



“A Strange Medley-Book”:
Lucy Larcom’s *An Idyl of Work*

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IN 1875, the Boston-based publisher Osgood & Company issued Lucy Larcom’s first and only book-length narrative poem, *An Idyl of Work*. Based loosely on Larcom’s years (from 1836 to 1846) as a factory worker in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, *An Idyl of Work* features a group protagonist: three young female millworkers, who share a room, are followed as they extend their friendships to other women and, eventually, leave the mills for their various fates—marriage, independence, death.

The publication of *An Idyl of Work* capped a significant investment of time and hope for Larcom, who had been struggling to make her living as a full-time woman of letters, with mixed success, for more than a decade. In the 1870s, Larcom worked alongside her friend and mentor John Greenleaf Whittier on a series of literary anthologies. As she composed *An Idyl* throughout 1873, 1874, and the first half of 1875, Whittier offered her encouragement. “Don’t forget that Poem,” he wrote her in March 1873; “Work on it whenever thee can get a chance.” In August 1874 he asked her again, “How about *the* Poem? I hope thee will imitate the ‘perfection of the saints’—& keep always at it until it is finished. It is a grand . . . theme, & thee can make it a poem which will have a right to live.”¹

¹John Greenleaf Whittier to Lucy Larcom, 29 March 1873 and 11 August 1874, box 2, Dudley Dulany Addison Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass. Whittier took full editorial credit for the three anthologies on which Larcom worked, although he acknowledged her contributions in his prefaces. On the tensions between Larcom and Whittier over the anthologies, see Shirley Marchalonis,

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But Whittier had his own ideas about the sort of poem Larcom should produce. He wrote to her wondering, “Would it not be well to describe graphically the interior of the factory—its appearance on entering—the vast rooms, the looms, & machinery;—the atmosphere dense with cotton filaments— . . . all the circumstances of the scene and time, agreeable or disagreeable?” He worried lest Larcom let her several main characters “talk too much,” preferring once again that she simply “describe the mill life & its possibilities” in her own voice, and he recommended that she not shrink from the story’s autobiographical appeal: “Of course, as the book is *about* thyself thee must needs talk of thyself, which is what thy readers want.” Even as early as July 1873, Whittier was urging Larcom to finish her poem and turn her attention to more popular, and more profitable, projects. “Where is the prose mill story which thee was to write & which I think I saw partly in MS?” he asked. “That would sell three to one better than verse.”²

But the poem Larcom apparently wanted to write, and stubbornly did write against Whittier’s advice, was more ambitious—more complex, multilayered, and intertextual—than the one he had proposed, and she had great expectations for it. The central topic of Larcom’s poem is not primarily the material conditions of the millworkers’ industrial labor—“the vast room, the looms, & machinery” that bulked so large in Whittier’s sense of Larcom’s true subject. Her theme is, rather, the mill girls’ access to culture and the role of culture in the making of class. For better or worse, Larcom wrote *An Idyl of Work* not to indict the corruptions of industrial work but to demonstrate (in idealized terms, to be sure) that some young women in these circumstances became, and perhaps remained, poets and that others combined mill labor with literary self-culture. This is a poem, then, about the material conditions

The Worlds of Lucy Larcom, 1824–1893 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), pp. 183–84, 201–3. Quotations from the Addison Collection by permission of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

²Whittier to Larcom, Addison Collection: box 1, 17 September(?) 187(?); box 2, 29 March 1873; box 1, 187(?); box 2, 1 July 1873.

not of industry but of literacy—an issue that threaded its way through all of Larcom's working life, long after she left the mills behind.³



Larcom's own early introduction to literacy took place under comfortable circumstances. The daughter of a retired sea captain, she was born in 1824 and spent the first eight years of her life in Beverly, Massachusetts. Her formal education began at the age of two, when she was sent to a village dame school; her reading started with the Bible and quickly advanced to hymns, which she memorized at the rate of "two or three hymns in a forenoon or an afternoon." "Rhyme had always a sort of magnetic power over me," she recalled, and it drew her on, as a child, into readings that included Byron and Southey as well as her textbooks' Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Bryant. She found and treasured a battered volume of Byron alongside a biography of John Calvin, "not aware of any unfitness or incompatibility," and "felt no incongruity between Dr. Watts and Mother Goose."⁴

The death of Larcom's father in 1832, however, left the family unexpectedly indebted. After three years of trying to make ends meet, Larcom, her mother, and several of her sisters moved to Lowell, Massachusetts, where they opened a boardinghouse for women millworkers. When the boardinghouse failed to provide the family with a sufficient income, Lucy Larcom was judged the best suited of the Larcom girls to go to work in the mills; she succeeded as a laborer, winning positions of greater responsibility and pay. The work, although physically demanding, was rewarding enough that she returned

³For Bourdieu's classic definition of "cultural capital," see "The Forms of Capital," in *The Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp. 241–58; see also John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁴Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood, Outlined from Memory* (1889; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), pp. 58, 129–34. In addition to Larcom's own memoir, Marchalonis's *The Worlds of Lucy Larcom* remains the fullest biography.

to the mills after an interval of living with an older married sister, and she stayed on in Lowell—living in a boardinghouse herself for the first time—when, in 1843, her mother returned to Beverly.

