: 'a good hewer'.

In this interview, Skipsey ensures that his authenticity as a worker is accentuated to illustrate that, despite writing poetry, he has not neglected his own industrial context, his 'proper sphere'. Spence Watson, in his 'Note' to *CftCF1886*, further validates Skipsey's industrial prowess while accentuating his efficacy in being able to compartmentalise the two spheres of his life. Far from being 'a mere dreamer', lost in an ivory tower, "when he should have been attending his machinery" (Altick, 1954: 9), Spence Watson insists Skipsey's more ephemeral pursuits never hindered the concrete and worthwhile pursuit of economic activity. Skipsey was:

a man who [...] made himself, and [...had] done it well. His life-long devotion to literary pursuits has never been allowed to interfere with the proper discharge of his daily duties. Whilst still a working pitman, he was master of his craft, and it took an exceptionally good man to match him as a hewer of coal. When after many long years of patient toil, he won his way to an official position, he gained the respect of those above him in authority whilst retaining the confidence and affection of the men.

[....]

He is personally known to not a few of the men whom, in letters and art, England delights to honour, and I think I may truly say he is honoured of them all. Perhaps, if we could see things as they really are, Joseph Skipsey is the best product of the north-country coal-fields, since George Stephenson. (Spence Watson, 1886: ii-iii, iii-iv)

Skipsey here is represented as having effectively hived off the physical and intellectual to such an extent he is respected by both the 'Masters' within his industry and those working alongside him,

while also being honoured by England's cultural firmament. His mining work is, however, prioritised, he is revealed as conforming to social norms and the literary is hidden from view, obscured by England's "men [...] in letters and art" (Spence Watson, 1886: iii). When Spence Watson concludes by comparing Skipsey to Stephenson, one of the most noteworthy of nineteenth-century industrialists, he bestows upon him the highest of accolades, but within a distinctly industrial context. To Skipsey it is vital that he perpetually validates and reinforces his industrial prowess within his community while maintaining deferential 'authenticity' in literary circles. In the deference displayed and the credibility of his paternal lineage, Skipsey attempts to satisfy both the dominant middle-class and the community that created him. In doing so, he breaches the mutual exclusivity of worker and poet and shifts between worlds. In each scenario, Skipsey's 'authenticity' is accentuated. There is no doubt Skipsey is a genuine working man as he is, metaphorically, brought before us in his working clothes as the "true poet – the man of decided genius" (RKRTB: 18), only visible through a diaphanous veil of his pit clothes.

The authenticity of the coal dust is as important to Skipsey's audience, throughout his life and afterlife, as being a 'true poet' was to Skipsey himself. It is a difficult balance that 'Skipsey in his Working Clothes' (Appendix Three) attempts to achieve.⁷⁹ This photograph of Skipsey illustrates a conscious effort to realise the equilibrium in which the 'pitman poet' balances the working sphere of the Davy Lamp in his left hand with the literary ambitions of the text in his right. As James Hall argues, in *The Sinister Side: How left-right symbolism shaped Western Art* (2008), there has been a long tradition of seeing the right side of an image, from the perspective of the image itself, as symbolising "the source of all good" (Hall, 2008: 3), whereas the left symbolises "the source of all

⁷⁹ In letters sent to Thomas Dixon in April and June 1879, Skipsey refers to having sat for portraits by photographer "Mr Mendelshon [*sic*]" (Skipsey, 1879e: 1-2), for which Dixon paid; Dixon sent copies to both Rossetti and Theo Watts-Dunton, to whom it "proved acceptable in both cases" (Skipsey, 1879g: 1). The photographer referred to is Hayman Mendelssohn (1847-1908), a German emigre who fled Poland "for political reasons" (npg.org.uk) and had studios in Newcastle between 1873 and 1883 before relocating to London.

evil” (Hall, 2008: 3). To read ‘Skipsey in his Working Clothes’ from this symbolic perspective, the text, representing Skipsey’s literary ambitions, is in his right hand (the ‘good side’) and the working paraphernalia, the economic necessity, in his left (the ‘evil side’). In presenting the text and the lamp in the image, Skipsey states “the production of a Working Man” (L1858: 3) can be both intellectual and physical. Skipsey can also be seen to be impersonating or ‘playing’ at being a miner, emphasising his ‘authenticity’, in order to satisfy audience expectations. In doing so, he places himself in a subordinate position and subjugates himself to what, *The Economist* editor, Walter Bagehot (1826-77) described as “the despotic power in England [...] deferring to what we may call the *theatrical show of society*” (Bagehot, 1867: 50-1, emphasis in original). Skipsey’s ‘working clothes’ become a theatrical costume in which middle-class dominance, the despotic power Bagehot refers to, enforces a display of ‘authenticity’ by playing the role of miner, accepting that he will always remain a pitman first and a poet second. Skipsey, however, appears to perform this role while simultaneously challenging this subjection. It is also possible to read the image, as I do here, as an attempt to negotiate, manipulate, and authenticate his position to his audience as a writer and his community as a miner. Skipsey, in this portrait, is working as a poet and as a miner: his working clothes cover both spheres of his existence.

This image also portrays an idealised version of the working classes comfortable enough for the higher echelons of society to digest. The picture presents Skipsey as a ‘representative artisan’, an archetype of a worker not lacking in education or culture, comfortable with his position in society, happy to subjugate himself to social hierarchies. Skipsey represents and embodies a non-threatening working class, as discussed in Chapter Three: “contented with his fate” (Scott, 1892: 271). The photograph encapsulates Matthew Arnold’s view that the working classes would be empowered, their lives improved, through the consumption of culture which “is a study of perfection [...] the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold, 1869: 8; viii). Having been empowered to become a poet, partly, through his reading of Shakespeare, Goethe, and

Milton, whom Arnold acclaimed “by his diction and rhythm the one artist of the highest rank in the great style whom we have” (Arnold, 1888: 63), Skipsey embodies that ideal of self-improvement through the consumption of, the ‘best that has been thought and known’, legitimate culture. To Arnold, working-class culture, synonymous with popular culture, was a symbol of the base urges that kept the working class in the gutter. With their growing power through the ballot box, an untamed and wild working-class culture was a signifier of the potential for social anarchy and the overturning of middle-class power through the celebration of the mediocrity of the “average man” (Arnold, 1888: 57). Skipsey’s portrait reveals that the working classes are able to adhere to, as John Storey argues, the hegemony Arnold expected: “social order, social authority won through cultural subordination and deference” (Storey, 2001: 21). Skipsey is caught in an orbit between two worlds. “Anxious to be done with hewing” (RKRTB: 17) but required to defer to cultural hierarchies and the gravitational pull exerted by the requirement for authenticity, he simply cannot achieve the escape velocity required to propel him into a different world.

This enforced cultural subordination is evident throughout Skipsey’s correspondence and reviews of his poetry, where friends and reviewers would encourage him to concentrate on his experiences as a miner. Anthologists have concentrated on similar areas where, as John Goodridge has pointed out, his “ambitious philosophical poems on seers, symbolism and the nature of mankind are [...] forgotten even by sympathetic anthologists [...] in favour of the short and simple poems of labouring and family life (Goodridge, 2006: xxi). The necessity to keep Skipsey within the boundaries of his mining community and the perception of what his *habitus* consists, is reinforced by the tendency of general Victorian poetry anthologies that include Skipsey to, as Goodridge demonstrates, shorter poems such as ‘Get Up!’ and ‘Mother Wept,’ or, if space allows, ‘The Hartley Calamity’. The more ambitious poems are generally ignored. These are the poems in which Skipsey, according to Bunting, “abandons the life he knew for a life he only saw on paper [...pieces where he] ‘tries to be clever’” (Bunting, 1976: 14). In accepting the role of ‘The Pitman Poet’, as he does at

the first opportunity, Skipsey enters a gilded cage of recognition. The poet in Skipsey is eager to be recognised but is constrained within the adjectival limitations of his profession and his industry; as such, he can only ever be read through the frame of that industry.

4.4 James Clephan

Gaining entry to the literary world has always been dependent upon capability, of course, but also the social capital one is able to utilise. One needs to make contact with the correct cultural gatekeepers and, as novelist John Braine (1922-86) suggested in his satirical 'Portrait of a Provincial Intellectual', be in possession of the correct password. The password is, effectively, possessing the correct types of capital that enables access to particular cultural sphere. Braine's provincial intellectual covets London as the place where all things lie, where the password that unlocks the ability to "satisfy any wish in the world" (Braine, 1957) can be found. While Skipsey had lived in London in his early twenties, perhaps the passwords or gatekeepers were withheld because he did not possess social capital, he did not know people, and "knowing people in London made all the difference; you were immediately on the inside, no longer the gaping provincial" (Braine, 1957). Knowing people in London would come later to Skipsey. In 1858, the gatekeepers to whom he gained access were his "one friend" (*PMG*: 2) Willie Reay, "the first educated man [he] had met" (*PMG*: 2) Reverend Edward Prest, and James Clephan, each of whom verified Skipsey's password and allowed him access to their networks, each step a progression in terms of their cultural and social capital. The influence that these men had on Skipsey's life was profound, and without their network of contacts, access to their social capital, it is possible his poetry would not have escaped the mine.⁸⁰ Skipsey's recognition of this influence was touching: Reay and Clephan were both commemorated in the naming of Skipsey's children, William Skipsey (born 1857) and James Clephan

⁸⁰ In a display of Romantic petulance, at the age of "twenty-one [...Skipsey] had as many pieces as would make a book, but after reading them over [...] put almost the whole of them on the fire" (*PMG*: 2).

Skipsey (born 1865), and all three were honoured in Skipsey's published works. The second edition of *Lyrics* is dedicated to Reay, and the first section of *P1862*, a blank-verse narrative poem on the Biblical tale of Potiphar's wife entitled 'The Wanton and her Victims', is "Inscribed to the Rev. E. Prest, M. A., Rector of Gateshead, by his obliged and obedient servant, The Author" (*P1862*: 3). The second part begins with another narrative poem, 'The Oracle' telling the tale of Odin's marriage to Frigg, "Inscribed to Mr. James Clephan, (author of 'The Bud and the Flower,') by his affectionate friend, The Author" (*P1862*: 24).

With Willie Reay as the initial catalyst and Rev. Prest encouraging Skipsey to publish, it seems most likely the influence of the newspaperman, James Clephan, brought Skipsey national attention with reviews in *The Spectator*, *The Eclectic Review* and the *National Magazine*, and placement of poems in a range of regional newspapers:

'Oh! My Spirit', *The Jersey Independent and Daily Telegraph* (13th January, 1859)

'The Lad O' Bebside', *The Derby Mercury* (9th March, 1859)

'To My Child', *The Cheshire Observer, and General Advertiser* (26th March, 1859)⁸¹

Both *The Jersey Independent* and *The Derby Mercury* attribute Skipsey's poems to 'J.S., A Coal Miner', and *The Cheshire Observer* to Joseph Skipsey of "Walker Colliery" (*The Cheshire Observer*: 1859: 8). In each of these newspapers, the positioning of Skipsey's poems appears pointed. In *The Jersey Independent*, Skipsey's questioning lament that despite experiences that would have brought others to their knees, he may die unrecognised:

Have I undergone privations
That the mightiest souls had bowed,—
Stooped to unearned degradations,
But to die as die the crowd? (L1858: 20, ll. 17-20)

⁸¹ 'To My Child' appears in neither edition of *Lyrics*, and is first published in *P1862* as 'O, my Blest Child!'. Thornton lists seven poems of Skipsey's published in the *Gateshead Observer's* 'Poet's Corner' between July 24th 1858 and June 25th 1859 (RKRTB: 24) with 'To My Child' appearing on 19th March 1859; Thornton does not look to other regional publications. 'The Modest Maid' was printed in *The Leicester Chronicle* in 1862.

This is juxtaposed, in a possibly sardonic editorial decision, by notice of the impending publication of “Mr. Tennyson’s new poem of King Arthur [...which] abound[s] in lines and passages of uncommon beauty” (Jersey Independent: 1859: 4).⁸² The placing of ‘To My Child’ in *The Cheshire Observer* appears to act as reinforcement to a translation of Anastasius Grün’s (1806–1876) ‘The Last Poet’. Where Grün rhetorically asks “When shall the poet weary,/ With having sung so long?” (Grün, 1859: 8, ll. 1-2), before listing exhaustively many poetic inspirations, this is corroborated by Skipsey’s panegyric on the “simple, heart-beguiling ways [...That] led me through their solitudes/ unto a golden land” (P1862: 105-6, ll. 5, 15-6) of poetic invention.

In *The Derby Mercury*, the positioning of ‘The Lad O’ Bebside’ appears most significant of all as it is placed beneath Henry Longfellow’s ‘The Village Blacksmith’, which allows the reader to make a direct comparison. Longfellow’s didactic poem about an idealised blacksmith who excels as a worker, a father brought to remembrance of his dead wife through his daughter’s “singing in the village choir [...] And with his hard, rough hand he wipes/ A tear out of his eyes” (Longfellow, 1877: 36, ll. 29, 35-6). In witnessing this touching scene, Longfellow’s narrator is brought to an understanding of approaching life with steadfastness and dignity. Skipsey’s own exemplification of the working-class male, ‘The Lad O’ Bebside’, who “dances so clever, and whistles so fine” (L1858: 8-9, l. 9) is distinctly different, however.⁸³ Where Longfellow’s detached narration witnesses the Blacksmith’s physical and moral rectitude, the female narrator Skipsey uses is intimately involved, her “heart is away with the Lad o’ Bebside” (l. 1) and on “three weeks come Sunday” (l. 28) will marry him. The Lad in the poem is endowed with high levels of the embodied cultural capital valued within his community and class, he revels in the physical: “He dances so clever, and whistles so fine” (l. 9), but where Longfellow shows the Blacksmith to be morally upright and physically impressive, all Skipsey is able to reveal in his Lad, “courted by many, and praised by all” (l. 13), is a “heart void

⁸² Tennyson’s first *Idylls of the King* was published in 1859.

⁸³ Bebside is a former mining village in Northumberland, its pit operated between 1858 and 1926.

of malice and pride" (l. 11). Despite opposing one another in style, purpose, and author background, bringing the two poems together in such close proximity contrasts the exemplifications of the working-class male.

All of this was important exposure for a poet, but in Clephan's desire for the readership of the *Gateshead Observer* to "honour themselves by stretching out a helping hand to struggling genius [...and] lift it from the darksome mine" (RKRTB: 21) he had a far greater pecuniary impact on Skipsey. The influence Clephan had on Skipsey's twin careers was publicly aired at a dinner to commemorate the centenary of Robert Burns' birth. On 25th January 1859, Newcastle held three celebrations, as Thornton describes, "a banquet in the Town Hall, a less expensive dinner at the Music Hall, and 'A Nicht wi' Burns' in the Lecture Room, which had talks, songs and readings but no food or drink" (RKRTB: 25). At the Lecture Room, a "Teetotal Gathering" (*Newcastle Guardian*, 1859: 3), where Clephan addressed the dinner stating that:

while Mr Gerald Massey was deploring the want of an English poet – a real people's poet – there was at the present time, perhaps in that very room, a person who had written poetry which would not have disgraced even Burns. That person had that very day published a batch of poems which were equal to any in the English Language, and yet he was in poverty. [...] Mr Clephan also mentioned that the poet [Joseph Skipsey] was now without occupation and he (Mr C.) hoped that some of the gentry of Newcastle might be able to give him employment, so that it might not be said hereafter, that whilst they were celebrating the centenary of a departed poet, they were neglecting the wants of a living son of genius. [...]

Mr BARKAS, in replying, said it struck him, by the appearance of the room, that, after all was paid, such as printing, &c., there would still be a surplus left over, and he thought a fitting opportunity was presented to apply the proceeds to a charitable object. He thought if they were to purchase a number of Mr Skipsey's [...] books, and send them to all the mechanics'

institutes in the Northern Counties, they would do Mr Skipsey a great service, and it would also benefit the public at the same time. (*Newcastle Courant*, 1859: 2)

In Clephan's address, there are some important comparisons with Burns and in endorsing Skipsey as 'a real people's poet', he foreshadows the praise Rossetti and Bunting would give him in later years. The direct contrast Clephan makes with Burns is praise in the grandest terms for a poet at the very beginning of his career, and in suggesting Skipsey may be the person to fill the role Massey regrets is missing from English poetry, a poet able to transcend his humble background to become a figurehead for the nation's common folk. As Skipsey and Burns shared a similar upbringing of poverty, hardship, and manual labour, their poetry possesses directness of purpose and a felicity that is not "like printed ones, by men who had Greek and Latin" but suited instead to those "living in the moors" (Crawford, 2011) or at the pit-mouth. This affinity with Burns was recognised further by an early reviewer. Where Clephan opined Skipsey's poetry 'would not have disgraced even Burns', *The Eclectic Review* bestowed greater praise on L1858 in finding that "Burns's first attempts were scarcely so successful" (*The Eclectic Review*, 1858: 555). As noted above, shortly after the Burns event, Skipsey's 'To My Child' was printed in *The Cheshire Observer* as being by Joseph Skipsey of Walker Colliery, the only time this location is mentioned in Skipsey's life. Walker Colliery in Newcastle opened a school in November 1857 and at a "tea meeting" to celebrate the opening a recital of Thomas Wilson's "'The Pitman's Pay' [...] was greatly applauded" (*Newcastle Guardian*: 1857: 5), with an obvious appreciation of the region's literature it seems plausible Clephan's call for 'some of the gentry of Newcastle' to 'give' Skipsey 'employment' might have reached the president of the school Mr Thomas Jobling and he found Skipsey a position. The route from autodidact to school teacher was a relatively familiar one, both J.P. Robson and Thomas Wilson trod this path, and it could be it was Walker Colliery that Spence Watson refers to when stating Skipsey took: "the place of schoolmaster in one of the colliery villages [...], he undertook the work for a short time, but, although he got plenty of pupils, he could not live on the remuneration he received as fees" (*RSWB*:

23). Whatever truth there is in this, Clephan did find Skipsey employment as a sub-storekeeper at one of Gateshead's largest employers the ironworks of Hawks, Crawshay & Sons. This demonstration of the importance and power of having a network of contacts must have been a revelation to Skipsey, presented as he was with 'the first educated man he had met', his first reviews locally and nationally, increased sales for his poetry, and provided an escape from mining.

CHAPTER FIVE

The influence of Thomas Dixon

5.1 A new beginning

Joseph Skipsey's employment at Hawks, Crawshay & Sons kept him out of the mines between 1859 and 1863 and, as he was called to recite an occasional verse at the works' 1861 Christmas dinner, it appears he was well respected within the company. After toasting the Queen and the company owners, Skipsey read "a few verses, which, he believed, would express the sentiments both of masters and workmen" (*Newcastle Guardian*, 1861: 6). The poem itself (Appendix Two), reproduced in the local presses but not in any collection, is laudatory and sentimental in its observing of the harmony between "Masters and Men" (l. 2) and reveals Skipsey to have been regarded sufficiently proficient a poet to be placed before the 'masters' at such an official engagement. Yet, in 1863, Skipsey left this employment when a position as sub-librarian became vacant at The Lit & Phil. Though the post would seem a congenial environment for a poet, it was short-lived. Unable to resist the temptation of "what appeared to him boundless pastures [of learning, Skipsey] would become absorbed in some passage of a well-known author, and he would scarcely recognise the eager and impatient member who wished for his services" (*RSWB*: 48). His duties seemingly neglected, Skipsey left after a matter of months when, as "what [he] earned was not sufficient for the maintenance of [his] family" (*PMG*: 2), the pre-eminence of economic capital proved overwhelming. Despite the fact that he was "popular on the whole" (*RSWB*: 49) as a poet, his "friends at length advised him to return to the coal-mines, and he did so [in 1863], and worked patiently away at hewing for many a year" (*RSWB*: 49). This chapter concentrates on events surrounding the publication of *Miscellaneous Lyrics* (1878) and gives an in-depth introduction to Thomas Dixon. Following a discussion of the influence that Robert Spence Watson had on the publication of *ML*1878, which reveals some of the

practical difficulties facing working-class authors, the remainder of the chapter concentrates on establishing the importance of Thomas Dixon. Dixon was a remarkable working man who had access to some of the most influential networks of the nineteenth century, and when Skipsey gained access to this valuable social capital, it effectively marked a new beginning to Skipsey's career as a poet.

Between his letter to the *Gateshead Observer* (discussed in Chapter Four) and May 1878, I have uncovered just four letters from Joseph Skipsey, each written to Robert Spence Watson, and all located within the *Spence Watson Papers*. While these letters give Skipsey's views on Browning and Tennyson, they reveal nothing about Skipsey's publications during this period (*PS&B*1862, *TCL*1864, or *P*1871), nor do they provide information about the volume *The Hell-Broth and Other Songs* (c.1863-71) held in Alfred Tennyson's library.⁸⁴ Furthermore, within the *Spence Watson Papers* there is a gap, or silence, of four years between letters from Skipsey.⁸⁵ In the spring of 1878, however, Skipsey was preparing the publication of a volume of poetry, *ML*1878, the reception of which would propel him to prominence as, Isobel Armstrong argues, "one of the last flowerings of working-class poetry in the century" (Armstrong, 1993: 401). This was Skipsey's fifth volume of poetry, the first completed with the assistance or guidance of Robert Spence Watson, and, following its introduction to Dante Rossetti, the publication that led to Skipsey acquiring institutionalized cultural capital in the form of the appreciation of London's literati.⁸⁶ On May 6th 1878, Skipsey wrote asking for Spence Watson's advice on a number of issues that highlight some of the practical

⁸⁴ Kirstie Blair, in a chapter on 'Tennyson and the Victorian Working-Class Poet', states Tennyson "owned several volumes by working-class poets, including the complete works of Ebenezer Elliot, [...] a collection by the Scottish woman poet Isa Craig, and a privately printed copy of Joseph Skipsey's *The Hell-Broth; and Other Songs*, signed 'Joseph Skipsey, Newsham Colliery, Northumberland' [Skipsey lived here between 1863 and 1871....] Like Skipsey's volume, Craig's poems were sent to Tennyson by the poet as a presentation copy" (Blair, 2009a:138). I have located two copies of Skipsey's text, one at Lincoln's Tennyson Research Centre and the other at Harvard University. Tennyson's, "FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION", copy includes cuttings of twenty-six printed poems pasted into a notebook. There are no collections that contain all twenty-six poems.

⁸⁵ There is an undated letter in the *Spence Watson Papers*, evidently written sometime in April 1874 (Skipsey, 1874b), and the next is dated 8th May 1878. The letter previous to that of April 1874 in the collection was written on 11th March, 1874 (Skipsey, 1874a).

⁸⁶ There is no indication Spence Watson assisted in the preparation of any of Skipsey's publications before 1878.

difficulties surrounding the working-class author's restricted access to the expert advice of a publisher, literary agent, or editor.

In this letter, Skipsey addresses Spence Watson with great extravagance, that, not having met with his friend for "a great interval of time", he feels "like the seaman outwardbound & to whom every hour that elapses adds to the vastness of the gulf & the insurmountability of the barrier that is thrown between ~~Me~~ him & all that is most precious to his heart" (Skipsey (I), 1878a: 1). In the struck through '~~Me~~', Skipsey absent-mindedly casts himself as the 'seaman outwardbound' to reveal that this friendship was precious to him. The central purpose of this letter, however, was to ask Spence Watson's opinion on other friends' "desire that [...a] portrait [of Skipsey] should appear in the book" (Skipsey (I), 1878a: 4), to ask Spence Watson "to glance at the 'proofs'" (Skipsey (I), 1878a: 3) of the text, and to request permission "to dedicate it to you both [Spence Watson and his wife Elizabeth] as a token ~~of~~ that I am fully alive to the debt which I owe for the many kindnesses that I have from time to time received by your hands" (Skipsey (I), 1878a: 2). Spence Watson obviously accepted the honour for himself, but not Elizabeth, as the following appears as the volume's *imprimatur*:

To
ROBERT SPENCE WATSON, ESQ.,
SOLICITOR, NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE,
AS A TOKEN
OF AFFECTION AND ESTEEM FOR THE MAN
HIS CULTURE AND HIS PRINCIPLES
THIS BOOK IS INSCRIBED
BY HIS FRIEND
THE AUTHOR.
Backworth, August, 1878.

Despite my doubts surrounding the claims of Spence Watson being Skipsey's patron, these requests for advice, proofreading, and permission to dedicate his poetry to him, do suggest patronage in its broadest sense in that Skipsey is asking Spence Watson for support. Furthermore, the inclusion of this kind of dedication is something Martha Vicinus identifies as a form of patronage.

In December 1843, the poet William Heaton, a Halifax handloom weaver, sent England's poet laureate, William Wordsworth (1770-1850), a letter in which he included his poem 'Stanzas To William Wordsworth, Esq.'⁸⁷ Wordsworth replied to Heaton's letter thanking him for "the good wishes you have expressed me [sic] in your Verses" (cited in Vicinus, 1947: 169) and the hope that "it long be permitted you in your humble station, to enjoy opportunities for cultivating that acquaintance with literature" (cited in Vicinus, 1947: 169). While the only reference Wordsworth makes to Heaton's ability as a poet is that the lines addressed to him are "greatly to [his] credit" (cited in Vicinus, 1947: 169), Heaton included Wordsworth's letter, with permission, as a dedication in his volume of poetry *The Flowers of Calder Dale* (1847). Heaton clearly sought to use Wordsworth's letter as a recommendation and validation of the quality of his own poetry and, in doing so, shared some of Wordsworth's cultural capital to further his own. This letter and Spence Watson's acceptance of Skipsey's dedication, effectively, become forms of patronage as they endorse and promote the work of an individual with less cultural capital.

Skipsey had received this kind of patronage by association in 1862, when dedicating poems to Rev. Prest and James Clephan, as an indicator of the support of influential gatekeepers, as it was with Spence Watson. Yet, as Vicinus intimates, this process was a mutual exchange "as it became socially necessary to foster working men who accepted middle-class superiority" (Vicinus, 1974: 168). The working-class poet Skipsey receives endorsement from Prest, Clephan, and Spence Watson each of whom validate Skipsey's decency and poetic ability and, in return, they receive the prestige of being seen as benevolent toward their social inferiors. This practice also aided the

⁸⁷ Heaton was a friend of Branwell Brontë and, in an article on 'The Letters of Francis Leyland – Branwell Brontë's Champion', Bob Duckett speculates that "it was with the knowledge of Branwell's attempt in 1837 that encouraged Heaton to write to Wordsworth" (Duckett, 2017: 229). Branwell Brontë sent Wordsworth a selection of poems in January 1837 and a letter asking if he should "write on, or write no more" (cited in Orel, 1997: 152); Wordsworth did not respond.

conversion of cultural and social capital into economic capital, as Vicinus further suggests, when “perhaps it also helped sales” (Vicinus, 1974: 169).

In addition to accepting the ‘honour’ of the dedication, it would also appear Spence Watson advised Skipsey to include his portrait as facing the volume’s title page is a sketch of the author (Appendix Four) by Ralph Hedley.⁸⁸ In stark contrast to ‘Skipsey in his Working Clothes’, discussed in Chapter Three, the portrait here introduces Skipsey as strong and respectable with no reference to mining and little indication of the class from which he and his writing has sprung. In this image, Skipsey displays confidence that prioritises himself and his poetry over his trade or social rank. He moves from the subordinate position of working-class or pitman-poet, casting aside the limiting adjectival designations to become the noun itself: poet, thus freeing *ML1878* from the preconceptions of the industrial label.

This confidence is undermined, however, by Skipsey’s own ‘Preface’, which is provided, as he states, “partly from deference to the opinion of a few well-wishers, and partly from an impression that it would be proper to do so” (*ML1878*: vii). It is important to read in this phrase that the ‘Preface’ is provided through deference and because it is the proper thing to do, not as a matter of choice. As Kathrine Jackson documents in her PhD thesis, *Pre-Raphaelite and Working-Class Poetry*, the requirement to provide an autobiographical preface also affected Ellen Johnston (c.1835-73), ‘The Factory Girl’. Johnston noted, in her introduction to *Autobiography, Poems and Songs of Ellen Johnston, The Factory Girl* (1867), the autobiography was only included due to the “express wishes of some subscribers” (cited in Jackson, 2014: 40). As Bourdieu suggests, “the capital of the autodidact [...] may be called into question at any time” (Bourdieu, 1986) and, as such, working-class

⁸⁸ Ralph Hedley (1848-1913) was a Tyneside artist who studied at W.B. Scott’s Government School of Design, Newcastle. Hedley, best known for realist portrayals of Tyneside industrial life, had numerous paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy and was the region’s most popular artist of the period. Hedley also painted a portrait of *Dr Robert Spence Watson* (1897) which was presented to Spence Watson to commemorate his founding and presiding over the Newcastle Liberal Club; it is now exhibited at the Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead.

writers are required to prove and reprove they possess sufficient reserves of capital to be considered worthy, not only of the title 'poet' but acceptable credentials as an 'authentic' worker. The provision of an autobiographical 'Preface' becomes a classifying act, or device, that creates an unresolvable tension between Johnston's and Skipsey's ambitions as artists and the conventions, the requirement for authenticity, allowing them to practise that art. The embodied cultural capital Skipsey amassed to become a writer is subsumed by the class within which he is constrained and, in providing the 'Preface', he defers to dominant middle-class expectations and reinforces his "exclusion" (Bourdieu, 2003: 84). Although Skipsey attempts to introduce himself through a portrait that moves away from biographical classification, social and hegemonic expectations will not allow him, as a working-class author, to do so.

The 'Preface' Skipsey provides, however, seems somewhat bored in its narration. Perhaps it is the dislocation created through the third-person delivery that creates this sense of ennui, perhaps Skipsey himself is weary of retelling the biographical details, or perhaps he is merely exasperated that, despite having been a published poet for twenty years, he is still required to qualify his position and explain how a poet emerged from such meagre conditions. He describes his literary career as follows:

[...] after making repeated efforts and in vain to get a suitable situation out of the mines, he printed a batch of lyrics, which earned him the respect of several eminent persons in the North of England [...]. In 1871 he again resorted to the printer, and issued a small volume of poems, which obtained a kindly notice [...] from the *Newcastle Chronicle* [...and] from many of the London weeklies, including the *Literary World* and the *Sunday Times*, and also a kind word from *The Athenæum* and the *Spectator*; whilst several of the pieces included in this issue were honoured by a translation into the French tongue and published in the *Beautés*

de la Poésie de Anglaise par le Chevalier De [sic] Chatelain [1863 and 1872].⁸⁹ (ML1878: viii-ix)

I have not located documentary evidence of how Skipsey's poetry came to be translated into French and, without proof, the process is probably unknowable. As is the reason Skipsey ignores entirely the publication of *L1858*, *PS&B1862*, and *TCL1864*, while vaguely announcing the publication of both *L1859* and *P1871*. He is, however, at pains to note his poetry has received 'kindly notice' locally and in august national publications, and 'honoured' in translation for an international audience.

In this description of the levels of appreciation he has received, Skipsey creates the distinct image of a tripartite hierarchal structure of acceptance through which his poetry had to advance. Firstly, his poetry managed to escape the mines earning the attention of eminent individuals in the region; secondly, his poetry has progressed through the local presses to the 'London weeklies', and on to the culturally significant "journal of *belles-lettres*" (Graham, 1930: 318) *The Athenæum*; and thirdly, having received local and national acceptance, Skipsey's poetry reaches the hierarchy's pinnacle through international recognition. Throughout this process Skipsey describes himself as submissive to his poetry and hegemonic expectations; he displays a respectful attitude to his own self-improvement and deference to the power exerted by those gatekeepers able to allow him access to each tier of acceptance, those conforming to the "*theatrical show of society*" (Bagehot, 1867: 51). Although Robert Colls disparages the idea that the working class was happy to defer to this middle-class "despotic power" (Bagehot, 1867: 50), stating that Bagehot "reckoned the masses

⁸⁹ Chevalier de Chatelain, pseudonym of Parisian poet Jean Baptiste Francois Ernest de Chatelain (1801-81), produced five volumes of English poetry translated into French, *Beautés de la Poésie de Anglaise*, between 1860 and 1872. The volumes include canonical figures Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Tennyson, alongside dialect poets such as Burns and William Barnes (1801-86), working-class poets Skipsey, Ebenezer Elliot and Gerald Massey, as well as American writers such as Emerson and Poe. Volume II (1863) includes Skipsey's 'A Golden Lot' ('Un Sort Heureux') and 'The Fairies' Parting Song' ('Chant de depart des fées'); Volume V (1872) includes 'The Toper's Song' ('Le Chant du Buveur') and 'My Merry Bird' ('Mon Gentil Oiselet'). Skipsey only gives 'The Fairies' Parting Song' this title in *P1862*, it is known as 'The Fairies' Adieu' in all other volumes. In his "Author's Preface" of *Poems and Lyrics* (1886), Willie Reay advises that Skipsey's "poems have been translated into the French and German languages" (Reay, 1886: 5); I have found no German translations of Skipsey's poems.

would look on, gawp, and defer” (Colls, 2002: 52), Skipsey does subordinate himself in this manner. In his deference, Skipsey effectively reinforces the ‘despotic power’ and the hierarchical nature of the society from whom he seeks consideration. It would appear Skipsey is coerced by “a certain pomp of great men [and...] a certain spectacle of beautiful women” (Bagehot, 1867: 51) to accept his submissive position in the hope that the positive attention and acceptance from culturally valued arbiters will be self-perpetuating. Implicitly, Skipsey’s message is that this working-man’s poetry has been accepted by eminent people, the national press, and received international exposure, and, therefore, has secured validation. Skipsey anticipates this message, along with his subordination to “the opinion of a few well-wishers” (*ML*: vii), will allow him access to a wider national middle-class audience.

According to the dedication, *ML*1878 was completed in August and was sold for 3s or 3s 6d by post (*Morpeth Herald*, 1878: 8). In September, however, Skipsey’s literary career altered course through an encounter that, ultimately, resulted in his permanent escape from coalmining. Like the lack of information surrounding his meeting Spence Watson, the exact circumstances of Skipsey’s introduction to Thomas Dixon is unknown. Where Thornton loosely suggests “Dixon [...] approached Skipsey, probably in 1878” (RKRTB: 34), it is, however, possible to give a closer estimation. Thornton makes the supposition based solely on correspondence from Skipsey to Dixon but when examining them, as I do here for the first time, in conjunction with Dante Rossetti’s letters to Dixon, a clearer picture emerges.⁹⁰ Dixon had corresponded with Rossetti for some time and, at the end of August (27th), he contacted Dante asking about the price of a picture for his “towns [*sic*] people for their Art School” (Dixon, 1878a: 1), to which Rossetti responded on 3rd and 19th September. In his second letter, Rossetti writes that he is “indebted to [Dixon] for the gift of Mr. Skipsey’s Poems” (Rossetti, 2009: 167); this is Rossetti’s first reference to Skipsey. Once Dixon discovered a new passion he

⁹⁰ The earliest extant letter from Skipsey to Dixon is dated 26th September, 1878; it was first identified by Thornton et al (2014: 34-5).

could not help but share it and it is most likely, therefore, that he first met Skipsey between his letter to Rossetti on 27th August and Rossetti's thanks on 19th September. Meeting Thomas Dixon immediately expanded Skipsey's social capital as he had made contact with someone who had access to some of the most culturally influential Victorian figures and, more importantly, someone prepared to use their influence on his behalf.

5.2 Thomas Dixon: Sunderland cork-cutter

Thomas Dixon was a remarkable individual who managed to construct a social network that breached class boundaries to overcome many of the cultural disadvantages associated with being a working man in a provincial town; without his intervention, Skipsey's poetry might never have received anything like the exposure it did.⁹¹ This one relationship was, and is, the key to Skipsey's legacy, which is indelibly linked to the contact with Dante Rossetti. Although Spence Watson was acquainted with many leading Victorian figures, it appears he was reticent in allowing Skipsey access to his spheres of influence, unwilling to share his cultural and social capital, and his access to London, *the* cultural capital, with his miner friend. Where Skipsey had previously benefitted from access to influential gatekeepers locally, Reverend Edward Prest and newspaper editor James Clephan, the facilitator of his introduction to the Pre-Raphaelites was a cork-cutter from Sunderland.

The embodiment of the mid-nineteenth century self-help mania, Dixon was described by E.T. Cook, editor of *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, as a "real life [example] of the ideal working-man" (Cook, 1905: lxxvii). As historian Geoffrey Milburn states, in one of the few extended pieces about him, Dixon believed in both temperance and the power of self-help, and also possessed a

⁹¹ Despite the contacts he made during his lifetime, Dixon is a peripheral figure in Victorian studies who appears *en passant* in autobiographies of W.B. Scott and William Rossetti, and is also regularly referred to in conjunction with Ruskin. Dixon, and his relationship with Skipsey, is referred to in *RSWB* and examined more closely in *RKRTB*. The Sunderland Antiquarian Society has twice published journal articles on Dixon, both pieces based on lectures concentrating on the famous contacts he had: 'Thomas Dixon and his Correspondents' by James Patterson (1911), and 'Thomas Dixon of Sunderland' by Geoffrey Milburn (1984). Peter Quinn's PhD thesis, *Picturing Locality: Art and Regional Identity in the North East of England, 1833-1900* (1997), documents Dixon's importance to Sunderland's cultural infrastructure.

“respect for the orders of society, a spirit of reverence, and a deference to authority” (Milburn, 1984: 22). In this, he was typical of many of the upper levels of the nineteenth-century working class: the artisans, merchants, and traders. Where Dixon is different, and somewhat paradoxical, is in the energy and passion he invested into the democratization of culture and knowledge, of cultural capital. As a working man in Sunderland, however, his position was one of treble disadvantage: due to his position as a member of the working-class, he was distant from the locus of societal power; he was geographically remote from the cultural metropolitan centre; and he lived in a town in the shadow cast by a domineering regional centre: Newcastle-upon-Tyne.⁹² This triple disadvantage was challenging, but while he possessed an ingrained ‘deference to authority’ and ‘respect for the orders of society’ his energy and passion allowed him to circumvent and ignore differences in class and space. Dixon’s drive to obtain embodied and objectified cultural capital and, in the spirit of mutual improvement, share it with all he felt might benefit (regardless of their social station) was remarkable; his ability to ignore, discount, or see the artificiality of class difference, and utilise the postal system to breach spatial boundaries, went a long way in overcoming his disadvantages.

As a cork-cutter, Dixon’s trade was intimately connected to shipping (in providing life-belts) and brewing (corks and bungs) and while Ruskin continually referred to him as a ‘Working Man’, which carries connotations of low-skilled labour, more recently art historian Peter Quinn distinguished him as “an artisan who paid rates and taxes” (Quinn, 1997: 290) a position implying the possession of far greater embodied cultural capital. As a sole-trader, Dixon’s position among the upper echelons of the working class afforded him a level of free time and economic autonomy that allowed him to pursue other passions. While brewing was anathema to the abstemious Dixon, his aptitude for campaigning proved useful in the shipping industry, and in an example of the nature of

⁹² In a Marxist sense, because Dixon owned the means of his production and sold the product of his labour not just his labour, he is not of the same class as Skipsey who can be identified as a member of the proletariat. Marx would classify Dixon as a member of the petite bourgeoisie and, as such, he acts as a bridging point between Skipsey and the bourgeois literary world.

his letter-writing, Dixon was instrumental in exposing malpractice within the industry. The production of life belts was, as with any industry, driven by cost and with cork the most expensive component reducing the amount used reduced costs. However, their usefulness suffered inversely. Many life-belts, although officially stamped as being 'warranted cork-wood' (all cork), were actually filled with reeds, straws, or wood shavings surrounded by a thin layer of cork, a life-endangering practice journalist James Greenwood (1832-1929) described, in *Punch*, as "the bottom of human baseness and wickedness" (*Punch*, 1869: 65).⁹³ Dixon wrote personally to Greenwood:

MR. DIXON [...] informed me that he had grave suspicions of the quality of life-buoys manufactured in London [...] He himself had met with life-buoys composed of the basest materials, and sent me some bits of *common rush* as a sample of the interior of one he had dissected. (*Punch*, 1869: 65)

Following his own investigation, Greenwood found "not one in a dozen" (*Punch*, 1869:65) life belts made by a London manufacturer were 100% cork and would sink within an hour, while those made entirely of cork would remain afloat for four hours.

This kind of cost-cutting through adulteration had been rife in Britain for centuries but mid-century exposure of the practice, in particular harmful additions to foodstuffs, changed people's resigned acceptance.⁹⁴ The coal industry, with which Skipsey was intimately connected, was particularly blighted when it came to the frugality of the owners of the means of production. The Hartley Calamity had a profound impact on the region and the wider coal industry, but the lives of the majority of the victims could have been saved had more consideration been given to worker

⁹³ For further information on James Greenwood's impact on Victorian journalism, refer to Martin Conboy, *Journalism in Britain: A Historical Introduction* (2011).

⁹⁴ *Household Words* reported, in 1852, that the "British consumer is [...] angry on the subject of adulterations [...] when he lifts a cup of coffee [he is told...] it contains chicory and coffins. In his tea, he [...] look[s] for black-lead, Prussian blue and gypsum; in his wine [...] drugs past reckoning" (Dickens, 1852: 423). Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) was written at the height of controversy surrounding food adulteration and, throughout the novel, food is never quite what it should be, whether that be the "little bottle [...] with the words 'DRINK ME' beautifully printed" on its label, the use of "tulip-roots instead of onions", or even "Mock Turtle Soup" (Carroll, 2011).

safety than profits. This attitude was framed perfectly when, during an 1835 Governmental inquiry into the causes of pit explosions, the famous mining engineer John Buddle (1773-1843) revealed that:

when gentlemen have expended £50,000 or £60,000 in sinking one pit, *it might not be convenient to spend £20,000 more to sink another merely to avoid the chance of an accident that might eventually happen: in fact I conceive if there were any legislative interference on that point it would tend to extinguish a very large portion of our coal mines.* (emphasis in original, cited in Fynes, 1873: 152)

Sinking additional shafts to aid ventilation and reduce the build-up of potentially explosive gasses, with the by-product of providing miners another means of escape, was found too inconvenient and too expensive. In just one of the many examples of the struggle between (economic) Capital and Labour in the history of mining, Buddle reveals both the dominance of money over workers and the pre-eminence of fiscal over human considerations. As discussed in Chapter Two, had the coal industry seen fit to bear the cost of sinking another pit at New Hartley the death toll would have been significantly lower when one shaft was blocked. While it took a tragedy to effect change in the coal industry, Dixon's exposé of malpractice in life-aid manufacture was significant in standardising product design and his efforts brought acclaim from Thomas Carlyle: "Nothing did I hear so worthy of the gallows [...] as the scandal and horror you were the means of exposing" (cited in Milburn, 1984: 8). That Dixon exposed the practise in a letter is a fitting introduction to the man and his association with Joseph Skipsey.