Among the mills' attractions by 1843 was the *Lowell Offering*, which published the literary efforts of the millworkers. Larcom soon became a contributor, and her poetry brought her to the attention of Whittier, who in 1844 was named editor of the Lowell-based *Middlesex Standard*. Their connection lapsed in 1846 when Larcom accompanied her sister Emmeline and her family to Illinois; after engagements as a teacher in village schools, Larcom eventually settled at the Monticello Seminary (near the town of Alton), where she could resume her education while also serving as an instructor. When Larcom returned to Massachusetts for a teaching position at the Wheaton Female Seminary in Norton, Massachusetts, in 1854, she and Whittier resumed their friendship, now firmly based on their mutual ambitions as writers.

Whittier helped Larcom publish her first book, *Similitudes, from the Ocean and Prairie*, in 1854, and her poetry began appearing regularly in periodicals as well. Hoping to make her living primarily from her literary career, Larcom left her full-time teaching position at Wheaton in 1863, although she would return for occasional lectures and for a full term in 1867 to eke out more income, and from time to time she taught elsewhere as well. In 1864 she became an editor (along with J. T. Trowbridge and Gail Hamilton) of *Our Young Folks*, Ticknor and Fields's entry into the burgeoning market for children's literature; in 1868 she assumed full editorial responsibility for the magazine, which gave her a reliable and quite respectable annual salary of twelve hundred dollars a year.⁵ The sale of *Our Young Folks* in 1873, however, threw her into uncertainty

⁵A receipt of 5 October 1869 from Fields, Osgood, and Co., box 1, Addison Collection, gives a sense of the relative contributions Larcom's various literary activities made to her income in these years: it shows a partial payment of \$500 on her annual salary over five months in contrast with royalties for her poems of \$75 in the same period.

again. The loss of her income from the magazine was partly recouped when she assisted Whittier on compiling and editing several popular anthologies—*Child Life: A Collection of Poems* (1871), *Child Life in Prose* (1873), and *Songs of Three Centuries* (1875).

In the summer of 1873, Larcom sent James R. Osgood a number of proposals for new projects of her own, including *An Idyl of Work*. Even as he wrote Larcom that he wanted to publish *An Idyl*, however, Osgood discouraged her from relying on writing as her sole means of support. “Literary matters are, as you know very well, rather precarious,” he reminded her, as he refused to entertain her suggestion that she draw a regular salary from the firm.⁶ She took his advice and taught for a year at Bradford Academy in 1873–74. The hard and, for Larcom, unrewarding work of teaching, as well as her work on the anthologies, doubtless delayed the completion of the *Idyl*, which Osgood had expected by January 1874. Although he leaned heavily on her for editorial support, Whittier also reminded Larcom of her larger ambition. He helped her polish the poem’s short preface, and in May 1875, Larcom finally delivered *An Idyl of Work* to Osgood.

Larcom’s ambition was indeed large. She sought to produce nothing less than a book-length, autobiographical, blank verse poem on the making of a poet, a composition that would take its place in a transatlantic poetic conversation. The posthumous publication of William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1850), followed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), not only gave Larcom prestigious precursors for her work but also showed her how one such poem could talk back to another, as Barrett Browning’s did to Wordsworth’s.⁷ Larcom would have known from the example of Josiah Holland’s *Katharina* (1867), still selling briskly in the 1870s, that American

⁶Quoted in Marchalonis, *The Worlds of Lucy Larcom*, pp. 193–94.

⁷“It is good for me to get stirred up and shaken soundly once in a while,” Larcom wrote to Whittier of her reading of *Aurora Leigh* soon after its publication (22 September 1857, in Grace F. Shepard, “Letters of Lucy Larcom to the Whittiers,” *New England Quarterly* 3 [July 1930]: 501–18, 508–9).

middlebrow tastes could happily accommodate a *kunstlerroman* modeled after Wordsworth and Barrett Browning. By the time of Holland's death in 1881, *Kathrina* had racked up sales of ninety-nine thousand copies, "outstripped all of its fellows in popular favor, and outsold all other American poems except Longfellow's 'Hiawatha.'"⁸ Larcom had every reason to suppose that her contribution would be similarly well received.

An Idyl of Work incorporates into its blank verse narrative what amounts to a miniature anthology of Larcom's shorter poems: at least sixteen lyrics, many of them previously published, beginning with "The Loaf-Giver" (a rhyming gloss on the Anglo-Saxon origins of the word "lady") and continuing through various sonnets, narrative ballads, and hymns.⁹ Larcom's most famous English model for such a poem would have been Alfred Tennyson's *The Princess* (1847), with its several well-known interpolated lyrics punctuating its blank verse narration—"a Medley," as Tennyson subtitled his work, that Larcom admired for its representation of women and for its "proof that intellectual theories, and the interests of today, can be put into poetry."¹⁰ Closer to home, Larcom observed that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had wrapped a narrative frame around a number of previously published shorter works to produce his *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (first series, 1863) and that Whittier had done much the same with his *The Tent on the Beach* (1867), which compiled nine ballads originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly* inside a versified fictional frame of four friends

⁸Edward Eggleston, "Josiah Gilbert Holland," *Century*, December 1881, pp. 161–67, 165. On *Kathrina* as a conservative critique of *The Prelude* and *Aurora Leigh*, see my *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 135–44. Eggleston's comments are supported by a glance through the holdings of Harvard University's libraries.

⁹For "Loaf-Giver," see Lucy Larcom, *An Idyl of Work* (Boston: Osgood and Company, 1875), pp. 15–18; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as *Idyl*. The etymology for "lady" in "Loaf-Giver" was among Larcom's many conventional transatlantic borrowings. See John Ruskin's gloss on "lady" in "Of Queen's Gardens," in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), ed. Deborah Epstein Nord (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 89.

¹⁰Lucy Larcom, untitled lecture on poetry, box 2, Addison Collection.

encamped at the seashore (the friends included Whittier, Bayard Taylor, Whittier's publisher James T. Fields, and Larcom's own friend Annie Fields). Like *An Idyl of Work*, Longfellow's and Whittier's medley-poems had no one, dominant protagonist; instead, the authors attributed their poems to a number of speakers, in a diffused sociality of letters.¹¹

Embarking on *An Idyl of Work* in the early 1870s, Larcom was no doubt content that a long narrative poem with interpolated shorter poems—an anthology-poem, as I call it—was a proper vehicle for her serious poetic ambition.¹² Moreover, experience told her, it would draw an audience. As Whittier's friend, she was well aware that *The Tent on the Beach* had been surprisingly rewarding for him; indeed, both Whittier and Longfellow found that incorporating previously published poems into a longer narrative form helped them boost the meager financial returns yielded by periodical publication or slender volumes of poetry.¹³ Beyond such financial considerations,

¹¹Elizabeth Maddock Dillon uses the term "sociality" to mark out the "space of public sphere activity concerned with private subject production" within a liberal public sphere structured by "the desire for recognition." See her *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 7. Anthology-poems—especially in their mid-nineteenth-century, high American, liberal mode—are centrally concerned with exactly this space of sociality.

¹²Christoph Irmscher notes Longfellow's interest in "the form of the anthology"—expressed not only in the compiling of his anthologies proper but in medley-style poems: "the form of the anthology . . . became one of Longfellow's favorite genres, from *The Waif* (1845) and *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* (1870), to *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863), Longfellow's answer to Boccaccio and Chaucer, and, finally, the thirty-one-volume anthology *Poems of Places* (1876–1879), the most comprehensive collection of poems ever published in the United States" ("Longfellow Redux," *Raritan* 21 [Winter 2002]: 100–29, 118).

¹³William Charvat's reconstruction of Longfellow's earnings shows that although Longfellow "made his reputation by his lyrics," for practical intents and purposes he "[gave] his lyrics to the world free"; it was Longfellow's narrative writings that maintained his income. As published in the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1861 to 1863, the poems that later entered *Tales of a Wayside Inn* contributed to Longfellow's total annual periodicals income of not more than three hundred dollars. Putting a narrative frame around them, and then using the narrative *Tales* to pull in buyers for the assorted "Birds of Passage" lyrics that followed in the volume, yielded a book that sold 22,000 copies in two years and that generated about twelve hundred dollars for Longfellow in its first year of publication. See Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), pp. 113–14, 140. Whittier thought his publisher, James T. Fields, imprudent for ordering an initial print run of 10,000 for

Larcom's deep (and thoroughly professional) immersion in the high Victorian Anglo-American literary field may well have convinced her that late-nineteenth-century poetry in English did some of its most interesting thinking within the confines of such relaxed narrative forms. E. Warwick Slinn's observation that "we find a growing experimentation among [British] Victorian poets with relationships between smaller discrete units—such as couplets, sonnets, or stanzas—and extended, often loosely constructed, narrative sequences" applies to both sides of the Atlantic. Such long poems or sequences of poems apparently constituted an informal, baggy, transatlantic super-genre for educated nineteenth-century Anglo-American readers.¹⁴ Although to describe such a form as "experimental" may seem strange to present-day American critics accustomed to reserving the honorific for Whitman's free verse and Dickinson's protomodernist lyrics, Larcom almost certainly viewed her own cultural moment in that way.¹⁵

The Tent on the Beach, but the volume sold out its first printing in ten days. See John B. Pickard, ed., *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, 1861–1892 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 145–46. Whittier's previously "negligible" income from books, Charvat reports, rose to "a little over \$3,000 a year," and in 1868 the total printings for all of Whittier's books, carried along by *The Tent on the Beach*, exceeded 53,000 (Charvat, p. 171).

¹⁴E. Warwick Slinn, "Experimental Form in Victorian Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 58. Slinn ventures that the "obvious nineteenth-century paradigm for such structures, particularly those that employ lyrics of varying stanzas and length," is Tennysonian monodrama (p. 59). A partial list of post-Civil War American sequences of lyrics in various stanzas, something along the lines of Tennyson's *Maud*, might include Edmund Clarence Stedman's sequence "The Carib Sea," Emma Lazarus's sequence of "Songs" and her "Translations from the Hebrew Poets of Medieval Spain," in *Songs of a Semite*, Sidney Lanier's "Hymns of the Marshes," and Trumbull Stickney's "Eride" sequence of love poems.