5.3 Thomas Dixon: cultural attaché

Where Dixon is known, it is, as Peter Quinn argues, for two areas of his life and on two different levels. In North-East England, he is known for his determination to establish Sunderland's cultural infrastructure and to make education and culture more widely available. More broadly, Dixon has become a footnote to individuals with whom he exchanged letters; he is:

the surprisingly learned correspondent of the more important figure [...and h]is correspondence [...] is plundered as a source of the thinking of his correspondent. Rarely is Dixon credited with harbouring his own agenda nor even with having a worthwhile original thought. (Quinn, 1997: 282)

Dixon's position within nineteenth-century culture is, therefore, difficult to fix in place; he exists somewhere between these two positions. Despite seeming contradictory, these two images of Dixon can be brought together in one unified picture if one considers him a cultural attaché, "responsible for promoting cultural relations between his [...] country and that to which he [was...] posted" (*OED*, 2017a). While Dixon did not represent a country, one can certainly consider a peripheral working-class community different enough from the Chelsea drawing room of the Rossettis or Bell Scotts to see Dixon as an individual representing his region and class by promoting cultural products and fostering relations across geopolitical divides.

Quinn's argument that Dixon has not been credited with his own opinions is a typical response to working-class intellectuals, and contiguous with Nigel Cross' suggestion in *The Common Writer* (Cross, 1985: 1-2), that their worth is only validated through their contact with more influential sectors of society. In other words, only those who have garnered sufficient social capital are remembered. They are not remembered for their own significance, however, but for the associations they made. In the same way, that Skipsey is contained within a few phrases from Dante Rossetti, Dixon's famous correspondents, particularly Ruskin, simultaneously reveal and obscure him. Dixon was a prodigious letter writer and, seemingly, sent letters and books to anyone with

whom he felt an affinity. He often wrote directly to authors, requesting copies of their work, and when he sent books there was a tacit expectation the recipient would, one day, reciprocate the cultural transaction.

While this appears charming and a little naive today, Dixon's requests for benefaction (direct or unspoken) served a purpose. He strove not only to increase his own cultural opportunities but also endeavoured to create a cultural infrastructure accessible to those he felt were even less advantaged; he sought to share his own cultural and social capital. In responding to the Public Libraries Act 1850, which allowed libraries to be funded through local taxation, Sunderland opened its first Free Library in rooms at The Athenæum building in 1858, and the core of its collection came from the donation of the Mechanics' Institute Library where Dixon was secretary. Dixon himself was central to the founding of another library, at the Sunderland Equitable Society in 1862, where those authors who obliged his requests for books formed the basis of its collection; within six months of opening, the library stocked 600 books (Milburn, 1981: 9). Dixon's efforts to create a cultural infrastructure in Sunderland appear noble in their purpose, but they also functioned as an access point to different levels of social capital. In writing to the great and the good of his day, Dixon was able to demonstrate his credentials as a member of a worthy working class to more important individuals. These credentials, and the acceptance of them in the form of correspondence, were a form of institutionalized cultural capital that allowed Dixon to cross class boundaries with relative impunity, allowing him access to social capital unattainable by others. This acceptance was vital in Dixon's role as a cultural attaché for his region, his class, and Joseph Skipsey.

As was the case with much nineteenth-century altruism, however, Dixon's efforts were not entirely free from ideological purpose. Yet, one covert intent, the promotion of temperance, reinforced his credentials as a member of a worthy poor. Instrumental in the opening of the Sunderland School of Design in the 1850s, Dixon used this as a device through which he could indulge his own interests and passions but also as a means of supporting and spreading teetotalism.

As Robert Colls illustrates in *The Collier's Rant*, the consumption of alcohol was part of the fabric of society in North-East mining communities; this centrality is easily seen in the barbarous and licentious behaviour displayed in Chicken's *The Collier's Wedding*, or the public house settings of Wilson's *The Pitman's Pay*, and Barrass' *The Pitman's Social Neet*. The temperate Dixon felt he contributed to this dissoluteness, as he told Ruskin:

It's my mode of living to supply these [public] houses with corks that makes me see so much of [...] drunkenness; and that is why I never really cared for *my trade*, seeing the misery that was entailed on my fellow men and women by the use of this stuff. (emphasis in original, cited in Ruskin, 1882: 203)

In deriving income from an industry he saw produce such injury, Dixon felt he contributed to the damage caused and was perhaps eager to perform 'good deeds' to be absolved of his involvement.⁹⁵ Improving educational opportunities for his peers provided them with a distraction from drunkenness. When reporting on an 1852 Sunderland School of Design committee meeting, *The Sunderland News and North of England Advertiser* revealed Dixon's dual mission: "[t]hose who came [...] to their evening sessions would improve their minds and escape evil company and dangerous temptations" (cited in Quinn, 1997: 280). In seeking to create sociality surrounding art and literature, rather than the solitary pursuit of "reading a tract [...Dixon understood his community's] tradition in communication which was social and visual" (Colls, 1977: 154). The creation of opportunities for the communal consumption (or making) of cultural artefacts, whether at a library or art school, were a distraction technique central to Dixon's ideal of a self-improving and self-disciplined community.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Quinn advises Dixon "dabbled in the non-established religions of the day" (Quinn, 1997: 282), his campaigning and promotion of others could be seen as a form of religious observance.

⁹⁶ Dixon revealed his personal experience of alcohol's destructiveness to Rossetti when writing of James Stokeld (1827-77). Sunderland-born painter, Stokeld was 50 "when he came to his sad end. he was a fine social kind hearted man. Drink was his bane [...], his widow [...] has five children to rear to man and woman hood" (Dixon, 1878b: 3-4).

In this endeavour, Dixon can be seen to be a working-class leader and while others from similar backgrounds in the region who led other fields have become well known, such as George Stephenson in engineering or Thomas Burt (1837-1922) and Jack Lawson (1881-1965) in politics, Dixon's contribution to his sphere is less regarded.⁹⁷ Perhaps this is because his work was on behalf of a remote provincial town or that establishing cultural institutions, like Skipsey writing poetry, is considered ephemeral, less concrete than improving physical infrastructures or the immediate living conditions of the populace. The latter was the finding of the journalist Rodney Pybus. When the magazine *Stand* asked its readership to submit poetry as part of a survey of contemporary North-East writing, the offerings were far from promising. Pybus found most submissions were "worse than third-rate, and a fair amount near-illiterate" (Pybus, 1966: 11) and concluded that, since the Kingdom of Northumbria, Bede, Cuthbert, and Cædmon, the region had been "traditionally antipathetic to literature [...because] the region's writers [and intellectuals] were more concerned with trying to improve [...] social and educational conditions, than writing novels or poetry" (Pybus, 1966: 12). While Pybus' observations may be somewhat brusque and generalised, his overall supposition is evident and understandable:

much of the interest in writing, in the North-East in the 19th century was directed, on a practical level, at improving social conditions, and in a more general way, in politics and social affairs [...where] literary talents [were] forced into the service of didacticism and social expediency. (Pybus, 1966: 22)

⁹⁷ Thomas Burt became secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Association in 1863 and Liberal Party candidate for Morpeth in 1873; he was elected as MP in 1874. Burt was the first miner MP and held his seat until retirement in 1919 (Benson, 2004). Jack Lawson (John James Lawson) started working at Boldon Colliery aged twelve. Through reading socialist newspapers, the *Labour Leader* and *The Clarion*, Lawson found his sense of social injustice matched that of the growing trade union and socialist movements and he joined the Independent Labour Party in 1905. In 1906 Lawson accepted a scholarship to Ruskin College, Oxford, and, upon completing his studies, returned to mining in County Durham. Here, he became involved in politics and, after World War One, was elected as MP for Chester-le-Street in 1919. He retained his seat until retirement in 1949 and, in 1950, entered the House of Lords as Baron Lawson of Beamish.

As Pybus argues, the region's cultural focus and cultural capital was shaped by the need for social improvement, as Bourdieu suggests of any community, by "the immanent structure of [its...] social world" (Bourdieu, 1986). In a nineteenth-century mining community, it would appear more than a little callous to worry about plot, metre, or metaphor when surrounded by disease, danger, and death.

Instead, working-class intellectuals became leaders through their own efforts in self-education, the spread of Methodism, as Robert Colls argues, and the expansion of trade unionism that gave individuals the experience of leading people. Working-class leaders and intellectuals were able to improve social conditions because, as Richard Hoggart argues, "they were among the few who were able to meet with and engage the managers in other classes with their own weapons, those of the intellect" (Hoggart, 2009: 305). Before the proliferation of grammar school education, working-class intellectuals were more likely to remain within their social and economic designation and, resultantly, attempt to improve the conditions surrounding them. This is problematic, however, as to be able to represent their community and their social existence, working-class intellectuals are required to dislocate themselves from their own cultural field and appropriate the forms and cultural capital of the dominant class. This is partially controlled by observing the precepts of Janteloven, the control mechanism that preserves social cohesion through the prevention of individualism, that ensures the cultural capital acquired by an individual is that required to represent the *us* and not to engage with dalliances such as art and poetry that glorify the *thou*; the "abrupt and early exclusion" (Bourdieu, 2003: 84) from legitimate culture Bourdieu envisages working in two spheres. Unlike a mineworkers' leader such as Thomas Burt it is perhaps inevitable that, due to the paucity of cork-cutters, Dixon sought to provide cultural opportunities in order to improve his, and his region's, social existence.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Milburn advises there were ten or eleven cork-cutters across Newcastle and Sunderland in 1873 (Milburn, 1984: 7), by contrast the National Association of Miners had 51,000 members from Northumberland (16,000) and County Durham (35,000) in 1872 (Fynes, 1873: 263).

While many working-class intellectuals strove to improve the physical conditions of their peers, Dixon saw the self-improvement he had undertaken as a model for the improvement of his own community. One sees the process of social improvement initiated by the working-class intellectual in action when reading W.B. Scott's account of the founding of the Sunderland School of Design. Having received a "queerly spelt but rather ably expressed" (Scott, 1892: 264) letter from Sunderland requesting advice on inaugurating an institution similar to Newcastle's Government School of Design, Scott replied and arranged a meeting. Expecting to be greeted by civic dignitaries such as "the mayor, or an alderman, or two shipbuilders, or other important worthies, ready [...with] funds and influence" (Scott, 1892: 264), Scott was instead met by a representation of the working-class elite: carpenters, a shipwright, and a cork-cutter who told Scott "I have no talent, but I know several who have, and I come to speak for them" (Scott, 1892: 265). Exactly as Hoggart describes, Dixon came to represent his peers (as he would Skipsey) and engage with Scott on a level others were unable. Obviously, that Scott was greeted by this informal collection of workers begs the question as to why the town's 'important worthies' were not more active in widening opportunities for its residents. Perhaps the town authorities lacked Dixon's pioneering attitude or vigour but, as Scott speculated, without Dixon's constant agitation to keep his "proposed institutions before the eyes of his own class as well as before the authorities, it is very doubtful whether Sunderland would have been so early in the field" (Scott, 1892: 66) of providing cultural opportunities for the masses.

5.4 Thomas Dixon's social capital

Where Joseph Skipsey seemingly accepted and respected the hierarchical nature of the society in which he worked and wrote, Dixon considered class difference less an impediment than it was. As a working-class man, his reach and the volume of social capital he acquired, "the size of the network of connections he [could] effectively mobilize" (Bourdieu, 1986), is remarkable. In the 1850s he sought assistance from Millais and advised Tennyson on publishing strategies; in the 1860s

and 1870s he communicated with Ruskin and Whitman, effectively introducing the American's poetry to England. He was in regular correspondence with Thomas Carlyle and W.B. Scott. It is, however, Dixon's correspondence with the Rossetti brothers that has greatest significance to Skipsey.

Although, according to Peter Quinn, Dixon began writing to William Rossetti as early as 1859 (Quinn, 1997: 297), the earliest extant letter from Dante Rossetti is dated 23rd July, 1863.⁹⁹ From their earliest correspondence, Dixon proved a nuisance to the Rossettis.¹⁰⁰ In a letter to William (14th August, 1861), Dante wrote with contempt that "Dixon had the coolness to write to me the other day, wanting the proper measurements & mode of making oak frames!" (Rossetti, 2002: 392), and after meeting Dixon while visiting W.B. Scott in Newcastle, Dante wrote to his mother:

The fearful Dixon got wind of my presence, & though discouraged, duly turned up one evening. He is exceedingly anxious, among other topics, as to the allegorical meaning of *Goblin Market* [1862], so Christina knows what she has to expect when next she sees him.¹⁰¹ (Rossetti, 2002: 518)

While Dixon's interest in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, with its notion that addiction can be overcome through the efforts of a self-sacrificing figure, is clearly redolent of Dixon's views on, and actions in relation to, alcoholism, Rossetti was obviously annoyed by these intrusions. Dixon persisted with his correspondence and, in forewarning Christina 'when she next sees' him, Dante suggests a familiarity between Dixon and the Rossetti family. The brothers, regardless of any irritation, reciprocated Dixon's advances rewarding his persistence and enthusiasm with objectified

⁹⁹ This letter is in volume two of *TCDBG* and is held at the Harry Ransom Center, Texas.

¹⁰⁰ The Harry Ransom Center, Texas, holds numerous letters to Dixon. Listed in various finding aids are 83 from William Rossetti (dated between 1862 and 1876), 13 from Ruskin (between 1867 and 1875), and 17 from Dante Rossetti (between 1863 and 1879); there are 18 letters from Dante to Dixon in total in *TCDBG* all of which, despite the disparity in numbers, are acknowledged as being at Texas. I have not consulted the letters from William Rossetti or Ruskin as they are dated prior to Dixon meeting Skipsey.

¹⁰¹ This letter is dated 23rd December, 1862. Rossetti stayed in Newcastle from 8th to 31st December, 1862, to paint Maria Leathart (1840-99), wife of industrialist turned art collector James Leathart (1820-95); Dixon visited Rossetti at W.B. Scott's studio. Both Dante and Christina Rossetti visited Newcastle on several occasions, visiting Scott as well as the Trevelyan family at Wallington Hall.

capital in the shape of letters and books. In one letter (23rd July, 1863), Dante writes that, as Dixon has “never read ‘Wuthering Heights’ [1847], a book [Dante] greatly admire[s]” he will send him a copy of the novel “in a few days” (Rossetti, 2002: 65). It is revealing of the respect Rossetti had for a self-made man like Dixon, that it took him almost a month (17th August) “to obtain an edition more worth offering as a present”, and, furthermore, “the only one now in print” (Rossetti, 2002: 74). In spite of any annoyance Dixon caused Rossetti, this exchange of objectified capital acts as a formalization and, in the absence of a sanctioning body, the institutionalizing of Dixon’s cultural capital by agents with significantly greater volumes of (economic, cultural, and social) capital.

Most correspondents seemed, at the very least, to tolerate Dixon and replied to letters with courtesy; some individuals, however, were less accepting of this cross-class correspondence. Indicative of this was Robert Browning’s (1812-89) response to Dixon’s attentions. Following the receipt of a copy of *A Memoir of Thomas Bewick, written by himself* (1862), Browning forwarded it to William Rossetti complaining that:

from time to time [he received] letters from “Thomas Dixon, 57 Nile Street, Sunderland,” who chooses to write them and embarrass me: he sends books as “presents”—thinking there is a lack of that commodity in London, apparently. And I don’t like to hurt his feelings because, from sundry peculiar bits of spelling and other epistolary infelicities in a mild way, I suppose him to need indulgence [...] You see, I am in no condition to guess whether he knows you, or does not know; [whether you] will be pleased with his “loan,” or bothered, as I own myself to be [...], so, as bidden, I pass on the thing to you [...] What you will do in turn I shall not concern myself with: only, I entreat, don’t return them to me.¹⁰² (insertion in original, ellipses added, Rossetti, 1903: 179-80)

¹⁰² Dixon sent copies of Bewick’s works to many figures including Carlyle, Ruskin, and Gladstone. When Carlyle received Bewick’s memoir from Dixon he “read the greater part of it” and advised Ruskin: “Peace to Bewick: not a great man at all, but a very true of his sort [*sic*]” (cited in Cate, 1982: 113). Ruskin was, at this time, studying Bewick for his *The Cestus of Aglaia* (1865, 1866).

Browning's less than magnanimous response to Dixon starkly contrasts that of the more tolerant Rossetti brothers. It seems, also, that, in his condescending and patronising attitude toward Dixon's impertinence at bridging hegemonic barriers, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of his mission to spread the work of his favourite artists. Browning's standpoint also exposes a bourgeois elitism that recognises the illegitimacy of the cultural capital of the working-class. Consequently, when Dixon introduced Skipsey to his network it had to be with the utmost care to ensure poetry written by a working-class man would receive a sympathetic reading.

Dixon's attitude toward the sharing of work about which he felt passionate, reveals his importance to Skipsey and some of his reasoning behind the sharing of his work or others like him. Bewick seems to have been Dixon's primary passion, as he wrote to Whitman: "the memoir of Bewick is [...] a work I love and esteem and one that will be read by you with pleasure [...] as the utterances of a real noble honest soul, free from all pretensions of culture" (Dixon, 1870a), words he could easily have written about Skipsey. Dixon also reveals the purpose of his sharing books in this manner: "I would fain see more known [of Bewick] here and in America, it is so brimful of good sound sense" (Dixon, 1870a). One presumes Dixon's letter to Browning will have contained similar sentiments. When Browning sardonically suggests London has access to books, he misrepresents Dixon's purpose to spread the work of those he felt underappreciated and, in doing so, enriching the cultural life of the recipient.¹⁰³ Like Ruskin's letters in *Time and Tide* or *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (1871-84), Dixon's gifts sought to educate their recipient. Where W.B. Scott was intrigued by Dixon's 'queerly spelt' advances, Browning was offended by the evident lack of embodied cultural capital in Dixon's 'peculiar bits of spelling and other epistolary infelicities'. One feels that had a gift, accompanied by letters with similar 'infelicities', come from a northern figure such as Lord Ravensworth, a member of the nobility ("the

¹⁰³ Bewick was far from unknown in the nineteenth century, Charlotte Brontë for example wrote a poem to Bewick when just 16 and, in *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jane reads Bewick's *History of British Birds* (1797, 1804) finding "every picture told a [...] profoundly interesting" (Brontë, 1992: 3) story.

form *par excellence* of the institutionalized social capital which guarantees a particular form of social relationship" (Bourdieu, 1986)), Browning might have been more charitable.

The nature of Browning's response can also be used to 'prove' a standpoint that reinforces the hegemonic position which propagates the dismissive view that, as Tim Hilton writes in *John Ruskin* (2002), "Dixon liked to press his opinions on the great and famous. Often to their annoyance, he requested their philanthropy and involved them in protracted correspondence" (Hilton, 2002: 398). Furthermore, there seems to be a distinctly opposing position taken when looking from above. While Dixon is accused of forcing his views on illustrious correspondents, when this culturally imbalanced relationship is inspected from a position looking back down the hegemony we find Ruskin praised: he was "at all times ready to give of his best to those in whom he saw a sincere desire to profit by what he might bestow" (Cook, 1904: xv). Ruskin's benevolence, however, can also be read as patronising. Instead, Ruskin's guidance becomes commendable and, despite the energy and commitment he invested in his town's cultural improvements, Dixon's impudence becomes an indelible stain when his actions are placed in this manner, unsubstantiated and unquestioned, without regard for the motivation behind his requests. Ruskin becomes a pedagogue, Dixon an 'annoyance'. Ultimately, however, Ruskin and Dixon's intentions are the same: they both seek to educate and enrich the life of their correspondents.

Having championed the works of Bewick and Whitman, Dixon began, in 1878, promoting Skipsey's poetry. The network to which Dixon introduced Skipsey, described in the *Sunderland Echo* upon Dixon's death as "the widest circle of artistic and literary friends and acquaintances of any man in the north of England" (cited in Milburn, 1984: 27), transformed Skipsey's literary career from local poet to arguably the most nationally prominent working-class poet in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. If Reverend Prest and James Clephan were the gatekeepers prepared to share their social capital to allow Skipsey to enter the local literary world, Thomas Dixon's social capital allowed Skipsey access to the national sphere and the cultural centre. The evidence suggests

Dixon used his influence immediately and if any one individual in Skipsey's life could be considered his primary patron, an individual actively using their power and influence to further the endeavours of another, then it must be Thomas Dixon.

CHAPTER SIX

Exchanging Capital

6.1 Dear sirs: Mr Dixon, Mr Rossetti, Mr Skipsey

The introduction of the Penny Post in 1840 revolutionised communication, it served to reduce geographical separation and, in allowing cross-class interaction by individuals such as Thomas Dixon, blurred cultural and class stratification. The writing of letters became a preoccupation for many and burdensome to others, as Tennyson told Dixon: “letter-writing is very disagreeable to me [...] I am so overwhelmed [...] in replying to [correspondence] the whole flower & bloom of the day goes” (cited in Sotheby & Co., 1970: 129). Correspondence was also an indicator, store, and transmitter of cultural and social capital. Many “considered penmanship a mark of breeding” (Golden, 2010) and letters could mark an individual out as worthy of scorn, as Browning found in Thomas Dixon, or as indicators of surprising amounts of, in Bourdieu’s conceptualisation, embodied cultural capital, as Rossetti found of Skipsey: “the literary command shown in your critical letters is truly surprising to me” (Rossetti, 1878b: 1). Furthermore, letters became an efficient method of introducing one friend to another. The letter of introduction became a social convention where, using their own cultural capital as a guarantee, individuals could recommend others to different social circles; it was, as Ylva Hasselberg comments in a study of letter-writing among the Swedish bourgeoisie, “social capital, [...that was] the most important benefit to be exchanged” (Hasselberg, 1999: 101). Dixon seemingly recognised this and freely crossed class boundaries, transgressing codes of etiquette, manners, or politeness and, in doing so, enraging some of his correspondents.¹⁰⁴ Despite the

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Carlyle begged Dixon for “an altogether silent continuance of our mutual relatⁿ” (cited in Sotheby’s & CO., 1970: 121),

irritation he sometimes became, Dixon utilised his social capital, largely deployed through belligerent persistence, to introduce working-class artists to those higher within the hegemony.

From the time he met Skipsey, Dixon promoted him with the same enthusiasm that had caused the irritated Dante Rossetti to complain about the “fearful Dixon” (Rossetti, 2002: 518). While exasperated in 1862, Rossetti remained tolerant of Dixon and when he received Skipsey’s *Miscellaneous Lyrics* in 1878, it was with enthusiasm. There followed an exchange of (at least) forty-six letters between Skipsey, Dixon, and Rossetti that would change the course of Skipsey’s literary career. Between the letter dated 19th September 1878 Rossetti sent to Dixon where the painter mentions Skipsey for the first time and meeting him in June 1880, I have located three letters from Skipsey to Rossetti (plus three after June 1880), eight from Dixon to Rossetti, twenty-one from Skipsey to Dixon, four from Rossetti to Skipsey (two of which are unpublished and reproduced for the first time here: Appendices Six and Seven), and thirteen from Rossetti to Dixon.¹⁰⁵ Of these letters, excepting the two reproduced here, all those from Rossetti have been collected in *TCDGR*. Thornton (2014) makes extensive reference to those from Skipsey to Dixon, tracking the development of their relationship and, while concentrating on biographical details, reveals some of Skipsey’s thoughts about reviews and sales. The letters Skipsey and Dixon sent Rossetti have not received, as far as I can establish, any attention to date. It is clear from this breakdown (there are no letters from Dixon to Skipsey, for example), and the letters themselves, that several are missing and, in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, Skipsey creates and leaves a tantalising trace relating to Rossetti. In his interview with the newspaper, Skipsey claims “it was to me his [Rossetti’s] very last letter was written” (*PMG*: 2) but gives no further details. The editors of Rossetti’s correspondence make no reference to this, instead they conclude with an incomplete letter to patron Frederick Leyland (1831-92) that ends “I am feeling very weak to-day” (Rossetti, 2010: 681) and the mournful footnote: “DGR

¹⁰⁵ Of the four extant letters from Rossetti to Skipsey, the two in *TCDGR* (v8) were first published elsewhere. The editors print the extract of the letter (29th October, 1878) included in *RSWB* (pp. 53-4) and the other (16th November, 1878) first appears in Ernest Rhys’ *Letters from Limbo* (1936: 31).

wrote no more” (Rossetti, 2010: 681). I have not found the letter to which Skipsey refers and therein becomes embedded the frustration of the ‘trace’ created. This chapter examines the extant correspondence between Skipsey, Dixon, and Rossetti that took place between 19th September and the end of 1878 to reveal more about Skipsey and his relationship with both Rossetti and Dixon than has previously been known, exposing the extent to which Rossetti utilised his social capital to aid Skipsey. In doing so, I release Skipsey from the few quotations of Rossetti’s within which he has been constrained over the succeeding years to reveal a more equal and respectful relationship than previously supposed.

The impudence Dixon had in crossing spatial and social boundaries that annoyed Browning, was vital for the cultural missionary work in which he engaged. Indeed, Spence Watson describes Dixon as “a missionary of knowledge” (*RSWB*: 107) and there was a brand of religious zeal in Dixon’s spreading of knowledge, “so soon as he had mastered a book and stored it away in his mind he felt it a duty to hand it to others” (*RSWB*: 107; he felt a moral obligation to share cultural works, considering it wasteful “to keep a book which was not being read or referred to” (*RSWB*: 107). In the aiding of his friends’ artistic ambitions, Dixon facilitated access to networks to which those with greater cultural and social capital had automatic access:

I feel happiest when I can serve either men or women who are unknown, and yet have gifts like Skipsey. I cannot produce anything like their work. & feel I am doing a small service if I can aid them in anyway [...] Knowing well, that the popular men and women have a list of people to help them, and to propagate their works and buy their pictures. (Dixon, 1878b: 2)

In the knowledge that ‘the popular men and women’ have access to systems and people to promote, sell, and buy their art, Dixon is aware of a system of patronage to which working-class individuals in possession of less valued forms of capital do not have automatic access. As with his proselytising of Bewick or Whitman, Dixon felt he could share Skipsey’s ‘gifts’ with a wider audience allowing him access to social capital and networks otherwise closed. There is also a sense in Dixon’s admission he

was unable to 'produce anything like their work' that, in circulating and publicizing the work of others, he experienced their achievements vicariously. One feels this was certainly the case with Joseph Skipsey.

Between the printing of Skipsey's *ML1878* and 19th September 1878, when Rossetti sent thanks, Dixon had devoured and stored its contents and, in accordance with his principles, handed it on. The reason Dixon chose to send *ML1878* to Dante Rossetti in particular is uncertain, but there are many possible motivations: perhaps it was merely that he had recently contacted Rossetti asking for the price of a painting (27th August); perhaps he recalled Rossetti's work with the Working Men's College and of Rossetti's support for another working-class poet Ebenezer Jones (1820-60); perhaps Dixon remembered Laura Savage writing in *The Germ* of the Pre-Raphaelite fascination with:

the poetry of the things about us; our railways, factories, *mines*, roaring cities, steam vessels, and the endless novelties and wonders produced every day; which if they were found only in the Thousand and One Nights, or in any poem classical or romantic, would be gloried over without end; for as the majority of us know not a bit more about them, but merely their names, we keep up the same mystery, the main thing required for the surprise of the imagination.¹⁰⁶ (my emphasis, Savage, 1850: 170-1)

The Pre-Raphaelite fascination with mystery and poetry of their surroundings was reflected in their obsession with nature and their desire to reproduce it with painstaking exactitude. For Savage, however, the nature to be investigated was human and found in the nation's industrial regions, where human life was more fabulous than those found in ancient Eastern texts. Skipsey's poetry reveals, just what Savage wrote, the novelty and wonders of industrial life; the 'debt' Rossetti owes is the surprising revelation of Skipsey's imagination.

¹⁰⁶ Dixon wrote to William Rossetti requesting copies of *The Germ* (Quinn, 1997: 297). Laura Savage was a pseudonym of Frederic Stephens (1827-1907) (Room, 2010: 426), a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Macleod, 2004) better known as art critic for *The Athenæum* (1861-1901).

After Dixon sent *ML1878* to Rossetti, Skipsey and his poetry dominated their correspondence for more than a month, during which time both were fulsome in their acclaim. Dixon describes Skipsey, in full accordance with the ideal respectable working class, as “a real worthy kind hearted honest man” (Dixon, 1878b: 1) and Rossetti finds “humour & feeling” in ‘Thistle & Nettle’, “remarkable justness of mind in ‘The Soul’s Hereafter’” (Rossetti, 2009: 168) as well as “pathos & power, [...especially in] the real-life poems” (Rossetti, 2009: 171). Rossetti’s opinions here match with Savage’s desire that art should reflect the poetry of the everyday, that it should reflect a sense of realism; in Skipsey, therefore, his authenticity is prized and the lived-life informing his poetry elevates his over intellectual or imagined artifice. Rossetti himself recognises this when, after sending Skipsey his own poems, he writes to Dixon that he “cannot expect [...] Skipsey will take the same interest in my poems [...] Mine are full of work which is art-study & speaks a much less universal language than his own” (Rossetti, 2009: 183).¹⁰⁷ Where Rossetti’s poems are expressive responses mimicking the ‘real world’, Skipsey’s are acute mimetic documentaries of that world, descriptions informed by encounter and a reflection of his social existence. In a sense, the “want of educational advantages” (Rossetti, 2009: 168) Rossetti finds are a necessary by-product of this process as to have a formal and prescribed education is to be guided toward an understanding of art as study and away from the Romantic view of poetry as a spontaneous, personal response to the world.

Throughout the correspondence surrounding Skipsey, Rossetti emphasises and reiterates the value of the miner’s authenticity, valuing him for his imperfections, his earthiness, and his lack of cultured artifice. In this, Skipsey is placed precisely as the Noble Savage, an idealised individual

¹⁰⁷ Rossetti’s letter to Dixon, on 4th October, included a copy of *Poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1873). In the letter he writes: “My own Poems are out of print in the English edition, but I send today a copy of the small continental [Tauchnitz] edition for your own acceptance. Small as it looks, it contains the whole, & has my last revisions beyond the last English edition” (Rossetti, 2009: 182-3). In writing that his *Poems* were sent for Dixon’s ‘acceptance’, Rossetti makes it unclear to whom the book was sent; whatever Rossetti’s intent, by 26th October Dixon had given the book to Skipsey.

considered morally superior to civilized individuals because they have not been corrupted by the modern world. This creates the paradox I for Evans recognised, as mentioned in Chapter One, in which Skipsey, and other working-class authors, is prized for his perceived primitiveness, lack of formal education, authenticity, and 'native force'. Yet, in the desire to be recognised as an artist, that authenticity and 'native force' are constraints imposed upon him by his embodied cultural capital, constraints from which he is perpetually attempting to free himself. The paradox is deepened when one considers that, despite struggling against adjectival determinants, a working-class writer must appeal to the cultural gatekeepers controlling the literary marketplace, that "middle-class monopoly" (Cross, 1985: 2) who value their authenticity. As the century progressed, Vicinus argues (Vicinus, 1974: 168), working-class artists received greater middle-class support; the gatekeepers were willing to assist, but with terms. As the social cohesion of a working-class community is threatened by individuals seeking cultural capital considered outside of its social sphere, the social cohesion of the dominant middle class is also threatened by potential contagions. As such, the expectations the bourgeois audience demands be fulfilled are an adherence to the constraints of one's embodied capital, one's *habitus*. To return to Goodridge's argument, working-class "poetry should be popular in style and [...] address one's social origins and one's 'own' culture" (Goodridge, 2006: xxi), operating within the confines of their author's social existence; they must identify that social existence, writing only about the industry and the community from which they emerge, and as Bourdieu suggests of relations between patron and subject, the "'poor relations' [of the bourgeoisie] forced into alternative trajectories" (Bourdieu, 2003: 316). Ultimately, the working-class writer is a contradiction who must accept hegemonic strictures in order to be accepted by them, while challenging that hegemony by their very existence.

As Willie Reay introduced Skipsey to Reverend Prest in 1858, Dixon introduced Skipsey's poetry to another gatekeeper and the first letter Skipsey received directly from Rossetti had a

significant impact upon his life.¹⁰⁸ Before arriving there, however, the series of events that led to its being written need to be considered to illustrate the difficulties working-class writers faced, as well as justifying Dixon's cultural mission. When Dixon wrote to Rossetti on 27th August enquiring about his price "for a small work in colour" (Dixon, 1878a: 1) he adds the postscript that he received, "from Mr J. Linnell [,] a nice copy on India paper [of William] Blake's [*Illustrations of the*] *Book of Job*" (Dixon, 1878a: 3); when shown the text, as Dixon told Rossetti, Skipsey reacted viscerally: he "seemed to shiver all over his body [...experiencing] very intensely the feeling in them" (Dixon, 1878e: 4).¹⁰⁹ In an earlier letter, however, Dixon highlights the difficulties Skipsey encountered in obtaining (particularly contemporary) literature. When relaying to Rossetti that Skipsey had "visions respecting Shelley [...] elucidat[ing] why he separated from Harriet [...] not disclosed in any of the lives of Shelley" (Dixon, 1878c: 1), he reveals Skipsey had only had access to the "very brief [biographies...] given in the cheap editions of [Shelley's] poems" (Dixon, 1878c: 1) but not the standard late-nineteenth-century work on Blake: "the *Life of Blake* by Gilchrist" (Dixon, 1878c: 1-2).¹¹⁰ While Skipsey evidently had access to works by Shelley, Shakespeare, Goethe, or Heine they were in older editions, a process Jonathan Rose describes:

Normally the well-to-do can outbid the poor in the literary marketplace. But as with furniture or fine art, there is a phase in the life history of a book when its market value slumps, when it is too old to be chic and not old enough to be an antique. Within this

¹⁰⁸ Between Rossetti receiving *ML1878* and first writing to Skipsey (29th October, 1878), Dixon was reticent to show him Rossetti's praise because, not wanting to give false hope, he "always like[d] to act with caution and care in all [he] undertake[s] for them" (Dixon, 1878b: 1). During this period, Skipsey had provided Dixon with biographical information and other examples of his writings sent to Rossetti as enclosures.

¹⁰⁹ John Linnell (1792-1882), landscape and portrait artist, was a friend of Blake; Spence Watson records the gift was not kept: Dixon "spent a day or two with me when George Macdonald was also visiting me, and the conversation turned upon Blake's 'Book of Job' [...] Dixon had had a copy of it presented to him by John Linnell [...] and, so soon as he returned home, he sent it as a gift to George Macdonald" (*RSWB*: 107).

¹¹⁰ *Life of William Blake* (1863) by Alexander Gilchrist, was foundational to the nineteenth-century popularisation of Blake. During his research Gilchrist interviewed many people who had known Blake and this work remains "the only source for much of what [...] is known] about Blake's life" (The Blake Society, 2008). Unfortunately, Gilchrist died in 1861 before the work was completed; it was finished by Alexander's widow Anne, assisted by Dante and William Rossetti.

window of unfashionability, literature trickles down to the twopenny bookstalls, where the working classes can freely buy what the well-to-do consider hopelessly out of date. (Rose, 1998: 99)

In what Jonathan Rose characterises as a 'cultural lag', the working classes only had access to writers less considered by contemporary literary taste, or editions containing less current research. This 'cultural lag' means the autodidact is influenced by authors contemporary culture has assimilated and from whom it has moved on, thus their writings can appear outdated or archaic.

When Dixon wrote to Rossetti of Skipsey's enthusiasm for Blake, he "seemed to love the book and man so deeply" (Dixon, 1878c: 2), alongside Dixon's regret that he had "not the Life of Blake [...] to lend him [...] because] he had let another friend have it" (Dixon, 1878c: 1-2), Rossetti promised to "find a Blake's Life [...] & send it to [Dixon] for him. Your remarkable efforts in spreading knowledge deserve cooperation from others" (Rossetti, 2009: 182-3). Rossetti sent "a copy of Gilchrist's Blake, [...] despite its] being difficult to obtain" (Rossetti, 2009: 184-5), on 8th October to give to Skipsey. In receiving this gift and the one phrase from Rossetti, that Dixon's 'remarkable efforts in spreading knowledge deserve cooperation from others', is the justification of Dixon's role in promoting cultural relations across the geopolitical divide between industrial periphery and cultural centre. Dixon's efforts as a cultural attaché bridged a gap Skipsey could not have otherwise crossed.

Initially, the epistolary conversation between Skipsey and Rossetti was linear, carried out through (and mediated by) Dixon: Rossetti asked questions about Skipsey to Dixon and Skipsey in turn responded to Dixon; Rossetti praised his poetry and this was selectively transmitted to Skipsey; Skipsey expressed appreciation of poets, Blake in particular, and Dixon passed this to Rossetti. It was only in the receipt of valuable objectified capital the epistolary exchange changed. A gift from the "renowned [...] D.G.R." (Skipsey (I), 1878b: 1) prompted Skipsey to bypass the intermediary, "taking up the pen & thank[ing] [...] Rossetti] for the handsome gift [...which has] been instrumental

in stirring up within me a font of gladness by an act of which this gift is only the symbolic outcome” (Skipsey (I), 1878c: 1). To Skipsey the gift symbolised “the approval of the great & the good of my species” (Skipsey (I), 1878c: 2) and became institutionalized capital; in sending the *Life of William Blake*, Rossetti recognised Skipsey had sufficient embodied cultural capital to appreciate the gift, therefore, the objectified capital becomes Skipsey’s certification, his guarantee, that his efforts have been approved and authorised. In this moment Skipsey receives the “acceptation of [his] country” (Skipsey (I), 1871: 7) he so desired.

This first letter from Skipsey to Rossetti displays the expected deference from a cultural subordinate, but it also displays self-confidence in his ability to meet Rossetti as an intellectual equal. In addressing Rossetti’s critique that *ML1878* displayed ‘the want of educational advantages’, Skipsey responds confrontationally, rhetorically posing a question that illustrates his isolation and struggle to create poetry:

I am not so vain as to imagine that my book is void of faults, but from a consideration of my position _ of the psychological influences of my surroundings & without the sympathy of one embodied soul that could assist me with any adequate Criticism what could be expected? (Skipsey (I), 1878e: 2)

While the developing friendship with Dixon provided the opportunity to expand the number of ‘embodied souls’ able to support his development as a writer, Skipsey also suggests that had he been afforded the advantages of legitimate culture, inculcated through a formal education or comfortable middle-class upbringing, he would have been more capable and more effective as a poet. While this sentiment is debatable, the closing question: “what could be expected?” is not only regretful of lost opportunities but also an accusation that the ‘establishment’, which Rossetti effectively represents, have neglected him and, by extension, others like him. It also illustrates Skipsey’s acceptance and awareness that, as Georgiana Burne-Jones (1840-1920) would later

intimate, his poetry would only ever be read “after allowance [was] made” (Burne-Jones, 1906: 108) for the circumstances from which it was written.

Early in the correspondence that forms the core of this research Skipsey recognised his own isolation, he wrote to Spence Watson in 1871: “I only want cultre [sic] to produce a series of lyrics that would constitute a legacy worthy of the acceptance of my country” (Skipsey (I), 1871: 7-8). That culture was the capital forms that Bourdieu recognises, access to art and literature and a network of like-minded individuals from whom he could receive the ‘adequate criticism’ necessary to improve his poetry. Thomas Dixon became an outlet for Skipsey’s “many little crotchets & fancies which pressed for an airing”, he provided access to “delightful talk about fine art & artists, poetry and poets”, and his home was a haven for “many of the struggling sons of Genius” (Skipsey, 1879I: 2). The loneliness and isolation Skipsey felt permeated to such an extent Dixon advised Rossetti “his visits [to Dixon’s house...] help to alleviate the lonliness [sic] of life in the village” (Dixon, 1879: 4).¹¹¹ Meeting Dixon not only allowed Skipsey to access new cultural and social capital to help him as a poet, it assisted him personally in providing access to a different community.

On 29th October 1878, Dante Rossetti wrote a letter to Skipsey that fundamentally shifted the recipient’s literary career and reputation. This one letter has received attention from many individuals and is quoted regularly in discussions of Skipsey: that Rossetti found ‘Mother Wept’ to be “very striking” is well known, as is the advice that Skipsey use ““Get Up!”” as “an example [...to follow and] never fall short of this standard, where not a word is lost or wanting”, and that Rossetti thought Skipsey was a “poet of the people who describes what he knows and mixes in” (Rossetti, 1878a: 2). While these few phrases are, potentially, the reason Skipsey is remembered today, they have become concrete and foundational, a base upon which subsequent research or opinions rest. Where noted, however, Rossetti’s praise has always been a one-sided critique. As a result, an imbalance in their relationship has been created that reinforces a perception of cultural dominance

¹¹¹ This letter, dated 25th November, 1879, is the last I have located from Dixon.

thus allowing critics, such as Brian Maidment, to conclude Skipsey was “humiliated” (Maidment, 1992: 85-6) at the hands of Rossetti. In the neglect of the correspondence of the less culturally powerful participant, is the revelation of a side effect of the ‘silence of the archive’. In the disregarding of Skipsey in this correspondence, the impression is that the interest of the culturally superior is being served thus exposing, as Adrienne Rich suspected, that “Silence can be a plan/ rigorously executed” (Rich, 1978: 17). Without considering Skipsey’s responses, a power imbalance is created. This imbalance is maintained and validated by the authority of the middle-class saviour narrative, which, in turn, leads to the patronising and dismissive opinion that, to Rossetti, Skipsey was just another “aspiring poet” upon whom he “lavished” his “generosity” (Rossetti, 2009: 168ⁿ); a sentiment in which one can glimpse Browning’s dismissal of Dixon. Throughout his interactions with supposed cultural superiors, Skipsey is portrayed as the passive recipient of assistance, given little credence for his own efforts. As such, Rossetti’s praise, the supposed ‘humiliation’ experienced, and the assumptions surrounding patronage, are all examples of a relational model (the middle-class saviour narrative) readily accepted. This narrative is unchallenged because the assumptions of the model fit with and support hegemonic preconceptions and structures; the continual ‘encouragement’ Skipsey received to write poetry of pit-life, perpetually reinforces his subordinate position as class boundaries are solidified. In examining Skipsey’s correspondence, hegemonic expectations and assumptions are challenged, as a monologue becomes a dialogue for the first time.

Where Skipsey’s poetry can, arguably, be seen as a site of acceptance of cultural dominance promoting the notion of a, as Martha Vicinus argues, “do-nothing sentimentality [...] particularly popular among middle-class readers” (Vicinus, 1974: 85), his letters become a site of resistance that challenges hegemonies and, in their discovery, the silence of the archive is disrupted. When reading Skipsey’s letters to Rossetti one is presented with an individual who, in following the cultural hegemony, is ebullient in his enthusiasm for the appreciation and attention paid him by a leading

cultural figure, but also someone prepared to challenge that hegemony with criticism of Rossetti's poetry. Where Dixon was bold enough to breach social boundaries, Skipsey was similarly disposed in his critiques of Rossetti's poetry and, while it is important to hear what Rossetti thought of Skipsey's poetry, the converse has not been considered. After wholeheartedly thanking Rossetti for his gifts, Skipsey responded with two letters in which, at "the risk of being intrusive or presumptive", he described "the effect produced [...] by a study of [Rossetti's] poems" (Skipsey (I), 1878e:1).¹¹² Throughout these "critical letter[s]" (Skipsey (I), 1878i: 1), Skipsey praises Rossetti's poems to the point of obsequiousness: he finds particular joy in the "working of a deep psychic law" (Skipsey (I), 1878e: 1) in 'The Blessed Damozel' and 'Sister Helen'; "purely poetical charm" (Skipsey (I), 1878e: 4) in 'Dante at Verona' and 'Jenny'; and compares 'Love's Nocturne', 'Troy Town', 'The Stream's Secret', and 'Eden Bower' to "music heard from afar" (Skipsey (I), 1878e: 3-4). In the enthusiasm Skipsey shows for Rossetti's poems, he clearly displays the importance and esteem in which he holds Rossetti, "thus proving his great interest in them" (Dixon, 1878g: 2), reflecting the delight he found in recognition received.

There is, however, more to Skipsey's letters than the hyperbolic and sycophantic placing of Rossetti's "poems [...] according to the orthodox canons [...] among the highest lyric efforts in the British tongue" (Skipsey (I), 1878e: 3). Skipsey is keen to reveal he is worthy of Rossetti's attention by showing he is well-read in making references throughout to W.B. Scott, Dante Alighieri's *inferno* (1320), to Blake, and to Byron. Furthermore, Skipsey perceptively compares Scott's 'Maryanne', although mistakenly calling it "'Mary Annie'" (Skipsey (I), 1878e: 5), with Rossetti's 'Jenny'. Originally titled 'Rosabell', 'Maryanne' is a companion piece (Boos, 1979: 5) to Rossetti's own "provocative meditation on a sleeping prostitute" (Block, 2006); Skipsey comments:

¹¹² The first of these letters (14th November) concerns itself with Rossetti's longer poems, the second (1878i) concentrates on Rossetti's sonnets. The second letter is incomplete and undated within the *Helen (Rossetti) Angeli – Imogene Dennis Collection*; its pages are numbered one to eight (by Skipsey) with five and six missing. An archivist has attributed the letter to 1879, however, these comments place the letter between "my last critical letter" (21st November) and Rossetti's next letter to Skipsey on 4th December.

In 'Jenny' [...] I find a subject handled in a masterly manner very similar to one [...] W.B. Scott in his Mary Annie [*sic*...] not as to the true character of Mr. Scott's poem I should say that though similar in subject 'Mary Annie' and 'Jenny' are entirely different in treatment & in poetic essentials have distinct & independent claims on the sympathies of their reader. (Skipsey (I), 1878e: 4-5)

While careful to avoid accusations of plagiarism, Skipsey is keen to display his capacity and poetic sensitivity and that he possesses more cultural capital than would be supposed of a miner. What is most striking, however, is Skipsey's self-recognition with the poetry and art he consumes. When one reads his visceral reaction to Blake's illustrations it is almost as if Skipsey saw himself, as Blake had done, cast as Job, living a life persecuted, unrecognised, and impoverished as a poet. The sense of Skipsey's self-recognition is further intensified when reading his reaction to his "first attempt to peruse [Dante's] Hell" by which he "was so stricken with horror at their intense & fearful reality" that he was "compelled to lay the book down" and so affected he had "not had the corage [*sic*] to look into it again" (Skipsey (I), 1878e: 5-6). The self-identification comes through his own daily descent into an underground chasm that had the potential to consume him. Unlike Emile Zola's *Germinal* (1885) or Sid Chaplin's 'The Thin Seam', which describe life and work underground with lurid and graphic detail, the working miner does not want to be reminded of his daily descent, as Chaplin describes to "dream [...] about work, which is the nearest kind of dream to nightmare without actually being a nightmare" (Chaplin, 1968: 6), resultantly the working life of the mine is far from Skipsey's poetry. The idea that "the pit could swallow people in mouthfuls of twenty or thirty at a time, and with such ease that it seemed not even to notice the moment of their consumption" (Zola, 2004: 24) is one that haunted the miner's life. For Chaplin this sensation became "the shadows behind the door you try to keep locked" (Chaplin, 1968: 43). To find his own personal inferno translated into literature was beyond Skipsey's endurance.

As Dixon had been quick to mobilize his social capital on Skipsey's behalf, so too was Rossetti. Shortly after receiving *ML1878* Rossetti wrote to his friend William H. Davies, about a "book of Poems [...] full of very striking real-life work & remarkable justness of thought on speculative matters" (Rossetti, 2009: 177), and to another, the "influential critic" (Rossetti, 2009: 191), Theodore Watts-Dunton with a more practical purpose. His letter to Watts was sent with the "good pieces" marked and the suggestion he might "wish to notice even if but briefly either in *Athenæum* or *Examiner* [...] a book of poems by a collier, one Joseph Skipsey" (Rossetti, 2009: 168). Watts did 'notice' the text in *The Athenæum* (16th November, 1878), but Rossetti's involvement in the review was significant. From the outset, Rossetti effectively controls and pre-empts Watts' review. In marking out the 'good pieces', Rossetti forces Watts into a position that makes an objective assessment of Skipsey's work very difficult, a situation exacerbated when he suggests the "real-life subjects [in Skipsey's poetry] are all remarkable & very sympathetic: there is both pathos & humour", and although he does not know "how many such local poets there may be in England, [Skipsey...] is no common one" (Rossetti, 2009: 168). Rossetti's encouragement of Watts seems to have been altruistic in purpose and benevolent in its motivation, with no immediately apparent desire from Rossetti to further himself, or seek to attach his name to Skipsey's in order to appear as his patron. Conversely, Rossetti actively discouraged this as being potentially injurious to Skipsey.

The initial reception of Rossetti's *Poems* (1870), his "most important literary work" (rossettiarchive, n.d.), was positive but a review in *The Contemporary Review* (1st August, 1871), written by the poet and critic Robert Buchanan (under the pseudonym Thomas Maitland), ignited a feud that significantly damaged Rossetti. Buchanan denounced *Poems* as "morbid deviations from healthy forms of life" (Maitland, 1871: 337) and labelled Rossetti with Baudelaire, Swinburne, and Morris as belonging to a 'Fleshly School of Poetry' (1871). The subsequent literary and sexual scandal deeply affected Rossetti, his friendships, career, and health suffered greatly and led to a suicide attempt in 1872. Aware of his public reputation following the 'Fleshly School' attack, Rossetti was

clearly concerned that attaching his name to Skipsey's might taint him with his own infamy. Rossetti advised he was:

glad indeed if any word of appreciation on my part can give you pleasure, but would not advise you to use such in a public way, on account of the malignity of literary cabals. I am conscientious in saying this. (Rossetti, 1878a: 5)

Speaking from his experience with 'malignant literary cabals' and the harm they could inflict, Rossetti was concerned his own deficient status among them would corrupt Skipsey's.

While Rossetti was concerned with appearing to support Skipsey, he was prepared to utilise his own social capital on Skipsey's behalf, noting that it added "something to the food if one can help in making a fine fellow happy" (Rossetti, 2009: 200) and suggesting he received actual sustenance in making 'a fine fellow happy'. As with Skipsey's encounter with James Clephan, establishing a connection to a new network brought a positive review and an increase in sales. While the attachment to Clephan brought about the distribution of copies of *L1859* to Mechanics' Institutes throughout the North, Rossetti wrote to Dixon on 23rd September asking to "purchase 6 copies for distribution to friends" (Rossetti, 2009: 171). Dixon's response was rapid as, on 26th September, Rossetti wrote to Dixon enclosing payment for "8 copies of Mr. Skipsey's Poems: [because...] every copy ought to bring him its value, so I take the liberty of including the price of the 2 sent to my brother & myself" (Rossetti, 2009: 173). While it may not have been the quantity distributed to the Mechanics' Institutes, eight copies of *ML1878* in the hands of individuals with the volume of cultural and social capital of William and Dante Rossetti would surely be significant.

There is great affection for Skipsey throughout the correspondence between Rossetti and Dixon as Dante makes enquiries as to Skipsey's "circumstances [...his] family [...and] their present prospects" (Rossetti, 2009: 171). In his first letter to Dixon (26th September, 1878), Skipsey responds to the request for his 'circumstances'. This letter yields little new information, but in Skipsey's "thanks for the interest & the trouble [...Dixon] exhibited [...] on behalf of one who was till so very

recently a complete stranger” (Skipsey (I), 1878b: 1), is confirmation the pair had only recently met. After sketching out the dire circumstances of his childhood, however, Skipsey is eager to illustrate to Dixon’s “renowned friend” (Skipsey (I), 1878b: 1) that, despite his disadvantages, he has known and been appreciated by prominent members of his community. Almost as if offering his contacts to Rossetti in exchange, Skipsey defines himself through a series of influential people: “I am or was known to the Venerable Archdeacon Prest [...] to G.E. Forster Esq. M.E. [...] Mr Richardson M.E. [...] G. Crawshay Esq. [...] to R.S. Watson [...and] Mr James Clephan” (Skipsey (I), 1878b: 3-4).¹¹³ In doing so, Skipsey demonstrates he is not of common mining-community stock and instead has gained, with the individuals’ institutionalized capital noted, the respect of his region’s middle class. Indeed, as there are religious, industrial, political, and journalistic representatives, Skipsey illustrates his worth to all pillars of that middle-class society, and, in presenting himself in this manner, reveals confidence that the “celebrated Rossetti” (Skipsey (I), 1878b: 5) will find delight in his work.

In the correspondence between Dixon, Rossetti, and Skipsey, can be seen exchanges and transferences of the three forms of cultural capital Bourdieu identified. Where it might be seen as a one-way process in which Rossetti shares his cultural and social capital, each transaction is a two-way exchange where the capital exchanged is converted through all forms. The most important transaction taking place, however, is in Skipsey acquiring the embodied cultural capital of being associated with a (relative) cultural giant and an increase of social capital in gaining access to the networks Rossetti belongs. Despite the advice that Skipsey not use his name “in a public way” (Rossetti, 1878a: 5), Rossetti receives capital in being associated, in a loosely philanthropic manner, with an ‘authentic’ working man. These mutual exchanges of capital allow Skipsey access to a physical world and Rossetti access to an imaginative one, “the poetry of the things about us; our [...]

¹¹³ “M.E.” relates to Mining Engineer.

mines [...] and the endless novelties and wonders produced every day” (Savage, 1850: 170-1), that would otherwise be difficult for either of them to enter.

6.2 An *Athenæum* review

In her PhD thesis, Kathrine Jackson explores a contiguous relationship between the poetry of Christina Rossetti, Dante Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne, and William Morris alongside that of working-class writers including, among others, Janet Hamilton (1795-1873), Thomas Cooper, and Gerald Massey. In doing so, Jackson examines intersections between Victorian high culture and working-class writers, as well as investigating the patronage and support Pre-Raphaelite artists gave less-celebrated artists. Jackson argues that the Pre-Raphaelites were profoundly aware, as Thomas Dixon was, of the “importance of the patronage system to the successful production and circulation of works of art” (Jackson, 2014: 33), which, in Bourdieu’s terms, suggests an awareness of the vital importance of social capital for the dissemination of their work. Rossetti, Millais, or Holman Hunt were able to attract influential or wealthy patrons, Ruskin or James Leathart for example, who were able, as Dixon described, “to propagate their works and buy their pictures” (Dixon, 1878b: 2). Where Ruskin and Leathart, a critic and an industrialist, were patrons providing support while external to an artistic circle, Jackson notes that the affinity and support the Pre-Raphaelites provided other artists indicated “an implicit alliance to promote their aesthetic” (Jackson, 2014: 33). This ‘implicit alliance’ is, effectively, an informal contract to share social capital in exchange for the cultural capital of being regarded benevolent, philanthropic, and ultimately a patron; patronage based on cultural and social capital and a mutual affirmation of aesthetic principles, where the only class issue is that of artistic class.

In a chapter entitled ‘Pre-Raphaelite Patronage of Working-Class Poets’, Jackson identifies three lesser-known poets with whom the Pre-Raphaelites formed this ‘implicit alliance’: the middle-class Charles Wells (c.1800-79), the working-class Ebenezer Jones, and Joseph Skipsey. In

establishing that “the Pre-Raphaelites [had...] a significant say in [how...] the poetry of these artists was received” and that the “group seemingly want[ed] to influence public taste by suggesting what is *good* (in their opinion) about the poetry” (emphasis in original, Jackson, 2014: 72), Jackson is particularly perceptive. The support Rossetti provided Skipsey is an example of the ‘implicit alliance’ to which Jackson refers as well as an apposite illustration of how the Pre-Raphaelites shaped the reception of these poets. Jackson argues the group were able to shape the reception of these poets with relative impunity and little resistance because their subjects were either “aged or already dead” (Jackson, 2014: 72), but, as this cannot apply to Skipsey who was four years Rossetti’s junior, it seems more likely it was the imbalance in the types of cultural and social capital each agent brought to the relationship that made Rossetti’s influence irresistible.

Highlighting the “significant aid [and] attention” (Jackson, 2014: 63) Skipsey received from the Pre-Raphaelites, Jackson refers to support provided in obtaining for him a Civil List pension and Skipsey’s curatorship of Shakespeare’s Birthplace, but is seemingly unaware of the assistance Rossetti provided in introducing Skipsey’s poetry to a wider audience. The remainder of this chapter examines how, within Jackson’s terms, Rossetti was able to influence public taste through manipulating a review of Skipsey’s poetry in *The Athenæum*. As with the *Gateshead Observer* in 1858, Skipsey’s entrance to a new sphere came in the shape of a review. While Skipsey’s poetry had received national attention, a substantial review by “an excellent hand” (Rossetti, 2009: 191) in *The Athenæum* proved his most significant. Yet, that entrance passes through a mediator that prejudices the reader’s approach to the text. As the *Gateshead Observer* ‘passed over’ some poems *The Athenæum* reviewer, Theodore Watts-Dunton, is pointed in the direction of “the good pieces [to...] save [him...] the labour” (Rossetti, 2009: 168). In both cases, the initial reader, Clephan or Rossetti, explicitly shapes Skipsey’s reception by “suggesting what is *good* [...] about the poetry” (emphasis in original, Jackson, 2014: 72), or, more significantly, by actively barring readers from certain areas of the text.

Although difficult to discover those poems marked for Watts' attention, they, presumably, included those Rossetti praised in his letters. Of the 48 poems in *ML1878*, Rossetti expressed his appreciation as follows:

19th September, 1878, to Dixon

'Thistle and Nettle'	"I am at once struck with 'Thistle & Nettle.' It is full of reality & possesses both humour & feeling" (Rossetti, 2009: 168)
'The Soul's Hereafter'	"There is remarkable justness of mind in 'The Soul's Hereafter'" (Rossetti, 2009:168)

4th October, 1878, to Dixon

'Bereaved'	"is perhaps his finest from the pathetic point of view – it cannot be read without deep emotion" (Rossetti, 2009: 183)
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29th October, 1878, to Skipsey

'Bereaved'	"perhaps the poem which most unites poetic form with deep pathos" (Rossetti, 1878a: 2)
'The Hartley Calamity'	"equal in another way, but written, I fancy, to be really sung, like the old ballads" (Rossetti, 1878a: 3) ¹¹⁴
'Thistle and Nettle'	"shows the most varied power of all" (Rossetti, 1878a: 3)
'Persecuted'	} "Other favourites of mine" (Rossetti, 1878a: 3)
'Willy to Lilly'	
'Nanny to Bessy'	
'Mother Wept'	"this very striking" (Rossetti, 1878a: 3)

¹¹⁴ In their chapter on 'Poetry, Politics, and Coal Mines in Victorian England', Thesing and Wojtasik attribute this passage to a review by Rossetti on "29 October 1887" (Thesing, 2000: 38) using the incorrect date from the 'Opinions of the Press' blurb in *CSB1888*. In repeating the error, Thesing and Wojtasik attribute the phrase to Rossetti five years after his death.

““Get Up!””

“It seems to me that, as regards style, you might take the verbal perfection of your admirable stanzas ‘Get Up’ [sic] as an example to yourself, and try never to fall short of this standard, where not a word is lost or wanting. This little piece seems to me equal to anything in the language for direct and quiet pathetic force.” (Rossetti, 1878a: 4)

‘The Violet and the Rose’

“I think very perfect, & a singular instance of exact resemblance to a charming clap of Blake’s work” (Rossetti, 1878a: 4)

‘Stanzas’

“I greatly admire the image evolved in the Stanzas” (Rossetti, 1878a: 4-5)

‘The Soul’s Hereafter’

“Among the poems of aspiration, the one which appears to me greatly the finest in expression & value is ‘The Soul’s Hereafter’. How could one speak on such a subject with such unhesitating justness of view” (Rossetti, 1878a: 5)

Of the eleven poems praised, the subjects covered in ten of them can be divided into four broad categories: courtship (‘Thistle and Nettle’ and ‘Willy to Lily’), loss and death (‘The Hartley Calamity’, ‘Nanny to Bessy’, and ‘Bereaved’), family life and the interrelationships therein (‘Mother Wept’, ‘Persecuted’, and ““Get Up!””), and finally spiritualism and the nature of the soul (‘The Soul’s Hereafter’ and ‘Stanzas’).¹¹⁵ Of the poems reviewed in *The Athenæum*, the selection made is from the first three of these categories and the examples of Skipsey’s “undoubtedly genuine poetry” (*Athenæum*, 1878: 618) Watts uses all come from Rossetti’s selection: ‘Thistle and Nettle’, ‘The Hartley Calamity’, and ““Get Up!””. Despite the “remarkable justness of mind [Rossetti found] in ‘The Soul’s Hereafter’” (Rossetti, 2009:168) or how much he “admire[d] the image evolved in the Stanzas” (Rossetti, 1878a: 4-5), that poems on speculative or imaginative subjects are ignored is illustrative of the limitations placed on a working-class poet. Skipsey himself notes this when

¹¹⁵ The one poem that resists this categorisation, ‘The Violet and the Rose’, is discussed in Chapter Seven.

complaining to Thomas Dixon on 10th December:

none of our Reviewers – not even *The Athenæum* – have given [a critique of...] the philosophical poems which occupy full one half of the book [...]. Of course some of these are colored [*sic*] by unpopular ethics [...], but surely one of the questions for a critic to decide is whether a poem is written with ability & if so I would ask if the pieces entitled *The Mystic Lyre*, *Omega*, *Music*, *Love Without Hope*, *'The Question_* [*sic*] *The Angel Mother*, *The Inner Conflict*, *The Hell Broth*, *The Reign of Gold*, *The Downfall of Mammon* &c have not the true lyric ring what poems in the English tongue have it? (Skipsey (I), 1878j: 1-2)

In the attribution of the criticism to 'our' reviewers, Skipsey credits Dixon's involvement in the promotion of *ML1878* as part-authorship and, in this, Dixon received a vicarious reward. Skipsey clearly felt the limitations placed on his poetry and his anger is demonstrated in the breakdown of his punctuation when listing the neglected poems. Yet, Skipsey only makes these comments after receiving similar sentiments from Rossetti on 4th December, "I felt a want in his article of a sentence [regarding...] the variety of the book's contents" (Rossetti, 1878b: 2-3), that give Skipsey the license to make these criticisms. Skipsey's frustration is indicative of the wider reception of working-class poets who are limited by expectation to describing their social existence; Skipsey must portray only "real-life subjects" (Rossetti, 2009: 200), "the life he knew" (Bunting, 1976: 14), or, as Jackson describes of working-class poets generally, his "subject matter is limited by locality" (Jackson, 2014: 13). In each of these instances, Skipsey is trapped within the hegemonic perception of his *habitus*.

Although *The Athenæum* review of *ML1878*, 16th November 1878, marked a watershed in Skipsey's career as a poet it was not his first in the journal, nor was he alone in being a working-class author to have "an article of full length" (Rossetti, 1878a: 1) dedicated to their poetry within its pages. Skipsey's *P1862* received a short, not altogether positive ("he is too often turgid and ambitious" (*Athenæum*, 1862: 401)), review on 27th September, 1862, and William Heaton had his *The Old Soldier, The Wandering Lover and Other Poems* (1857) warmly received, the "music may not

be of the newest, – but it *is* music” (*Athenæum*, 1858: 227), in an almost full-page review on 21st August, 1858.¹¹⁶ In comparing the two substantial reviews, there is a distinct similarity in the handling of two texts written by working-class poets. The review of Heaton’s work is almost entirely biographical, taken from the ‘sketch’ he provides of his life, and Watts dedicates over half a column of his three to reproducing direct from Skipsey’s ‘Preface’. In both reviews, significant use is made of the social, economic, cultural, and educational disadvantage the authors suffered, their deficiencies in all forms of capital, and the reviewers suggest that, despite this, there “is many a singer better born and better educated in the rank of the minor minstrels who could not make so pleasing” (*Athenæum*, 1858: 227) poetry. It would appear neither reviewer is prepared to read the poetry without the mediation of the preface and, as Brian Maidment has argued, “middle-class interest was primarily *biographical* rather than literary” (Maidment, 1987: 17). This specific interest is verified in the editor’s placement of Skipsey’s review between those of two sociological studies: *Analysis of English History, based on Green’s Short History of the English People* by C.W.A. Tait, and *Russian and Turk from a Geographical, Ethnological, and Historical Point of View* by R.G. Latham. Yet, there is more depth to Watt’s review than just a biographical or sociological reading of Skipsey’s poetry.

The extent to which Rossetti contributed to this review has not been investigated beyond the brief comments by the editors of *TCDGR* who note Rossetti assisted “in preparing a review article on Skipsey’s poems” (Rossetti, 2009: 206ⁿ), or that it was with “much assistance from DGR [...], TWD [Theodore Watts-Dunton] reviewed the book in *The Athenæum*” (Rossetti, 2009: 168ⁿ). The assistance mentioned, however, appears somewhat euphemistic when considering the review alongside the comments Rossetti made about Skipsey’s poems in his correspondence. Instead, it becomes apparent that there are sufficient similar views expressed in the review itself to question its authorship. Whether the editors of *TCDGR* were being generous when referring to Rossetti’s

¹¹⁶ *RKRTB* attributes this anonymous review of *P1862* to dramatist John Marston (1819-90).

assistance or just unaware of the extent to which Rossetti contributed is unclear, but to say Watts' opinions were 'coloured' by Rossetti's would seem an understatement.

The correspondence from Rossetti to Watts immediately prior to the publication of this review illustrates the extent of Rossetti's input. On 13th November, Rossetti advises Watts he has received the proofs of the review and found "many misprints" (Rossetti, 2009: 200) which he corrected and sent to the printers. Additionally, Rossetti states he "introduced a few words (as I said I meant to do) in the 'Thistle and Nettle'" (Rossetti, 2009: 201), the 'few words' amounting to 118, and the suggestion of a number of stanzas to be used as examples. The following day, Rossetti writes to Watts again giving instances of "bad punctuation which should be corrected" (Rossetti, 2009: 205) and further suggests "one very vivid stanza characterizing pit-work [...] from the Hartley Calamity[,] the one beginning [']On, on they toil[']" (Rossetti, 2009: 205). The published review reproduced all of Rossetti's suggestions, exactly as advised, and constitute the final third of the review. Rossetti's influence, however, was not limited to these insertions.

The review itself opens with a mini-treatise on the nature of the poet and poetry, in which Watts finds poetry functions in two ways that either reveals "the poet's soul [...or] truly paints the external world" (*Athenæum*, 1878: 618). Contiguous to this, Rossetti finds glimpses of Skipsey's soul revealed in the "deep pathos" (Rossetti, 1878a: 2) or the "pathetic force" (Rossetti, 1878a: 4) of "'Get Up!'", finds him painting true pictures of the 'external world' in both the "real-life poems" (Rossetti, 2009: 171) and in declaring Skipsey "a poet of the people who describes what he knows and mixes in" (Rossetti, 1878a: 2). After revealing the nature of poetry, Watts pronounces that, to be considered a poet, one must possess "the gift of speaking the truth" (*Athenæum*, 1878: 618); he finds convincing evidence of this precious gift in Skipsey's demonstration of "so masculine an intellect and so true an insight" (*Athenæum*, 1878: 619). Rossetti's position again corresponds to Watts' in his comments that Skipsey has "remarkable justness of mind" (Rossetti, 2009:168) or "such unhesitating justness of view" (Rossetti, 1878a: 5). When Watts finds *ML1878* "full of imperfect

workmanship and [...] mannerisms which surprise at first and vex [...] at last [...] but his] claim to attention cannot be passed by" (*Athenæum*, 1878: 619), the artistic merit Watts finds among the technical difficulties confirms Rossetti's verdict that "Stanzas similarly rhymed are apt to follow each other, & the metre is [...] often filled out by catching up a word in repetition [but the want...] is of artistic finish only, not of artistic tendency" (Rossetti, 1878a: 3). And finally, when Watts finds "'Get Up!'" to be an example to modern poets of "the way to write everything" (*Athenæum*, 1878: 619), he merely impersonates Rossetti advice that Skipsey should "take the verbal perfection of [...] 'Get Up' [*sic*] as an example to yourself, and try never to fall short of this standard, where not a word is lost or wanting" (Rossetti, 1878a: 4). Rossetti not only suggested the poems to which Watts should direct his attention, he clearly exerted a significant influence over this review and how Skipsey's poetry was received by the poetry-reading public.

While Dante Rossetti was able to shape the presentation of Skipsey's poetry to a wider literary audience, he also utilised his social networks to make others aware of him. Having additional copies of *ML1878* to distribute among friends it is implausible that he did not introduce others, as he did Lady Catherine Milnes Gaskell (1856-1935), to the review:

I don't know if you see *The Athenæum*. There is a review this week of some Poems by a Coal Miner, many of which (those bearing on real life) are quite remarkable. I have some knowledge (by correspondence) of the writer & gave Mrs [Georgina Cowper-] Temple a copy of his book. (Rossetti, 2009: 209)

Not only does Rossetti point Gaskell toward Skipsey's poetry, he also makes sure she is aware of other individuals in possession of the text. This review brought Skipsey to the cultural centre and a specific literary elite in a manner of Rossetti's fashioning. In doing so, Rossetti attempts to create trend-based demand: 'if Mrs Temple owns a copy, then I must have one too'. The reception was more than positive.

Rossetti reported to Dixon that the review had "excited great attention & interest" (Rossetti,

2009: 204), and Skipsey described, somewhat prosaically, the regional reaction: “I am delighted as a matter of course & so are many of my old Newcastle well-wishers with *The Athenæum* article” (Skipsey (I), 1878h: 1). Dixon was more effusive, telling Rossetti he was “as glad as [a] soul could be to see the article” (Dixon, 1878g: 1) and that Skipsey had been “full of joy and hearty spirits on the notice” (Dixon, 1878g: 2). The hopes, encouragement, and enthusiasm expressed by all parties, however, is perpetually undercut with doubt as to the pecuniary impact the review might have. Even before the review appeared, Dixon seemed doubtful as to whether *ML1878* would sell; instead, Dixon gave over to “hope and trust he may dispose of the 500 copies of his poems” (Dixon, 1878c: 2), and Rossetti advised patience while repeatedly communicating his hope sales would succeed:

I do trust that this book may succeed so as to improve your position permanently. This of course is not to be done in a moment as no one will feel better than one so clear-headed as yourself: but it may be a firm first step to that end.¹¹⁷ (Rossetti, 1878a: 6)

Rossetti was correct in his assertion that the publication of *ML1878* might ‘be a firm step’ to improving Skipsey’s ‘position permanently’ and that it would “not be done in a moment” (Rossetti, 1878a: 6). Despite the positive reception *The Athenæum* review received, “not much [was] felt in the way of sale[s]” (Skipsey (I), 1878j: 1).¹¹⁸ While *The Athenæum* review helped to raise his profile, its primary purpose was to boost sales; local and national economic conditions, however, seemed to conspire against Skipsey.

As the pace of progress of the Industrial Revolution slowed in the second half of the nineteenth century, world economies slowed and there began a global recession (the Long Depression, 1873-96); as might be expected the coal industry was severely affected. Dixon described to Rossetti the conditions within his region when advising sales were “very slow, through the

¹¹⁷ Rossetti writes to Skipsey on 16th November and 4th December enquiring about sales; on 16th November, Rossetti hopes *ML1878* will be “asked for at Mudie’s Library” (Rossetti, 2009: 207).

¹¹⁸ Following a letter from Dixon (3rd October) Rossetti replies the following day. However, *TCDGR* includes three letters Rossetti sent to Dixon in quick succession (8th October and twice on 12th October) the contents of which suggest (at least two) letters from Dixon are lost.

distress among the miners, many of them are out of work, whilst others are working 2 to 3 days per week” (Dixon, 1878e: 1). Skipsey made the same connection, as Dixon revealed: “Mr. S. spent last night with me, and he feels that this depression is the sole cause of the poor sales” (Dixon, 1878e: 1-2). While Dixon gave specifics of the local economic conditions, Skipsey wrote more generally to Rossetti in finding “the times [...] too hard [for] doing much in the way of sales” (Skipsey (I), 1878h: 2). Unemployment and short-working would certainly dampen one’s appetite for poetry. Despite Dixon stating it was Skipsey’s opinion that economic depression was the ‘sole reason’ for the lack of sales, Skipsey rationalised the situation differently, pointing instead to the lack of a London publisher:

The reason of this [lack of sales] I imagine is the want of a central pub. _ a pub. who could have sent out copies to the various booksellers both in the large towns & Small ones Many you will quite understand would buy a book if they had it put into their hands or saw it lying on a book stall that would not take the trouble to write for it. (Skipsey (I), 1878j: 1)

To Skipsey, writing to Bedlington to obtain a copy of his poems was a trouble too far for a reader with a passing interest piqued by a favourable review.

In this assertion, Skipsey is probably correct and it is, in turn, emblematic of the struggle a writer, working class or otherwise, faces in being located away from the cultural centre. Yet, at a point when economic capital was in short supply, possessing considerable cultural and social capital proved ineffective, as Rossetti wrote:

I wish I could see my way (& Mr Watts wishes the same) to finding a publisher for the poems in these very worst of times [...] but must assure you that just now it would be impracticable even from men of name to induce publishers to look at poetry. (Rossetti, 2009: 373)

Rossetti’s inability to ‘induce publishers’, however, points to a wider context regarding the saleability of poetry, as does his view, in an unpublished letter (Appendix Six), in which he states, that “being a true poet under difficulties is in the nature of poetry to account for” (Rossetti, 1878b:

1-2), or, as Thomas Dixon himself lamented: “how many persons are there that really buy books of poetry?” (Dixon, 1878d: 2). Ultimately, even in the best of economic conditions, Skipsey, a self-published poet on the nation’s periphery, faced a challenge to be noticed at all let alone be received so positively by a figure like Dante Rossetti.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Biographical silence and control

7.1 Skipsey and the 'influence' of William Blake

The lives of working-class individuals are stories rarely told. The Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiographies, the main repository for such documents, holds over 230 autobiographies of individuals who were “working class for at least part of their lives[, who...] wrote in English[, and lived...] in England, Scotland or Wales between 1790 and 1945” (Brunel University, 2014), and of the entries on Goodridge’s ‘Database of British and Irish Labouring-Class Poets and Poetry, 1700-1900’, only 54 refer to an autobiography, many of which are prefaces similar to that included in *ML1878*, even fewer (31) refer to a biography.¹¹⁹ Clearly, when writing any life narrative, conscious choices are made about what to include, emphasise, or exclude about an individual’s life. These choices represent a negotiated process that can lead to questions surrounding authorial objectivity. In the case of biographical work, objectivity informs the position the biographer takes, and to what extent their subject is “given [an] heroic presence in the [...] dramatic organization” (Batchelor, 1995: 3) of the text shapes that objectivity as it does the selection of material. Furthermore, prevailing fashions and overarching concerns can affect the revelations a biographer makes and, often more revealingly, what is omitted. In the case of the nineteenth-century working classes, Juliette Atkinson argues in *Victorian Biography Reconsidered* (2010), there was a tendency to “stress the subject’s contentedness of mind” (Atkinson, 2010: 29) even where this was not necessarily the case. Where Dante Rossetti controlled the reception of Joseph Skipsey in 1878, following Skipsey’s death Robert Spence Watson has shaped, almost exclusively, the posthumous reputation of his biographical

¹¹⁹ The Burnett Archive, held at Brunel University, is based on the research collected by James Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, for the three-volume annotated bibliography *The Autobiography of the Working Class* (1984-89).

subject.

While an element of championing is to be expected in a biography, the opening pages of *Joseph Skipsey: His Life and Work* immediately bring into question Spence Watson's objectivity. This is something Spence Watson himself recognises when, in addressing the life of a "close friend" (*RSWB*: 7), he states it is possible that "the affection and esteem with which [he] regarded him may [have led...] him to estimate [Skipsey] somewhat more highly than [he] ought to" (*RSWB*: 7). When Spence Watson outlines his ambition for *RSWB*, he pushes authorial objectivity beyond view: "I am not content [Skipsey] should become a mere memory without giving those of his countrymen [...] the opportunity of knowing who he was and what he did" (*RSWB*: 7). In examining significant omissions from *RSWB*, the first section of this chapter establishes for the first time how and why Spence Watson controls the information surrounding Skipsey, and, with particular reference to William Blake, how omissions have provided an unstable foundation upon which subsequent criticism rests. The second section further examines correspondence from Thomas Dixon to Dante Rossetti that reveals a new interpretation of Skipsey's poetry, fundamentally transforming him from a representative of his industry and class to a poet writing from a deeply personal perspective.

As argued in relation to the Royal Literary Fund in Chapter Three, socially marginalised individuals only become visible when they interact with official bodies or those in possession of superior forms of cultural and social capital. It is only at this point of intersection that hidden lives become visible and 'lost' voices become heard; it is in this coming together, the creation of the biography written by Spence Watson, Joseph Skipsey is found. In the absence of diaries or an autobiography, and despite his own concerns about objectivity, Spence Watson's has become the authoritative account of Skipsey's life. Spence Watson effectively curates and controls Skipsey's position within literary culture. Backed by the clear imbalance in cultural capital, and sustained by a 'middle-class saviour narrative', Spence Watson's "inadequate idea" (*RSWB*: 8) has become an unquestioned orthodoxy. This orthodoxy has shaped wider perceptions of Skipsey in line with

Spence Watson's opinions and, significantly, his prejudices.

The curation of Skipsey's life in this manner, and the orthodoxies emerging from it, is crystallised when one considers the omissions Spence Watson chose to make when reproducing the single most important letter Skipsey received in terms of his literary reputation, the one item (as I argue in Chapter Six) symbolising the "acceptation of [his] country" (Skipsey (I), 1871: 7-8). Although *RSWB* provides the basis of Skipsey's posthumous reputation, without receiving this letter from Rossetti it seems doubtful the biography would have been written at all; it is foundational to Skipsey's reputation as one of the few working-class writers "taken up by a literary circle" (Vicinus, 1974: 169). In reproducing the letter, however, Spence Watson excluded the whole of the first and the last two and a half pages from *RSWB*:

16 Cheyne Walk

Chelsea

29 Oct: 1878

My dear Sir

I much esteem such a little as you have written me. I believe I may now safely tell you (as I wrote to Dixon yesterday) that a friend of mine – a very influential critic – is engaged on a review of your Lyrics which will appear in the *Athenæum* – I suppose either this week or next. It will not be a mere article, but an article of full length. I believe I may now state this as a certainty, & hope heartily that your book may benefit as it deserves.

[....]¹²⁰

"The Violet & the Rose" I think very perfect, & a singular instance of exact resemblance to a charming clap of Blake's work.

I greatly admire the image evolved in the Stanzas at page 25.

Among the poems of aspiration, the one which appears to me greatly the finest in expression & value is "The Soul's Hereafter". How could one speak on such a subject with such unhesitating justness of view.

I am glad indeed if any word of appreciation on my part can give you pleasure, but would not advise you to use such in a public way, on account of the malignity of literary cabals. I

¹²⁰ This section is reproduced in *RSWB* (53-4).

am conscientious in saying this.

I do trust that this book may succeed so as to improve your position permanently. This of course is not to be done in a moment as no one will feel better than one so clear-headed as yourself: but it may be a firm first step to that end.

With best wishes for the welfare of you and those dear to you,

I am yours sincerely

D G Rossetti

Mr Joseph Skipsey¹²¹

(Rossetti, 1878a: 1, 4-6)

In choosing to omit this material specifically, material in which Rossetti encourages, cautions, and praises Skipsey further, Spence Watson has created notable absences. This proves an alternative form of archival silence where a consciously created absence has become convention, validated as it is by Spence Watson's superior forms of capital. The archive as a form of cultural memory, of which *RSWB* is part, is distorted as a result of disparities in capital and parity only achieved when looking beyond the biography and to the source material. Scholarship to date has been shaped by this single fragment of a letter, which results in a very specific depiction of Rossetti's response to Skipsey's poetry. Therefore, that Rossetti found 'Mother Wept' "very striking" (Rossetti, 1878a: 3) or "'Get Up!'" being "equal to anything in the language" (Rossetti, 1878a: 4) are the only perspectives available. As a result, these phrases become those within which Skipsey is constrained, those repeated by Vicinus (1974: 60), Bunting (1976: 12), and most subsequent writings, with each having in common the one fragmentary source.

In editing, curating, and censoring Skipsey's life in this manner, Spence Watson controls and limits the critical boundaries within which Skipsey can be considered, and an imbalance in the foundational knowledge surrounding Skipsey is manufactured. Rather than being left with a more accurate representation of Skipsey and Rossetti's relationship, what remains is an image skewed away from the working-class writer and, along power-relational lines, toward the superiority

¹²¹ RKRTB (2014: 38-9) prints the letter in full, but makes no comment on its incompleteness within *RSWB*.

attributed to the bourgeoisie. The reader can only perceive the image from Spence Watson's perspective, unable to comprehend the absences, unable to see the imbalance created. It is only in the underpinning of knowledge, through the filling out of spaces, that the relationship can be viewed as one based on equality. In the process of underpinning, the foundational knowledge is filled out and a different image is presented. As such, to use Spence Watson's term, subsequent writings that draw conclusions based on this letter as it exists in *RSWB* cannot be considered "sound criticism" (*RSWB*: 92). The omissions are significant and, in their absence, critical thinking surrounding the relationship between Rossetti and Skipsey is affected to such an extent Bernard Richards interpreted their meeting as Skipsey "hob-nobbing with the Pre-Raphaelites" (Richards, 1988: 59). New research presented in this chapter establishes these omissions and this new archival evidence shows Skipsey and Rossetti on a more equal footing than hitherto presented by Spence Watson.

While some flexibility can be afforded Spence Watson in terms of omissions enforced by editing, and the first page probably falls into this category, why the latter section is omitted seems more nuanced and the impact more varied. It would appear Spence Watson has two separate motivations in omitting the latter section: politeness and prejudice. In taking politeness first, Spence Watson omits Rossetti's reticence (discussed in Chapter Three) at Skipsey using his name 'in a public way' either as a symbol of acceptance or testimonial. This placing of an informal embargo on Skipsey using Rossetti's name seems to deny him the full value of the social and cultural capital available from being linked with him, but, following the artist's death, Skipsey did use Rossetti's name 'in a public way' in the 'Opinions of the Press' in both *CSB*1888 and *S&L*1892.¹²² Spence Watson's exclusion of Rossetti's embargo, 27 years after Rossetti died and six after Skipsey, protects Skipsey from accusations of having failed to comply with Rossetti's wishes. In the, effective, extension of Rossetti's embargo Spence Watson reveals one of the concerns, Juliette Atkinson argues,

¹²² The earliest published reference I have found connecting Rossetti to Skipsey is in Hall Caine's *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1882), where Caine reproduces "a pleasant piece of literary portraiture" (Caine, 1882: 197) in which Rossetti relayed his opinion of Skipsey. This letter is discussed in detail in Chapter Eight.

biographers felt during this period, that they were bringing “private matters to public light” (Atkinson, 2010: 24). In a sense, Spence Watson himself defers to Rossetti’s wishes and, as a result, this withholding of information also affects knowledge surrounding Rossetti. The editors of *TCDGR* comment that, by late 1879, Rossetti “habitually informed any seeker after his influence that his name would do more harm than good” (Rossetti, 2009: 349ⁿ); in the revelation of the excluded sections of this letter, it is clear Rossetti began advising of this as early as 1878.¹²³

In the omission of the praise Rossetti gives to three of Skipsey’s poems (‘The Violet and the Rose’, ‘The Stanzas’, and ‘The Soul’s Hereafter’), two interlinked prejudices come to the fore. Spence Watson makes clear, in *RSWB*, his cynicism toward spiritualism and Skipsey’s supposed abilities as a medium. Indeed, it is something repressed within their relationship: “From time to time we discussed points relating to seership and to Spiritualism, but as we did not agree in our views upon the matter, we gradually ceased to do this” (*RSWB*: 78) and after attending a séance together, Skipsey never again “mentioned Spiritualism” (*RSWB*: 79) to Spence Watson. Because of this scepticism and the resultant repression, that Rossetti found merit in Skipsey’s “poems of aspiration” (Rossetti, 1878a: 5) such as ‘The Soul’s Hereafter’, which opens as an elucidation of spiritualism: “DIES not the soul when dust to dust is given” (*ML*1878, 131: l. 1), is hidden. Yet, it is in the absence of the appreciation of ‘The Violet and the Rose’, the poem Rossetti lauded most highly in comparing it to William Blake, that control exerted on the basis of Spence Watson’s prejudice is most clearly demonstrated.