¹⁵The paradigm that would canonize Whitman and Dickinson as American heterodox experimentalists was already at work in Larcom's day. On how American literary nationalism created the space for the rebellious "American Homer" that Whitman came to fill, see Timothy Morris's *Becoming Canonical in American Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), esp. pp. 1–53. For another valuable historical perspective on the supercession of the "schoolroom poets" (Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, and Whittier), see Angela Sorby's *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865–1917* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2005).

When Longfellow, Whittier, and then Larcom wrote long narrative poems in which lyrics and ballads circulated among various speakers, they found a way of reflecting in poetic form the means by which poetry is transmitted. That is to say, at a very fundamental, formal level, the subject of all of these poems is the creation and distribution of cultural capital (as we call it today, after Pierre Bourdieu): how poetry gets read, translated from one person to another, ordered, accessed, preserved. The embedded structure of the anthology-poems (and of other mid-century “medley” works, like James Russell Lowell’s *The Bigelow Papers*, that incorporate poetry within prose narrative or fictional commentary) offered writers and readers maps of the nineteenth-century literary field, reflexive formal models for the production, circulation, and reception of poems. In other words, anthology-poems formally literalized the matrix of print culture out of which they emerged. The anthology-poem’s characteristic reframing of languages by other languages echoes Bakhtin’s famous description of the novel: here “discourse not only represents, but is itself represented.”¹⁶

The rapidly shifting character of nineteenth-century Anglo-American publishing—the dramatic expansion of readership, the multiplication of publication outlets, the commercialization and stratification of the literary field—may well have given rise to poetic experimentation. Trying to account for the fecundity of nineteenth-century prosody, Herbert Tucker speculatively links the phenomenon to the conditions of nineteenth-century print culture: “The nineteenth century developed the nearest thing that publishing poets have ever had to a mass readership, with distributive possibilities and marketing schemes to match, but also new grounds for anxiety about whom a poet was speaking to—indeed, about whether anyone was listening.” The bewildering varieties of nineteenth-century versification, Tucker argues, “[bespeak] a serious attempt [by poets] to construct

¹⁶M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 336.

a venue for poetry's survival."¹⁷ Anthology-poems or medleys, like anthologies in the more conventional sense, gave new life to shorter works and offered poets the formal means of imagining and reimagining, idealizing and critiquing, the circulation of poems (including their own poems) within the burgeoning print market, both within and across national boundaries.

When Larcom turned from her editorial collaboration with Whittier on their transatlantic anthology *Songs of Three Centuries* to concentrate on composing *An Idyl of Work*, she was not, perhaps, turning so very far. The poem's "medley" form, its choice of a group protagonist, its avoidance of concrete detail about the work of the mills, and its conspicuous transatlantic intertextuality all conspire to interfere with readers' ability to read Larcom's *Idyl* as an individual story of suffering and release, as a historical document of industrialization, or as a class protest against oppression. But all of these formal features contribute to Larcom's collective biography. For Larcom's purposes in *An Idyl of Work*, mapping the transatlantic literary field and writing her own poetic autobiography seem to have been one and the same project.



In composing *An Idyl of Work*, Larcom drew some broad plot patterns from her transatlantic generic models. Like Tennyson's *The Princess*, Larcom's *Idyl of Work* centers on a trio of young women, but Larcom's heroines—sober Esther, ethereal Eleanor, and flighty Isabel—are workers rather than aristocrats, workers who self-consciously ponder their own relation to aristocratic ideals of "ladyhood." In the opening of the poem, May floods idle the mills' machinery, a circumstance that grants the young women an unaccustomed occasion for leisure—for an idyl, as it were.¹⁸ Lacking the resources to found a female

¹⁷Herbert F. Tucker, "Of Monuments and Moments: Spacetime in Nineteenth-Century Poetry," *Modern Language Quarterly* 58 (September 1997): 278.

¹⁸Larcom's title both puns on the "idling" of the machinery and invokes another transatlantic model for the long narrative poem, Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King* (1859); again, Larcom challenges the aristocratic bias of her model.

center of learning, as does the protagonist of Tennyson's poem, Larcom's heroines nonetheless use their free time to improve themselves along the lines available to them: reading and singing to one another, attending church, discussing the sermon and their lives more generally. And, as in *The Princess*, their doings are watched by a group of interested young men.

At this point in the plot, Larcom introduces a new character to her trio: Ruth Woodburn, who, as it will turn out, writes poetry. A few weeks later (recalling Charles Dickens's visit to Lowell in 1842), a group of visitors from Britain and Boston arrives at the mill, among them a Boston man who will attempt to seduce Isabel.¹⁹ In high summer, Eleanor and Esther accompany another friend on a vacation to the New Hampshire mountains, where the women befriend a wealthy woman, Miriam Willoughby, and draw her into their circuit of poetic exchange. In their absence from Lowell, Eleanor and Esther miss a threatened strike in the factories, the *Idyl's* version of class apocalypse beheld from a distance, like the burning of Romney Leigh's estate in *Aurora Leigh*. They also miss Isabel's flight "up the Boston road" with her would-be seducer. Fortunately, the seducer—Miriam Willoughby's wayward nephew, eventually also exposed as an embezzler—skips town before stealing Isabel's virtue. *An Idyl of Work* concludes as Esther marries a doctor, Isabel establishes a modest independence as a seamstress in Boston, and Eleanor anticipates a beautiful consumptive death in Esther's arms, overlooking a Boston drenched in a "suffusing harmony of light" (*Idyl*, p. 180)—now become a New Jerusalem.