Spence Watson neither appreciated Blake’s poetry nor did he approve of his popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century and, in disallowing Skipsey this connection to Blake, he shifts Skipsey’s reputation to correspond with his own predilections. In doing so, although Rossetti finds a “singular instance of exact resemblance to a charming clap of Blake’s work” (Rossetti, 1878a: 4),

¹²³ On 2nd October 1879, Rossetti refused a testimonial request from Hall Caine for a position at the Council for the Promotion of Social Science, stating he did not know “even one member of the Committee” (Rossetti, 2009: 348).

Spence Watson removes this view from criticism surrounding Skipsey, Rossetti, and even Blake. In *RSWB*, however, Spence Watson disputes the comparison:

It was often said in the critical notices of Skipsey's poems which appeared from time to time during his lifetime that he reminded the writers of Blake. I cannot think that this is a sound criticism [....] Blake had no great influence upon Skipsey. There has of late years sprung up a Blake cult which I do not think is altogether a genuine growth. (*RSWB*: 92-3)

Spence Watson objects further in stating that:

Blake is simple and direct, or mystical and remote. Skipsey also is simple and direct, and there are a few poems, amongst those which he published in early middle life, which are tinged with mysticism, but it is a mysticism which I do not think in any way recalls that of Blake. (*RSWB*: 92)

Although I agree that Blake was not necessarily a 'great influence on Skipsey', Spence Watson's reasoning appears incorrect. Rather than an absence of Blake's particular form of mysticism casting doubt on his great influence over Skipsey, it is, instead, probability.

There are undoubted similarities between the styles of Skipsey and William Blake, there is, as Oscar Wilde found, a "metrical affinity [and a...] marvellous power of making simple things seem strange to us, and strange things seem simple" (Wilde, 1887: 5) in both, and in this simplicity and this directness there seems sufficient evidence to state, as Vicinus does in reviewing Maidment's *The Poorhouse Fugitives*, Skipsey "clearly knew Blake" (Vicinus, 1988: 496). This view is reinforced when examining 'The Violet and the Rose', the poem in which Rossetti finds an "exact resemblance to a charming clap of Blake's work" (Rossetti, 1878a: 4):

The Violet invited my kiss,—
I kiss'd it and call'd it my bride;
"Was ever one slighted like this?"
Sighed the Rose as it stood by my side.

My heart ever open to grief,
To comfort the fair one I turned;

“Of fickle ones thou art the chief!”
Frown'd the Violet, and pouted and mourned.

Then to end all disputes, I entwined
The love-stricken blossoms in one;
But that instant their beauty declined,
And I wept for the deed I had done! (ML1878: 35)

With its three-quatrains verse form and a *volta* that acts as a fulcrum at the poem's centre, the structure Skipsey utilises here is similar to that which Blake employs in 'The Clod and the Pebble' (Blake, 2000: 80-1). However, in comparing 'The Violet and the Rose' to Blake's 'The Sick Rose' and 'My Pretty Rose Tree', from *Songs of Experience* (1794), further similarities are revealed.

The superficial similarity in the use of roses is clear, but the likenesses do not end there. In all three pieces the poet disrupts and subverts pastoral imagery in their personification of flowers to explore illicit love and jealousy. From the outset Skipsey, foreshadowing *fin-de-siècle* decadence, looks to the corrupting power of a kiss and so undermines the connotations associated with the violet.¹²⁴ Traditionally symbolising “faithfulness” or “modesty” (Greenaway, 1884: 42), Skipsey's Violet transgresses these ideals in inviting a kiss from the narrator, an invitation greedily accepted and taken to its carnal conclusion in the euphemistic “call'd it my bride” (l. 2). The Rose's reaction matches that of Blake's 'My Pretty Rose-Tree' whose jealousy attracts the speaker's affections and attentions, but where Blake's Rose-Tree turns away from the tending “by day and by night” (l. 6), Skipsey's Rose accepts the speaker's euphemistic “comfort” (l. 6). In both 'My Pretty Rose-Tree' and 'The Violet and the Rose', the conclusion to heightened sexual actions and emotions is the removal of beauty from the speaker's life; one left with thorns, the other tears. In transposing 'The Violet and the Rose' onto 'The Sick Rose', however, both Skipsey's Violet and his speaker could be seen as the embodiment of the poisonous influence of Blake's “invisible worm” (l. 2) whose finding out of Rose's “bed/ of crimson joy” (ll. 5-6) has the same pernicious effect on the Rose in both poems. In

¹²⁴ One is reminded of Wilde's 'Ballad of Reading Gaol': “each man kills the thing he loves [...] The coward does it with a kiss” (Wilde, 1991: 841, l. 37, 41), or Ernest Dowson's 'Nom sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae'.

all three poems, however, the overriding theme is the loss of innocence. In each instance, the rose as a symbol of purity and love, is corrupted by the more worldly powers of lust and jealousy and, infected by their influence, innocence is lost and beauty destroyed.

Further similarities with Blake's poetry can be found in 'Mother Wept', where Skipsey seemingly takes the opening lines of Blake's 'Infant Sorrow': "My mother groaned, my father wept!/ Into the dangerous world I leapt" (Blake, 2000: 87, ll. 1-2), to give the couplet an environment within which it can grow.¹²⁵ Skipsey produces a rite of passage that juxtaposes parental fear with the joy of a lad about to enter the coalmine for the first time:

MOTHER wept, and father sighed;
With delight a-glow
Cried the lad, "to-morrow," cried,
"To the pit I go."

Up and down the place he sped,
Greeted old and young,
Far and wide the tidings spread,
Clapt his hands and sung.

Came his cronies, some to gaze
Wrapt in wonder; some
Free with counsel; some with praise;
Some with envy dumb.

"May he," many a gossip cried,
"Be from peril kept;"
Father hid his voice [*sic*] and sighed.¹²⁶
Mother turned and wept.

(ML1878: 119)

Where Blake describes the distress, pain, and anguish associated with childbirth and the "Striving against my swaddling bands" (l. 6) of subsequent strictures placed on the child by social necessity,

¹²⁵ Ernest Rhys in his autobiography *Everyman Remembers* (1931) notes that 'Mother Wept' "may remind you of a song by [...] William Blake, called 'Infant Sorrow' (Rhys, 1931: 225).

¹²⁶ The use of 'voice' here should read 'face' and is listed as 'Errata' in ML1878. I have retained 'voice' as the error illustrates Skipsey's lack of access to an experienced editor. Retaining 'voice' also changes the reading of the poem in that, although the father does not turn away from his son, he remains unable to vocalize his fears as his words are hidden by the sigh.

Skipsey looks to another birth, of sorts, where the child passes into adulthood and the sphere of economic activity. Again, both explore the loss of innocence, this time enforced by economic necessity. Keegan and Goodridge recognise this comparison between ‘Mother Wept’ and ‘Infant Sorrow’ finding, in the contrast between Skipsey’s joyful ‘lad’ and the parenthetical solemnity of the adults, an ambiguity that questions the overriding parental emotion: are they fearful for his wellbeing as he prepares to confront the ‘peril’ of pit-life, or are they relieved he will now be able to “bring home the money that such a family would desperately need” (Keegan, 2013: 238)? Yet, in the weeping Mother and the sighing father there is, like in Blake’s criticisms of child labour in ‘The Chimney Sweep’ or poverty in ‘Holy Thursday’, the revelation of the middle-class complicity in creating the dangerous conditions into which the ‘lad’ is to be plunged. The juxtaposition of joy and fear in ‘Mother Wept’ becomes a microcosm of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794).

While Skipsey clearly had knowledge of Blake’s poetry by the time he came to edit and introduce *The Poems, with Specimens of the Prose Writings, of William Blake*, his correspondence with Dixon and Rossetti makes it less clear that Skipsey “knew Blake” (Vicus, 1988: 496) when writing much of his poetry. Blake’s work was not well known within his own lifetime and his nineteenth-century reputation prior to the 1860s was that of a psychological and mystical oddity, and it was only in his ‘discovery’ by the Pre-Raphaelites his eminence grew. The early twentieth-century “Blake cult” (RSWB: 92), to which Spence Watson refers, was based specifically around the final of the “three dominant nineteenth-century studies of Blake” (Dent, 2000: 2): Gilchrist’s *The Life of William Blake, ‘Pictor Ignotus’* (1863), Swinburne’s ‘William Blake: a critical essay’ (1868), and Edwin John Ellis and W.B. Yeats’ *The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic and Critical* (1893).¹²⁷ In other words, nineteenth-century interest in Blake was initiated by Gilchrist, enhanced by Swinburne, and, according to Bruce Woodcock, “reached a wider audience in the late nineteenth century after W.B. Yeats’ inaccurate but enthusiastic selected edition” (Woodcock, 2000: xiv).

¹²⁷ *Pictor Ignotus*, Latin for ‘Painter Unknown’, is borrowed from the title of Browning’s dramatic monologue.

Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, instigated, as Shirley Dent describes in her PhD thesis on the reception of Blake between the 1860s and 1880s, a nineteenth-century "blossoming of interest" (Dent, 2000: 2) in Blake with the creation of a "Pre-Raphaelite Blake" (Dent, 2000: 2). As might be expected, the two volumes of Gilchrist's work were not aimed at a working-class, or even general, readership, as the *Reader* (7th November, 1863) made explicit:

These are no everyday volumes, they have a high beauty, both substantial and artistic – are fit for a place of honour on the drawing-room table and on the library shelf. Those [...] who form the bulk of the 'reading public' will, perhaps, not care for them much, but they will find their own public, and the name and genius of William Blake will, by their help, become known to thousands, and no longer remain as the almost private treasure of a small and scattered band of enthusiasts. (cited in Dent, 2000: 4-5)

In the hands of an *avant-garde*, that 'small band of enthusiasts', with significant social capital Blake's name did spread and *Pictor Ignotus* was raised out of obscurity.

At mid-century, Blake's art and poetry was only accessible to literary elites, Thomas Dixon being a notable exception. Martha Vicinus' study of the literary achievements of the nineteenth-century working class, *The Industrial Muse*, makes no mention of Blake being influential among working-class authors in the period, instead pointing to Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, and Shelley as sources of inspiration. The earliest reference Jonathan Rose makes to Blake in his examination of nineteenth and twentieth-century reading habits, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001), relates to a study of Board School textbooks between 1888 and 1912 and Goodridge's database mentions Blake in just three entries.¹²⁸ The major studies of nineteenth-century working-

¹²⁸ The Reading Experience Database, which records the experience of reading in Britain between 1450 and 1945, lists just William Wordsworth and Elizabeth Gaskell as readers of Blake before Skipsey's association with Rossetti. Goodridge's database includes an entry for William Blake, who is further mentioned in Joseph Skipsey's entry and in the entry of William Linton (1812-97), a Chartist and engraver who worked on both volumes of Gilchrist's work. In *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring Class Poets: 1860-1900*, Blake is only mentioned in relation to Skipsey.

class authorship and cultural life show no evidence of Blake having been a significant influence at this point in the century and, taking into consideration the 'cultural lag' Rose describes, it is unlikely Skipsey had sufficient or early enough access to be significantly influenced by Blake; ironically, Skipsey's editorship of a 1s edition of Blake's work that was marketed at a mass audience, made Blake more accessible to working-class audiences.

Instead, the documentary evidence remaining in the correspondence between Skipsey, Dixon, and Rossetti, illustrates Skipsey had little or no access to Blake's work and, therefore, the extent that Blake influenced Skipsey directly is questionable. On October 3rd 1878, Dixon writes to Dante Rossetti that he has "promised [...to give Skipsey] a copy of Blake's Poems edited by your brother [William Rossetti]" (Dixon, 1878c: 1) and, as we have seen, Rossetti sent Skipsey a copy of Gilchrist's work, which was appreciatively received:

I cannot allow this good Sunday morning to pass away without my taking up the pen & thanking you for the handsome gift [...] Blake's name has been long familiar to me although of the man & his works I have been able to learn little – too little to enable me to form an adequate idea of their real character & merits. I have you to thank you [*sic*] for the gift which no longer leaves me in this position. (Skipsey (I), 1878c: 1)

In stating that he was 'long familiar' with 'Blake's name', Skipsey demonstrates to Rossetti he is worthy of such a valuable gift while making it clear he has not had significant exposure to Blake. Additionally, the chronology of the authorship of much of Skipsey's poetry compared to Blake's pre-dates these acquaintances. 'The Violet and the Rose', for example, was written while Skipsey was "working as a common miner at Pemberton's Colliery" (Skipsey, 1879b: 2) near Sunderland and was first published in 1858, 'Mother Wept' and "'Get Up!'" first appeared in 1871.

Rather than seeing Blake as an influence on Skipsey, however, I would suggest they share a common heritage. In all four poems discussed here, the poet concerns himself with the loss of innocence, which, ultimately, suggests a shared influence on both writers. In his interview with *The*

Pall Mall Gazette, Skipsey revealed that, at the age of fifteen, he borrowed a copy of John Milton's (1608-74) *Paradise Lost* (1667) from an uncle; Goodridge recognises the typical image of a "self-taught labouring-class poet borrowing a copy of Milton or Burns from some kindly friend or neighbour, and studying it in the odd moments snatched from work or into the night [as] a familiar one" (Goodridge, 2006: 325). Despite his uncle's reservations that he would "nivor be able to understand [*Paradise Lost*,... Joseph] was entranced [...he] thought of nothing else night or day, and [...] accepted the book as a narrative of fact" (*PMG*: 2). With such a powerful reaction to Milton's own examination of the loss of innocence, it is impossible Skipsey would not be deeply influenced by the "greatest long poem in English" (Jefferson, 2006: 39). Blake was clearly inspired by Milton and, as the poet Tom Paulin suggests, 'The Sick Rose' can be read as "a version of *Paradise Lost* in eight very short lines" (Paulin, 2007). Indeed, 'The Violet and the Rose', 'The Sick Rose', and 'My Pretty Rose Tree' all envision innocence and what Blake conceptualises as "Heaven in a wild flower" ('Auguries of Innocence', Blake, 2000: 135, l.2), the loss and corruption of which, as in *Paradise Lost*, is irreversible.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton uses his expansion of the Book of Genesis in an attempt to "justify the ways of God to men" (Milton, 2005: Book I, l.6) and to come to terms with the Restoration and his nation's failure to free itself from the tyranny of monarchy.¹²⁹ To Milton, the collapse of the Republic was itself a loss of Eden and in each of the poems by Skipsey and Blake discussed here, the reader is presented with an Edenic world at the point at which Satan tempts Eve. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton mentions violets twice and, in both instances, the flower can be seen to be associated with Satan or representative of The Fall. In Book IV the prelapsarian violet is found "underfoot" (IV: 698), much like a serpent or Blake's "invisible worm" (l.2), contrasted against the valorous roses proudly revelling in their own beauty "Rear[ing...] high their flourished heads" (IV: 697); in Book IX "Violets",

¹²⁹ All subsequent references to *Paradise Lost* are from this edition and are noted as book followed by line number; as such, this reference would read (I: 6).

"Pansies", and "Asphodels" (IX: 1040) form "the couch" (IX: 1039) upon which Adam and Eve's "amorous play" (IX: 1045) consummates the Fall when they "mutual[ly] guilt the seal,/ [with] The Solace of their sin" (IX: 1039-40). Instead of the faithful violet of tradition, Skipsey uses the Miltonic violet to undercut pastoral associations and produce a symbol of temptation. The speaker in 'The Violet and The Rose' submits to the inducement of the corrupting kiss and, in the euphemistic "call'd it my bride" (l.2), consumes the carnal fruit. Rather than undergoing the traditional process of 'making' the Violet 'his bride', the 'call'd' dispenses with the ceremonial necessities and, in the action of naming, the speaker consummates their non-marriage.

In *Paradise Lost*, The Fall does not occur when Eve is tempted by Satan but instead when "Adam took no thought,/ [in] Eating his fill" (IX: 1004-5) from the "virtuous tree" (IX: 1033), and it is not until Skipsey's Rose accepts the speaker's "comfort" (l. 6) innocence is lost.¹³⁰ The Violet, already established as lacking virtue, represents Eve, while the Rose, with its symbolic purity intact, represents Adam. However, as is the case with Blake's 'Sick Rose', particularly when observing his accompanying illustration, the symbolic weight of purity drags the flower's head down almost to the level of the prelapsarian, Miltonic violet to invite the accusatory pronouncement: "O Rose, thou art sick!" (l. 1). The 'comfort' Skipsey's and Blake's Roses feel is that of the phallic 'invisible worm' finding out of their "bed/ Of crimson joy" (l. 5-6); a parasitic force that destroys its host with an unknown, sexually transmitted, pathogen. Blake's "invisible worm/ That flies in the night/ In the howling storm" (ll. 2-4) becomes Milton's Satan, "that falseworm" (IX: 1068) who:

In meditated fraud and malice bent
[...]
By night he fled and at midnight returned
From encompassing the Earth, cautious of day
[...he] by stealth

¹³⁰ In the Biblical account of Creation and in *Paradise Lost*, God prohibits Adam from eating "from the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:17) (cf. *PL*, VIII: 317-33), before the creation of Eve. In neither account does Eve explicitly receive the prohibition from God, instead it is implied that Adam forbade Eve. The Fall comes, therefore, not when Eve defies Adam, but when Adam defies God's instruction and the: "Sky lowered and mutt'ring thunder some sad drops/ Wept at completing of the mortal sin/ Original" (*PL*, IX: 1002-4).

Found unsuspected way [into Eden].

(IX: 55, 58-9, 68-9)

In this passage, Satan flies around the Earth for seven nights in a 'howling storm' of his own enraged 'fraud and malice' looking for a route into Eden, keeping within the dark side of the planet in order to remain 'invisible' and avoid detection by "the cherubim/ That kept their watch" (IX: 61-2). Upon gaining entrance to Eden, Satan, while in the body of the worm-like serpent, discovers Eve alone in her 'bed/ Of crimson joy'; here, however, the bed is not that of a dangerously luxurious sexual encounter. Instead, Satan finds Eve in a flowerbed of 'crimson joy' with "thick [...] roses bushing round/ About her" (IX: 425-6). Having discovered Eve, however, Blake introduces an inversion in the final two lines ("And his dark secret love/ Does thy life destroy" (ll. 7-8)) that creates a circularity within the poem and two opposing readings. The word order immediately suggests it is the invisible worm's 'dark secret love' that destroys Rose's life, but the inversion suggests, as Harry Berger (Berger, 2011: 9) argues, it is actually the Rose's life, vitality, beauty, and innocence, that destroys the invisible worm's 'dark secret love'. While both are possible outcomes, the second is a Miltonic reading. When seeing her for the first time, Satan is overwhelmed by Eve's "heav'nly form/ Angelic, but more soft, and feminine" (IX: 457-9) to such an extent that "her every air/ Of gesture, or least action, overawed/ His malice" (IX, 459-61); Satan's 'dark secret love', a dark desire to destroy, is threatened by Eve's beauty, and in:

That space the Evil-one abstracted stood
From his own evil, and for the time remained
Stupidly good; of enmity disarmed,
Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge.

(IX: 463-6)

Separated from his 'enmity', Satan's 'dark secret love' is overcome and destroyed by Eve's vitality and 'life', albeit momentarily. Recomposing himself, Satan destroys Eve's life in bringing about The Fall, where she finds another, and another kind of, 'bed of crimson joy' in which she and Adam find 'comfort' in the consummation of their sin.

Where 'The Sick Rose' brings the reader to the point of The Fall, 'My Pretty Rose Tree' and

'The Violet and the Rose' go beyond it. Having brought about the end of innocence, through illicit sex and betrayal in one and an incitement to jealousy in the other, each speaker attempts to recreate or restore their prelapsarian, Edenic worlds. Skipsey's speaker, in a rather strange attempt at hybridisation, reminiscent of Andrew Marvell's 'The Mower Against Gardens' who complains about the "Forbidden mixtures [...that] does Nature vex" (Marvell, 1986: 31-2, l. 22, 29), endeavours to create a new Eden. By combining the two species, the speaker hopes to overcome the sins of each and amplify their respective virtues. Ultimately, the transgression is irredeemable and, as Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise, the paradisiacal beauty that existed prior to the temptation is lost, "their beauty declined" (ML1878: 35, l. 11). Blake's speaker also overcompensates and, rather than the forced cross-species intercourse, suffocates his Rose-tree. Where in *Paradise Lost*, the prelapsarian Rose is "without thorn" (IV: 254), once expelled "Cursed is the ground" (X: 201) to "Thorns [...] and thistles it shall bring forth [.../] Unbid" (X: 203-4) and Blake's over-cultivation brings "thorns" as the speaker's "only delight" (l. 8).

In Milton, and more specifically *Paradise Lost*, not only do we have a significant and foundational influence on both Joseph Skipsey and William Blake, we also have a significant and foundational influence on nineteenth-century working-class poets more generally, which points toward the canon to which working-class readers and writers had access. Rather than suggest Skipsey was influenced by Blake, it would appear both developed (in differing degrees) their styles from Milton and thus similarities formed. Spence Watson is probably correct in asserting Blake was "no great influence upon Skipsey" (RSWB: 92), but omitting Rossetti's comparison goes beyond Derrida's idea of violence within the archive (Derrida, 1995: 7), where the cultural memory matches the oppression to which the powerless were subjected to during their lifetimes. Instead of silencing voices, Spence Watson disallows entirely areas of cultural exploration that become reasonable and valid when one is in possession of a fuller picture. This creates a fundamental imbalance in the information surrounding his biographical subject that remains unchallenged because of their

relative societal positions, which is then reinforced by the author-subject power relationship. With each repetition of the phrases included in *RSWB*, there is a hardening of their certainty and the claims he makes become unquestioned orthodoxies. Blake might not have been a major influence on Skipsey's poetry, but in the removal of Rossetti's praise, the possibility of investigating wider implications is also removed. Without the disclosure that comes of archival discovery, Skipsey remains bound within the confines of Spence Watson's making.

7.2 Personal writing and affectivity in Skipsey's poetry

My close reading of Milton alongside Skipsey's poetry illustrates how Skipsey's reading influenced his writing. Yet, Skipsey is often read, denying his self-education, as a representation of the universal experience of miners and he becomes the pit "village itself composing" (Bunting, 1976: 14). The correspondence of Joseph Skipsey not only breaks silences created by Spence Watson it, to some extent, releases him from his position as a representative of his trade by creating and allowing alternative readings of his poetry. One consequence of this is the revelation of the personal, or autobiographical, nature of some of Skipsey's poetry. The dangers of the mining industry were numerous and major disasters attracted national headlines and raised public sympathies, as the risks involved in fuelling the Industrial Revolution and homely-hearth became unavoidably apparent. Disasters brought the human cost of coal into sharp focus but major incidents were relatively rare and accounted for a surprisingly small portion of mining deaths.¹³¹ Instead, pit-deaths came in ones, twos, and threes, in what one commentator described as "Colliery disaster in instalments" (cited in Benson, 1980: 39). In their chronicle of *Great Pit Disasters: Great Britain, 1700 to the present day* (1973), Duckham and Duckham neatly classify the dangers:

The kinds of catastrophe which might befall a mine can be broadly classified into three:

¹³¹ Disasters, considered to be accidents claiming in excess of four lives, "never accounted for more than a quarter of total fatalities" (Benson, 1980: 39).

explosion, inundation, and the miscellaneous entombment of men – an arrangement reminiscent of the Greek elements of air and fire, earth and water. (Duckham, 1973: 16-17)

The scale of death and injury that occurred in the mining industry is terrifying to consider and where the physical impact on workers is measurable, the mental impact is less quantifiable.¹³² One nineteenth-century coal miner vocalised this existential threat: “no man knows when he leaves his happy fireside in the morning but ere night he may be carried home a mangled corpse” (cited in Benson, 1980: 43). The persistent peril of the explosion of methane gas, inundation of water, or collapse of underground passages becomes an elemental part of the individual and community consciousness. As is seen, in Marx’s belief in the defining influence of an individual’s social existence on their consciousness and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, these elemental and powerful forces become absorbed into the *habitus* (Marx, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986).

Although Skipsey seems to have avoided significant injury, with death and injury so prevalent within coalmining, he witnessed terrible incidents during his career, as Spence Watson recounts:

[When Skipsey] was a wee child [... t]here was no cage to go down [the pit] in [...and] the boys used to cling to [a] chain, putting their feet into bits of rope for the purpose; [...] a dangerous business it was [....Skipsey] saw one little fellow who began to lose his hold as he went up on the chain. His brother was below him and he called to him, ‘A’m gannen to faal, Jimmy.’ ‘Slide doon to me, hinney,’ his brother replied. But, when he slid, the brother could not hold him, and they fell down the deep shaft together. (RSWB: 18)

As the earth swallows the boys, one must not ever have been able to become inured to such catastrophic incidents. Another ‘pitman-poet’, Tommy Armstrong (1848-1920), described the foreboding such incidents created in the opening lines to his poem written following an explosion

¹³² Statistics paint a stark picture regarding injuries and deaths that occurred in Britain’s coal mines: “Between 1868 and 1919 a miner was killed every six hours, seriously injured every two hours, and injured badly enough to need a week off work every two or three minutes” (Benson, 1980: 43).

at Trimdon Grange colliery on 16th February, 1882:

Let us not think of to-morrow,
Lest we disappointed be;
All our joys may turn to sorrow,
As we all may daily see.

(‘Trimdon Grange Explosion’, l. 1-4, in Lloyd, 1978: 183)

The miner must live in the present because, as he witnesses ‘daily’, he may not survive until ‘to-morrow’. Yet, at this distance in time from the event, it is easy to dislocate the human tragedies from the poetry on the page.

Although life underground is largely absent from Skipsey’s poetry, the threat of loss and death permeates; it lurks in the silences he creates, the affectivity he employs, and in the *carpe diem* nature of the courtship rituals he describes. In doing so, Skipsey reveals the tension created by the constant threat of being ‘carried home a mangled corpse’ and the release associated with safe return. Although not formally conceived as such, a sequence of five of Skipsey’s lyrics can be seen to recreate a miner’s day. “‘Get Up!’” describes the miner’s waking routine:

“GET UP!” the caller calls, “Get up!”
And in the dead of night,
To win the bairns their bite and sup,
I rise a weary wight.¹³³

My flannel dudden donn’d, thrice o’er
My birds are kiss’d, and then
I with a whistle shut the door
I may not ope again.¹³⁴

(ML1878: 86)

Upon leaving the family home, the miner’s journey to the pit is represented in ‘The Stars are Twinkling’:

THE stars are twinkling in the sky,
As to the pit I go;

¹³³ A caller was an individual appointed to wake those due to start work, they would usually carry a long stick to tap on the windows of workers’ houses, or, as Skipsey shows, shout to wake them.

¹³⁴ A miner’s ‘duds’, or ‘dudden’ in “‘Get Up!’”, were his coarse working clothes. Heslop, in *Northumberland Words*, cites Skipsey as evidence of the usage of ‘dudden’ in this context; Heslop, however, spells it “duddin” (Heslop, 1892: 256). This poem is discussed extensively in Chapter Nine.

I think not of the sheen on high,
But of the gloom below.

Not rest nor peace, but toil and strife,
Do there the soul enthrall;
And turn the precious cup of life
Into a cup of gall.

(ML1878: 54)

Rather than being captivated by the grandeur of the stars, Skipsey's miner is transfixed by the 'gloom below' and the dangerous world he is about to enter. While the opening line may seem to connote a child's lullaby, the darkness Skipsey brings is not the unconsciousness of sleep but of death and the threat of 'air and fire, earth and water' haunting the miner's existence. In turn, the juxtaposition of the image of the physical 'gloom below' against the grandeur of the stars presents an image of eternity. Where the 'precious cup of life' is transformed 'into a cup of gall' the narrator turns from 'the sheen on high' of God's grace, subjected to 'the gloom below' and the 'toil and strife' of the classical image of Hell, and in the final line allusion to Christ the miner enters martyrdom, sacrificing himself for the greater good.¹³⁵

What happens in the 'gloom below' is rarely observed in Skipsey's poetry. Nowhere can you find Christopher Jack's experience of "the heat [that] slaps you in the face then enfolds [you] like a drab harlot" (Chaplin, 1968: 42) in 'The Thin Seam'. Instead, Skipsey describes his personal underground in 'A Golden Lot':

In the coal-pit, or the factory,
I toil by night or day,
And still to the music of labour
I lilt my heart-felt lay;

I lilt my heart-felt lay —
And the gloom of the deep, deep mine,
Or the din of the factory dieth away,
And a Golden Lot is mine.

(CftCF1886: 224)

¹³⁵ Matthew 27:34 states while on the cross Christ was offered "wine to drink, mixed with gall".

The repeated 'heart-felt lay' occupies the centre of the poem as its extremities 'dieth away'; the music becomes escapism, suppressing the danger and transcending the drudgery of industry. In his widening of the scope to include 'the factory', Skipsey identifies with workers in other industries to suggest that art can provide an escape route for the endangered and exploited working class. The 'Golden Lot' to which Skipsey refers, becomes a physical space filled with artistic endeavour that insulates him from the "feeling of death [that] steals apace round [his] core" ('The Thought Toiler', *ML1878*: 102, l. 11), using the 'music of labour' to transmute his 'gloom' into gold.

Having survived the 'gloom below', Skipsey describes the miner's homecoming in 'Willy to Jinny':

Duskier than the clouds that lie
'Tween the coal-pit and the sky,
Lo, how Willy whistles by
Right cheery from the colliree.

Duskier might the laddie be
Save his coaxing coal-black e'e,
Nothing dark could Jinny see
A-coming from the colliree.

(*CftCF1886*: 17)

While Skipsey poses an alternative to this homecoming in 'The Fatal Errand', in which a child reluctantly delivers the news of a pit fatality, Willy's 'cheery' whistle counterpoises that in "'Get Up!'" where, freed from pre-work foreboding, it now signals the end of his shift, the end of his working day, and the putting aside of peril. The coal, however, permeates Willy's existence to such an extent it is absorbed into his being, as his 'coaxing' eye is 'coal-black'. Jinny is so encompassed by the mine's darkness she sees beyond it and is instead relieved not to be the recipient of 'The Fatal Errand'.

Once the coal-dust has been cleaned from the miner's body, the end of his day arrives in 'O! Sleep':

O sleep, my little baby; thou
Wilt wake thy father with thy cries;
And he into the pit must go,

Before the sun begins to rise.

He'll toil for thee the whole day long,
And when the weary work is o'er,
He'll whistle thee a merry song,
And drive the bogies from the door.

(S&L1892: 2)

As in 'Willy to Jinny', whistling connotes happiness in the reconstitution of domestic bliss that had been suspended while the father was toiling 'to win the bairns their bite and sup'. The driving of 'the bogies from the door' serves two functions here. It points to the father's ability to chase monsters from the child's mind before sleep and also acts in an economic sense. A bogie was a "low truck for the carriage of casks or other merchandise" (Heslop, 1892: 75), and so Skipsey uses the term as an allusion to coal passing through a mine. Once entering the coal industry, a boy would work, as Skipsey had, as a trapper and in this manner, the father works in the hope that his child, presumably a son, might not have to attend the bogies at his own underground door.

The 'sleep' also serves two functions. Firstly, in its brevity there is the revelation of the amount of work the coal miner had to undertake. The sleep only lasts until the baby does 'wake' the father, or, if the mother does subdue the child, until 'the caller' comes and the relentlessness of the work/sleep routine begins anew. Either way, the miner is embraced by the unconsciousness of sleep for just two opening lines before he is sent 'into the pit' once again. Secondly, the sleep becomes a euphemism for death when, in an allusion to a popular German idiom that someone is able to snore "loud enough to wake the dead" (Schemann, 1997: 105), the mother shushes the child with the phrase 'thou Wilt wake thy father with thy cries'. While Skipsey's miner appears to be alive, the space between poetic sleep and death is minimal and the imploring could easily be requesting the child's dignified calm at his father's wake. This is accentuated when considering a further use of 'bogies', in Thomas Wilson's 'The Captains and the Quayside', that describes a "hearse on bogie wheels" (Wilson, 1843: 107-14, l. 131) implicitly associating a bogie with death.

In reconstructing the pitman's day across these five lyrics, Skipsey intimately illustrates the

difficulties coal miners faced and suggests he is recounting personal experiences. Skipsey realised, as he told Dante Rossetti, that his “bread must be earned as it [had] been by manual labour”, that his poetry was “written only [...as] essential [...] relief to my feeling” (Skipsey (I), 1878i: 8) and, as in ‘The Golden Lot’, artistic creation equalled escapism and a way of relieving mental anguish. Skipsey’s poetry was an experiential process and, although they express very different sentiments, Oscar Wilde and Basil Bunting were correct in asserting that an understanding of Skipsey’s biography is essential to reading his poetry. Where Wilde found Skipsey’s poetry “so individual in [its...] utterance, so purely personal in [its...] expression, that for a full appreciation of their style and manner some knowledge of the artist’s life is necessary” (Wilde, 1887: 5), Bunting finds “things once made stand free of their makers, the more anonymous the better” (Bunting, 1976: 7). Wilde finds Skipsey’s “life and the literature too indissolubly wedded to be ever really separated” (Wilde, 1887: 5) and Bunting finds, in Skipsey’s case, “there are exceptions” (Bunting, 1976: 7) to his precept. Yet, where understanding the biography shifts understanding of the poetry, Wilde and Bunting can only read it through a lens of disadvantage; his poetry can only be read with “allowance made” (Burne-Jones, 1904: 108) for the biographical details of the lack of educational advantage and economic freedom to pursue his art. The filter through which both Wilde and Bunting see Skipsey’s poetry is the deprivation of a mining community, not as a working out of his feelings.

While Skipsey witnessed death and injury in the workplace, the Skipsey family experienced the tragedy of the deaths of five of their children: William died aged three in 1860, crushed while playing among railway wagons; James died “from a severe cold” (RKRTB, 2014: 30) aged five months in 1866; and in October 1868 Cuthbert (fourteen), Emma (one), and Harriet (seven) all died “from Scarlatina” (RKRTB, 2014: 31) within an eleven day period.¹³⁶ The impact of these deaths must have

¹³⁶ *The Morpeth Herald* reported the deaths of Skipsey’s three children, advising Cuthbert “was interred, and [...] followed to the grave by [...] most of the workmen of Newsham Colliery” (*The Morpeth Herald*, 1868: 4); illustrating Skipsey’s standing within his community and suggesting Cuthbert was working at the colliery at the time of his death. The paper also reported, on the same page, “suggestions for the prevention of the spread of [scarlet] fever”, the disease that killed Skipsey’s children.

been devastating and the effect on Joseph's poetry is revealed when Thomas Dixon speculated, in a letter to Dante Rossetti, that:

the poem 'Bereaved' is in part a moan for the last of his own children. I feel that poem is the utterance from the depth of his heart and is full of love and deep sympathy for his dear children that are dead at least so I felt when I read the poem.¹³⁷ (Dixon, 1878c: 2)

Dixon later confirms:

the poem Bereaved represents his feelings at the loss of his children, has [*sic*] I wrote you before. and was the outcome of his grief [....] the poems printed [in *ML1878*] cover many years of such thoughts and outpourings of his poetic feeling. (Dixon, 1878g: 3-4)

While Dixon perceives the personal nature of 'Bereaved', Spence Watson gives a less revealing explanation of its motivation:

The poem called 'Bereaved' tells the story of a widow who had lost two children by fever, and had mourned their loss with their father; and then he and his two remaining boys had gone down the pit in the early hours of the morning, and there had been an accident, and they were all taken from her [....it is] a tale of that which constantly happens to one or another of the inhabitants of a pit village. (*RSWB*: 33)

Rather than being a restriction of the information, this is an instance where Spence Watson seems unaware of the nature of 'Bereaved' in particular and Skipsey's poetry in general.

Dixon's revelation of the autobiographical nature of Skipsey's poetry suggests wider implications that destabilise the notion of Skipsey's subjects being representative of pitmen and their communities. Of Skipsey's most affective poems, the majority appear in the volume published immediately after the 1868 deaths of his children: *PSB1871*. This autobiographical nature also suggests that 'Mother Wept', written in the year in which Cuthbert turned twelve (1867), is a direct

¹³⁷ Thornton speculates that these deaths persuaded Joseph and Sarah to finally marry, which they did in December 1868 (Thornton, 2014: 31).

response to their son entering the pit for the first time and, therefore, the mournful parents are thus transformed into Sarah and Joseph Skipsey. Furthermore, and most hauntingly, is the suggestion that the miner in “‘Get Up!’”, with his children “‘thrice o’er [...] kiss’d” (ll. 5-6), is Skipsey leaving his three dead children William, Emma, and Harriet for the final time. These poems, as Bridget Keegan suggests of Skipsey more generally, “poignantly and directly reveal the emotional toll of mining on families and powerfully show the affective depths of those family connections” (Keegan, 2011: 184), and in doing creates a relationship between reader and subject that binds the two parties together into one family unit. Skipsey’s family becomes the reader’s, and vice versa. Rather than being general representations of the lives of mining communities, this new information brings an emotional charge to Skipsey’s poems and a different coloured filter through which to view them.

In these affective poems, Skipsey forms a familial relationship with his reader; in ‘Bereaved’, however, Skipsey holds the reader at a distance. This poem, which Dixon reveals is “a moan for the last of his own children” (Dixon, 1878c: 2), alienates the reader through a series of devices that prevent Skipsey from being identified as the poem’s central figure. These devices allow Skipsey to communicate “utterance[s] from the depth of his heart” (Dixon, 1878c: 2) without risking censure for expressing intense emotions. In ‘Bereaved’ (ML1878: 45-54), Skipsey adopts a third-person perspective but the narrative voice is only active in the opening scene-setting stanza:

ONE day as I came down by Jarrow,
Engirt by a crowd on a stone,
A woman sat moaning and sorrow
Seized all who gave heed to her moan.¹³⁸ (ll. 1-4)

and almost the full fourth stanza:

“Ah, thus let me sit,” so entreated
She those who had had her away;
Then yet on the hard granite seated,

¹³⁸ All references to ‘Bereaved’ are from ML1878.

The remainder of the poem is a passive, third-person narration of the woman's words that introduces a tripartite *cordon-sanitaire* between the author and her 'sorrow'. First, and most obviously, the third-person voice creates a personal space between Skipsey and his female subject. Second, placing the events at Jarrow, South Tyneside, creates spatial distance between subject and author, who was living in Northumberland when the poem was first published. Third, while Skipsey tends to place his poems in the present, in 'Bereaved' he creates temporal distance between himself and his narrative as the 'One day' opening clearly suggests an historical setting. This is extended in the combination of geographical location with the "dread blast" (l. 9) that has killed the husband and two sons. With major accidents in 1817, 1826, 1828, 1830, and 1845, Jarrow Colliery was notorious for explosions and, as such, Skipsey effectively places the events in the aftermath one of these incidents, creating further, indeterminate, temporal distance between himself and the losses in the poem.¹³⁹ Through these devices, similar to the mask of anonymity deployed in the use of 'J.S., A Coal Miner', Skipsey insulates himself from being identified as the female subject of the poem. However, if one removes the first stanza, what remains is a first-person account of a grief-stricken woman and Skipsey effectively using a female poetic voice in order to come to terms with his own grief.

In the introduction to an essay collection on the appropriation of women by men in literature, *Men Writing the Feminine* (1994), Thaïs Morgan suggests one of the reasons a male author employs a female voice is to enable them "to feel or say what is forbidden to him socially" (Morgan, 1994: 7). It is clear that Skipsey uses 'Bereaved' to explore and exorcise his grief at the death of his children and, in using a female voice, creates space between himself and potential accusations of emotions unbecoming of his masculinity. In a direct contrast to Tennyson whose, 'In Memoriam', directly and openly requests his reader to "Forgive my grief for one removed"

¹³⁹ These five explosions resulted in a total of 129 lives being lost (dmm.org.uk).

(Tennyson, 1994: 285-364: l.37), Skipsey's own discomfort at emotional expression is transferred to his female subject, as his anxieties are revealed in her repeated entreaties: "blame not my sad lamentation" (ll. 5, 25); "oh, let [...] my tears flow,/ Nay offer me no consolation" (ll. 6-7); and "chide not. This sad lamentation" (l. 57). Skipsey uses the female voice to plead for the physical and emotional space for his own tears and the expression of intense feelings without condemnation, but it also creates a hierarchical relationship between the author, the poetic subject, the speaker, and the reader; a hierarchy at the bottom of which is the female subject. As Susan Wolfson describes, when examining Wordsworth's adoption of 'The Female Vagrant' as a "voice of loss and displacement without courting questions about unmanly feeling" (Wolfson, 1994: 37), in portraying "female distress [Wordsworth] invokes a code of chivalry and its hierarchy of capable power and female dependency" (Wolfson, 1994: 37). The subordinate position of the female subject allows and invites the creation of this hierarchical relationship in which the female becomes a target for male sympathy and pity, of which Skipsey himself becomes the ultimate recipient.

In the recreation of the deaths in 'Bereaved', Skipsey also transposes the causes of death of his children into their being killed in a colliery explosion, a form he can more readily process and understand. In the poem, the woman suffers six losses in total, matching the five Skipsey children plus Joseph's father. First, the woman's mother, who foresaw the potential tragedy associated with marrying a miner, seems to have died of natural causes and "sleeps under the yew" (l. 26).¹⁴⁰ When recounting the first infant death she announces her "burden began,/ When to the whole dale's consternation,/ Our second was crushed by the van" (ll. 58-60), clearly representing the death of William Skipsey (1860) crushed by a railway wagon. Next, representing the loss of James Skipsey in 1866 'from a severe cold', "Death took the gem of the number" (l. 111) as "The bairn with his hair bright and curled/ [...] The bonniest bairn in the world" (ll. 86, 88) is lost to a "fever" (l. 106). This

¹⁴⁰ This seems to refer to Skipsey's father; *RKRTB* (69) states Joseph's mother, Isabella, was recorded in the 1881 census and, therefore, still alive when 'Bereaved' was written.

death had a profound effect on the woman's husband who changed utterly when "the dark shadow" (l. 73) of grief fell upon him:

No more would his heavy step lighten,
No more would his hazel eyes glow;
No more would his smutty face brighten
At sight of the darling. (ll. 76-80)

Finally, is the most recent of her losses as her husband, "the one praised by all" (l. 22), and her remaining children, the "two happy creatures" (l. 25), are now "dead down below" (l. 8). In the final three deaths here, Skipsey represents the deaths of his three children from scarlatina in 1868. While the genuine causes of the deaths of William and James are presented, those of Cuthbert, Emma, and Harriet, from a less tangible cause, are more difficult to rationalize and Joseph alters the causes of death into a more community-specific form he can more easily comprehend and process.

For those living in a community whose existence depended upon the mining industry, death was such common occurrence it became part of the inhabitants' social existence and part of the community's embodied cultural capital. The seemingly mutually destructive relationship between coal and miner, as Friedrich Engels concluded in *The Conditions of the Working Classes in England* (1845), meant that the "coal mine [was] the scene of a multitude of the most terrifying calamities [...and in] the whole British Empire there [was] no occupation in which a man may meet his end in so many diverse ways" (Engels, 1845: 255). While the nation was aware of large-scale disasters that affected communities in such a discriminatory fashion, the victims were mainly male and of working age, the smaller scale tragedies of deaths in ones or twos, or more burdensome injuries that preserved life but made victims economically inactive, or the bereavements such as Skipsey suffered through illnesses were less understood but no less profound. To extend the use of Mike Sanders' argument specifically regarding Chartist poetry (Sanders, 2009: 6), Skipsey's poetry confirmed and reinforced the ethos of his community, it performed a cathartic role, and from this perspective became, as Wilde and Bunting suggest, imbued with the presence of the community and their

emotional being; it becomes representative of miners' experiences. However, this is to see Skipsey's poetry on a strangely impersonal macro-level that displaces the affectivity he employs and removes his ownership of the emotions explored. This dislocation is evident in the difference between the community-wide agonies of 'The Hartley Calamity' against the personal pain of 'Bereaved'. Where one is sympathetically and universally acknowledged the other is less understood, and Skipsey's poetry becomes representative of the wider community instead of being understood as deeply personal writings through which he is coming to terms with the psychological tribulations of his industry and his interactions with his wider community.

Ultimately, this denial of the experiential nature of Skipsey's poetry by critics becomes a model for the manipulation and shaping of the reception of a working-class poet, in which the subject of the control has little influence. It mimics the reputation of Thomas Dixon, seldom acknowledged "with having [had] a worthwhile original thought" (Quinn, 1997: 282), and prefigures the shift in working-class poetry at the end of the nineteenth century of which, Isobel Armstrong argues, Skipsey was "one of the last flowerings" (Armstrong, 1993: 401). In this shift, the displacement of the poetic argument from personal to communal, there is created the opportunity for "middle-class poets [to...] speak for the class below" and "steal [...] the very rhythm of working-class poetry in order to represent the oppressed by proxy" (Armstrong, 1993: 401). If a working-class poet can be denied their own personal voice by a process of communal appropriation brought about by middle-class expectation, then that voice itself can be commandeered by any poet seeking to place their own understanding of the working-class existence as a documentary of that existence or experience. In this process, the writing *of* coal miners becomes less regarded as the writing *about* coal miners dominates.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Joseph Skipsey and London, *the* Cultural Capital

8.1 The cheap train to London

In his satirical fairy tale *The Rose and the Ring* (1855), William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63) pronounced that the best thing a child could experience was “a little *misfortune*” (emphasis in original, Thackeray, 1855: 12). A brief glance at Joseph Skipsey’s biography shows he experienced a significant amount of misfortune in both childhood and adulthood. Despite his many misfortunes, Skipsey remained stoic and, as he told Rossetti, the positive reception of his poetry proved sufficient reparation:

[The] admiration of my poems affords me [...] the greatest pleasure & in itself constitutes a compensation for much of the privation to which I have been subjected in my devotion to self-culture & to the Muse. (Skipsey, 1880l: 2-3)

This notion of benefitting from individual sacrifice is central to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital, as the acquisition of embodied cultural capital “presupposes a personal cost [...], with all the privation, renunciation, and sacrifice that it may entail” (Bourdieu, 1986); the capital Skipsey acquired came as a result of many sacrifices, privations, and misfortunes.

This chapter examines the most prominent reward Skipsey received for his sacrifices when, in June 1880, he travelled to London to meet some of the most notable contemporary cultural figures. The chapter examines correspondence between Thomas Dixon, Dante Rossetti, and Skipsey that relates specifically to Skipsey meeting Rossetti, which corrects, clarifies, and expands upon the brief account given in *RSWB*. The first section reveals the practical difficulties Skipsey had to overcome in order to visit London that, once again, undermines Spence Watson’s authoritative voice, and reveals the ongoing efforts by Dixon to proselytize on Skipsey’s behalf. The second section

looks at the “few days liberty” (Skipsey, 1880f: 2) Skipsey was able to secure in June 1880 to visit London, and how his encounters during this time are examples of the capital exchanges taking place when social classes intersect. In the reproduction in this thesis of a second unpublished letter from Rossetti (Appendix Seven), the argument is developed further to establish the importance of Dixon’s relationship with Skipsey as well as a summation of the wider esteem in which Thomas Dixon was held.

In June 1880, Joseph Skipsey travelled to London where he met some of, according to the *ODNB*, “the leading intellectuals of the day” (Langton, 2014), including, as Spence Watson notes, Edward “Burne Jones [*sic*], the Rossettis, Holman Hunt, and Theodore Watts” (*RSWB*: 53). The known details surrounding this trip are based on three sources: *RSWB*, *TCDGR*, and Georgiana Burne-Jones’ *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (1904). *RSWB* gives the basic detail of some of the people Skipsey met in London and adds that Skipsey and Dixon, “[o]n their way [...] visited Oxford, where they stayed with Professor Jowett at Balliol” College (*RSWB*: 53). *TCDGR* fixes the date upon which Rossetti met Skipsey and Rossetti’s impression of the “stalwart son of toil” (Rossetti, 2010: 214). Georgiana Burne-Jones reveals it had been Dixon’s “great wish” to introduce Skipsey to “some of the men whose work he specially honoured” (Burne-Jones, 1904: 107), and that the pair dined with the Burne-Joneses on three occasions. During these visits, “Edward [Burne-Jones] talked much with [Skipsey] and was struck by his wide knowledge of English literature and his poetic vision” but found “the circumstances of his life had left him at a disadvantage in the art of writing poetry for which nothing could make up” (Burne-Jones, 1904: 108). Despite the momentous nature of this trip within Skipsey’s life, little more than this has been said and critical sources, where it is noted, only do so in passing. Martha Vicinus merely states that Skipsey was “well treated whenever he visited London” (Vicinus, 1974: 170), Basil Bunting suggests he might have met John Ruskin (Bunting, 1976: 11), and Goodridge’s *Database of British and Irish Labouring-Class Poets & Poetry* records that Skipsey met Dante Rossetti. Thornton et al (2014: 44-7) reproduce excerpts from *Memorials of*

Edward Burne-Jones, one letter from Rossetti to Hall Caine, and one letter to Thomas Dixon but do not elucidate further (RKRTB: 44-6). The *ODNB* states that Thomas Dixon “took” Skipsey to London that suggests a passivity that is not necessarily accurate. As has been the case throughout this thesis, the correspondence uncovered during my archival research has revealed significant new information surrounding Dixon and Skipsey’s visit to London, *the* cultural capital.

While it is certainly true Dixon instigated this trip and arranged the itinerary, that he ‘took’ Skipsey to London, as the *ODNB* insinuates, or that the pair travelled to Oxford to stay with Professor Jowett on the way, as Spence Watson asserts, is disproved by correspondence. That it was Dixon’s ‘great wish’ to bring Skipsey to London, as Georgiana Burne-Jones states, is also cast into doubt when one considers Skipsey first proposed visiting Rossetti in 1878. Following the enthusiasm surrounding the positive reception of *ML*1878, Skipsey wrote (21st November, 1878) to Rossetti with positivity. In this letter Skipsey suggested he might, should he “succeed in getting a [London] pub[lisher], be able to visit [...Rossetti] in London about the Xmas” (Skipsey (I), 1878h: 2). In less than two weeks, however, Skipsey’s view had changed. Whether it was that a “respectable London publisher” could not be persuaded to “take a few copies of the book” (Skipsey (I), 1878h: 1) or that Rossetti did not immediately respond with affirmation he would be welcome, Skipsey retracted his suggestion. By 4th December, Skipsey’s optimism had waned and he, seemingly, reconsidered:

In my last I intimated to have said that such would only be a flying visit [...] to see a few friends and shake hand [*sic*] with them & enjoy with these a little tete-a-tete [*sic*] confab. over a cup of tea: & not to seek literary work or a way of gaining subsistence by the pen. It is many years since my mind was made up on that point. (Skipsey (I), 1878i: 8)

While Skipsey unmistakably ‘intimated’, in his letter of 21st November, that he was hoping ‘to seek literary work’ when optimistic a London publisher might be found, this change in opinion represents a remarkable and rapid *volte-face*. Clearly suffering from anxiety about potential delusions of grandeur, that Rossetti might be interested in receiving him, Skipsey’s withdrawal from visiting

London and the extinguishing of hope in gaining 'subsistence by the pen' indicates a resigned acceptance of his position in society and the restrictions placed upon him by social expectations. Yet, a previously unpublished letter (Appendix Six) shows Rossetti *was* receptive to the proposal as he indicated: "I live an almost completely secluded life, but should be very pleased to receive a visit from you if you carry out your invitation of looking in on London about Christmas time" (Rossetti, 1878b: 3). Although Georgiana Burne-Jones advises it was Dixon's great ambition for Skipsey and Rossetti to meet, it was originally Skipsey's own inclination.

This suggestion of a meeting, however, does appear to have taken root within Dixon's mind. On the same day Rossetti advised he would welcome Skipsey, he wrote encouragingly to Dixon: "Mr S[kipsey]. tells me that he thinks of running up to London at Xmas: if so I trust to see & know him a little: he is a very remarkable man" (Rossetti, 2009: 224). One week later, 11th December, Dixon replied suggesting the mutual benefit of their meeting:

I hope he may see you, for such a meeting will have its uses on you both for ~~such~~ men as he is, seems sure to see [*sic*]. I feel this knowing how it would [...unintelligible...] you as an artist. of all men. I think artists should know such men in the flesh . [*sic*] for I think it cannot but do them a power of good coming into contact with such persons. (Dixon, 1878d: 3)

In this passage, Dixon almost represents Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and how the proposed meeting would be mutually beneficial in those terms. He is careful, despite his indistinct phrasing, to make no clear distinction between Rossetti and Skipsey and, as Rossetti was 'an artist of all men', it is difficult to draw a line of demarcation between the artist and 'such men' or 'such persons' with whom they meet. In terms of beneficiaries of the receipt of cultural capital neither appears, in Dixon's mind, to be the net gainer should they meet. Instead, there is a mutual exchange of capital in which both men gain access to otherwise inaccessible worlds.

Although Skipsey withdrew his suggestion of visiting Rossetti, the thought seemed to have laid dormant within Dixon until it bore fruit in late-spring 1880. On 11th April, Skipsey writes

expressing his deep gratitude for Dixon's "unwearying efforts" (Skipsey, 1880b: 1) on his behalf. These 'efforts' really do appear to have been 'unwearying' as, following a request for "a few more copies" (Skipsey, 1880d: 1) of *ML1878*, Dixon finally secured for Skipsey "a couple of London Booksellers" (Skipsey, 1880e: 3). That Skipsey still had copies of *ML1878* available two years after publication is indicative of the poor sales he experienced, however, a review of James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems* (1880) in *The Athenæum* (1st May, 1880) illustrates Skipsey's reputation as one of the most, as Keegan and Goodridge argue, "seriously regarded laboring-class poets of his era" (Keegan, 2013: 239). In using Skipsey for, possibly, the first time as an exemplar of a working-class poet *The Athenæum* reviewer found that Thomson had:

something besides mere vigour. He has, like Mr. Joseph Skipsey, the power of looking at the prosaic facts of every-day life through that halo which is only known to the poet, to whom Nature is a poem even when seen through the windows of a third-class railway carriage.
(*The Athenæum*, 1880: 561)

Despite the clearly patronising position of finding both Thomson and Skipsey observing their poetic subjects from 'a third-class railway carriage', Skipsey was pleased with the recognition when he asked "tell me if a certain humble friend [...] ought not to be proud of the additional complement bestowed upon him" (Skipsey, 1880d: 2). Being used as an archetype in this fashion is an important indication of Skipsey's standing within the literary world, but there is another consideration when looking at the publisher with whom Thomson placed his work: Reeves & Turner.

Described by one William Morris scholar as "a bookshop and small publishing establishment in The Strand" (Peterson, 1991: 187), in the spring of 1880 Reeves & Turner were engaged by Dixon to distribute *ML1878*.¹⁴¹ It may be entirely coincidental that Skipsey pointed Dixon in the direction of *The Athenæum* review of Thomson's work but the following notice in *The New York Times* (29th June 1880) reveals Reeves & Turner to be one of Dixon's 'London Booksellers':

¹⁴¹ Morris used Reeves & Turner as an alternative to his Kelmscott Press in 1888.

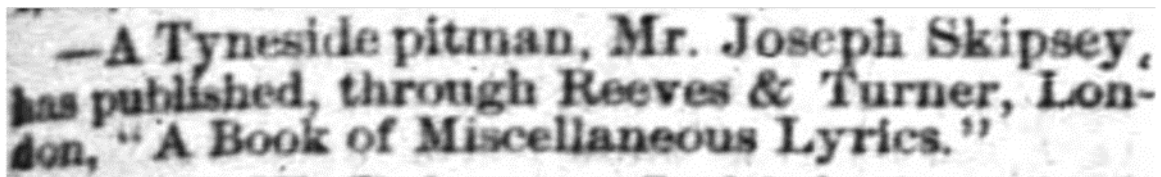


Fig. 1: *The New York Times* (1880: 3) notice announcing the availability of *ML1878* from Reeves & Turner, London.

A publisher to distribute his books secured, Skipsey was able to fulfil his 1878 proposal to visit the capital upon finding a “London publisher” (Skipsey (I), 1878h: 1). By 12th June, when Skipsey responded to his “generous proposal” (Skipsey, 1880f: 1), Dixon had suggested visiting London, “the famous Town” (Skipsey, 1880f: 2), in his company. While Skipsey was clearly keen to accept the offer, he would “gladly have availed myself of it had it been at all practical” (Skipsey, 1880f: 1), the proposal did not fit Skipsey’s working schedule.

Skipsey’s reservations were based entirely on the practicalities of the proposal. In the impracticability of Dixon’s suggestion is revealed two of the major obstructions for a working-class writer:

it so happens that the cheap trip train falls upon a day when I have to commence the measurement of our stone bargain men’s yardage – a piece of business that occupies me for two days & after I accomplish this I have the Colliery Shift Bill to make out & submit to the inspection of the manager.¹⁴² This is done upon the Saturday. I have acquainted ^{our manager} however with your kind proposal and he says after the Saturday I could [have] a few days liberty. (Skipsey, 1880f: 2)

The difficulties here are fundamental to any writer’s ability to perform that work: cost and time. When looking ‘through the windows of a third-class railway carriage’, as *The Athenæum* reviewer conceives working-class writers do, these impediments are exacerbated. To Skipsey, time is the primary concern and how his liberty to use it is entirely dependent upon the goodwill of his industrial

¹⁴² It is unclear to what Skipsey refers in measuring the ‘stone bargain men’s yardage’, but “Bargain-Work” was work “let by proposal, amongst the workmen at a colliery, to the lowest offer” (Greenwell, 1888: 5). It seems, therefore, Skipsey was to measure contract work already completed or, alternatively, the amount to be tendered for.

superiors. The exact nature of Dixon's proposal is unknown but to work backwards from the details given, it would imply Skipsey was to travel to London on a Wednesday or Thursday (the measurements take two days, prior to submitting the Colliery Shift Bill on Saturday) probably the 15th or 16th June. Not wanting to waste the 'few days liberty' allowed through goodwill, Skipsey proposed leaving Newcastle "upon the evening of Saturday the 19th & reach London upon the Sunday morning" (Skipsey, 1880f: 2). At the time of Dixon putting the proposal before Rossetti, however, doubt surrounding Skipsey's journey jeopardised the whole trip.

While difficult to ascertain both sides' responses from the one-sided record that remains in *TCDGR*, Dixon's initial proposal to visit Rossetti met with indifference. With the uncertainty surrounding Skipsey's presence in mind, Rossetti writes (16th June) giving the impression he might not be able to receive him: "I am a good deal cut up as to time at present & don't know whether I shall have the opportunity of making Mr Skipsey's acquaintance just now" (Rossetti, 2010: 210). When Skipsey confirms he has secured the 'liberty' to visit London (12th June), Rossetti changes heart:

When *you yourself* proposed to come [...], I was a little dubious whether I could conveniently see one whom I was not in the habit of seeing [...]. However [,] *I shall trust certainly to see Skipsey* if he comes. (my emphases, Rossetti, 2010: 210-11)

In this reversal is revealed an initial reluctance to receive Dixon alone, and the importance of Skipsey to Rossetti is seen in the change in his availability once Skipsey's attendance was confirmed.

Skipsey and Dixon's letters in this period not only show the efforts involved in bringing about the meeting between Skipsey and Rossetti, they also refute the *ODNB* entry that states Dixon 'took' Skipsey to London and, barring the circuitousness and impracticality of travelling from Newcastle to London via Oxford to stay with "Professor Jowett at Balliol" (*RSWB*: 53), the correspondence reveals different arrangements. On 1st June, Skipsey wrote he had visited Dixon on Saturday (29th May) to find him not at home, and refers to a recent trip Dixon had made to Glasgow and how Skipsey looks

forward to “hearing ~~from~~ a few deeply interesting remarks on the pictorial wonders you must have witnessed” (Skipsey, 1880e: 1-2). Mindful of the fact Dixon had introduced his work to Rossetti, Skipsey adds that, had he known Dixon intended visiting Glasgow, he would have given him:

a note of introduction to my friend A.J. Symington the author of ‘The Beautiful in Nature, Literature & Art’ & also ‘Pen &’ [sic] Pencil Sketchings of Iceland and the Faroe Islands’ – a gentleman who must have had a special attraction to you since he has not only written extensively upon art [...but also] conducted a large correspondence with some of the most notable artists of the day – both British & Foreign.¹⁴³ (Skipsey, 1880e: 1-2)

At this point visiting London had not been mentioned, but when Skipsey writes to Dixon again (12th June) the proposal had been made. It is clear from the correspondence Dixon was already in London when Skipsey was due to travel to the capital. Writing from his home at Backworth on 16th June, Skipsey was “uneasy” (Skipsey, 1880g: 1) at not having received a response from Dixon to his earlier letter (12th June) when he proposed alternative arrangements. Skipsey continues:

Will you kindly write & inform me by return of post and whether you will be in London after the 19th & whether it would be convenient for you to spend a day – or say a few hours, with me?

[....]

I showed your note to our friends Mr & Mrs Watson on Saturday and they expressed themselves as highly pleased ^{at} your proposal since, so they believed, you would be able to introduce me to a few ^{prizable} [sic] sights & ~~to~~ to the society of a few persons whom I would very much esteem.

[....]

¹⁴³ These texts are actually titled *The Beautiful in Nature, Art, and Life* (1857), and *Pen and Pencil Sketches of Faroe and Iceland* (1862). Symington is presumably the same person who wrote Skipsey’s entry in *North Country Poets* and editor of the *Canterbury Poets’ Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (1885). Symington is in Skipsey’s address book but I have found no correspondence between them, nor evidence of Skipsey visiting Glasgow.

Mr Watson says I could get a train – a fast one – which leaving Newcastle about 4pm would bring me to London at about 11pm.

[....]

Waiting for your reply & trusting that you are well and enjoying your London visit. (Skipsey, 1880g: 1-2)

It is plain to see here Skipsey did not travel to London either with Dixon or by way of Oxford. Furthermore, Spence Watson was aware of the practicalities of the arrangements and the exciting possibilities awaiting Skipsey. Spence Watson was clearly aware Dixon was already in London and Skipsey was to join him, and even advised getting a ‘fast’ train. Yet, in *RSWB*, we are told Skipsey and Dixon travelled together, visiting Oxford *en route* to London. There seems no motivation to mislead here, and (as the most likely scenario for meeting Jowett is when Skipsey was custodian of Shakespeare’s Birthplace) perhaps Spence Watson is conflating memories, but it is clear they did not meet on Skipsey’s way to London and if they met at all it seems extremely unlikely it was in the ‘few days liberty’ from the pit Skipsey found in June 1880 or in the company of Thomas Dixon.¹⁴⁴

8.2 A “few days liberty” in the “Great City”

When Skipsey did make it to London, seemingly on Saturday 19th June, he met with Dixon and proceeded to “have the honour of shaking hands with some of our living great men in Literature & Art” (Skipsey, 1880f: 2). As stated above, little has been said of this trip to London and the existing knowledge rests heavily on a small amount of information and much of what Skipsey saw and whom he met is unknown. Spence Watson’s account is limited to a single unembellished passage: “In London Skipsey saw many of the men who formed so distinguished an artistic circle, and amongst them Burne-Jones, the Rossettis, Holman Hunt, and Theodore Watts” (*RSWB*: 53). Georgiana Burne-

¹⁴⁴ The *Professor Jowett Papers* at Balliol College has no letters from Skipsey or Dixon, the diaries they have do not relate to this period.

Jones suggests Dixon met William Morris at her home before Skipsey arrived, the Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums summary of their 'Thomas Dixon of Sunderland' collection adds the name Thomas Carlyle, and Geoffrey Milburn states "they were entertained several times by Edward Burne-Jones, met Carlyle, the Rossettis, Holman Hunt and William Morris, lunched with Professor Legros, and so on" (Milburn, 1984: 36). There is clear evidence confirming Skipsey met with Burne-Jones and Theodore Watts and, although I have seen no confirmation, it seems likely he also met Holman Hunt and Thomas Carlyle, but Spence Watson's claim Dixon and Skipsey made the acquaintance of multiple 'Rossettis' appears incorrect. Perhaps he is once again conflating memories or perhaps he, unnecessarily, seeks to enhance the value of this trip, but it seems Dante was the only Rossetti present. William Rossetti's diary entry of 21st June records he:

spent the evening with Gab[riel].... [Who] Asked me to come on W[ednesday] to meet Dixon from Sunderland, Skipsey the Tyneside poet, & Watts, but I shall probably have to be at Trelawny's that evening. (cited in Fredeman, 1982: 228-9)

Following their meeting Rossetti wrote to Skipsey requesting a transcription of their discussions regarding Shelley to show his brother and a letter from Skipsey to Dante Rossetti (22nd July) discussed below, confirms William was not present and there is no suggestion any other Rossetti was invited. Skipsey did meet William later and Lucy Rossetti (1843-94) (William's wife) visited him in Stratford, but there is no record of Skipsey having met Christina Rossetti.

Exactly what Skipsey and Dixon did and who they met while in London is unclear, even the details of Skipsey and Rossetti meeting remain vague, but the correspondence I have uncovered provides new information. Rossetti's invitation reveals Dixon and Skipsey were to "look in on Wednesday [23rd June] at 7 & see a picture or two, [...and] take a little dinner afterwards at [Rossetti's] late hour of 8.30" (Rossetti, 2010: 212). Skipsey's correspondence adds to this, confirming he had "sight of [some] marvellously beautiful pictures" (Skipsey, 1880I: 2), took great delight in Rossetti's "highly philosophic yet sweet, quiet talk" (Skipsey, 1880I: 1-2), was pleased to

recite “two or three [...] songs” (Skipsey, 1880l: 3) to Rossetti, and that they discussed Shelley.¹⁴⁵ Georgiana Burne-Jones records that Skipsey visited the Burne-Joneses the “Sunday following” (Burne-Jones, 1904: 108) Dixon had met with William Morris at their house, and her husband “talked much [with Skipsey about...] Literature and his poetic vision” (Burne-Jones, 1904: 108).¹⁴⁶ Spence Watson expands on this to advise Burne-Jones and Skipsey talked “of some happy possibility of [Skipsey...] being free from [his] present work” (*RSWB*: 75). There is, however, more than a hint of a patronising tone in Edward Burne-Jones’ reception, in that, as Georgiana reveals, he felt Skipsey was “so sensitive in nature [that he...] must carry about with him the pain of knowing that all he did could only be judged after allowance made” (Burne-Jones, 1904: 108) for the circumstances in which he was raised.¹⁴⁷

The patronising tone of Edward Burne-Jones is present in all of the evidence relating to him and Skipsey, and it diverged significantly from Rossetti’s opinion; where Burne-Jones views Skipsey as something of a pet, Rossetti saw him as an equal. Writing to Mary Gladstone, the daughter of Prime Minister William Gladstone, Burne-Jones described Skipsey as unlike the “perky lithograph” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 83) included in *ML1878* (Appendix Four), discussed in Chapter Five, which gave “a wrong impression of a head that is leonine and dignified” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 83). While unclear whether Burne-Jones refers to either the lithograph or Skipsey himself that gives the ‘wrong impression’, the atavism in his description of Skipsey consuming his art is unmistakable:

I could not bear to watch him look at my pictures, for the look of his face had the same kind of pain in it that seeing a starved creature eat hungrily would have. (cited in March-Phillips,

¹⁴⁵ This discussion probably centred on Skipsey’s “very singular clairvoyant visions [...] of Shelley & his two wives” (Skipsey(l), 1878h: 2).

¹⁴⁶ Rossetti wrote to Watts (21st June) advising “Skipsey will not be here beyond the week” (Rossetti, 2010: 212); the Sunday referred to is, presumably, the day after Skipsey arrived: 20th June.

¹⁴⁷ In the text this passage clearly refers to Georgiana Burne-Jones’ interpretation of Edward’s views on Skipsey; it is, however, regularly reproduced and attributed as a direct quote from Edward Burne-Jones (cf. Vicinus, 1974: 140).

In this, Burne-Jones projects his own assumptions surrounding Skipsey's lack of access to objectified cultural capital and his reaction is, as Bourdieu describes, that of the "autodidact [...] fundamentally defined by a reverence for culture [...] which led to an exalted, misplaced piety, inevitably perceived by the possessors of legitimate culture as a [...] grotesque homage" (Bourdieu, 2003: 84). Skipsey is portrayed as a wretched figure entirely excluded from the bourgeois art world and, having this brief access, preys upon Burne-Jones' paintings with ravenous intensity. Burne-Jones' own reaction is one of fascinated horror as he recoils from the scene watching, almost through his fingers, his creations being fed upon.

Where Burne-Jones makes assumptions regarding the types of cultural capital Skipsey possessed and could access, he does so in a conservative manner that reinforces class boundaries. This conservatism implies, to describe it in the post-colonial terms of Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), that Skipsey does not possess the "rigorous codes of intellectual and moral behavior" (Said, 1994: xiii) expected of a cultured individual, displaying instead the oppositional behaviour "associated with such relatively liberal philosophies as multiculturalism and hybridity" (Said, 1994: xiii). Burne-Jones defines Skipsey in opposition to his own middle-class identity and insinuates Skipsey is beneath him in the class hierarchy. Rossetti is more liberal in his views as his impression of Skipsey is diametrically opposed, in Said's terms, to that of Burne-Jones. Rossetti produces a description, in a letter to Hall Caine, which challenges the rigidity of social stratification in transforming Skipsey into a hybrid figure:

[Skipsey] came here [Rossetti's house] and I found him a stalwart son of toil and every bit a gentleman. In cast of face he recalls Tennyson somewhat, though more bronzed & brawned. He is as sweet and gentle as a woman in manner, and recited some beautiful things of his

own with a special freshness to which one is quite unaccustomed.¹⁴⁸ (Rossetti, 2010: 214)

Rather than a hybrid, as Kirstie Blair defines it in her article on 'Hybrid Forms and the Victorian Working-Class Poet', being "caught between and composed of two cultures" (Blair, 2009: 526), Rossetti creates an identity, that matches Blair's definition of hybridity extended through Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia*, that is a blending of multiples. Rossetti establishes distinct dichotomies between those who toil and those who are gentlemen; those who labour manually and those who labour poetically; those who are manly and those who are not. In Rossetti's opinion, that is as much a projection of his own liberal position as Burne-Jones' conservative one, Skipsey occupies both oppositions simultaneously. One review of *TCDGR* (v9) recognises this in describing Rossetti's account as "not inhibited by class" (Faulkner, 2011: 71), which is true because, in placing Skipsey between supposed oppositions, it divests him of his class. Instead of occupying both positions concurrently, Rossetti creates for Skipsey a liminality that mirrors the alienation from his own community, further enforced by middle-class expectations, as he falls between the oppositions. He is a worker and a gentleman, a manual labourer and a poet, but, in the mutual exclusivity of these positions, being both disbars him from being wholly either. The position in which Skipsey is placed, however, disbarred from each of the facets of his identity, destabilises what could be seen as a colonial relationship between middle-class colonist and a colonised working class. As Homi Bhabha describes, the colonial relationship relies on "the production of differentiations, individuations, [and] identity effects through which discriminatory practices [create...] the visible and transparent mark[s] of power" (Bhabha, 1985: 153), oppositions that enable those "who engage in the battle for 'power'" (Bhabha, 1985: 153) to create an 'other'. This process of 'othering' reinforces social structures based upon whichever facet of identity (race, class, gender, sexuality, regionality) is chosen.

¹⁴⁸ Hall Caine reproduces this letter in his *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*; it is the earliest published reference I have found connecting Rossetti to Skipsey.

When considered in terms of 'hybridization', a blending of multiples, this passage becomes radical as it places Skipsey in a position beyond the 'othering' process. In the reference to Skipsey being 'bronzed' is the suggestion that Rossetti is describing him as he might one of his own paintings, redolent of the auburn hair of the Pre-Raphaelite female, and evocative of the combination of golden halo and red hair in Rossetti's *Venus Verticordia* (c.1863-8). To Rossetti, Skipsey was too manly to be like Tennyson yet is simultaneously womanly and in this is the suggestion of androgyny that lurks among many of Rossetti's paintings. Where much of Rossetti's work displays female subjects, with thick necks and square jaws, possessing unmistakably masculine features, Skipsey's masculinity is shadowed by a conspicuous femininity. This is not, however, the androgynous figure of Decadence with its connotations of licentiousness and decline, an image A.J.L. Busst recognised in his foundational essay on nineteenth-century representations of androgyny: 'The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century'. In this essay, Busst recognises an opposition between representations of androgyny in the first part of the century compared to those at the end, declaring the difference as being the early nineteenth-century androgyne as optimistic and its later counterpart pessimistic.¹⁴⁹ The androgyne, whether optimistic or pessimistic, represents, Francette Pacteau argues, "a denial, or a transgression, of the rigid gender divide, and as such implies a threat to our given identity and to the system of social roles which define us" (Pacteau, 1986: 63); whether the implied threat is viewed as monstrous or progressive is the difference between conservatism and liberalism. The optimistic androgyne, Busst argues, was to be the culmination of human development in which all divisions between individuals, not just gender, were negated and all social problems solved and, as Sally-Anne Huxtable suggests, the "idea that the social order of patriarchy and the very divisions between masculinity and femininity might be questioned must have been [...] tantalizing" (Huxtable, 2014: 180). Speaking from a Judeo-Christian background, Busst relies heavily

¹⁴⁹ John Tosh argues, in an article on the difficulty historians experience in representing masculinity 'seriously', the hostility toward Decadent androgyne, and its image as dissolute and corrupting, was an "outward symptom of a need to repress the feminine within" (Tosh, 1994: 196).

on reading both Adam and Christ as androgynous figures and it is the restoration of the androgyne, the two genders having been split as a consequence of The Fall, that social unity is found: “the androgyne, divided into sexes [...reinstates] itself through social equality” (Busst, 1967: 19); in the advance toward unification, Wendy Bashant asserts, “Kings would lose their power; gods would become human; men and women might become equal” (Bashant, 1995: 5). In this androgynous (hybrid) form, Skipsey exists between but also beyond classification.

Rossetti effectively breaks Skipsey’s identity down into three categories: firstly, Skipsey is describes in terms of class, ‘a stalwart son of toil and every bit a gentleman’; secondly, in terms of his labour, he is both a thought-toiler resembling Tennyson and a ‘bronzed & browned’ labourer; thirdly, and borrowing from the terms of his first two distinctions, he possesses the implied hyper-masculinity of the ‘working miner’, yet is non-threatening in being ‘as sweet and gentle as a woman’. In each of these categorisations, Skipsey shifts between and across diametrically-opposed boundaries. In doing so, he becomes neither one nor the other wholly and yet his being encompasses the oppositions. He stands outside of, not only, his own social class and his own physical realm, but he stands outside of *all* classes and physicalities. Furthermore, in his presentation as a being of both genders Skipsey stands outside of his own masculinity. This, however, does not put him in a position of disadvantage or of lack and instead he becomes transcendental. The passage reflects not only what Jay Sloan has argued were William Rossetti’s “cultural anxieties regarding his brother’s purported failure, as both man and artist, to enact Victorian gender norms” (Sloan, 2004: 8), but also a belief that social barriers between individuals could be broken down. Divested of his class, physicality, and gender, Rossetti places Skipsey in a space free from the process of othering; a sexless, genderless, classless being, capable of both physical and intellectual labours. In creating Skipsey as a cultural androgyne, Rossetti reconstitutes all classes and both genders into a single coalesced figure of social unity and social equality. A “universal [hu]man” (Busst, 1967: 19) that only existed before the androgyne Adam was split into

woman and man. This is not to suggest Rossetti saw Skipsey as an Adam-like, Christ-like, divine redeemer, but instead that social equality could be achieved in the transcendental power of art and that the artist as cultural androgyne represented social unity.

The correspondence surrounding the Pre-Raphaelites reveals some of what Skipsey and Dixon experienced in London, but does not provide a complete record and it is doubtful whether a full reconstruction is possible. Yet, the following of traces and overturning fragments of information does reveal a previously unknown encounter. In Bram Stoker's *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (1906), he lists some of the guests who had experienced the "range of [Irving's...] hospitalities at the Lyceum and elsewhere" (Stoker, 1906: 314).¹⁵⁰ Among this list is the name "Joseph Skipsey" (Stoker, 1906: 319). Although Stoker states this list refers to those in receipt of hospitality 'at the Lyceum *and* elsewhere', letters from Skipsey to Stoker show he and Dixon were invited, on the evening of 21st June, "into a private box to witness the marvellous performances of Mr Irving & Miss Terry" (Skipsey, 1880j: 1). It is not, however, meeting Ellen Terry (1847-1928) or Henry Irving (1838-1905) the correspondence reveals, but in the "high opinion" Skipsey had from the "moment [he] met with you at The Lyceum" (Skipsey, 1880m: 1) is the revelation that Skipsey met with Bram Stoker.

There is no suggestion Terry, Irving, or Stoker knew either Skipsey or Dixon personally prior to the invitation to a 'private box' at The Lyceum. Nor is it clear that Dixon had "had the consideration to present [...Stoker] with a copy of [...Skipsey's] Book of Lyrics" (Skipsey, 1880m: 2) prior to the visit, yet the invitation to a 'private box', rather than just free tickets, suggests a level of familiarity and acceptance emanating from one of Terry, Irving, or Stoker. I have found no evidence of these individuals corresponding with either Skipsey or Dixon before this visit, but in Skipsey's assumption Stoker had received a copy of his poetry from Thomas Dixon is the suggestion that the

¹⁵⁰ There was a Lyceum Theatre in Sunderland that opened in 1852, it was destroyed by fire in 1855. The theatre re-opened as the New Royal Lyceum Theatre with Irving in his first professional role as Gaston, Duke of Orleans, in *Richelieu: the Conspiracy* on 29th September 1856.

invitations came from Bram Stoker. While there is the evidence of Skipsey and Dixon communicating with Rossetti before being invited into his home, the only correspondence I have uncovered involving Stoker is after Skipsey returned home.

Letters within Bram Stoker's correspondence that forms part of Leeds University's *Brotherton Collection*, however, point to a friendship that could have carried sufficient influence to induce such an invitation from Stoker. Accompanying Skipsey and Dixon to watch Terry and Irving perform was another associate of Stoker's: the artist Alfred Dixon.¹⁵¹ Little is known about Alfred Dixon, but I have found twelve letters from him to Stoker and, through the thanks for theatre tickets, his impressions of various Irving performances, and the descriptions of his struggles to establish an artistic career, it is clear the pair were associates and friends in the first half of the 1880s at least; if Thomas was not the source of initial contact with Stoker, it may have been Alfred who secured the invitation into a 'private box'.¹⁵²

Skipsey's experiences and the "other kindred souls" (Skipsey, 1880l: 1) he met while in London must have been beyond his expectations when he stood at Newcastle's Central Station awaiting the "4pm" (Skipsey, 1880g: 1) train, but the trip was not without missed opportunities and regrets. In writing his thanks to Dante Rossetti for the "welcome" he received on his "visit to the Great City" (Skipsey, 1880l: 1), Skipsey stated he "had one [...] regret when [he] left London & that was [he...] had not been able to see [Dante's...] noble-minded brother" (Skipsey, 1880l: 2) William. To this one regret, Skipsey adds, when writing to Bram Stoker, his visit:

would have been greatly enhanced had [he] had the honour, as [he] at one time was led to

¹⁵¹ I have found three letters from Alfred to Thomas Dixon (all written early in 1880) and, as he addresses them to either "Dear Friend Dixon" or "Dear Friend Tom Dixon", it appears they were not related.

¹⁵² Alfred was reluctant to date his letters, but where he did the range of dates given (alongside those I have been able to establish with any certainty) place his correspondence with Stoker between 1880 and 1884; it is not clear any of the letters were sent before June 1880. Alfred clearly had connections to Sunderland as five of the letters (three to Thomas Dixon, two to Stoker) are addressed from there; nine further letters were sent from three London addresses: 2a Limerston Street, Chelsea; 29 Cochrane Street, St. Johns Wood, and the Savage Club, Lancaster House; one letter is unaddressed and undated. A number of Alfred's letters to Stoker refer to his painting *A Stowaway* which was bought and exhibited by The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; the painting was "destroyed in World War II" (Wright, 2006: 302).

think [he] should have had [,] of shaking hands with these two high-sould [*sic*] & most perfect adepts [Irving and Terry] in an art for which I have always had the greatest esteem. (Skipsey, 1880m: 3)

Despite these complaints, the worth of the trip to London was “of more value than the coffers of the millionaire” (Skipsey, 1880l: 1) to Skipsey and the social capital developed, in connecting with some of the most influential nineteenth-century network during those precious “few days [of] liberty” (Skipsey, 1880f: 2), would yet prove invaluable.

8.3 The return home

Although Skipsey and Thomas Dixon arrived separately in London, there is nothing to suggest they returned north independently and it must have been with a sense of triumph. A letter from Alfred Dixon to Stoker (10th July) immediately following the trip, however, foreshadowed tragedy. Alfred writes that:

Tom Dixon [...] is ill. [...] I saw him today he is a little better. was little delirious [*sic*]. and talking about pictures. and Rossetti – poor fellow – it is partly reaction from the glorious time he must have had. (Dixon, A: 1880c: 1-2)

This was followed (13th July), from Skipsey to Dante Rossetti, by the “startling news [...] from Sunderland [...] Mr Thos Dixon is dead” (Skipsey, 1880h: 1). Although Rossetti speculated the “well-meaning Georgie Jones finished [him] off in that scrambling jaunt she gave him” (Rossetti, 2010: 227), Dixon had suffered from a respiratory affliction for many years and had approached, by letter of course, the prominent London physician Dr Thomas Southwood Smith in 1857 for a prognosis.¹⁵³ He received the following doleful verdict: “If the state of your lungs be such as you describe there is no hope. Organic [?deterioration] is going on which no human power can arrest” (insertion in

¹⁵³ Dr Thomas Smith (1788-1861) was a prominent figure in the mid-nineteenth-century drive to improve public health and was a close friend of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832); Smith carried out the public dissection of Bentham’s body.

original, Milburn, 1984: 10). While the letters announcing Dixon's death refer to an extreme asthma attack, it is possible an industrial disease called suberosis caused his death.¹⁵⁴ Although Dr Smith was unable to provide a specific prognosis, a cure for his ailment, or even hope, it was not until 11th July 1880 that his lungs failed.

Skipsey had visited Dixon shortly before he died, finding him "in a hopelessly weak condition. Conversation was out of the question" (Skipsey, 1880h: 1), and he simply "took his hand & sat in sympathetic silence by his couch [...] for the space of two hours" (Skipsey, 1880h: 1-2). Upon leaving, Skipsey "had the impression [he would...] see him no more in the flesh" (Skipsey, 1880h: 2) and so it was. Another of Dixon's friends, the orientalist William Brockie (1811-90), wrote to Spence Watson with further details:

[Dixon] squeezed [Brockie's] hand with a sort of grasp half convulsive half conscious. Ill as he was, he thought he might yet recover, if allowed to fall into a quiet sleep [...] at 10.20pm [...] he had just breathed his last [and...] he [...] had fallen quietly asleep.

His brothers Stafford and John were in the house, but neither of them saw him die. (Brockie, 1880: 1-2)

Although the death was unexpected by others, and despite Brockie stating Dixon 'thought he might yet recover', correspondence from Alfred Dixon suggests Thomas knew his death was imminent as "he had an empty will form in his portmanteau" (Dixon, A, 1880d: 3). Alfred was concerned, as he told Bram Stoker, about the likely disposal of Thomas' personal property in the absence of a will:

I am sorry to say he made a bit of a muddle after all. There is no will – so all the drawing. books. pictures &c. &c. etchings – that he had been working all his life to get for the town. and which he told all. would come to the town 'when he was gone' will of course be claimed by The son. a worthless man I believe a ne'er-do-well in Australia – Those Rossetti Drawings

¹⁵⁴ Suberosis, a hypersensitivity pneumonitis caused by inhaling cork dust (Morrell, 2003), was first described among Portuguese cork workers in 1955.

of course are lost – unless Rossetti could claim them. (Dixon, A, 1880d: 1-2)

Despite Dixon's predilection for passing on books, the objectified cultural capital that remained on his death must have been astounding, as Brockie indicates:

There is a vast amount of interesting material amongst the deceased's papers [...] + all of his, together with his valuable library, would be squandered or lost if left to the mercy of his brothers [...] I have therefore taken it upon myself [...] to see that everything is kept intact till the young man [Dixon's son] comes home. His estate will make, if all goes well, between three or four thousand pounds [...] I mean to go over the boxes and drawers in house very carefully [...] so as to separate what is valuable from what is worthless. Nothing however will be destroyed.¹⁵⁵ (Brockie, 1880: 2-3)

Brockie had no faith in the preservation of Dixon's culturally valuable possessions if 'left to the mercy of his brothers' and in this is visible another factor creating archival silence. It is unclear what motivated Brockie's mistrust, whether he thought they might (not understanding the cultural value of artefacts) simply dispose of valuable artefacts or sell them for their own personal gain, but his concerns illustrate the precariousness of archival presences. When an individual is an anomaly within their family or social circle, as Dixon was, the unexpected death of an owner of significant objects can not only result in objectified cultural capital being exchanged for economical capital but also the destruction of culturally significant items through ignorance.¹⁵⁶ Where this happens within a working-class environment, it is doubly unfortunate because hegemonic structures are less likely to sanction the detection of traces, unless amplified by connection to those with larger volumes of authorised forms of capital.