¹⁹In Larcom's version of Dickens's famous encounter with American industry, "Some strangers came one day into the mills,— / Among them English travelers." The "strangers" note with dismay that children are working in the mills—"copying / Our British faults too closely"—before they turn with pleasure to contemplate Larcom's virtuous, intelligent, and comely young-adult heroines (*Idyl*, pp. 77–78). Dickens's own account is in his *American Notes* (1842), chap. 4. Larcom's attitudes follow Dickens's closely, including his unfavorable comparison of British working conditions with those in the U.S. Larcom responded to Dickens's recollections more directly in her autobiographical essay "Among Lowell Mill-Girls," *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1881, pp. 593–612, 609–10.

Larcom maps the cultural field of the 1840s, the decade of the poem's action, throughout the *Idyl*. Perhaps its most explicit expression can be found in the description of Esther's cherished books:

The bookshelf swung between
 Two simple prints,—the "Cotter's Saturday Night"
 And the "Last Supper," dear to Esther's heart,
 Though scarce true to Da Vinci. On the shelves
 Maria Edgeworth's "Helen" leaned against
 Thomas à Kempis. Bunyan's "Holy War"
 And "Pilgrim's Progress" stood up stiff between
 "Locke on the Understanding" and the Songs
 Of Robert Burns. The "Voices of the Night,"
 "Bridal of Pennacook," "Paradise Lost,"
 With Irving's "Sketch-book," "Ivanhoe," Watts's Hymns,
 Mingled in democratic neighborhood.

[*Idyl*, p. 43]

A pure, canonical distillation of early-nineteenth-century, respectable, evangelical, transatlantic vernacular literacy, Esther's collection of books poignantly sums up the mill girls' shared cultural capital in Larcom's *Idyl*.²⁰ Robert Burns's enormously popular poem "The Cotter's Saturday Night," which depicts a humble, cottage-dwelling family reading the Bible together, inspired numerous paintings and prints.²¹ For Larcom's country-bred mill girls, it would have been a nostalgic image to keep faith with: their single-sex dormitory refuge from their industrial labor contrasts with the familial domesticity of the rural

²⁰Larcom glossed her own memories of such bookshelves at length a few years later in "Among Lowell Mill-Girls": "Among children of the Puritans, the reading of good books was a matter of course. . . . With the Pilgrim's Progress many of us had been from infancy as familiar as we were with the road from our own door-stone to the meeting-house. . . . Milton also had the charm of a great story-teller; and the Paradise Lost, being a religious book, was to be found in most home libraries that contained more than a dozen volumes, a large number for those days." The mill girls' tastes, she recalls, ran to "Standard English works" rather than "the thickets of modern miscellaneous literature," since the standards "were almost the only books within reach" (pp. 604, 605).

²¹Larcom could have had in mind the Scottish painter David Wilkie's well-known rendition of "The Cotter's Saturday Night" (1837), although the self-taught U.S. artist Eunice Pinney also painted a "Cotter's Saturday Night" (1820).

cottage, and their small bookshelf, although orthodox, is nonetheless much wider and more secular than the Cotter's reading. Distanced at yet one more remove from Esther's modest acquirements by both time and superior cultural knowledge, Larcom's narrator in turn endorses the bookshelf's "democratic neighborhood" as the foundation not only for Esther's self-culture but also for American national culture.

In seeking to define the literary aims of a democratic American culture, Larcom was open to transatlantic influence, but she had ambitions to exert as well as to receive it. Esther's bookshelf is obviously transatlantic in its contents; what is less obvious is that in compiling it, Larcom sought to recast Marian Earle's more impoverished and fragmentary acquisition of literature in *Aurora Leigh*. Marian Earle, a poor seamstress taken up by Aurora's cousin Romney Leigh, "tramped" alongside her parents as a child with no access to books except through the casual charity of other vagrants, like the peddler who

would toss her down
 Some odd stray volume from his heavy pack,
 A Thomson's Seasons, mulcted of the Spring,
 Or half a play of Shakespeare's, torn across . . .
 Or else a sheaf of leaves (for that small Ruth's
 Small gleanings) torn out from the heart of books,
 From Churchyard Elegies and Edens Lost,
 From Burns, and Bunyan, Selkirk, and Tom Jones,—
 . . . [S]he weeded out
 Her book-leaves, threw away the leaves that hurt . . .
 And made a nosegay of the sweet and good
 To fold within her breast, and pore upon
 At broken moments of the noonday glare.²²

The raw materials of Marian's and Esther's literacies overlap considerably, save for the absence of American reading in Marian's "nosegay." What differ are the conditions in which the two

²²Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* (1856) (London: Women's Press, 1978), bk. 3, ll. 972–92; hereafter cited parenthetically by book and line number.

women acquire and use their precious, hard-won cultural capital, conditions that emblemize Larcom's jealously guarded sense of divergence between the hopelessly impoverished, dispossessed population of the industrializing British countryside and the American workingwomen of Larcom's own idealized girlhood experience, youth who left their family farms or small-town homes, often temporarily, to labor in New England's emerging industries.²³