Perhaps, in light of Dr Smith's prognosis, Dixon lived with the knowledge that every breath

¹⁵⁵ The Bank of England 'inflation calculator' estimates £4,000 in 1880 equated to £441,574.47 in 2016 (<http://bankofengland.education/inflationcalculator/>).

¹⁵⁶ In his lecture on Dixon, James Patterson recalled a conversation he had with Dixon where he told Patterson "no one in this house cares for the kind of book I read" (Patterson, 1911: 9).

he took might be his last and this fuelled his remarkable energy and persistence with letter writing; living with the inevitable failure of his lungs perhaps gave rise to a desire to complete as many 'good works' while he was still able, developing a cultural infrastructure for Sunderland, and promoting the work of those he felt were more talented than himself. Dixon improved the lives of many within his own community and he touched (or intruded upon) the lives of many culturally significant individuals. The reaction to his death is testimony to the impact he had as "kind + sombre letters [arrived] from D.G. Rossetti, W.B. Scott, E. Burne Jones, Frances Cobbe, A. Legros, Max Müller, [...] lamenting Thomas Dixon's sudden unexpected demise" (Brockie, 1880: 3). The greatest testimony came from Max Müller (1823-1900), professor of languages at Oxford:

Thomas Dixon was not a learned man, but [...] his letters, in spite of occasional mistakes in spelling, showed a clearer insight into the true objects of all my writings [...] and conveyed to me more useful criticisms than many a review in our best [...] journals. How he found time to all he did, to read all he read, is still a riddle to me. Nothing gives me a stronger faith in the intellectual vigour and moral strength of the English people than that such a man as Thomas Dixon could have lived and passed away almost unknown except to his friends and fellow citizens. (cited in Milburn, 1981: 21, ellipsis in original)

Or that:

We must not judge England by its so-called head or capital city [...] but by its backbone that runs through the provinces, and but its noble heart that beats so strongly in the breasts of such men as Thomas Dixon [...] a truer, more noble man than many a Duke or Marquis. (cited in Patterson, 1911: 12)

That an Oxford professor sent proofs of his *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1866) to him for critical comments is testimony to his capacity and standing, but for that same professor to speak in such appreciative terms of a man variously described as 'annoying' or 'irritating' is indicative of the fact that most of what he did was selfless and for the betterment of others. That his death came

just a few days after he was able to realise “his heart’s desire in bringing [Skipsey...] up to London to see & shake hands with, & enjoy the conversation” (Skipsey, 1880I: 1) of cultural figures beyond the reach of a Northumbrian coal miner, is a fitting epitaph.

With Thomas Dixon’s death coming so soon after meeting him, Dante Rossetti seems to have been particularly affected by the sudden departure. Rossetti sent his condolences to Skipsey, he was “shocked [by...] the sudden calamity of poor Dixon’s death” (Rossetti, 1880: 1) a sentiment he shared with his sister Christina, his mother Frances, and W.B. Scott. While these sentiments could be seen as platitudes, a social reflex in response to death, there seems more gravity to his comments and a real mourning for the loss of Dixon’s “high minded candour” (Rossetti, 1880: 1) and the fact that he had been “truly [...] useful in his generation” (Rossetti, 1880: 2). To Christina Rossetti, Dante expanded:

I never knew of any one individual in any walk of life [...] who was so entirely devoted to promoting intellectual good among those within his reach. (Rossetti, 2010: 230).

Rather than just bringing Skipsey to his attention, Rossetti clearly alludes here to the wider cultural influence Dixon had. This is illustrated in the impact of his death on the Sunderland Art Gallery, which Dixon had helped to establish. As Peter Quinn argues, the gallery was established with the intention (wholly Dixon’s) that it would be a space in which art students and amateurs could study “high quality modern works” (Quinn, 1997: 293) to improve their own work. Beyond this, however, Dixon also sought to reduce spatial and class boundaries. Spatial differences were overcome by exhibiting local artists alongside those “from the metropolitan and cultured centre” (Quinn, 1997: 294) and class boundaries were breached in allowing open access to the gallery on “alternate days” (Quinn, 1997: 294). The Sunderland Art Gallery was a space where the difference between local and national art was minimised and where all classes could view both alongside one another. Upon Dixon’s death:

his donations quickly acquired a commemorative or memorial aspect [and no individual...]

was able to take up [his] energies and contacts, and the purchase of further works for the gallery was done from a fund built up from the takings at the gallery cloakroom.¹⁵⁷ (Quinn, 1997: 293)

Local artists were marginalised as travelling exhibitions took precedence and the gallery instead became as space in which the ‘metropolitan and cultured centre’ was, effectively, able to accentuate its dominance in “visiting its own preoccupations upon the locality” (Quinn, 1997: 299) and the ‘intellectual good’ of those within Dixon’s sphere of influence suffered.

Thomas Dixon’s sphere of influence was vast and it is unlikely Rossetti’s admiration for his “promoting [of] intellectual good among those within his reach” (Rossetti, 2010: 230) was limited by class or geography. Not only did Dixon strive to increase cultural opportunities locally, he introduced Whitman and Skipsey to new audiences and, in the contact Rossetti had with Dixon and Skipsey, one sees the repairing of the damage caused by the ‘Fleshly School of Poetry’ scandal that caused Rossetti’s withdrawal from publishing poetry. Following the receipt of Skipsey’s poems, Rossetti asked Dixon (17th December, 1879) to secure “some copies of the Tauchnitz edn of [his] Poems” (Rossetti, 2009: 379). It is to this letter the editors of *TCDGR* attribute “the beginning of DGR’s revival of interest in writing and publishing poetry that led” (Rossetti, 2009: 379ⁿ) to the resumption of Rossetti’s poetry career with *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881) and *Poems: A New Edition* (1881). As such, the ‘intellectual good’ of even Rossetti was improved by being within Dixon’s ‘reach’.

Following the death of Skipsey’s “best friend” (Skipsey, 1880h: 2), Rossetti was deeply concerned about the impact it would have on Skipsey: “Not my least thought in the matter is for yourself – when so much more alone in spirit” (Rossetti, 1880: 1-2). Rossetti expressed similarly to W.B. Scott:

I thought [Dixon] looked like a sufferer from absolute physical exhaustion, but never

¹⁵⁷ It had been Dixon’s intention that purchases were to be funded by admissions.

expected the end to come so soon. [...] Skipsey was of a tougher mould. I fear poor Skipsey's mental outlook & even worldly prospects are greatly worsened by the loss of such intercourse and aid by publicity as Dixon zealously afforded. (Rossetti, 2010: 227)

Dixon's death, which came within two years of meeting the poet, was a severe blow to Skipsey and, as Rossetti outlines perceptively, affected four specific sectors of Skipsey's life: his mental health, his poetry, his isolation, and the propagation of his work.¹⁵⁸ Skipsey's letters following Dixon's death are desperate in their mourning for the man "to whose soul [his...] was bound by the golden cord of an enlightenment & an ennobling sympathy" (Skipsey, 1880k: 1), he found the personal loss "a great one & more especially [because his...] circle of cultured & genuine friends is so small" (Skipsey, 1880k: 2).¹⁵⁹ The effect of this loss on Skipsey's literary career, having been the one person to bridge the gap from periphery to cultural centre on his behalf, is inestimable.

As discussed in Chapter Seven, Skipsey was haunted by death and misfortune; he outlined this when writing an autobiographical sketch for Rossetti at the beginning of their correspondence:

I was born in a miners hut at Percy Main Colliery near North Shields in the year 1832 [...] I was the youngest of a family of eight [...], my father [...] was shot dead by a police constable in a pitman's riot a few weeks after I saw the light of day [..., and] the misfortune which overtook us ^{^at the outset of my existence^} seems to have taken a special liking to the youngest & most helpless of the family & so has pursued him with a dragon like vigilance from that day to this. [...] I may further add that I am a married man [...] have had eight children four of whom have died of fever & one of whom met his ~~by~~ end by unfortunately falling before some coal waggons.¹⁶⁰ (Skipsey (I), 1878b: 1-3).

¹⁵⁸ Dante Rossetti also died (9th April, 1882) within two years of meeting Skipsey.

¹⁵⁹ Skipsey borrows from his own poetry here when modifying a line from 'The Guardian Angel', where he writes of a "golden cord of sympathy" (ML1878: 154-5, l. 3) that ties the "spirit Emmalina thy guardian angel" (l. 1) to the watched-over individual.

¹⁶⁰ Rossetti wrote to Dixon (23rd September, 1878) requesting further information about "Mr. Skipsey's present circumstances" (Rossetti, 2009: 171), this was Skipsey's response.

With the premature death of his father and the loss of five of his eight children, it is easy to see how Skipsey felt misfortune stalking him with 'a dragon like vigilance'. The death and misfortune he suffered created the social existence that shaped his poetry, which is revealed most explicitly in 'O, my Spirit!':

O, MY [*sic*] spirit, art thou vanquisht?
Is thy latest prospect gone?
Must my task he thus relinquisht
Ere my noble end is won?

Must I die, and be remember'd
Never more, ah, never more!
As the clown who laught and slumber'd
Out his passing mortal hour?

Has my life been one untiring
Vigil kept at Sorrow's shrine,—
One unceasing toil acquiring
What unsought for had been mine?

Have I undergone privations
That the mightiest souls had bow'd,—
Stoopt to unearn'd degradations,
But to die, as die the crowd?

Whither wilt thou wander? whither?
From thy quest my soul refrain!
Sure the God who sent me hither
Had some purpose in my pain!

(*PS&B*1862: 63)

Written prior to meeting Dixon, in 'Oh, My Spirit!' Skipsey casts himself in the role of Job and can only see this life as unending, senseless suffering; the overall effect is a kind of sentimental pessimism and a sense of inevitability that the unrewarded and 'unceasing toil' can only lead to a frustrating and anonymous end. The loss of Dixon perpetuated this feeling.

Skipsey had clearly learned the importance of social capital from his engagements with Dixon, however, and building a network of contacts and readers seems to have been never far from his mind. In the letter Skipsey sent Stoker acknowledging the condolences he received, Skipsey

continued Dixon's work by including:

a copy of a journal [...] containing selections from my Songs some of which are not in the Book of Lyrics [...] I also enclose copies which you will perhaps do me the kindness to present to Mr Irving & to Miss Terry as a token of my admiration & the highest regard by one whose name I imagine has already been mentioned to them by Mr Dixon. (Skipsey, 1880m: 2)

In presuming Dixon had mentioned his name to Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, Skipsey adopts two of Dixon's methods of increasing his social capital. First, by sending objectified capital to a recipient with significant volumes of social capital and, second, sending it to well-known associates of his initial target. Without Dixon's enthusiasm and persistence, unfortunately, it seems Skipsey's successes were not as pronounced and the amount of correspondence located written after Dixon's death decreases significantly.

Despite Dixon's death, or maybe because of it, Skipsey remained in the minds of the influential people he met in London. In Edward Burne-Jones, despite his patronising views, was another individual prepared to utilise their social capital on Skipsey's behalf. Emerging from a series of seven letters from Burne-Jones to Skipsey (two) and Mary Gladstone (five), is how the artist envisaged some "lightening of [Skipsey's] life [...] so that he might not live so much in the dark" (cited in March-Phillipps, 1917: 82), could be achieved.¹⁶¹ Burne-Jones, like Dixon, used his social capital to aid Skipsey, but where Dixon valued Skipsey's poetry, encouraging his literary career by distributing his work, Burne-Jones patronisingly advised Mary Gladstone not to "read the poems as literature but look at them as [...] wonders to have been written at all in such dark surroundings" (cited in March-Phillipps, 1917: 82). Rather than provide an outlet for Skipsey's poetry, Burne-Jones sought, "now his friend is gone [...] somewhere in the North [where] a librarian might be wanted" (cited in March-Phillipps, 1917: 83). The tone Burne-Jones adopts in his letters to Mary Gladstone

¹⁶¹ The letters to Skipsey are reprinted in *RSWB* (pp. 75-6) and those to Mary Gladstone in *Some Hawarden Letters 1878-1913, written to Mrs. Drew (Miss Mary Gladstone)* (pp. 82-85). The letters to Mary are undated and those to Skipsey are dated "September, 1880" (*RSWB*: 75).

reflects his attitude toward Skipsey. While it is likely Burne-Jones embellishes his language for the purpose of the correspondence, to gain assistance from the Prime Minister, there is pity when Edward rhetorically asks: “how terrible the pit life must have been from infancy to a nature so sensitive and imaginative” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 83). Furthermore, when, in his second letter to Mary Gladstone, Burne-Jones advises her “my pitman has written” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 83), he effectively takes ownership of Skipsey as a pet. In taking ownership of Skipsey in this manner, Burne-Jones frames himself as Skipsey’s middle-class saviour, individually responsible for improving the life of his social inferior.

Although less than complimentary toward Skipsey’s poetry, his “attitude to the man [was] extremely practical” (RKRTB: 47) and his letters were successful in securing a “kind proposition” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 84) from the Prime Minister. This was offered to Skipsey as follows:

a friend of mine [...] much interested in your work [...] would like to offer you a little annual sum for the purchase of books or photographs, or what not. It is not much—£10 yearly, I think—and it comes straight from the Prime Minister, and you can take it without feeling any discomfort, for it is from a public fund for such purposes. (cited in *RSWB*: 75)

The payment of £10 annually was at odds with the desire to find Skipsey a librarianship as he was, according to Burne-Jones, “not in need of money” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 84) and the amount awarded contradicts another letter Burne-Jones sent to Mary Gladstone. Concerned the payment might end should the government change, Burne-Jones asks:

Please is it a permanent fund of one hundred a year or does it end if the country wants to be Tory? I only want to know because of the wording of my letter, not that it would otherwise make any difference, for he is so simple that if he liked to take money at all five pounds would be the same as a hundred. (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 85)

The difference lies in Burne-Jones’s reference to ‘one hundred a year’ and that he appears to negotiate that figure down to as little as ‘five pounds’ seems to indicate Burne-Jones felt Skipsey

was undeserving of such a sum, but would be happy with the recognition alone. It was confirmed on 4th October, 1880, by civil servant Edward Hamilton, “that Mr. Gladstone has directed that an annuity of £10 should be paid to you out of the Royal Charity Fund” (cited in *PGCPS*: 34).¹⁶² The award was reported in local presses from Portsmouth to Aberdeen and there is a sense of pride in the reports that the centre has recognised a provincial poet and awarded, as Kathrine Jackson describes, “institutionalized approval” (Jackson, 2014: 68). Although Jackson stops short of depicting the award as a symbol of Bourdieu’s institutionalized capital, it clearly represented the “acceptation” (Skipsey (I), 1871: 7) Skipsey sought.

The offer, the award, and the institutionalized capital, however, prove contradictory to the ambitions Burne-Jones had for Skipsey as he (repeatedly) states in his letters. Instead Burne-Jones felt the miner needed “leisure to read [...] he cannot read [...as he] has literally no time it is hard work in the pit and then [...] sleep, and more pit, and so on always” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 84). In this perpetual repetition, as in the recreation of a pitman’s day discussed in Chapter Seven, is the suggestion of the punishment of Sisyphus and a common theme emerges. Burne-Jones was appalled most of all that Skipsey had “No sunlight (better than all books), no summer, no history of the year, but darkness always” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 84). This lack of daylight seems to have been Burne-Jones’ primary motivation in wanting Skipsey to live on the “upper earth” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 84), and in the concern surrounding a miner living in permanent darkness is a foreshadowing of H. G. Wells’ Morlocks, that is extended in a contrast that is further suggestive of Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895).

It was a widely held perception that coal miners lived their entire lives underground as a visit to a Kent public house by, Durham union leader, John Wilson (1837-1915) attests:

the barman wanted to learn who I was [...] I told him I was a pitman. [...] “Why, I thought

¹⁶² *RSWB* advises that in “January, 1886, Skipsey received a donation from the Royal Bounty of £50, and the annuity was raised to £25 a year” (76); this is discussed further in Chapter Nine.

you pitmen lived down there always,” said the querist. It was not long before I gathered [...] he was not alone in his ideas, for there was a generally held opinion that [coal...] was dug out of the bowels of the earth by a class of people who were little removed from barbarism, and whose home was in the eternal darkness. (cited in Benson, 1980: 2)

Burne-Jones is clearly of a similar opinion that miners lived in ‘eternal darkness’ and even intimates Skipsey’s family were fed on coal as he describes that, after leaving his librarianship at The Lit & Phil, Joseph “was obliged to go back into the earth to get food for his wife and babies” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 84). In the concerns of his living in perpetual darkness, the atavistic representation, and in the pet-like patronising of Skipsey, can be observed a parallel with Wells’ description of a Morlock:

hidden in a black shadow [...it was] a dull white, [with...] strange large greyish-red eyes [...and] was flaxen hair on its head and down its back [...] it ran on all-fours, or only with its forearms held very low. (Wells, 2005: 45-6)

Physically altered by its underground existence Wells’ portrayal above could equally be a description of the woodcuts accompanying Lord Ashley’s Children’s Employment Commission report and is suggestive of Burne-Jones’ atavistic description of Skipsey. This is counterpoised by an Eloi-like representation of his own life in “the comfort of the daylight race” (Wells, 2006: 47) where Burne-Jones’ languid afternoons consisted of “doing no work but lying down and reading about ancient Irish things” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 83). In a further foreshadowing of Wells, Burne-Jones even states, “I wonder they don’t try and kill us all” (cited in March-Phillips, 1917: 83). Wells was terrified of the growing organisation of the working classes, paranoid his own tenuous grip on a middle-class existence would loosen and he would be consumed by the morass, miners as the most immediately recognisable members of the working-class and the most organised were a clear and obvious threat “watching [him] out of the darkness” (Wells, 2006: 45). Skipsey’s route out of the darkness, however, was becoming clearer.

Having had an all too brief contact with the bright lights of London, Skipsey undoubtedly returned to coalmining frustrated with working underground and his remoteness from the cultural centre. Like Camus' Sisyphus, that "futile labourer of the underworld [...]" when [...Skipsey] had seen [...] the face of the world, enjoyed water and sun, [the] warm stones and sea [of contact with a cultural elite] he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness" (Camus, 1955: 108) of coalmining. Although both Bunting and Vicinus assert Skipsey ended his days a working miner (Bunting, 1976: 9; Vicinus, 1974: 170), within two years of visiting that "famous Town" (Skipsey, 1880f: 2) Skipsey left the 'infernal darkness' permanently and returned to the 'upper earth'. As Wilde famously wrote when asked for advice on pursuing a literary career, however, "it is impossible to live by literature" (cited in Sherard, 1916: 254) and "friends again sought some place for him where he might have more ease" (RSWB: 1909: 71). As Martha Vicinus argues, these friends "recognized [Skipsey] could never become a journalist, and would never earn anything from his verse. Without the training to become a secretary or librarian, the only alternative was a respectable unskilled job" (Vicinus, 1974: 170) and he was appointed as caretaker of a new Board School in Newcastle; as Rossetti stated, the improvement in Skipsey's position was "not to be done in a moment" (Rossetti, 1878a: 6). This role, however, allowed Skipsey far greater leisure time than had previously been afforded him, and in the years immediately succeeding his permanent escape from mining, Skipsey was at his most prolific as a poet, a literary critic, and as someone able to invest time in the development of his social capital.

CHAPTER NINE

The uses of social capital

9.1 “Get Up!”: the poet as subject

At the 1856 Royal Academy exhibition, a painting by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Henry Wallis (1830-1916) caused a sensation. *The Death of Chatterton* (1856), described by Ruskin as “faultless and wonderful” (Ruskin, 1856: 60), portrayed Thomas Chatterton (1752-70) driven to suicide by poverty, a tragic hero symbolising the suffering necessary to be a poet.¹⁶³ In representing Chatterton in a Christ-like pose, his lifeless hand stretched down toward “torn sheets of poetry on the floor” (Tate.org), Wallis portrays the poet as a martyr, sacrificing himself for his insight and art. Although far from the Romantic hero, which Chatterton’s idealised sacrifice came to embody, Joseph Skipsey also came to represent his own class of people. The pain and suffering Skipsey endured translated itself in his poetry and became an embodiment of the conditions of the mining classes. This chapter examines how the privations, labour, and self-sacrifices Skipsey endured were finally recompensed with, in terms of cultural and social capital, rewards beyond his comprehension. This first section reveals an image of Skipsey that has hidden in plain sight for over 130 years, further showing how his poetry has been used as a representation of miners’ experiences and, drawing on the idea of poet as martyr, investigates Skipsey as an idealised working-class father. The final two sections argue that Skipsey took the social capital acquired through his friendship with Thomas Dixon and utilised it to better his own life and the lives of others. These sections illustrate how Skipsey mobilised his social capital, how that brought him to the centre of British literary culture, and how

¹⁶³ Chatterton was infamous for fraudulently passing off his writings as those of, fifteenth-century monk, Thomas Rowley. His death from an overdose of laudanum, aged 17, has passed into mythology as a poverty-induced suicide (Groom, 2004) creating an image of a proto-Romantic tragic hero. Chatterton was commemorated in poetry by Wordsworth (‘Resolution and Independence’), Coleridge (‘Monody on the Death of Chatterton’), Keats (‘To Chatterton’), and Dante Rossetti (‘Five English Poets’).

he engaged with a new cohort of poets that included prominent members of the Rhymers Club: W.B. Yeats, Ernest Rhys, and Ernest Radford. This chapter moves Skipsey from being a recipient of philanthropy to an individual using his influence to enhance the careers of a younger generation of poets.

On the cover of the Basil Bunting edited *Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems* is the painting “‘Get Up!’” (1880-84) by Alfred Dixon (Appendix Five), a painting that has long been known to have been influenced by Skipsey’s poem of the same name. This painting, currently held at Newcastle’s Laing Art Gallery, was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1884 and featured in an NCB-sponsored touring exhibition, entitled ‘Coal: British Mining in Art 1680-1980’, during 1982 and 1983. In the exhibition catalogue, Dixon’s painting is listed as being “accompanied by four lines of verse by the Northumbrian pitman poet Joseph Skipsey” (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1982: 74), with the two four-line stanzas of Skipsey’s poem “‘Get Up!’” constricted into just four lines. While it is known the poem inspired the painting, it has only ever been associated with Skipsey in abstraction. What was previously unknown is the miner represented in the painting is Joseph Skipsey himself.

As little is known about Alfred Dixon and his paintings little studied, that Skipsey’s poem was the inspiration for the painting has not been investigated further.¹⁶⁴ However, my uncovering of Alfred’s correspondence with Bram Stoker within Leeds University’s *Brotherton Collection* reveals Skipsey to be a more intimate part of the painting than previously understood. Following the death of Thomas Dixon, Alfred wrote to Bram Stoker (15th July 1880) with some familiarity that he would “see Skipsey at the funeral tomorrow” before adding he is “painting Skipsey as miner. going off in the morn ‘To win his bairns their bite & sup’ he kisses them asleep” (Dixon, A, 1880d: 4). He makes

¹⁶⁴ The only critical study of Alfred Dixon I have found is Peter Quinn’s PhD thesis, *Picturing Locality: Art and Regional Identity in the North East of England*, and this only in conjunction with Thomas Dixon. Quinn advises Alfred was a “Sunderland artist”, “a long-time associate of Thomas [Dixon]” (Dixon, 1997: 294), whose “career only developed on his taking up residence in London” (Quinn, 1997: 75). Quinn also considers Alfred’s “attempt to ‘realise’ the [working-class] woman as mother” (Quinn, 1997: 295) in his painting *Forsaken (The Interior of a Workhouse)* (1879), this is discussed in this chapter.

a similar assertion, on 23rd September 1880, when stating he “shall see Skipsey on Saturday. He is my model” (Dixon, A, 1880e: 2-3). The line from the poem and the description of the ‘action’, clearly indicate Skipsey sat as Dixon’s model for the painting. In this revelation, Skipsey is transformed from poet to subject, a process that adds a layer of significance to an already emotionally charged lyric.

Joseph Skipsey’s poem, ““Get Up!””, has become representative of the common miner’s experience of leaving home each day knowing that “ere night he may be carried home a mangled corpse” (cited in Benson, 1980: 43). A short, simple, affective, and powerful poetic representation of the psychological pressure miners faced, it has been quoted widely in the aftermath of pit disasters and in works seeking to humanise miners. The poem was printed in an article in, the medical journal, *The Lancet* (Oliver, 1907: 1768-72) that focussed on rescue efforts after an explosion at Courrières in France (10th March, 1906), and in the *Cambridge Independent Press*, following an explosion at Glamorgan’s Senghenydd Colliery (14th October, 1913).¹⁶⁵ On a smaller scale the *Morpeth Herald and Reporter* used ““Get Up!”” in an editorial by “An Ashington Widow” when “seventeen men and boys [were...] killed in the Northumbrian pits” (Wansbeck, 1938: 10) during a four-month period. A story in *The Manchester Guardian*, on ‘The Colliery Explosions of the Last Twenty Years’, concludes “this chronicle of disaster has a rhetoric of its own, and forms a commentary upon the pathetic verses written by Joseph Skipsey, the miners’ poet” (A Correspondent, 1885: 6), and prints the poem:

“GET UP!” the caller calls, “Get up!”
And in the dead of night,
To win the bairns their bite and sup,
I rise a weary wight.

My flannel dudden donn’d, thrice o’er
My birds are kiss’d, and then
I with a whistle shut the door
I may not ope again.

(CftCF1886: 108)

¹⁶⁵ The accidents at Courrières (1099 deaths) and Senghenydd (439 deaths) remain, respectively, Europe’s and Britain’s largest number of fatalities in single coalmining accidents.

The poem was even recited in a Parliamentary debate on the 'Constitution of the Coal Commission' when David Adams (1871-1943), MP for Consett, used it to highlight "the gross abuses under which the mining community exists", stating that Skipsey's words were "as true to-day as they were 40 years ago" (House of Commons Hansard, 1937). In Adams' recitation there lies the humanising purpose to which "'Get Up!'" is deployed. The poem shows that the miner was not the "terrible and savage pitman" (Fynes, 1873: 19) of repute but someone who should be afforded protection.

In each of these uses, "'Get Up!'" becomes representative of the psychological impact this daily existential threat had on the miner. In the poem, we see the physical, emotional, and financial pressures brought to bear on the miner setting out to work; the reader is presented with, as Keegan and Goodridge argue, a reversal of "the familiar 'cottage door' scene of homecoming" (Keegan, 2013: 352). Rather than the worker coming home and the family unit being reconstituted, as envisaged in 'Willy to Jinny' (discussed in Chapter Seven), the miner departs with the threat he may not return. Like Chatterton's self-sacrifice, Skipsey's miner, still 'weary' from the previous day, must rouse himself to earn the household the means to live while placing his own survival in jeopardy. However, in the contemplative silence that exists in the closing of the door he 'may not ope again' there is a stillness in which the reader comes to the realisation the poem's real subject is not the miner. Instead, the focus falls on the children whose father may be taken from them while they themselves are consumed in the silence of sleep. When reading the kisses from the perspective that Skipsey's poetry was an "essential [...] relief [...for his] feeling[s]" (Skipsey (I), 1878i: 8), the sleep becomes a thin veil that exists between life and death. While Keegan and Goodridge suggest the number of kisses the miner delivers are, "like Keats's 'kisses[,']...' simply a random number that seems to fit the poem" (Keegan, 2013: 240-2) Skipsey's 'thrice' is more pointed.¹⁶⁶ The number of

¹⁶⁶ The allusion is to 'La Belle Dame sans Merci': "She took me to her Elfin grot,/ And there she wept and sighed full sore,/ And there I shut her wild wild eyes/ With kisses four (Keats, 2006: 334-6, ll. 29-32). In correspondence, Keats, somewhat flippantly, explains "Why four kisses [...] because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse [...] and I was obliged to choose an even number that both eyes might have fair play: and to speak truly I think two a piece quite sufficient" (cited in Cohen, 1967: 12).

In the silence of the closed door and that of the sleeping children, there is inevitability that the sorrows the miner and his family endure are essential and elemental parts of their existence. Death, to the God-fearing Skipsey, is not “fearful” however:

Skipsey's position 'here below' has three senses: it is physical, social, and spiritual. Physically, the below refers to his life underground; socially, it relates to his position in the class structure, and spiritually it is his position on earth rather than in Heaven. In each of these senses, Death brings a glorious release into 'the life of life' and a "soul that lives for ever" (l. 12). Rather than seek to reverse the oppression and relieve the suffering of life 'below', Skipsey trusts that anguish in this life will be rewarded in an afterlife. His thoughts become "the sigh of the oppressed creature" (Marx, 2009), which, in turn, become emblematic of what Martha Vicinus translates as a "do-nothing sentimentality" (Vicinus, 1974: 85). Skipsey is the model of a respectable working class, willing to accept his subordinate position in society without looking to overturn the class-based hegemony. He comes to represent the "great masses of the population" who give, as Antonio Gramsci describes, their:

Skipsey, his poems, and this portrait, became not only a subject of the oppression imposed by the 'dominant group' but also an instrument of that oppression.

Writing to Dante Rossetti (11th October, 1880), Skipsey apologised for not having sent a transcript of the “visions of Shelley” (Skipsey, 1880n: 1) they had discussed in June. It was not “from want of leisure” (Skipsey, 1880n: 1) as might have been supposed; instead it was as a by-product of poor economic conditions. According to *RSWB*, in 1880 Skipsey was a deputy overman at Backworth Colliery (*RSWB*: 49) and, as such, part of the underground management structure, he found that, because of:

the circumstance that the Colliery [where he was...] employed was not doing well [,] a deal of dissatisfaction exists among the upper powers which comes down with a thunderous force upon the heads of such poor subalterns as myself. Indeed the strain put upon my feelings through this cause of late has been such as to put me to extreme pain. (Skipsey, 1880n: 1-2)

In describing himself as a subaltern, Skipsey probably refers to the military rank of a junior officer, an individual with rank but little power or influence. While the term has now been co-opted into a very different form in post-colonial studies, Skipsey recognised himself as a subordinate and an oppressed agent within society while simultaneously accepting the position. While able to negotiate “a few days liberty” (Skipsey, 1880f: 2) in June, he had not had the ‘leisure’ to produce the transcript promised.

Within the silences in ““Get Up!””, there is a barely suppressed, tacit acceptance of the fragility of a miner’s life and a resignation that, in his oppressed position as subordinate, it is an unchangeable part of his reality, which, in turn, leads to a pessimistic sentimentality. That fragility haunts every line of the poem in which, as Rossetti thought, “not a word is lost or wanting [..., and was] equal to anything in the language for direct and quiet pathetic force” (Rossetti, 1878a: 4). The power lies in its directness and, in the initial capitalisation of the caller’s call to “GET UP!” (l. 1), the waking of the miner has the same impact upon the unwary reader who is suddenly awakened to the immediacy of mining life. The reader is put in the position of the men at Hartley who, when amongst

“the din and strife of human life” (‘The Hartley Calamity’, *Cf*1886: 21-5, l. 21), have a physical reaction to the “shock [...] felt which makes/ Each human heart-beat heard” (ll. 23-4). Contained within the capitalisation of ‘GET UP!’ and the repetition of the phrase, there lies an insistent, pressing, exclamatory alarm call that operates as both a call to waking, or as an enactment of his response to danger. Where the miner is roused by the caller to don his “flannel dudden” (l. 5), the alarm at Hartley elicits the same reaction, albeit with more rapidity:

Each bosom thuds, as each his duds
 Then snatches and away,
 And to the shaft in terror flees
 With all the speed he may. (ll. 25-28)

As Skipsey did in the reconstruction of the miner’s day described in Chapter Seven, these parallels create an interaction between the poems and bring the pathos Rossetti found and a sense of realism in which the danger in ‘The Hartley Calamity’ is foreshadowed by the threat in “‘Get Up!’”.

Where ‘The Hartley Calamity’, with its dramatic irony that the reader is aware of the miners’ fate while they themselves lack foreknowledge of the impending events, fosters a permanent sense of tragedy, in “‘Get Up!’” there is a persistent sense of threat. Skipsey alerts his reader to this constant sense of impending loss permeating a mining family: they are awoken in the ‘dead of night’ and in the miner’s raising of his ‘weary wight’, with wight acting as a homophone for white, he assumes an otherworldly and ghostly appearance. The use of ‘wight’ here, however, proves problematic. Bunting took great exception, claiming wight has no:

place in modern English or modern Northumbrian as a synonym for man [...and] since Skipsey’s own pronunciation was always that of Tyneside [...] before the Irish navvy immigrants had made ‘geordie’ of it [...he] baffles me when he rhymes ‘night’ (‘neet’) with ‘wight’, which has [...] no Northumbrian sound. (Bunting, 1976: 12-13)

In this passage, Bunting makes an unsupported, unexamined, assumptive statement that undermines his argument. While Bunting may be speaking from personal knowledge of Skipsey’s

Tyneside pronunciations, a sentiment replicated in Skipsey's *ODNB* entry that states "he read his poems in a strong accent and expected others to do so" (Langton, 2014), neither of these positions is supported evidentially. Indeed, in the lack of "dialect words [or...] 'terms of art' from the collieries" (Bunting, 1976: 13) in Skipsey's poetry, is the evidence to the contrary. In avoiding the use of dialect, the lack of "attempt to transliterate dialect pronunciation" (Langton, 2014), or the infrequent use of coal-mining jargon, Skipsey utilises Standard English to open his poetry to a wider audience than otherwise available to the dialect poet.

In his confusion at the use of the word 'wight' there is the suggestion that Bunting is doing two things, one consciously the other unconsciously. Firstly, Bunting was an arch northern nationalist and, as his friend the poet Tom Pickard (1946-) pointed out, believing the ancient borders of the kingdom of Northumbria to be his birth right "over a pint, he [would muse...] about setting up passport controls in the South [...] passionately convinced that we have been screwed by southrons for centuries" (cited in Armstrong, n.d.).¹⁶⁷ In following Skipsey chronologically, and having had physical contact with him, Bunting believed he was carrying on a tradition of Northumbrian poetry he had absorbed through physical contact:

[Skipsey] lived just long enough to come as a visitor to my father's house and hold the baby on his knee, which was me, so I suppose the whole poetic afflatus must have been passed on to me. (cited in Burton, 2013: 456)

In Bunting's supposed absorption of Skipsey's 'poetic afflatus', a divine poetic impulse, is the transference of embodied cultural capital in the form of poetic facility and a conscious attempt by Bunting to appropriate a kind of cultural capital to which he had no access, that which Skipsey represents: the working-class background emblematic of his region's identity. This is an identity

¹⁶⁷ The *OED* defines 'Southron' as "Chiefly Sc. Belonging to or dwelling in the south of Britain; southern" (*OED*, 2017c), its usage is largely derogatory. Bunting uses it in the wide definition the *OED* gives, but it also appears interchangeable with what he regarded as the Establishment, a kind of "metropolitan [thinking that...] represents the singleness of the State" (Burton, 2013: 18).

Bunting is disconnected from by the class into which he was born and the life he led; he had possession of the wrong type of cultural capital. Educated in Yorkshire and Berkshire, Bunting spent much of his time away from his native region and during the late-life revival of his career he sought to reconstitute his Northumbrian identity by attempting “to devise a distinctive mythos for an area [...] marginalized since [...] its Anglo-Saxon heyday when the kingdom of Northumbria had been a major artistic, political, and religious nexus of European culture” (Niven, 2014: 376). Bunting’s ambition was to construct an “independent, autonomous identity and framework for Northumbrian culture” (Niven, 2014: 376) in which he could take a share and to which he could tie himself, thus validating his Northumbrian credentials. The use of Skipsey is part of a wider project, including the biographical poem *Briggflatts* (1966), to validate that Northumbrian identity that even included a physical change as, the poet Denis Goacher (1925-98) reveals, Bunting’s “own Northumbrian accent was [...] manufactured” (cited in Burton, 2013: 16). The absurdly romantic notion of inheriting Skipsey’s ‘poetic afflatus’ through physical contact, to appropriate his working-class cultural capital is part of Bunting’s conscious effort to emphasise his own northern identity.

In this issue, however, Bunting unconsciously denies Skipsey a large portion of his self-education. Although the *OED* lists one of the earliest uses of ‘wight’ to be in the Lindisfarne Gospels, that most Northumbrian of texts, Bunting discovers that ‘wight’ “is not to be found in northern writers” (Bunting, 1976: 13).¹⁶⁸ Thereafter Bunting limits his findings to medieval or Old English texts where he finds it pronounced to rhyme with ‘neet’, “once in *Sir Gawain* and once in *Pearl*, meaning, in each case, a young girl; in *Beowulf*, a thing” (Bunting, 1976: 13).¹⁶⁹ In limiting his search to this specific pronunciation, Bunting passes over nine wights in Shakespeare and one in *Paradise Lost*,

¹⁶⁸ The Bloodaxe edition of *Briggflatts* has an illuminated page from the Lindisfarne Gospels on its front cover.

¹⁶⁹ Bunting ignores the use of “wight” in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (1476), where it is used over 100 times. The editors of *The Riverside Chaucer* (2008) include two noun definitions of “wight”: “creature, person, being” or “weight”, and one adjectival: “strong, active, agile” (Chaucer, 2008: 1306).

writings central to Skipsey's self-development as a writer.¹⁷⁰ It appears that, rather than being aligned with Bunting's perceptions of the language a northern poet should be using, Skipsey's writing and the use of this particular word is actually informed by his own reading. Ignoring, or overlooking, the use of 'wight' in Shakespeare and Milton, whose influence is discussed in Chapter Seven, is to deny the sacrifices he made in his self-education. Rather than using 'wight' as a synonym for 'man' as Bunting suggests, instead Skipsey uses it in its archaic sense, as in the Lindisfarne Gospels, symbolising a supernatural or "unearthly being" (*OED*, 2017c).¹⁷¹ In doing so, the use of 'wight' would be correct for the reinforcement of the ghostly, otherworldly appearance given his miner who, as in Rossetti's description of Skipsey, exists between worlds as a hybrid being.

Having dismissed a dialect reading, however, I would make one concession in that weight can be also pronounced to rhyme with night, which produces another possible reading.¹⁷² To read 'wight' as 'weight' also conforms to the poem's logic, as the weight contained therein is manifold: it is the physical weight of a weary body, the weight of emotional responsibility 'To win the bairns their bite and sup', the weight of physical burden, and the psychological weight of the dangers awaiting him. The weight here also suggests another example of how Skipsey's reading informed his poetry, in considering Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' (Wordsworth, 2006: 109-114). When returning to the Banks of the Wye after "Five years" (l. 1) absence, Wordsworth's speaker reverentially experiences nature that had previously only been regarded "in the hour/ Of thoughtless youth" (ll. 103-4) and finds himself in:

[...] that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lighten'd [...]

(ll. 40-52)

¹⁷⁰ Shakespeare uses "wight" once in 'Sonnet 106', *Henry V*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, twice in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and three times in *Othello*.

¹⁷¹ The *Beowulf* poet uses "wight" in a similar sense when describing Grendel during his attack on Heorot, "Wiht unhælo/ grim ond grædig" (Swanton, 1997: 40, ll. 120-1), as a grim and greedy, unholy creature.

¹⁷² Chaucer uses "wight" to mean "weight" in 'The Knight's Tale' (l. 2145, l. 2520), 'The Franklin's Tale' (l. 1560), and 'The Second Nun's Prologue' (l. 73).

While it is hard to imagine Skipsey's miner in a 'blessed mood' as he leaves home with the possibility of being consumed by the 'unintelligible world' and "laid asleep/ In body, [to] become a living soul" ('Tintern Abbey', ll. 47-8), his lifting of the physical and metaphorical 'weary wight' aligns itself with the 'heavy and weary weight' that is 'lighten'd' by nature in Wordsworth. In this instance is revealed the importance of Wordsworth to Skipsey that has not been considered previously. Following a week in the Lake District in 1886 with the Spence Watson family (*RSWB*: 79), Skipsey was enthused by the region in which Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) had written poetry. Inspired by Nature and the atmosphere of the place, Skipsey wrote 'The Rydal Trip' (*S&L*1892: 166-74) in which "he imagines Wordsworth stooping to crown him 'The Rustic Bard'" (*RSWB*: 82). Liberated from his industrial region and inspired by the Lake District, Skipsey imagined himself sharing the same spaces as Wordsworth where the freedom of Nature and the:

...thoughts of God,
Are mine, as I thro' pathways fare,
That Wordsworth trod. (ll. 129-32)

And, in a reverie, picturing that his poetic forebear:

...mightst have stoopt this hour, to crown
The rustic bard. (ll. 176-78).

How delighted he must have been when W.B. Scott wrote, after reading *ML*1878, that "Wordsworth would have given [...] his respect and shaken [Skipsey] by the hand" (Scott, 1878: 1). This placing of Skipsey alongside Wordsworth clearly carries the prestige of association, but also the negative connotations of being a 'rural bard' and the suggestion of an uncultured primitivism.

The weight of the 'unintelligible world' pressing upon the miner in "'Get Up!'" is clear to see, and within mining communities the associated psychological pressures were often deflected, disassociated, and sublimated into superstition. As Keegan and Goodridge suggest, the 'thrice o'er' kissing of his 'birds' possess a ritual symbolism, the numbering of the kisses suggesting a superstitious need. This detail focusses the attention on the speaker as the subject of the poem; his

'dudden' and his birds are objects owned by the possessive 'My' and the poem becomes his. However, in the tuneful suppression of his fears, the focus of the poem swings, as the hinge of the shutting door 'he may not ope again', to those left behind. The last line has a similar impact to Ibsen's famous stage direction in *A Doll's House* (1879), "*The street door is slammed shut downstairs*" (Ibsen, 1996: 104), but a very different emotional resonance. Where, in Ibsen's play, one is shocked and thrilled in the sudden silence of Nora's liberation from patriarchal Norway, once Skipsey's door is closed there hangs a dead weight of silence. The contraction of 'open' adds gravity and affective pathos, leaving behind an emptiness that could not have been achieved in the fullness of the word. This simple device separates the family both physically and emotionally, they have been opened up, rent asunder by the insistent alarm call; both the family and reader are held in a position of stasis as the contraction also stands for the 'hope' they have in the father's safe return.

In the limitations of the media, however, Alfred Dixon's painting is unable to reproduce the subtlety of this shift. Dixon, instead, focusses on those left behind should the father not return. The kind of sentimental social realism Dixon portrays in this painting is a theme running through his work, as is, according to Peter Quinn, an interest in constructing an idealised maternal bond. Dixon's *Forsaken* shows a mother sitting at a fireside, gazing with downcast eyes at the swaddled child on her lap in an "expression of the symbolic importance of the relationship between mother and child [and....] an attempt to 'realise' the woman as mother" (Quinn, 1997: 294, 295). In this, Dixon attempts to highlight "the shared humanity and the global concerns of the working class" (Quinn, 1997: 299). The immediate response to Dixon's "*Get Up!*" is that he is more successful in representing these themes in this painting than he is in any of his others. The candlelight falling on the (distinctly pre-Raphaelite) female and the sleeping child emphasises the subjects of both the painting and the poem, with the miner obscured in the half-light and half-turn away from the viewer, already part consumed by the darkness of the door and the mine he is about to enter. The illumination of the female and the child recreates and realises, as Quinn argues of *Forsaken*, the

‘woman as mother’, a universal relationship that humanises the mining family. It also appears that in this harmonious scene, an homage to domesticity and respectability, Dixon is negotiating and debating the working-class female’s role in Victorian society. The surprisingly spacious and well-furnished room romanticizes the existence of the working-class family and, further, by including the demure miner’s wife, absent from Skipsey’s poem, points toward the middle-class ideal of the ‘Angel in the House’.¹⁷³ This pre-lapsarian archetype saw a woman’s duty was, as Ruskin argued, to be “enduringly [, and] incorruptibly good [...keeping her home free] from all injury, [...] terror, doubt, and division” (Ruskin, 1977: 59-60), a sanctuary in which her husband found refuge from his daily endeavours. While the painting fails to carry the emotional resonance of the poem, the illumination of its subjects emphasises the poignancy of human suffering in the mining industry.

That Skipsey was the model for Dixon’s painting, however, gives an alternative perspective on its theme. Paintings that display paternal affection are relatively uncommon but images of fathers kissing their children are exceptionally rare and, although shrouded in half-darkness, turned away from the viewer, he is *the* central person (the middle of the three) within the family unit.¹⁷⁴ In this, Dixon transfers the painting from being a discourse on working-class motherhood onto one on the working-class father. Although not making reference to Dixon’s painting, Julie Marie-Strange argues, in her ground-breaking study of *Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865-1914* (2015), that cultural representations of fathers have been marginalised as historians have euphemistically viewed ‘family’ as representing the maternal relationship, with the father an absent parent even when he is not. Where the working-class father has been represented, it has been as a social problem, portrayed as a figure of decline and dissolution, damaging the family unit with his “rough, drunken and profane” (Marie-Strange, 2015: 1) behaviour. This image finds an equivalent

¹⁷³ ‘The Angel in the House’ was a popular Victorian archetype of the virtuous, innocent woman, confined within the domestic sphere. She was named after Coventry Patmore’s series of poems (1862) about his wife Emily.

¹⁷⁴ I have found just one other painting in which a father kisses his child: *The Kiss* (c.1845-48) by Honoré Daumier (1808-79).

in the popular image of the “terrible and savage pitman” (Fynes, 1873: 19) that Richard Fynes denounces in his history of *The miners of Northumberland and Durham*. Counter to this is the image of the middle-class father who, as district nurse M.E. Loane reported in her 1908 essay on ‘The working-class father’, is seen to be “self-sacrificing, solicitous and devoted” (cited in Marie-Strange, 2015: 1). Dixon’s portrayal of Skipsey, the working-class father, contradicts this binary relationship by presenting him in these distinctly middle-class terms.

Marie-Strange’s study relies heavily on working-class autobiographies and, in recording labour leader Walter Citrine’s (1887-1983) account of his father, demonstrates the self-sacrifice working-class men undertook in order to “To win the bairns their bite and sup” (“Get Up!”, l. 3). Citrine’s father was a seaman whose career was fraught with danger and, while regularly absent working at sea, he had one “hand [...] crushed, he lost two fingers, [had one...] knee smashed, he was shipwrecked three times and each sailing was a dalliance with death” (Marie-Strange, 2015: 8) all to provide sustenance for his family. While it is easy to see the potential tragedy surrounding the individual in both the poem and the painting of “Get Up!”, the miner becomes a representative and archetype of a wider respectable working-class father. Skipsey, working in an industry with a lamentable record for death, disablement, and serious injury, is transformed into a martyr for his family. Where *The Death of Chatterton* shows the artist as a martyr, Skipsey’s poem and Dixon’s painting place the working-class father in the same position, sacrificing himself to ‘win’ economic capital. Furthermore, his martyrdom, the mother’s virginal white nightgown with hints of blue shadow redolent of the Virgin Mary, all suggest the Holy Family, which is accentuated as the light falling on the child’s pillow becomes a halo. Ultimately, the sentimental social realism of Alfred Dixon’s “Get Up!” provides an aspirational image stating this is what the working classes are respectable, stoical, and independent, ‘self-sacrificing, solicitous, and devoted’: qualities no longer exclusive to the middle classes, and an image that finds Joseph Skipsey at its centre.

9.2 A network of influence

Joseph Skipsey was clearly concerned with his legacy and, as he wrote to Thomas Dixon, was “sometimes afraid that [he should...] die as [he had...] lived a coalminer” (Skipsey (I), 1878b: 4). A previously unconsidered letter from Skipsey to Robert Spence Watson reveals this further, when Skipsey is convinced all he required was “a little more leisure to produce a series of lyrics that would constitute a legacy worthy of the acceptance of my country” (Skipsey (I), 1871: 7-8). Breaking the cycle of pit-sleep-pit, as shown in Chapter Seven, was key to achieving this ambition. Although Spence Watson advises Skipsey’s first employment once freed from mining was “an office of much labour and small emolument [that] afford[ed...] little opportunity of lettered ease” (Spence Watson, 1886: ii), it did allow him the ‘leisure’ he craved. Following his departure from mining, Skipsey entered the period of his greatest productivity and of the 182 poems in his next publication, *Carols from the Coalfields* (1886), 97 appeared for the first time. Skipsey published 283 poems in total, almost half of which (135) were first published after he left mining.¹⁷⁵

This flourishing of Skipsey’s writing career also saw him at the vanguard of a publishing revolution when the, Tyneside-based, Walter Scott Publishing Company appointed him the founding editor of the ‘Canterbury Poets’ series. Sir Walter Scott (1826-1910) had been a civil engineer before he fell into publishing.¹⁷⁶ Engaged to build a printing works for the rapidly expanding Tyne Publishing Company, when the overstretched business failed at the beginning of 1882, Scott’s company took ownership “of the business in lieu of payment” (Turner, 2012). Under the management of Scotsman David Gordon, the company was underpinned by cheap reprints and impressions including Camelot Classics, the Emerald Library, and the Oxford Library (Turner, 1991: 323).¹⁷⁷ These high volume, low

¹⁷⁵ In the ten volumes of poetry Skipsey published there are 313 poems in total. Across these, however, many were renamed as they evolved, removing duplicates leaves 283.

¹⁷⁶ Scott’s company specialised in large-scale infrastructure projects and “built the first ‘tube’ underground railway in London [...Scott] was made a baronet in 1907 [, and] one of only fifteen truly self-made millionaires before 1939” (Turner, 2012).

¹⁷⁷ Gordon had been a bookbinder at the Tyne Publishing Company.

price productions proved popular, and their sales enabled the company to take risks and became culturally significant as the publisher of the Contemporary Science Series, edited by Havelock Ellis, as well as some of the work of George Bernard Shaw and George Moore; the company was among W.B. Yeats' first publishers and was, as Jonathan Rose indicates, the first to publish English translations of Ibsen and Tolstoy (Rose, 2001: 131).¹⁷⁸

The cheap reprint market was enabled by numerous legal, economic, educational, and technological factors, and, by the 1880s, formed a significant part of the literary marketplace. According to Jonathan Rose, in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, "even Dickens [...had not been] widely available in a provincial mid-Victorian town" (Rose, 2001: 132), but cheap reprints made classic literature available at a price accessible to the lower-middle classes and an increasingly literate working class. Skipsey himself proves a case study in this, apparent, democratisation of the nation's literary heritage. Having had to save for ten weeks to afford the five shillings for a complete works of Shakespeare (*PMG*: 2) in the late 1840s it was only available to Skipsey at significant personal cost. Yet, by the 1860s, the publisher John Dicks was selling single plays for 1d. and the complete works for 1s. Previously inaccessible texts became available without the kind of sacrifice Skipsey had had to make.

As with many of the practicalities surrounding Skipsey's life and writing career nothing is known about how he became editor of the *Canterbury Poets* but, in June 1884, he started the series with the edited volume of Blake, mentioned in Chapter Seven, to which he provided prefatory information. This was rapidly followed by similar volumes on Coleridge (July), Shelley (August), Poe (October), and two on Burns in April 1885. The rapidity of the publishing of these volumes, prepared while still a caretaker for the Newcastle Board School, accounts for some of their "varied quality" (*RKRTB*: 51) as does Skipsey's relative inexperience as an editor, and after these six editions he

¹⁷⁸ Yeats had published poems (1885) and the verse play *Mosada* (1886) in the *Dublin University Review* prior to Walter Scott publishing his *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888).

resigned the position. Despite this, Skipsey retained influence with Walter Scott Publishing and it was in his prescient choice of future editors he would have a major influence over the widening of access to important and canonical writers.

The importance of having influential contacts and friends, significant social capital, was clear to Skipsey from his experience with both Willie Reay and Thomas Dixon. After his involvement with Rossetti and his appointment with Walter Scott, Skipsey appears to have understood the potential of his own influence and was able to use it to benefit a younger generation of writers. When the young mining engineer, Ernest Rhys, left his job in 1886 to take up “the reckless and risky career of a literary adventurer” (Rhys, 1940: 71) it was Skipsey who sent a letter of introduction, addressed to W.B. Scott, with the aspiring writer. Scott had taught Skipsey’s friend Willie Reay, had been a close friend of Thomas Dixon, and remained a prominent figure in London, and while a letter of recommendation might have been little more than a token to Scott, it was an important document displaying mutual faith, respect, and support between Skipsey and Rhys. As with Thomas Dixon’s introduction of Skipsey to Rossetti, Skipsey used his social capital to guarantee Rhys’ cultural capital. The letter was, for Rhys, a ready-made invitation to the Bell Scotts’ social circle as, although William was somewhat curmudgeonly by this time, his wife Letitia ensured the newcomer was involved in their social scene. It would not be long before Rhys established himself as part of the London literati; Skipsey, however, was yet to have the most significant impact on Rhys’ life.

Seeking to expand the Canterbury Poets, Skipsey sent, what Rhys described in one of his two autobiographies, *Wales England Wed* (1940) as, “a surprising letter [...] asking if [Rhys] would do a volume of George Herbert” (Rhys, 1940: 74). Rhys’ interest in literature flowered when living in Newcastle and, if the letter to Scott had been influential in introducing Rhys to London society, the letter inviting him to produce work for the Canterbury Poets would change his life, something he readily acknowledged: “[my] real debt to [Skipsey] cannot be counted, for without him and his love for his fellow poets I might never have [...] ended by shouldering a thousand authors” (Rhys,

1931: 225). Rhys would go on to work for Walter Scott on the prose series Camelot Classics before persuading another northern publisher, J.M. Dent (1849-1926), to found the Everyman Library.¹⁷⁹ The Everyman Library began in 1906, in the first year produced 153 volumes, and by the time Rhys died had published 983 in total (Waugh, 2007). The Everyman Library, and predecessors like Walter Scott, produced cheap copies of texts by classic authors that revolutionised the publishing industry in Great Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century. Without Skipsey's influence, Rhys may not have been at the centre of this revolution.

Despite being in a position to be able to use his social capital to benefit Rhys, Skipsey's life remained bifurcated between published poet and manual labourer. The tensions and contradictions of this emerged during a chance encounter with Lord Carlisle. As the Bentinck School had grown, Skipsey's duties grew beyond him and he found a new position as porter at Durham College of Physical Science. One morning, Spence Watson recalls, when accompanying Lord Carlisle and the principal, William Garnett, on a college tour the trio met Skipsey in a corridor "bending beneath the weight of two coal scuttles of considerable dimensions" (RSWB: 71). Lord Carlisle was astonished that a poet was to be found in such circumstances and, Spence Watson claims, in that instant he saw "that it was quite impossible [...for] the scientific men [...] to see the Principal and the artistic and literary men [...] the porter" (RSWB:72). Spence Watson continues that "at this time some of us heard of a probable vacancy which seemed the very thing" (RSWB: 72) for Skipsey when the following advertisement appeared in *The Athenæum* (11th May, 1889):

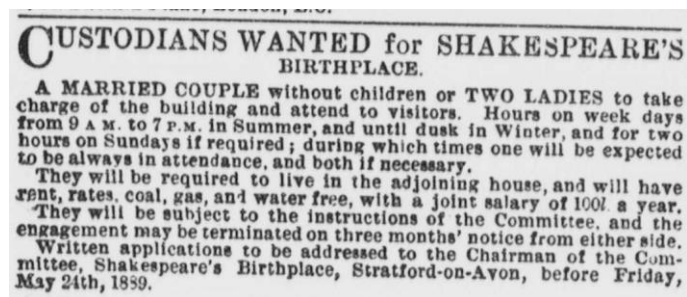


Fig. 2: Situation vacant at Shakespeare's Birthplace (*The Athenæum*, 1889: 585).

¹⁷⁹ Despite Skipsey's importance to Rhys, I have not found any correspondence between the two men outside of Rhys' autobiographies.

Including Skipsey's, the committee received 132 applications (RKRTB: 60).

The list of individuals supporting Skipsey's application, as noted by Spence Watson, is remarkable and testimony to the social capital he possessed:

[Robert] Browning, Tennyson, John Morley, [Edward] Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Theodore Watts, [Frederic] Leighton, F.R. [Frank Robert] Benson, Andrew Lang, Lord Carlisle, W.M. Rossetti, Austin Dobson, Bram Stoker, Lord Ravensworth, Thomas Burt, William Morris, Wilson Barrett, Edmund Gosse, Professor [Edward] Dowden and many other men of mark, bore willing testimony to his intrinsic value. (*RSWB*: 72)

While this list of culturally significant men prepared to use their name to guarantee Skipsey's embodied cultural capital ('his intrinsic value') is undoubtedly impressive, it is inaccurate as Dante Rossetti is included despite having died seven years before the position became vacant; Spence Watson's erroneous inclusion of Dante Rossetti here has been repeated widely and has been unchallenged until now.¹⁸⁰ Despite this inaccuracy the list can still be reconstructed, to some extent, and includes many of the names recorded. *PGCPS* (36-7) published the testimonials from Burne-Jones, Burt, Lord Ravensworth, and the unlisted Oscar Wilde, my research has uncovered letters from Dobson, Gosse, Edward Dowden (1843-1913), and William Rossetti, as well as evidence of Skipsey writing to Morris, Algernon Charles Swinburne, William Sharp (1855-1905), and Theodore Watts-Dunton asking for assistance. Further evidence of Skipsey's social capital working for him can be found in William Rossetti's journal:

[17th May, 1889] Skipsey [...] wants to become custodian of Shakespeare's Birthplace: he wrote me asking for any recommend^{ns} – I sent him a testimonial, & wrote to [Dr Frederick

¹⁸⁰ Several people including Thornton (RKRTB: 60), Alan Myers (Myers, 2001: 307), Kota Ito (Ito, 2006:210), and Andrew Murphy (Murphy, 2008: 122) have reproduced this list from *RSWB*. Although she does not reproduce this list, Martha Vicinus does claim that "in 1888 with the assistance of Rossetti [clearly implying Dante] and other Pre-Raphaelites, Skipsey, at fifty-five, was appointed custodian of Shakespeare's home" (Vicinus, 1974: 170).

James] Furnivall a letter enclosing S's own papers.

[...]

[18th May...] Furnivall, on receiving my letter, wrote to Mr. Flower [...] in favour of Skipsey.¹⁸¹

(Rossetti, 1889)

Other than those mentioned here, it appears the testimonials Skipsey received are largely lost. Regardless of Spence Watson's inaccuracies, it must have been difficult for the trustees to overlook an application championed by so many illustrious names; Skipsey's appointment in June 1889 proves they could not resist.

The association Skipsey had with the Rossettis and Burne-Jones must have been astonishing and revelatory to a man from a Victorian mining community, and the contacts he made within artistic circles enlarged the possibilities of his life beyond any possible expectation. His appointment as curator of Shakespeare's Birthplace was the culmination of a lifetime of self-sacrifice, work, and effort invested in the accumulation of cultural and social capital. Yet, a familiar sense of working-class passivity and middle-class philanthropy pervades his appointment. As Edwin Reed recalls, Skipsey was "placed there on the recommendation of Mr. John Morley" (Reed, 1907: 44), William Rossetti claims *he* "had procured the berth chiefly through the influence of Dr Furnivall; who had acted [...] upon my recommendation" (Rossetti, 1906: 443), or, in a later interpretation of the chain of events, it was Edward Burne-Jones "with George Howard's help, [who...] got Skipsey the job of caretaker at Shakespeare's house at Stratford" (Hope, 2009: 49). It seems strange, however, to claim one specific reference or individual's support was responsible for Skipsey's appointment and to do so is to view him as the recipient of patronage from those with greater volumes of cultural and social capital. He is denied agency in his ability to gain this notable support and becomes a victim of an adverse inference implying his submissiveness in the process, and, in the multiple claims of

¹⁸¹ Edgar Flower (1833-1903), son of Edward Flower (1805-83) founder of Stratford's Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, was chairman of Shakespeare's Birthplace.

responsibility, is the sense that individuals are competing for the prestige of being considered Skipsey's middle-class saviour.

My examination of Skipsey's correspondence, however, reveals that it was Skipsey himself who mobilized his own social capital. This is most explicitly revealed when Skipsey wrote to the critic Edmund Gosse, illustrating the individuals to whom Skipsey was turning for assistance:

I wish to draw your attention to the enclosed [presumably the situations vacant advertisement] & solicit your kind assistance in obtaining for me the post therein advertised [...] I am writing to Burne-Jones, W. Morris, Theo. Watts, A.C. Swinburne, Prof. Dowden & others notable in Literature & art as I will need all the influence I can enlist on my behalf & these gentlemen I believe will do what do what [*sic*] they can for me. (Skipsey, 1889b: 1)

The impact of Skipsey's requests and the remarkable speed to which they were attended can be measured in a further letter from Skipsey in which Gosse is thanked for his support:

Pray accept my heart-felt thanks for your beautiful testimonial. You will be glad to hear that I have just received similar testimonial from Mr Andrew Lang & Mr W. M. Rossetti & that Mr Oscar Wilde & Mr Henry Irving have both written to the Chairman of the Stratford Committee on my behalf.¹⁸² (Skipsey, 1889c: 1)

It is interesting to note that Skipsey states here, on 18th May, that Henry Irving has already contributed a letter of support to the board of trustees by the time William Morris writes (21st May) to Irving soliciting his support, illustrating the proactive nature of Skipsey's lobbying for the position; it also illustrates the high esteem in which he was held by these culturally significant individuals. These brief examples evidence the social capital he had built up over his writing career, a network that proved to be invaluable to him towards the end of his working and writing life.¹⁸³

¹⁸² The online repository for Henry Irving's correspondence does not have a transcript of his testimonial.

¹⁸³ Following his curatorship at Shakespeare's Birthplace, which he left aged 59, there are no records of Skipsey being in any other employment. Following his departure from Stratford, Skipsey published one further volume of poetry *Songs and Lyrics* (1892). This volume contained 149 poems, 43 of which were new.

As the Skipseys travelled to Stratford in June 1889, the world they were about to enter must have seemed one of immense possibility and excitement. A letter to the Newcastle illustrator, wood-engraver, and book producer Joseph Crawhall II (1821-96) illustrates the significance to Skipsey of securing the post:

You will be glad to hear [...] the change we made is so far altogether a great improvement upon anything I have hitherto had. I am brought into contact with people possessed of the highest culture – devout lovers of Literature & Art of among whom I feel I am making many friends. (Skipsey, 1889: 1)

Working and living in Northumberland or Durham for most of his life, Skipsey felt a profound sense of isolation from ‘devout lovers of Literature & Art’. This appointment brought him into contact with the larger cultural circles from which he felt deprived, invited, “to North-country eyes [...into] a Paradise” (Watson, 1909: 74); a tacit recognition by the cultural elite of his value to, and position within, the nation’s literary heritage – another example of institutionalized capital.

It seems the curatorship was outwardly successful as visitors found that Joseph “did so much to give interest to every object preserved at the Shakespeare House” (*The Era*, 1892: 12) but, inwardly, dark clouds soon appeared as Skipsey revealed to, Tyneside song collector and publisher, Thomas Allan (1832-94). Although Skipsey liked “the situation [...] very much” (Skipsey, 1889i), the terms of the position which required a ‘married couple without children’ meant they were isolated from their family, a situation that began to take its toll: “Mrs Skipsey & I feel very keenly our being separated from our family” (Skipsey, 1889i). Within two years of the letter to Allan the daily exertions, which *The Penny Illustrated Paper* describes, became too much and Skipsey resigned in October 1891:

From nine to seven every day crowds [...enough] to make a babel of the pleasant dwelling in which [...] a mighty poet was born. [People...] from all nations and of all tongues, Hindoos, Chinamen, and Persians included; but most noticeable the American, with his easy, hasty

rush; and the German, with his laboured, minute scrutiny. (*The Penny Illustrated Paper*, 1889: 70)

Initially, Skipsey cited the duties they were asked to perform were damaging the couple's health and made the position untenable, his resignation letter (11th July, 1891) advises the trustees they were "resigning [...] simply from the fact that [...] the duties of the post [are] injurious to our health and particularly [...] Mrs Skipsey's" (cited in RKRTB: 68). Yet, this seems to have been a partial justification.

A letter to newspaper editor John Cuming Walters (1863-1933), printed in *The Times* after Joseph's death, complicates matters as Skipsey cites a lack of faith in the veracity of the artefacts he was peddling as the reason for their premature departure. Quoting from correspondence of 12th May 1893, Walters revealed Skipsey:

had gradually lost faith in the so-called relics which it was the duty of the custodian to show, and [...] explain to the visitors [...] This loss of faith was the result of a long and severe enquiry into which I was driven by questions from time to time put to my wife and me by intelligent visitors; and the effect of it on myself was such as almost to cause a paralysis of the brain [...] That our Shakespeare was born in Henley-street [*sic*] I continue to fully believe, and that the house yet shown as the Shakespeare House stands on the site of the house in which he was born I also believe (and it was sacred to me on that account); but a man must be in a position to speak in more positive terms than these if he is to fill the post of custodian of that house; and the more I thought of it the more and more I was unable to do this. As to the idle gossip, the so-called traditions and legends of the place, they are for the most part an abomination and must stink in the nostrils of every true lover of our divine poet. (ellipsis in original, cited in Walters, 1903: 5)

Charles Laporte, in an article on Victorian bardolatry, finds, in the language Skipsey uses here, the 'loss of faith', and the sanctity in which Shakespeare was held, a clichéd example of the wider loss

of faith that has become “established as a literary and cultural trope” (Laporte, 2007: 624) in nineteenth-century studies. Although it is interesting to couch Skipsey’s resignation in this pseudo-religiosity, symptomatic of Victorian pessimism at the loss of the great meta-narratives, Skipsey’s correspondence reveals more varied reasons that lie between this and the impact the work had on the couple’s health.¹⁸⁴ Writing to Joseph Crawhall II, Skipsey declared the couple “left Stratford because the situation was not what we had expected it to be; that the salary was a mere nothing for work we had to do; & that it was ruinous to our health” (Skipsey (I), 1892a: 1). Here Skipsey alludes to the ‘issues’ he had with “conduct[ing] parties over the little house, [...] explain[ing] each place and giv[ing] a history of each piece of furniture many times a day [to...] visitors were not always thoughtful and reasonable” (RSWB: 74), but to hear the salary, of £100 a year with accommodation, coal, gas, and water included, was insufficient for the work required of them, seems strange for an ex-coal miner who must surely have worked harder in the pit.¹⁸⁵ In introducing the complaint over the salary, Skipsey adds another layer of complexity to the reason for his resignation but also, in placing a monetary value on the couple’s labour, suggests the amount of work they were asked to do was disproportionate to the amount being paid.

Most revelatory of the reasons for his leaving Stratford, however, is a letter dated 22nd October 1891 that John Lewis Bradley found at the Folger Shakespeare Library and published in *Notes and Queries* (August, 1978). Upon returning to his “old northern home” (cited in Bradley, 1978: 320) Skipsey complained to a “dear friend” (cited in Bradley, 1978: 320), an unnamed poet connected to “Mr. Horne & the Hobby-horse circle” (cited in Bradley, 1978: 321), that he had been “compelled to act the part of a showman [and that...] not a single one of the many so-called relics

¹⁸⁴ For a history of the Shakespeare Birthplace see Julia Thomas *Shakespeare’s Shrine* (2012). Henry James used the Skipseys’ experience at Stratford as the basis of his short story ‘The Birthplace’; in James’ story Maurice Gedge’s position as custodian at ‘The Birthplace’ is put in jeopardy as he loses faith in the authenticity of the displayed artefacts. Where Skipsey resigned his position, Gedge immerses himself in the fiction assuming the role of showman. Maurice’s performances proved so successful that visitor numbers rose and he and his wife Isabel received a rise in their salary.

¹⁸⁵ The Bank of England ‘inflation calculator’ estimates that £100 in 1889 equated to £11,792.05 in 2016 (<http://bankofengland.education/inflationcalculator/>).

could be proved to be Shakespeare's" (cited in Bradley, 1978: 320-1); that he and Sarah were "turned upon sometimes by our visitor[s] & told point-blank that the whole thing [...] was a fraud!" (cited in Bradley, 1978: 321); the mental pressures he experienced meant he had "little leisure for pen work" (cited in Bradley, 1978: 321); and the "demands upon our attention was at times distracting, so much so that I am afraid that my dear little wife's health has been ruined" (cited in Bradley, 1978: 321).¹⁸⁶ While, in the immediate aftermath of the resignation, Skipsey reasons that money, lack of faith, and overwork were equally contributory factors, he rationalizes to William Rossetti, in June 1892, that although he "had sufficient reasons to [be] disgust[ed...] with the post [he...] was driven to take the step [he] did through [his] poor wife's illness [which was...] a serious down come of the womb which placed her life in daily jeopardy" (Skipsey (I), 1892c: 1-2). Upon returning home, Sarah received specialist gynæcological treatment from "Dr Farquarson [*sic*] of Wesgate [*sic*] Road" and, although "in much better spirits [, that she would...] thoroughly recover [remained...] a question" (Skipsey (I), 1892c: 2-3).¹⁸⁷ Sarah lived for another ten years, and, like identifying an individual responsible for Skipsey's appointment, saying conclusively the specific reason for the resignation is impossible.

9.3 Dig the new breed: the extending influence of Joseph Skipsey

Irrespective of their difficulties at Stratford, the decision to resign the curatorship must have been difficult and Joseph wrote to William Rossetti (15th June 1892) revealing his concerns. Resigning the post put the Skipseys in such a precarious economic position Joseph felt he might, even at the age of 60, have "to return to the coal-mines [....] to earn a few shillings a week [....] to keep me & my dear little wife [...] in our old age" (Skipsey (I), 1892c: 7-8), but resigning also

¹⁸⁶ The archive catalogue shows the recipient of this letter to be Robert Spence Watson, however, the contents suggest this is not the case.

¹⁸⁷ Dr James Duncan Farquharson, M.B., C.M. Glas., of 242 Westgate Road, was admitted a Fellow of the Edinburgh Obstetrical Society in 1890 (Edinburgh Obstetrical Society, 1905: xiii) and a Fellow of The British Gynæcological Society in 1891. He was one of just nine gynæcologists in Newcastle in 1894 (Napier, 1894: xi).

endangered his social capital. Skipsey told William Rossetti he “felt that by leaving Stratford I had incurred your displeasure as I believe I did that of other precious friends & this I account as one of the greatest misfortunes it has been my lot to endure” (Skipsey (I), 1892c: 1). Despite his reservations, Skipsey’s social capital remained intact and prepared to work for him as correspondence from Edward Dowden, Professor of English at Dublin’s Trinity College, to Edmund Gosse demonstrates. Skipsey knew Gosse through Spence Watson and, reminiscent of the account of Skipsey meeting Eiríkr Magnússon, Spence Watson recalls:

when he met Mr. Edmund Gosse [...], after a brief conversation, Skipsey became at home with him to a quite unusual extent. There was [...] no real point of difference between them, but Mr. Gosse, with great ability, drew him on until he got into an eloquent and close comparison between Shylock and Marlowe's Barabbas in the “Jew of Malta.” (RSWB: 88)

Gosse had supported Skipsey’s application to Shakespeare’s Birthplace and, despite the resignation, remained prepared to use his social capital and his influence on Skipsey’s behalf as two letters, from Edward Dowden to Edmund Gosse I uncovered in Leeds University’s *Edmund Gosse Archive*, reveal. Dowden wrote (8th June 1891) that he had been contacted by “W.W. Tomlinson of Whitby” (Dowden, 1891a: 4) requesting testimonials and signatures for a “memorial” (Dowden, 1891a: 1), later confirming this was a petition to be presented to the Treasury to have Skipsey’s annuity raised:

Could you see your way to signing the accompanying memorial to Mr. Balfour on behalf of Joseph Skipsey.¹⁸⁸ I know your name would have weight with the First Lord of the Treasury (& could you get any signatures?) – He is a very deserving man. Burne-Jones will present the memorial. (Dowden, 1891b: 1-2)

Spence Watson advises that Skipsey received, “[i]n January, 1886, [...] a donation from the Royal Bounty of £50, and the annuity was raised to £25 a year” (RSWB, 76), thus implying both the

¹⁸⁸ William Weaver Tomlinson (1858-1916), author and historian of Northumberland. Arthur James Balfour (1848-1930), First Lord of the Treasury from 1891-1902 (Mackay, 2011).

donation and the annuity increased in 1886. The £50 donation was confirmed by civil servant Roland H. Blades on 9th January, 1886: "I have the gratification of informing you that a grant from the Royal Bounty has been made to you of £50 as a donation" (PGCPS: 35). Yet, no suggestion was made that his annuity was also to be increased. This correspondence from Dowden to Gosse indicates, not only, that the annuity was raised around the beginning of 1892 but also the efficacy of Skipsey's social capital despite his resignation from Stratford. The letter from Dowden to Gosse, dated 8th June, also illustrates that Skipsey's struggles at Stratford appear to have been relatively well known even before he resigned. Presumably, Tomlinson had advised Dowden of Skipsey's circumstances when presenting him with the memorial as Dowden was, as he wrote to Gosse, "sorry to hear [Skipsey...] did not do well at Stratford – I was told that his health was not good & that he is essentially a north-country man, who felt out of his natural home when transplanted" (Dowden, 1891a: 2). Although some of Skipsey's contacts will undoubtedly have felt displeased at his resignation, his social capital remained influential.

While the critical attention Skipsey has received has been largely a result of assistance from more culturally powerful individuals, there has been no consideration given to how Skipsey used his own social capital for the benefit of others. As shown above, Skipsey had a significant impact on the life and career of Ernest Rhys, but Rhys also left something tangible of Skipsey for posterity, leaving some personal recollections of the man. The memoirs of Rhys, *Everyman Remembers* and *Wales England Wed*, give the most extended, albeit still brief, first-hand biographical coverage of Skipsey's life outside *RSWB*. In doing so, like Dante Rossetti, Rhys reveals the enormous impression the 'pitman poet' left upon him in pronouncing, with phrasing that sounds a little odd today, alongside William Morris, Walt Whitman, Rabindranath Tagore, and George McDonald "[Skipsey was] one of the four or five most impressive, most convincingly self-impersonating figures among all the poets I have known" (Rhys, 1931: 90). Like Spence Watson, Rhys gives no details as to how he first encountered Skipsey but in what could be considered a 'literary scene' in Newcastle in the 1880s,

the 'pitman poet' was regarded as an elder statesman amongst "a band of young journalists and writers, most of whom wrote verse and very bad verse at that [...who occasionally] met at the house of the only real poet among them, old Joseph Skipsey" (Rhys, 1940: 32). Eventually, Rhys' life would be transformed through his contact with 'old' Joseph Skipsey.

It seems possible Rhys took inspiration from his literary meetings in Newcastle that were occasionally held at Skipsey's house when founding The Rhymers' Club with W.B. Yeats. In turn, it seems most likely that it was through Rhys that Skipsey came to have contact with some of the most notable late-Victorian and modernist poets. The group, who met regularly in the early 1890s to read their poems to one another at Ye Old Cheshire Cheese pub in Fleet Street, became a support network of young and aspiring poets. The group was built on the mutual affirmation of their cultural and social capital, reinforcing, reproducing, and sharing, through favourable reviews, their reputations, and network in a self-perpetuating manner. Many of this group published in The Canterbury Poets series and it would appear most likely that either it was through Rhys or Walter Scott that Skipsey became associated with one of the most important twentieth-century poets.¹⁸⁹

By the time Skipsey had been appointed at Stratford, W.B. Yeats was living with his family in Bedford Park, London, and had already published the *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* through Walter Scott, his first poetry collection *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889), and journalism for American publications. In the first of his articles in the *Boston Pilot* (3rd August, 1889), 'Irish Writers Who Are Winning Fame', Yeats concentrated on his major preoccupation at the time: the relationship between literature and nationality and in particular Irish nationalism.¹⁹⁰ In the article, Yeats accentuates the influence of Irish literary culture over England's, stating to the newspaper's Catholic readership that "England is an old nation, the dramatic fervor has perhaps ebbed out of her

¹⁸⁹ For further information on The Rhymers' Club refer to Norman Alford's *The Rhymers' Club: Poets of the Tragic Generation* (1996). Parts of this section have been published as: 'Joseph Skipsey, the 'peasant poet', and an unpublished letter from W.B. Yeats'. The final definitive version of this paper has been published in *Literature & History*, Vol. 25(2), October 2016 by SAGE Publications. All rights reserved Gordon Tait©.

¹⁹⁰ Yeats wrote fourteen articles for the *Boston Pilot*, this piece was written in London on 10th July, 1889.

[...and the] most prominent London dramatist at the present time is certainly the Irishman" (Yeats, 1989: 9). This assertion is extended and applied to poetry when, in this article, Yeats makes a surprising reference:

Apropos of poets, the peasant poet is less common in England than with us in Ireland, but I did meet the other day an Englishman who was a true specimen of the tribe. He is a Mr. Skipsey. He is from the coal country – a strange nursing mother for a poet – and taught himself to write by scribbling with a piece of white chalk on the sides of coal shafts and galleries. In the depth of a mine hundreds of feet under the earth he has written many sweetest and tenderest songs. He has not been left to sing his songs to the dull ear of the mine, however. The most sensitive of ears of our time have heard them. Rossetti, a little before his death, read and praised these simple poems. The last few months Walter Scott's collection of Mr. Skipsey's mining poems has made new admirers for their author.¹⁹¹ He is more like a sailor than a miner, but like a sailor who is almost painfully sensitive and refined. He talked to me about Clarence Mangan a good deal. Mangan is a great favorite of his. He recited, for the benefit of a Saxon who stood by, Mangan's 'Dark Rosaleen.' Himself a peasant, he turned for the moment's inspiration to the country where poetry has been a living voice among the people. (Yeats, 1989: 10-11)

Although Skipsey's links to the Pre-Raphaelites have been documented, that he had a connection to Yeats was previously unknown and this reference to Skipsey in the *Pilot* has been neglected by Yeats scholars; as a result, further connections have been missed or have not been investigated.

In his labelling of Skipsey as a 'peasant poet', Yeats co-opts him into an argument that, Edward Hirsch argues in an article on the 'Imaginary Irish Peasant', "every Irish writer since [Yeats...] has had to contend with" (Hirsch, 1991: 1126), an argument that was, and remains, "a complex cultural discourse motivated by crucial economic, social, and political needs as well as by pressing

¹⁹¹ Carols, Songs, and Ballads was published in 1888.

cultural concerns" (Hirsch, 1991: 1116). At the vanguard of an Irish revivalist movement, Yeats revered an 'essential' rural folk placed at the centre of a constructed national identity, a folk attuned with nature, opposed to, and oppressed by their English colonial overlord. In Yeats' Irish nationalism he crafted an image that portrayed the peasantry as noble savages, unsullied by the commerce and materialism of the English; a peasantry without individuality, however. His rural 'folk' were a great de-individualised mass of tenant farmers, umbilically connected to their homeland, their soil, and their oral culture. Yeats' 'imagined' peasants are superior in their earthiness, antithetical to the manufactured culture of their colonial masters, precisely because of the lyrical nature of the 'country where poetry has been a living voice among the people'. To imply that the English have never given regard to their peasant poets, moreover, is to infer the peasant's place at the centre of the Irish Literary Revival and to elevate it above the literature of 'the old nation', with its ancient, slavish devotion to materialism coupled with a disavowal of the non-material or intuitive.

When envisaging 'peasant poets' as a 'tribe', a community descended from and identifying with a common ancestry, Yeats suggests not only separation from mainstream literary culture constructed through a classical education, a society-endorsed programme of acquiring 'legitimate' culture, but also isolation from the community to which they belong. In this partitioning can be observed the beginnings of a tendency that, James Pethica argues, came later:

[Yeats'] writings of the late 1890s begin to credit the vital imaginative core of folklore to the literary genius of a few pre-eminent makers of folk poetry, rather than to the imaginative sensibilities of the country people in general. (Pethica, 2007: 137)

Yeats begins to see the creative urge emerging from the peasantry as emanating from exceptional individuals, like Skipsey, rather than a collective imagination. In this, there is the foreshadowing of Basil Bunting's approach to Skipsey discussed in this chapter, as Yeats seeks to appropriate the exceptional folk-imagination in order that it can be assimilated into his own embodied cultural capital. To pronounce that 'peasant poets' are 'a tribe' is an intricate sociological insinuation

through which Yeats can distance himself from a perceived primitivism, while simultaneously conjoining himself with an ancient tradition of purity, simplicity, and earthiness. As with Bunting's own attempt to appropriate Skipsey's working-class Northumbrian identity, Yeats is tying himself to a primal and spiritual folklore from which he is alienated by his upbringing and embodied cultural capital. In doing so, Yeats suggests he has a familial lineage to a race of peripatetic troubadours, poets, and songsters emerging from the soil with a shared heritage and from a common progenitor. Rhys makes a comparable observation that carries similar inferences when describing Skipsey as "a later skald" (Rhys, 1931: 225). Here, Skipsey is dislocated from his own time and tradition, but in this instance, Rhys, mindful of Northumbria's ancient Viking kingdom and its own literary tradition stretching back to Cædmon and Bede, makes a specific link to Old Norse cultures.

Despite Yeats' political point scoring, the appreciation he gives of Skipsey's 'sweetest and tenderest songs' appears genuine and affectionate, and there is an echo of Rossetti's sentiments regarding Skipsey's unification of "poetic form with deep pathos" (Rossetti, 1878a: 2). Yeats makes a further, albeit brief, reference to Skipsey's poetry that illustrates the esteem in which he held him. In an anonymous review of James Dryden Hosken's (1861-1953) *Verses by the Way* in the *Speaker* (26th August, 1893), like the earlier reviewer of James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* as discussed in Chapter Eight, Yeats utilises Skipsey as an exemplar of the possibilities of the common man. Yeats finds Hosken: "a Customs Officer at Albert Dock [...], a 'super' at a theatre [...], a postman at a little town in West Cornwall, besides several other things between-whiles" and although:

he really does know how to write [...he does so] not so well as Mr. Skipsey, the northern miner, despite a better mastery over metre and rhythm; for Mr. Skipsey has sung of the blackness of the pit and the loves and tragedies of the pit-mouth. (Yeats, 1970: 288-89)

While Yeats acknowledges Skipsey's poetry has deficiencies, his authenticity and his simplicity of purpose and voice, raises it above a more efficiently constructed and considered poetry, lacking the weight of a sympathetic soul at its core. In this, Yeats illustrates the extent to which Skipsey's poetry,

or its impression, had permeated Victorian society meaning that, as Martha Vicinus suggests, where “reading Tennyson assumed a familiarity with classical myths, [so] reading Skipsey implied a recognition of the English working man and his place in society” (Vicinus, 1974: 60). To read Skipsey’s poetry was to understand the lives, loves, and tragedies that befell the English working classes. Like the trend in investigative journalism that allowed access to, as Dan Bivona and Roger Henkle argue in *The Imagination of Class* (2006), “a realm of experience that is either not immediately available to their [...] readers or too threatening for the more genteel among them to risk” (Bivona, 2006: 6), reading Skipsey allowed a vicarious, if sanitised, experience of the hardships facing a respectable and deserving poor.

While this journalistic evidence displays Yeats’ knowledge of Skipsey as a man and poet, I have found no critics who have discussed or investigated possible connections between the two men, and there are many shared interests. A letter from W.B. Yeats to Joseph Skipsey, I discovered in an uncatalogued section of the *Spence Watson Papers*, provides a starting point for further investigation; this letter is not in Yeats’ collected letters and I reproduce it in full here:

3 Blenheim Road
Bedford Park
Chiswick
London.

Oct 7

My Dear Mr Skipsey

Ever since I saw you in spring I have been saying to myself “I must write & thank Mr Skipsey for his book & send him mine” But some how I have put off & off. At first I did not know where you were & then when I did some how I ~~left~~^{let} week after week go by. A copy of “Oisin” has been lying in this corner ready addressed to you for a month or more. Please do not think I have neglected ~~reading~~ your book. I have read most of its poems several times & have twice made paragraphs about it in papers. Indeed I really began to forget that I had not written to you.