Unlike *Aurora Leigh*, *An Idyl of Work* imagines its transatlantic cultural capital as an asset that can be shared among workingwomen, even generated by them. Larcom makes her point through supporting character Ruth Woodburn. Ruth, who has been disappointed in love, habitually carries about an "old portfolio of [her own] verse" (*Idyl*, p. 85). The narrator reproves Ruth's self-indulgent lyrics—"Tis no good place for songs," she says, "Dungeoned in self. Birds in a darkened cage/ Stop singing" (*Idyl*, p. 86)—but the author goes beyond personal admonition to question the origins of such a literature of misery. Larcom's plotting suggests that the stereotypically feminine poetry of "secret sorrow"—in Cheryl Walker's critical term for a dominant strain in nineteenth-century American women's verse—stems less from individual romantic loss than from incomplete, or biased, cultural transmission. Ruth carries a romantic secret but also, more important, "a blurred text of chained books / in her heart's crypt" (*Idyl*, p. 85).²⁴

²³The work of Thomas Dublin and other twentieth-century labor historians reaffirms contemporary accounts that, at the time of Larcom's mill employment, young women frequently worked for several years in the mills but then returned to the family farm. Some women found ways—teaching, sewing, marriage—of staying on in urban centers after leaving the mills. On the evolution of women's work in the Lowell mills, see Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), and *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). In "Among Lowell Mill-Girls," Larcom recalls that during her time in the factory, she and her fellow operatives wept over "Mrs. Browning's Cry of the Children" even though "the unilluminated darkness of those English children's lot seemed as remote from us as what we had read of heathen nations that sacrificed their little ones to idols" (p. 602). Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem was published in 1843.

²⁴See Cheryl Walker, *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), which identifies "the

For Ruth, the fall into sorrowing song results from her acquiring a specific kind of cultural capital in a specific educational setting: the private tutorial in the classics, a version of the education that Aurora Leigh enjoys with her father (as did Elizabeth Barrett Browning) and that Larcom regards with more suspicion than does Barrett Browning. Aurora, after her father's death, recalls with longing "The trick of Greek / And Latin he had taught me" (*Aurora Leigh*, bk. 1, ll. 714–15). For Ruth, too, classical learning is linked with loss. She eventually recounts her story to Esther, who rescues and befriends her:

". . . he [a schoolteacher] came,
And with old Virgil, made an Italy
Of cold New Hampshire. I, beyond the rest,
Prizing the Latin lore, we studied much
Together, in long evenings, by ourselves."

[*Idyl*, p. 89]

No sexual sin follows, only literary sins, as the teacher, Amrose, goes west, falls in love with another woman, and forgets about Ruth. Abandoned, Ruth tries to instruct her unhappy lyrics in forgetfulness and, ultimately, transcendence.

Ruth Woodburn's story reflects aspects of Larcom's own life: her most significant romantic relationship, with Frank Spaulding, ended when Spaulding settled in California and Larcom decided not to join him there.²⁵ The differences between

secret sorrow" as the central matter of nineteenth-century American women's poetry. Larcom seems already cognizant of what Nina Baym, replying to Walker, complains of as "narcissistic" in the "nightingale" tradition ("Reinventing Lydia Sigourney," *American Literature* 62 [Fall 1990]: 389). Unlike Baym, however, Larcom can critique this tradition performatively, by providing both its lyric voice and a surrounding, corrective narrative. The nineteenth-century identification of the "literature of misery"—whose writers "are chiefly women, gifted women may be, full of thought and feeling and fancy, but poor, lonely and unhappy"—comes from an essay, "When Should We Write," published in the *Springfield Daily Republican* of 7 July 1860, probably written by Samuel Bowles and now well known for its possible application to the poetry of his friend Emily Dickinson. For a discussion of the essay in this context, see Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 215–19.

²⁵On Larcom's relationship with Frank Spaulding, see Marchalonis, *The Worlds of Lucy Larcom*, pp. 64–70 and *passim*.

Ruth's and Larcom's stories, however (Spaulding was a physician and a businessman, not a teacher of classical languages; Larcom refused him, not he her), underline the more general cultural origins and force of Larcom's critique. "Perhaps your Ambrose also loves himself / Glassed in her admiration" (*Idyl*, p. 92), Esther tells Ruth in response to her revelation. This unequal pedagogical erotics leads to entrapment on both sides, with women's writing "dungeon'd in self" and men's relationship to culture degraded to narcissism *à deux*.

If this is the social disorder of "secret sorrow" female poetics, what is its cure? It lies, Larcom suggests, within Esther's transatlantic, democratic, vernacular bookshelf: Esther attempts to minister to Ruth's sorrow before she knows its cause by taking down her Wordsworth and reading aloud his "Laodamia," "with its heroic thoughts / Climbing sharp crags of sorrow with high faith" (*Idyl*, p. 35). Her therapeutic choice fits Ruth's circumstances more than Esther knows, for Wordsworth's poem critiques both women's excessive mourning and the classical male heroic ethos to which it gives a shade's voice. But when Ruth protests that Wordsworth's poem is "too hard, too hard!" Esther sets it aside and takes up a homemade book from which to read her friend to sleep:

The one she chose
 Was a strange medley-book of prose and rhyme
 Cut from odd magazines, or pages dim
 Of yellow journals, long since out of print;
 And pasted in against the faded ink
 Of an old log-book, relic of the sea,
 And mostly filled with legends of the shore
 That Esther loved, her home-shore of Cape Ann.
[*Idyl*, p. 36]

The poem Esther reads out of this "medley-book," a ballad titled "Peggy Bligh's Voyage," is in fact one of the many lyrics and ballads of her own that Larcom anthologized in the *Idyl*.²⁶

²⁶The *Poetical Works of Lucy Larcom* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1884) reprints "Peggy Bligh's Voyage" (pp. 6–9) and most of the other lyrics and ballads incorporated into *An Idyl of Work*.