I think I like best of all ^{among the longer poems—} the Hartley Calamity – the last 8 or 9 verses are among the finest ballad verses I know – and then Bereaved & I like very much also “Thistle & Nettle” all through these poems you show such careful & industrious observations – they are full of little touches that bring the people you describe & before ^{one} in a minute. Then I like, as I

suppose every one does, your little songs of mining life – above all “Mother Wept” “get up” “The Fatal Errand” and “A golden Lot” I think too that “Meg Goldlocks” is very fine indeed – a real song. “Young Fanny” is quite as good – sometimes I prefer one sometimes another. I had almost forgotten “Nanny & Bessy” I think this one of the very finest of all – as fine as “Bereaved” – and full of the little ^{touches} of observation which give such weight to your poems. Among the poems on more general subjects – I like very much “A lucky Hour” and “The Secret.” Indeed all through the book are things that could not be better – ~~like~~ “Lotty Hay” for instance – things which are an abiding pleasure to one. The book grows constantly on one – and will I believe on men generally.

Yours very Sincerely

WBYeats

(Yeats, 1889: 1-4)

This letter is stored in an envelope (Appendix Eight) that was clearly not addressed by Yeats and is postmarked ‘Oxford, Au 12, 91’, in the top left corner is a note, in a third hand that could be Skipsey’s, advising the letter is “From Mr Yeats” under which is an archivist’s note adds “The Poet”. Judging by Yeats’ comment that he was sending the letter with a “copy of ‘Oisin’” (Yeats, 1889:1), it appears the letter was sent in wrappers with the book. As the handwriting indicating the contents are from ‘Mr Yeats’ resembles Skipsey’s, it seems likely he, recognising the letter’s importance, used an envelope from another (less important) correspondent in which to store the letter. While Yeats gives no year when dating the letter ‘October 7’, the postmark being in 1891 creates confusion as to the year the letter was written. Reading that Yeats also sent a copy of *The Wanderings of Oisín* (published January, 1889), and the comment that he saw Yeats saw Skipsey ‘in spring’, in conjunction with the *Pilot* article where Yeats states he met Skipsey ‘the other day’, it is my assertion the letter was written on 7th October 1889.

When Yeats comments in the letter that he had met Skipsey ‘in spring’ and in the *Pilot* that they had talked ‘about Clarence Mangan a good deal’, he seems to suggest that Skipsey was in attendance at a lecture delivered by Yeats about Clarence Mangan to the Southwark Irish Literary Society on 29th May, 1889 (Kelly, 1986: xiv). Mangan was a great favourite of Skipsey’s and, in the pair, Yeats may have seen two poets with similarly ‘strange nursing mothers’: “Unlike most poets,

[their] childhood[s were] not spent among woods and fields, with Nature's primitive peace and ancient happiness. [They] had no early dream – no treasure-house of innocent recollection" (Yeats, 2004: 40). With this similar rearing, it would seem natural Skipsey might be drawn to Mangan's poetry, and Spence Watson recalls the power of Skipsey's recitations:

no one who heard him [...] read Clarence Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen" or "Kathleen Nynoulahan" [*sic*] will ever forget it. He waited quietly until he felt the spirit of that which he was about to do come upon him. Then he was as one possessed, everything but the poem was forgotten, but that he made live, or perhaps I should more truly say that he incarnated it; he actually became the poem himself. His features changed with every expression of the verse, his hands, nay, even his fingers, expressed the meaning of the words, and that meaning thoroughly revealed itself. It was far beyond what you had thought of, but it stood out clear for you ever afterwards. (RSWB: 110)

Although Spence Watson found Skipsey's Mangan recitations revelatory it seems Yeats found his performance less memorable. Skipsey is not mentioned in Yeats' own *Autobiographies* (1935) and no connection between the two men has been made by subsequent biographers.

While this letter is a single instance of Yeats writing to Skipsey, an item in Yeats' library tantalisingly suggests a sustained and prolonged communication between the two. Item 1946 in Edward O'Shea's *A Descriptive Catalog of W.B. Yeats's Library* (1985) is a copy of Skipsey's *Songs and Lyrics* (1892), number 145 of 250 copies, signed "J.S." and inscribed on the flyleaf:

To W.B. Yeats,
With the Season's Greetings
and the best regards of his sincere Admirer
and friend,
The Author
New Year's Eve,
1895. (O'Shea, 1985: 253)

Skipsey was careful to keep in touch with critics, friends, and acquaintances, and while this inscribed copy of his own work may have been, as the inscription describes, from an admirer and, importantly,

a friend, in all probability it seems the gift of objectified cultural capital was an *aide-mémoire* to a poet whose star was on the ascendancy from one, even at the end of his career, striving to keep alive his network of contacts. At times, this form of network building was reciprocated by younger poets: Yeats sent Skipsey a signed first edition of *The Wanderings of Oisín*, and Ernest Radford sent a copy of *The Second Book of the Rhymers' Club* (1894). Radford's gift was inscribed with a ten-line poem and the dedication to "Joseph Skipsey July 17, 1894 With kindest regards E.R." (Sotheby's London, 1993: 31).¹⁹² The first three lines of this poem illustrate the esteem in which Radford held Skipsey, esteem that possibly spread among other poets of the younger generation, and, for Radford at least, the need to seek validation from a poet who had been known by Dante Gabriel Rossetti:

If I herein have phrased a thought
In words that jar not on your ear,
I shall be happy...

(emphasis in original, Radford, 1895: 129)

Radford, secretary and founder member of the Rhymers' Club who met Ernest Rhys through the Fabian Society (Adams, 2004), contributed eight poems to *The Second Book of the Rhymers' Club*, one of which reflects his socialist philosophy and, perhaps, gives further recognition to Skipsey:

The voice of labour soundeth shrill,
Mere clamour of a tuneless throng,
To you who barter at your will
The very life that maketh song.

Oh, you whose sluggard hours are spent
The rule of Mammon to prolong,
What know you of the stern intent
Of hosted labour marching strong?

When we have righted what is wrong
Great singing shall your ears entreat;
Meanwhile in movement there is song,
And music in the pulse of feet.

¹⁹² Radford included this poem in *Old and New: A Collection of Poems* (1895), under the title 'To Joseph Skipsey' 'With the Book of the Rhymers' Club'.

Skipsey’s voice cannot have been far from Radford’s thinking when he predicted the ‘great singing’ that would be heard once the iniquities of Victorian society were successfully overcome. While this poem jars abrasively with many of the poems in the collection, out of touch as it is with the general tone of the Rhymers’ Club that sought to “preserve poetry from the ‘impurities’ of politics, moral causes, and other such exogenous forces” (Adams, 2004), it reveals an egalitarian conviction among the young poets.

It is perhaps this egalitarian attitude that allowed Yeats the opportunity to appreciate the output of the peasant poet tribe and, in Skipsey, perhaps Yeats saw, as he would in Maud Gonne (1866-1953) and J.M. Synge (1871-1909), that:

All that [he] did,...
[came] from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong

(‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’, Yeats, 1991: ll. 42-4).

In this letter to Skipsey, Yeats expresses an appreciation of 13 poems, all of which concern themselves with the life and loves of the mining communities, ‘the soil’ that proved so fertile for his poetry. To Yeats, Skipsey’s poetry plainly and simply, as Rossetti wrote, “describes what he knows and mixes in” (Rossetti, 1878a: 2). With the ‘little touches’ and power to bring people to life, Yeats finds Skipsey’s ‘careful & industrious observations’ summon the spirits of lives to bring them ‘before one in a minute’; a representative of mining communities, a “poet of the people” (Rossetti, 1878a: 2) as Rossetti described him, or, as Bunting enigmatically put it, “the village itself composing” (Bunting, 1976: 14). In the eyes of some who have investigated Skipsey’s work, however, ‘Antaeus-like’ his poetry succeeds only while he maintains contact with mining communities, and their cultural capital. To Bunting in particular, when Skipsey’s poetic ambition took him to the more elevated slopes of Mount Parnassus to address more universal, humanistic subjects such as the

nature of man, the meaning of art, or the movement of the spheres, he moved away from the subject matter he knew best, lost 'contact with the soil' and lost his power. This led Bunting to conclude accusatorily that those poems "in which [he] abandons the life he knew for a life he saw only distorted and on paper [...he] tries to be clever" and produces poems that "seem arch or irritable when he probably meant to be witty" (Bunting, 1976: 14). Tying Skipsey to his community in this fashion mirrors the limitations imposed upon him in the "pass[ing] over [of] 'A Patriotic Invocation'" (RKRTB: 18) by James Clephan, as discussed in Chapter Four, in Skipsey's very first review.

Viewed from a twenty-first-century perspective, a letter from W.B. Yeats to Joseph Skipsey is an example of correspondence between writers of vastly different reputations, a canonical writer corresponding with a minor one; an insight into the early career of a Nobel-prize winning poet. As such, it is easy to lose track of the original context of the letter and to see this dialogue in asymmetrical terms, positioning Skipsey once again as a passive, abject figure. It is important instead to try to appreciate the letter within its original context: a young writer forging a literary reputation, interacting with a poet with a national reputation and one whose poetry "the most sensitive of ears [Rossetti's...] have heard" (Yeats, 1989: 11). The fact the letter existed in the first instance and the apparent attempt to preserve it, gives an indication of the significance of the relationship, or the potential of a relationship, between the two poets. To Yeats, the older man had made a significant enough impression on him that, after meeting Skipsey in spring, he remained in his mind until October and that he needed to write to him. In the letter Yeats is obviously eager to ingratiate himself to his elder: he is keen to make Skipsey aware he had not laid his book, unconsidered, to one side, and, most importantly, that Yeats had 'twice made paragraphs' about Skipsey's poetry in his journalistic work. Yeats' generous comments, that he supposes that 'every one' likes his 'little songs of mining life' and that the book will grow 'on men generally', are loaded with an assumption that Skipsey's poetry had created and obtained the 'legacy', and the 'acceptation' he sought, again

Yeats attempts to flatter Skipsey, perhaps aware of his association with Walter Scott, and the potential of future publications that Skipsey might be influential in securing.

Connections to Yeats, Radford, Rhys, and others are, however, absent from the biography and while Skipsey's association with various Pre-Raphaelite painters and poets is known, there have been no links made between him and the poets of the 1890s. Yet, in the existence of a letter from Yeats to Skipsey and its absence from *RSWB* there is further evidence of the shaping of Skipsey's literary afterlife by Spence Watson. There seems little opportunity for this letter from Yeats to have entered the *Spence Watson Papers* after the biography was written and why Spence Watson makes no reference to it is confusing. Clearly, in terms of editing at least, Spence Watson had the same considerations regarding selection of material as when he omitted Rossetti's comparisons between Skipsey and Blake, but once more the motivation seems extraneous to this process. The reason for omission seems to lie in Spence Watson's evident desire to create Skipsey in his own image of a respectable working class and two possibilities emerge. Firstly, Spence Watson clearly sought to keep Skipsey's reputation free from controversy and the infamous riots following the opening performance of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* at The Abbey Theatre in January 1907, a play to which Yeats was significantly attached, was probably not too distant a memory as Spence Watson was preparing *RSWB* and could have had a significant impact on his omissions.¹⁹³ Secondly, there is Yeats' interest in spiritualism and his association with the occultist Helena Blavatsky (1831-91). Skipsey considered himself a medium, about which Spence Watson was deeply cynical, and it could be, therefore, Yeats was excluded in order to expunge spiritualism from Skipsey's life story. Yet, neither scenario seems wholly satisfactory in explaining the reason for the absence.

Ultimately, the absence of this link to Yeats from the biography, and other poets of the

¹⁹³ In a similar fashion, Spence Watson omits Oscar Wilde from his list of those who supported Skipsey's application to Shakespeare's Birthplace, nor does he refer to Wilde having reviewed *CftCF*1886. After Wilde's incarceration for gross indecency, the playwright was shunned by 'polite' society and to have attached his name to Skipsey risked sharing Wilde's tainted image.

1890s, is an example of middle-class mediation of working-class culture, where Spence Watson's cultural superiority authenticates and validates the posthumous perception of Skipsey. Spence Watson was happy to show Skipsey had made contact with, and (more importantly) received benefaction from, the Pre-Raphaelites and in particular Edward Burne-Jones or Dante Rossetti, figures whose reputations were largely secure in the national consciousness. In the omission of the Yeats material, Spence Watson creates further spaces and absences from critical thinking. Absences that once again reinforce the image of Skipsey as a deferential working-class subject. Spence Watson deserves credit for not allowing his "close friend [of...] forty years [from becoming...] a mere memory" (*RSWB*: 7). Yet, despite that "few events occurred to either of [them] which were not made known to the other" (*RSWB*: 7), the absences and silences make *RSWB* an unsound foundation on which to base "sound criticism" (*RSWB*: 92). It is only in the archival discoveries made and included in this thesis that, despite Spence Watson's own admission of the "inadequate idea" (*RSWB*: 8) of Skipsey's life that he produced, the flawed nature of the biography is revealed.

CHAPTER TEN

Conclusion

In his introduction to *The Poetry of Chartism* (2009), Mike Sanders uses the complaint of ‘a Factory Girl of Stalybridge’, identified simply as E.H., whose submission to the poetry column of the *Northern Star* newspaper decried not just her economic poverty but also her cultural deprivation. In her poem ‘On Joseph Rayner Stephens’, E.H. affirms that working-class:

[...] children, too, to school must be sent,
Till all kinds of learning and music have learnt;
Their wives must have veils, silks dresses, and cloaks,
And some who support them can’t get linsey coats.¹⁹⁴

[...]

If they had sent us to school, better rhyme we could make,
And I think it is time we had some of their cake.

[....]

We factory lasses have but little time,
So I hope you will pardon my bad written rhyme.

[...]

May God spare your life till the tyrants are ended,
So I bid you good bye, till my verses I’ve mended.

(cited in Sanders, 2009: 1-2)

While concentrating on the conjunction between aesthetics and politics, in that E.H. recognises the deficiencies in her ‘bad written rhyme’ and excuses herself from writing ‘verses’ until her technique has ‘mended’, Sanders finds “aesthetic standards mattered to her” (Sanders, 2009: 2). What E.H. also identifies, however, is the linking of the acquisition of embodied cultural capital to material gains and, ultimately, social equality: working-class children must be given the opportunity to

¹⁹⁴ Joseph Rayner Stephens (1805-79), Methodist minister and factory reform campaigner.

acquire 'learning and music' in order to share, not the metaphoric "bread" representative of overturning "economic scarcity" (Sanders, 2009: 1), as Sanders points out, but the 'cake' of economic capital. Central to E.H.'s complaint is a yearning for access to education and cultural capital beyond the sphere of 'factory lasses' in order that she and others like her might be able to write aesthetically pleasing poetry. As Joseph Skipsey wrote: "I only want cultre [*sic*] to produce a series of lyrics that would constitute a legacy worthy of the acceptation" (Skipsey (I), 1871: 7-8) of his country.

To maintain their subjugation 'all kinds of learning and music' had been denied to the British working class as a matter of necessity; not only was formal education denied, however, self-education was also discouraged within The Great Northern Coalfield in the early nineteenth century, as Richard Fynes argues:

All learning was at that time positively discouraged amongst the lower ranks of society, and if any person, who had received a scanty stock of learning got into trouble the "pastors and masters and those in authority over" the poor shook their heads ruefully and declared that the misfortune was the result of an impertinent curiosity to know as much as their betters.

(Fynes, 1873: 12)

Despite it being common knowledge that pitmen were denied access to education, they were "taunted with their barbarity and want of intelligence" (Fynes, 1873: 9), and as such their reputation as "terrible and savage" (Fynes, 1873: 19) grew nationally and even internationally. From this reputation, within North-East England, came a stereotype that became entrenched within local culture. An amalgam of keelmen and pitmen, 'Bob Cranky' was an archetype who appeared chiefly in dialect ballads around the turn of the nineteenth century: he was "characterized as cheerful, beer-swilling and fond of a fight" (Murphy, 2007: 257), "a drunken bully and bruiser who also has affectionate, convivial, and exuberant attributes" (Hermeston, 2014: 157).¹⁹⁵ Although education

¹⁹⁵ 'Keelmen' operated keels, or barges, taking coal from the banks of the Tyne to be loaded onto collier ships.

and, importantly, respectability slowly spread through the pit villages in the first-half of the nineteenth century, largely, as Robert Colls argues (1977: 77), through the influence of Methodism, the Bob Cranky stereotype held sway and through reinvention “came to stand for ‘Geordies’ in general” (Colls, 2007: 163), sublimating into the twentieth-century cartoon character Andy Capp.¹⁹⁶

Fighting against this image, particularly during times of industrial unrest, miners leaders, often Methodists themselves, pleaded for men to act responsibly and to shun violence. Thomas Hepburn urged, in 1832, that striking men “let the world see their determination to support good order” (cited in Fynes, 1873: 27) and during The Great Strike of 1844, workers’ leaders urged that the men:

conduct the contest in peace and good order, and with a view to carrying out this plan, they lost no opportunity of bringing the importance of proper conduct before the men whenever they were assembled together in anything like numbers. With them it had to be a fair stand-up battle between Might and Right, and they wanted no desperate or violent conduct on the part of the men as auxiliaries in the struggle; feeling sure that by the one course they would gain—what was very important for their success—public sympathy, and by the other they would fail to gain it, and disgust those who might otherwise be friendly disposed towards them. (Fynes, 1873: 63)

Despite appalling provocation, striking miners did, on the whole, refrain from violence and in doing so, as Nicholas Marsh affirms, proved their respectability:

When Engels observed the miners’ strike of 1844, he was – like Dickens ten years later – astonished at the rational self-control of the striking miners. So far from their behaviour reflecting the sub-human filth and violence of their place of work, on the contrary, their

¹⁹⁶ Andy Capp, the creation of cartoonist Reg Smythe (1917-98), first appeared in *The Daily Mirror* in 1957 and is a working-class man who never actually works, he is what could be considered a “stereotypical, flat-cap wearing northerner” (Leatherdale, 2006). Andy revels in the physical, plays football, often being sent off for fighting, and drinks heavily, he lives in Hartlepool with his wife Flo who, initially at least, was often the victim of domestic violence.

behaviour was that of 'moderation, rationality, self-control' – all middle class virtues Engels hardly thought to witness during such a bitter dispute. (Marsh, 2015: 235)

Their small victory achieved through the aping of middle-class values and, as Alan Plater refrained in *Close the Coalhouse Door*, "the conscience of the nation was stirred, never forget that" (Plater, 2000: 17, cf. 54, 56). Yet, regardless of their ability to replicate these middle-class virtues, the Bob Cranky stereotype of miners remained and remains, to some extent, in wider representations of 'Geordies' today.

Skipsey wrote within and against this tradition, his "dislike to strikes" (*PMG*: 2) promoting within him the absolute necessity of portraying his working class as respectable; this move toward respectability was extended by his biographer Robert Spence Watson as "middle-class intellectuals found their [working-class] hero in [the] Northumbrian collier and poet" (Ito, 2006: 208). Yet, as his embodied cultural capital was partly formed through the singing of "the elder boys in the pit" (*PMG*: 2) Bob Cranky, a popular song subject as Skipsey was growing up, is not absent from his poetry. Cranky exists in the potential sexual infidelity of the absent male in 'Jemmy stops Lang at the fair', but he is not just a dissolute figure. As an exemplification of (albeit parodic) masculinity, Cranky could also be "affectionate, convivial, and exuberant" (Hermeston, 2014: 157) and can be found in the physical prowess of Skipsey's 'The Lad of Bebside', who "dances so clever, [and] whistles so fine" (*S&L*1892: 60, l. 5) or 'The Collier Lad':

There's not his match in smoky Shields;
Newcastle never had
A lad more tight, more trim, nor bright
Than is my Collier Lad.
[...]
At bowling matches on the green
He ever takes the lead,
For none can swing his arm and fling
With such a pith and speed
[...]
The quoits are out, the hobs are fix'd,
The first round quoit he flings

Enrings the hob; and lo! the next
 The hob again enrings
 [...]
 When in the dance he doth advance,
 The rest all sigh to see
 How he can spring and kick his heels,
 When they a-wearied be. (S&L1892: Chorus, ll. 19-22, 35-8, 43-6)

Physically excellent and surpassing his rivals in popular, distinctly working-class, pursuits, “Tho’ doomed to labour under ground,/ A merry lad is he” (ll. 13-4), ‘The Collier Lad’ is brave and tragic enough to “have been among Hardy’s, no less than Housman’s, characters” (Bebbington, 1975: 48).¹⁹⁷ He is also generous:

Besides a will and pith and skill,
 My laddie owns a heart
 That never once would suffer him
 To act a cruel part;
 That to the poor would ope the door
 To share the last he had (ll. 51-6)

Despite these virtues, he approaches the Cranky stereotype in that “He seldom goes to church/ [...] And when he does [...] He with a leer will sit and hear,/ And doubt the holy men” (ll. 59-62) but is hauled back by his future wife to the respectability required of him in order to keep ‘proper conduct’: “soon as we are wed,/ To please the priest, I’ll do my best/ To tame my Collier Lad” (ll. 63-6). As a metaphor for the perception of Skipsey’s life and poetry, filtered through *RSWB*, ‘The Collier Lad’ symbolises the difference between what could be considered ‘reality’ and the need to package him as a respectable model of the working class; ‘The Collier Lad’ is ‘tamed’, made safe for social acceptance, at the behest of the Church whereas Skipsey is sanitised and enclosed within Spence Watson’s proclivities.

¹⁹⁷ Bebbington notes that George Sampson, in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (1941), placed Skipsey’s “‘Lyrics of the coalfields’ with *A Shropshire Lad*” (Bebbington, 1974: 47), where Sampson finds Skipsey’s poetry a forerunner to Housman’s “now familiar laconic note of bitterness in beauty” (Sampson, 1957: 1009).

This packaging of Skipsey is accepted because it conforms to an image that supports hierarchical and hegemonic perceptions of the established middle class that dominates literary culture, their specific forms of cultural, social, and economic capital prized within that sphere above all others. As Bourdieu suggests, however, a denunciation of the hierarchy is fruitless as this “does not get us anywhere [...Instead w]hat must be changed are the conditions that make the hierarchy exist, both in reality and our minds” (Bourdieu, 1992: 84). In researching the work of a working-class writer the ‘conditions that make the hierarchy exist’ are the assumptions, based on and supported by dominant forms of capital, that allow a ‘middle-class saviour narrative’ to develop. This narrative privileges Spence Watson’s position, by weight of his institutionalized capital, as Joseph Skipsey’s patron purely based on the totemic position afforded to *RSWB* with one feeding the other in a mutually beneficial, closed relationship. In the widest sense of the term ‘patron’ that sees him merely a supporter of Skipsey, this assumption is correct, but to consider a narrower definition of a patron, as an individual that actively uses their power and influence to further the endeavours of another, the evidence for the case for Spence Watson as patron is lacking. And in a sense, to refer back to Bourdieu, this is not to denounce the hierarchy that existed between Skipsey and Spence Watson, because this role of patron is not something claimed by the author of the biography. In the examination and disruption of *RSWB*, this thesis reveals that hierarchy and the conditions that maintain its perpetuation.

Changing the conditions, as Bourdieu states is imperative, in order to understand and challenge this hierarchy involves reaching beyond the information available that preserves, reproduces, and disseminates hierarchical reinforcers. At the centre of this is class, because, as John Guillory suggests, the “fact of class determines whether and how individuals gain access to the means of literary production, and the system regulating such access is a much more efficient mechanism of social exclusion than acts of judgment” (Guillory, 1994: ix). In being actively denied access to a formal school education, the most basic of the means of literary production and the

place in which legitimate forms of cultural capital are disseminated, Skipsey is already excluded by the hierarchy-preserving mechanism, his ability to gain access on his own terms removed. Instead, Skipsey is expected to remain within his own cultural field among the 'terrible and savage' pitmen. Should he demonstrate sufficient resourcefulness to break free from that environment, the adjectival limitations of his industrial designation, Pitman Poet, re-fix his position within the hierarchy and, more specifically, literary culture. The label dictates the scope of the working-class writer without any judgment being required, Skipsey must continue to produce "The real life pieces" (Rossetti, 2009: 191) in spite of his desire to have access to the full range of poetic subjects, access only afforded to those who have the correct cultural and social capital.

What allowed Skipsey to circumvent the class label to such an extent he was able to transcend his position as a miner poet to become a minor Victorian poet, was his access to social capital and, crucially, gatekeepers. In each instance of Skipsey's progression toward literary culture, from his showing Willie Reay transcriptions of his compositions (*PMG*: 2) to their subsequent passing through Rev. Edward Prest to James Clephan and so on, a gatekeeper with access to the next hierarchical rung was on hand to obviate the 'fact' of his class, by effectively guaranteeing his embodied cultural capital. Where Skipsey stands apart from other working-class poets is his progression through this hierarchy to achieve prominence as "one of the few working men taken up by a literary circle" (Vicus, 1974: 169). In spite of Robert Spence Watson's efforts to preserve his memory of Skipsey, without the introduction by the extraordinary Thomas Dixon, to not just a 'literary circle' but one of the most influential artistic groups of the Victorian period, Skipsey would have remained "in obscurity, poverty, or subject to the calumny & obliquy [*sic*] of a world [...] ever ready [to] bow the knee to the idols of Fashion" (Skipsey, 1878j:3). Instead, through Dixon's network and his actions as a catalyst, Skipsey has become indelibly linked to what could now be considered, in Rossetti in particular, 'idols of fashion' and individuals with significant cultural capital, that has now been institutionalized in artistic and literary canons by the academy. In this process, Skipsey

retains the respectability that was required of him as a subordinate to middle-class expectations, but rather than achieving the escape velocity required to fully escape into the orbit of 'literary production' he is held back by the gravity of the expectations surrounding his trade, the adjectival insistent Pitman, and his region.

It has long been known that Skipsey met with Dante Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones and that they had, in varying degrees, supported him with encouraging comments or practical help, but this has only ever been viewed from the perspective of patronage, Skipsey's agency within the process denied. The silences surrounding Skipsey have been maintained due to the imbalances in 'authorised' and 'acceptable' forms of cultural capital or legitimate culture. Hegemonic expectation and literary culture is satisfied with the neat packaging of Skipsey as a model of subordination and middle-class philanthropy, the middle-class saviour narrative dictating these assumptions is fulfilled and reproduced in perpetuity. Without reaching beyond the totemic biography, Skipsey has been held in stasis, packaged and consumed as a model of a respectable working class. While cultural productions such as Alan Plater's *Close the Coalhouse Door*, Lee Hall's *Billy Elliot* (2000) or *The Pitman Painters* (2007) have shown the struggles of working-class artists and intellectuals within their communities, it is clear the "opposition of worker and artist is a false one" (RKRTB: 11) yet the mechanism promoting this false dichotomy continues to perpetuate the notion. This research, in examining the archives and following traces others have ignored or disregarded, redresses this by disrupting the silences and exposing the processes that have led to Skipsey's categorisation, persistently putting the poet before the pitman. Although it seems unlikely a collection of letters received by Joseph Skipsey will ever be recovered, with the increasing digitization of archival information more networks to which he had access will become visible, and the distance between the poet and the pitman increased.

Despite being the most immediately recognisable class of worker or the absolute necessity of their economic function, writing produced by coal miners, as both Gustav Klaus and Bridget

Keegan have argued (Klaus, 1985: 63; Keegan, 2011: 178), has been neglected. This thesis is part of an ongoing uncovering of the literary work of miners, begun by Vicinus and Klaus and revived by Keegan, and, in the archival discovery possible in concentrating on a single poet, bringing to the surface what has remained in dark underground passages. Situated within the established fields of working-class literature and regional identity, carried out by John Goodridge and Robert Colls in particular, but in concentrating on a poet who happened to be a coal miner this thesis exposes the systems that have kept Skipsey a pitman first and a poet second.

Marginalised by his class, Joseph Skipsey was also peripheral in terms of geography and, despite its foundational role in English literature in the shape of Bede, Cuthbert, and Cædmon, the literary heritage of North-East England has been ostracized by the cultural centre. In his chapter in *Northumbria: History and Identity 547-2000* (2007), the literary historian Alan Myers states this is, in part, because English literary culture is “in thrall to the prejudices of the Renaissance” (Myers, 2007: 294) that value the heritages of Rome and Ancient Greece over its own Anglo-Saxon legacy. Not only is the North seen as peripheral it has connotations of death, hell, and a subterranean existence, a theme Dickens explores in *A Christmas Carol*. When Scrooge is visited by the Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come, he is taken to:

a bleak and desert moor, where monstrous masses of rude stone were cast about [...where] the setting sun had left a streak of fiery red, which glared upon the desolation for an instant, like a sullen eye, and frowning lower, lower, lower yet, was lost in the thick gloom of darkest night.

“What place is this?” asked Scrooge.

“A place where Miners live, who labour in the bowels of the earth.” (Dickens, 2003: 92)

Reminiscent of, Northumbrian-born painter, John Martin’s (1789-1854) *Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1852), Dickens’ spirit takes Scrooge to an outlying world of menace and threat in a last attempt to have him change his ways. It was in this peripheral “industrial hellhole” (Byrne, 1992:

37), part of a maligned class of worker, and a region whose literary tradition is dismissed by the cultural centre that Joseph Skipsey was attempting to produce poetry worthy of his nation's remembrance, his cultural capital actively working against his literary ambitions.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE

'A Patriotic Invocation'

(L1858: 5)

Oh! England, why longer delay to unsheath
Thy sword in the cause of Truth, Justice, and Right?
As thou lookedest on Poland till trodden to death.
Must Hungary too kiss the ground in thy sight?

Must Russia and Austria their forces unite
The weak to enslave and the noble to brand,
And thou stand unmoved whose high prowess could smite
The smiters, and rescue such prey from their hand?

For once be thy spirit aroused from its sleep!
Arise from the couch of contentment and ease!
That moment God chose thee the Queen of the Deep,
He demanded thy aid in such moments as these!

Pour! pour out thy wrath on each bold thirsty hound,
Until proved to the nations by action and word;
That whenever the voice Britannia may sound
The Protectress of Freedom and Justice is heard!

So shalt thou become the beloved of the earth,
And add to those stars which have deck'd thee so long,
While hisses and curses shall cancel thy worth,
If thou sufferest the weak to be gorged by the strong!

APPENDIX TWO

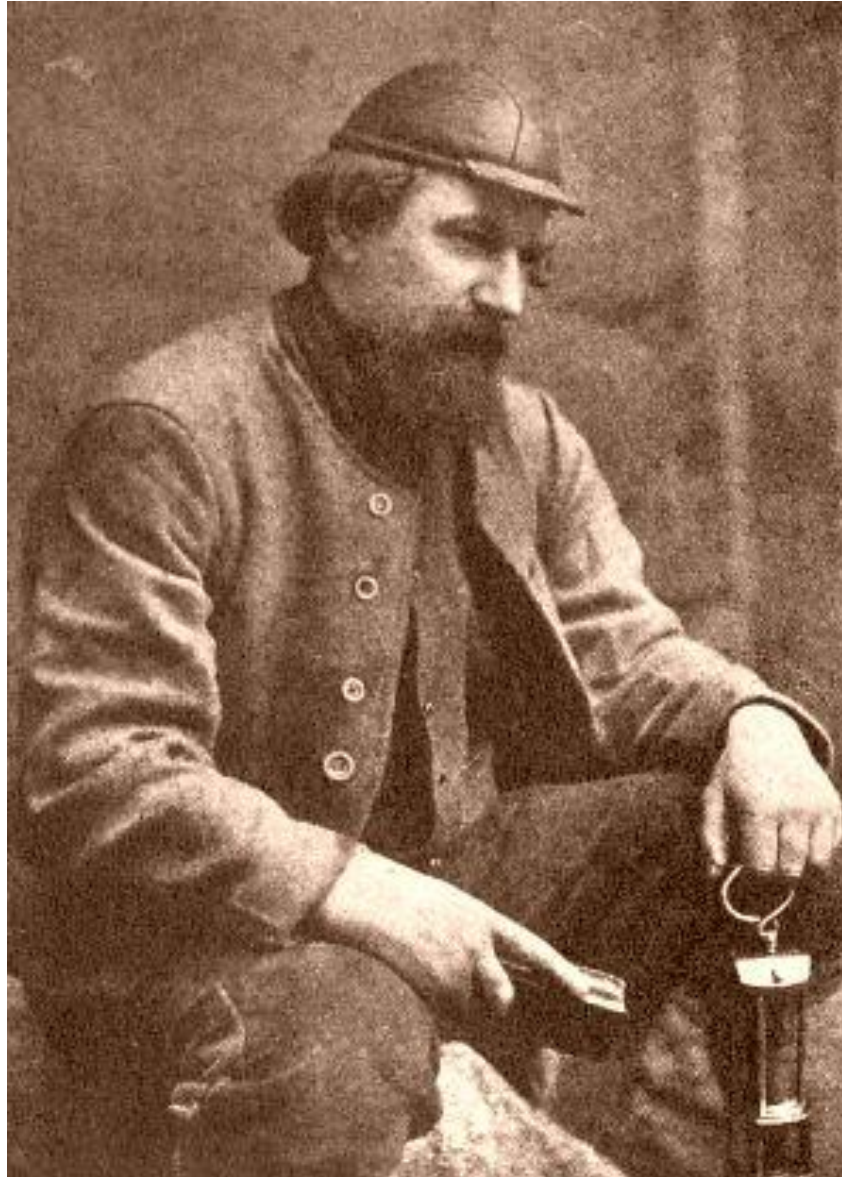
Lines Read at Christmas, 1861

(Newcastle Guardian, 1861: 6)

We meet to-day as, to our deep regret,
Masters and Men have too, too seldom met.
Not each other's frailties to scan;
Man must have frailties while man is man!—
Not to barter in mere honey'd phrase;
The Sons of Freedom still despise the base!—
Not the bands of Harmony to bind;
Masters and Men were never firmer join'd!
No, no! we're gathered here to show
If we have failings, we have virtues too;
To dower our honey'd words with noble acts—
To fortify our highest vaunt with facts;
To consecrate the bands already bound;
To brim the cup of Social Glee around
As it were never brimm'd! Yes! such the aim,
The blest design of him in whom the name
Of Master blends into the name of Friend:—
Yes! such his aim, and such will prove the end!
Lo! this to us shall be a Banquet, which,
Enthroned in Memory's most sacred niche,
Henceforth shall stand a monument to bless
A retrospective glance, and more or less
Call Gratitude, while our life-glass runs,
To bless the name of Hawks, Crawshay and Sons.¹⁹⁸

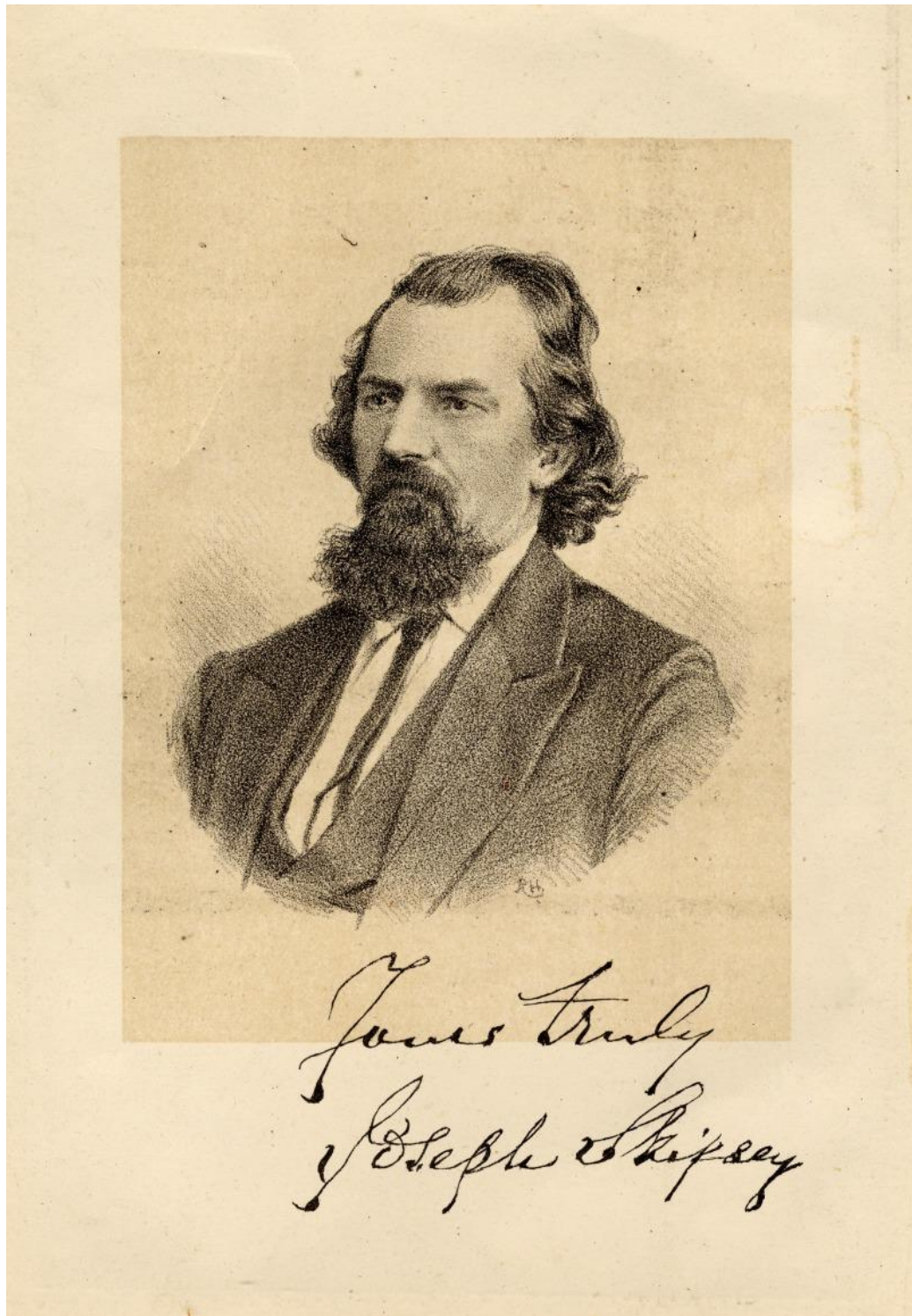
¹⁹⁸ This is the extent of what was reported in the *Newcastle Guardian*; it is, presumably, the whole poem.

APPENDIX THREE



'Skipsey in his working clothes' (photographer unknown)
(RSWB: 54a)

APPENDIX FOUR



Ralph Hedley sketch of Skipsey
(front matter, *BML1878*)

APPENDIX FIVE



"Get Up!" (c.1884)

Alfred Dixon

(<http://artuk.org/discover/artworks/get-up-the-caller-calls-get-up-36445>)

APPENDIX SIX

Unpublished Letter from Dante Rossetti¹⁹⁹

16 Cheyne Walk

Chelsea

4 Dec: [1878]²⁰⁰

My Dear Sir

I have been meaning to write you for I know not how long, & to thank you for the kind attention to have paid to my poetry. Indeed on this subject I must write again at some length but do not like to delay longer the [indecipherable] acknowledgement of your letters, & have not lately been feeling quite well enough for much correspondence.

You being a true poet under difficulties is in the nature of poetry to account for; but the literary command shown in your critical letters is truly surprising to me, when you tell me how much you are limited to your daily occupations.

I hope The Lyrics are making some way, & should like (if convenient to send) to have a sight of the Durham paper which surprised the Athenæum awhile. The provincial lyrics you sent me are insightful but not fully efficient. I was saying to my friend Watts that I felt a want in his article of a sentence [indecipherable] the variety of the book's contents; & he said he felt this much himself on reading it in print, & knew he had meant to introduce a point but it somehow slipped out in haste of writing. W. B. Scott was speaking to me the other day with much sympathy of your work.

I live an almost completely secluded life, but should be very pleased to receive a visit from you if you carry out your invitation of looking in on London about Christmas time. Meanwhile & ever believe me.

Sincerely yours

D G Rossetti

¹⁹⁹ This letter is held in the Special Collections of the Robinson Library, Newcastle University; it is reproduced with the kind permission of Charles Rossetti.

²⁰⁰ Rossetti gives no year in dating this letter. I have attributed 1878 because, on 21st November 1878, Skipsey advises Rossetti he is thinking of visiting London around Christmas; this letter accepts that proposal. Furthermore, *TCDGR* (v8) includes a letter to Thomas Dixon (4th December) in which Rossetti indicates he would welcome Skipsey's visit.

APPENDIX SEVEN

Unpublished Letter from Dante Rossetti²⁰¹

14 July [1880]²⁰²

16 Cheyne Walk

Chelsea

Dear Mr Skipsey

Few things could have shocked me more than the sudden calamity of poor Dixon's death. I thought when I last saw him that there was a wild look in his eyes as [I find are?] when asthma had long been doing its work of asphyxia. ~~My~~ Not my least thought in the matter is for yourself – when so much more alone in spirit. If you could try yourself to visit London sometimes, I know of no one who wd be more welcome. Burne Jones was speaking to me with the greatest interest of yourself & Dixon the other evening & he will be extremely grieved to hear of this unexpected loss. The honoured position which Dixon held for his high minded candour is much as I never knew of in the case of any other individual. He has truly been useful in his generation.

Watts conceived the greatest personal esteem for you, and was telling me of the enthusiasm for your poems shown by a lady – Lady Archibald Campbell – to whom he had lent the volume.

I would be sincerely grateful if, at some spare moment, you w^d think it well to write down a transcription [in full?] what you told me [relating?] to Shelley with every particular as exactly as you can remember it. I wish much to show it to my brother if you have no objection but will not show it to others without your permission.

Hoping to meet you again on a future occasion.

I remain

Sincerely yours

D G Rossetti

²⁰¹ This letter is held in the Special Collections of the Robinson Library, Newcastle University; it is reproduced with the kind permission of Charles Rossetti.

²⁰² Rossetti gives no year in this letter, but is clearly written following Dixon's death in 1880.

APPENDIX EIGHT

Photograph of envelope containing letter from W.B. Yeats to Skipsey²⁰³



Author's own photograph

²⁰³ The envelope is held in the Special Collections of the Robinson Library, Newcastle University; its author is unknown.

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Close the coalhouse door, lad
And stay outside
Geordie's crawled out of his hole
Geordie's standing at the dole
Geordie's paid the price of coal
Close the coalhouse door, lad
There's blood inside
There's bones inside
There's bairns inside
So stay ... outside

*A silence, a pause, then everybody turns
quickly towards the pithead.
They bow their heads in homage.*

A fade to blackout.

(Plater, 2000: 84-5)