The scrapbook in which Esther finds it is recognizably Larcom's nostalgia-laden reflection on her own compositional performance as well as a reference to the scrapbook "gleanings" of Marian Earle's painfully acquired literacy in *Aurora Leigh*. Esther's small anthology melds the world of public print with her own practices of reading and appropriation, which take their meaning from the workingwomen with whom she lives in community, and the passage above nominates their homely literary activities, alongside Larcom's more prestigious Anglo-American literary models, as sources for the poetic form of *An Idyl of Work*.

The transatlantic sequence of cultural transmission in Ruth's story—from Virgil to Wordsworth to this home-spun American writing—suggests that the cure for what ails Ruth and her poetry is a different, more authentic relationship to the cultural enterprise: one mediated by women as well as by men, one that would read humane letters in the domesticated Anglo-American vernacular as well as the classical tongues. It is only after staging this curative scene of cultural transmission between two workingwomen that Larcom widens her poem's focus to imagine literary culture mediating between women of different classes. When she does so, transatlantic poetic exchange is once again her privileged medium and the anthology-poem her chosen form.

When Esther and Eleanor, vacationing in the New Hampshire mountains, meet the wealthy Miriam Willoughby, they cement their cross-class friendship by trading poetry—Larcom's own nature sonnets along with appreciations of Wordsworth's *Excursion* (*Idyl*, p. 128)—and by sharing with Miriam their stratagems for reading in bits and pieces while tending to machinery. Although forbidden to take books into the mill, Esther says,

". . . we rebel; at least, evade.
 Few girls but keep some volume hid away
 For stealthy reading. Some tear out the leaves
 Of an old Bible, and so get the whole;
 For books, not leaves, are tabooed. Others paste
 The window-sills with poem, story, sketch:

No one objects to papering bare walls.
I have a memory-book well filled so.”

[*Idyl*, p. 129]

Once again, it is the mill girls’ improvised technologies of literacy, not the technologies of manufacturing, that occupy the foreground of *An Idyl of Work*. And here, as elsewhere in the poem, Larcom’s retrospective reconstruction of her Lowell experience notably subordinates literary activities sponsored by the mill owners—most famously, their subsidized publication of *The Lowell Offering*—to those initiated by the millworkers, as they themselves set about laying claim to literary culture.²⁷ Esther explains to Miriam that

“ . . . we all know

[Whittier’s] ‘Yankee Girl,’ ‘Angel of Patience,’ too.
There’s Bryant’s ‘Thanatopsis,’ ‘Death of the Flowers,’
Hood’s ‘Bridge of Sighs,’ likewise his ‘Song of the Shirt,’
With Shelley’s ‘Skylark,’ Coleridge’s ‘Mont Blanc.’
These, and more waifs of lovely verse, I’ve learned
Between my window and my shuttle’s flight.”

[*Idyl*, p. 129]

As foreign as the conditions of the mill girls’ reading are to the more privileged Miriam, the texts they select are entirely familiar (as they also would have been to any purchaser of Whittier’s and Larcom’s *Songs of Three Centuries*, for which Esther’s list is virtually a table of contents).



Elizabeth Freeman proposes that the Lowell mill girls at mid-nineteenth century represented for nonworking-class

²⁷In their conversation with Miriam Willoughby, one of the mill girls confides that Esther’s prose and poetry have appeared “In the ‘Offering,’—you know the magazine / That the girls publish” (*Idyl*, p. 139). This brief mention is the poem’s only concession to Esther’s published authorship. Larcom’s relationship to the *Offering* was extensive and continued after she left Lowell to teach in Illinois; see Marchalonis, *The Worlds of Lucy Larcom*, pp. 34–35, 48–49.

observers, including middle-class women, “the prospect of female homosocial reproduction . . . disjoined from home and family, in which women became ‘Lowell girls’ by imitating other women in a process that blurred property and identity, consolidating both in the hands of women.” Larcom’s *Idyl*, in fact, idealizes this power of female homosocial reproduction, attaches it to the millworkers’ informal technologies of literacy, and, through the millworkers’ encounter with Miriam Willoughby, extends it to women of the upper class.²⁸ Constructed as it is out of a shared cultural capital, the sociability of this community, Larcom goes on to insist, is far preferable to socialism of the Fourieristic variety. Like Aurora Leigh, who tells Romney that “Your Fouriers failed, / Because not poets enough to understand / That life develops from within” (*Aurora Leigh*, bk. 2, ll. 483–85), Eleanor proclaims, “there’s no home / For anyone, in everybody’s home; / . . . our one little room is more / To me than ten Brook Farms” (*Idyl*, pp. 138–39). Eleanor wants no part of Fourier’s substitution of phalansteries for families. The mill girls’ and Miriam’s idealized commons of Anglo-American literature, Larcom implies, is grounded in and ideally returns to the inwardness of private domesticity.²⁹ And yet the circle is not perfect; as the print of “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” that oversees the “democratic neighborhood” of Esther’s bookshelf emphasizes, the idealized anyone’s “home,” presided over by a husband-father, is not identical to the “little room” shared by Eleanor, Esther, and Isabel. Indeed, to some observers of the Lowell mills in their early days, those small rooms, hived in dormitories, seemed more than halfway to the phalanstery: they brought women together in forms of association outside the circle of the family; they overlaid bonds of work with bonds

²⁸Elizabeth Freeman, “‘What Factory Girls Had Power Do’: The Techno-logic of Working-Class Feminine Publicity in *The Lowell Offering*,” *Arizona Quarterly* 50 (Summer 1994): 110–11. On female millworkers’ lives in the early Lowell boarding-houses, see Dublin, *Women at Work*, pp. 75–85.

²⁹Larcom quoted *Aurora Leigh*’s strictures on Fourier a few years later in “Among Lowell Mill-Girls.” “Perhaps we were conservative,” Larcom acknowledges, “and perhaps some of us dimly felt, with Aurora Leigh, that ‘Your Fouriers failed, / Because not poets enough to understand / That life develops from within’” (p. 607).

of domestic life in ways that upset emergent norms of gendered separate spheres; and they rescaled intimacy.

Larcom's most ambitious revisions of her British poetic models pay tribute to the power of this cross-class female literary commons. Although the themes and staging of the dialogue between the millworkers and Miss Willoughby echo those of Wordsworth's *Excursion*—especially the *Excursion*'s debate, in its final two books, over the consequences of British industrialization for country folk—Larcom positions the mill girls as the speaking subjects, as well as the objects, of the *Idyl*'s dialogue on their condition. To the Wanderer of Wordsworth's poem, among the various horrors of child labor is the denial of childhood's natural access to the sublime: the body of the factory boy "Who, in his very childhood, should appear / Sublime from present purity and joy" becomes "to the joy of [its] own motions dead," his senses "rarely competent / To impress a vivid feeling on the mind" of nature's delights (*Excursion*, bk. 8, ll. 319–28). Larcom, by contrast, insists not only that the natural sublime is accessible to her mill girls' appreciation but also that Wordsworth's version of it is within their capabilities to assess. In one exchange with the mill girls, Miriam Willoughby recalls climbing a mountain. Her description directly echoes the ascent of Mount Snowdon in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, but then it turns into a pointed critique of the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime:

And Miriam told them, sitting side by side
 On Ossipee's steep crags, . . .
 Told them how once upon Pequawket's slope
 She lingered, as the summer sun went down,
 Her fellow-pilgrims vanishing from sight,
 Bounding like chamois up into the mists
 Of the veiled summit: all the world below,
 Path, mountain-forest, changed to one gray blank;
 And she alone there in a vapor-rift,
 That left one lichened crag, one blasted tree
 Above her head, and one vast mountain-gap
 Brimmed with a cloudy sunset's awful red
 That lurid gorge seemed widening vast and far

As an eternity . . .

.....

“Yet that night
 Was ghostly, more than heavenly; for we stayed
 Till dawn on Pequawket’s hidden top,
 Hidden from eyes below, that only saw
 Our camp-fire as a star above the cloud.
 We to ourselves were shipwrecked mariners
 In a great sea of pallid mist, that surged
 And curled up to our feet. We stood on rocks
 Floating in vapor. Dim isles loomed around
 Out of the fog, an archipelago
 Of desolation. We were cast adrift
 ’Mid unsubstantial guesses of a world
 Such as old Chaos in his slumber shaped.
 And someone said, “We are philosophers!
 Life is illusion; we and fogs are real.”
 And then another,—with him I agreed,—
 “Who climbs to isolation from mankind,
 There thinking to find wisdom, is a fool.”

[*Idyl*, pp. 121–23]

In the conclusion to the 1850 *Prelude* that Larcom here rewrites, Wordsworth ascends Snowdon only to find his downward vision blocked by “a silent sea of hoary mist,” broken only by a “rift” through which rises “the roar of waters,” token to Wordsworth of a “mind / That feeds upon infinity, that broods / Over the dark abyss” (*Prelude*, bk. 14, ll. 42, 56–59, 70–72). Miriam, however, decisively turns away from Wordsworth’s homeless infinitude. “Who climbs to isolation from mankind, / There thinking to find wisdom, is a fool” (*Idyl*, p. 123), Miriam concludes from her experience of the sublime, and the emphatically social experience of Larcom’s heroines as they hike the White Mountains ratifies Miriam’s revision of Wordsworth.³⁰

³⁰Three years after *An Idyl of Work* appeared, Larcom published a shorter poem, “In a Cloud Rift,” that similarly views an occluded landscape from the top of Mount Washington: “The gulf profound / Below us seethed with mists, a sullen deep” (*Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, August 1878, p. 403). Marchalonis links this poem and another

The “lurid” chasm visibly and invisibly gaping below Miriam Willoughby’s view is, as she implies, social rather than ontological. The question posed by Larcom’s *Idyl* is whether her heroines’ shared, female-authored revision of Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime has sufficient power to alter the industrial landscape. The heroines’ bonding over poetry is literally their escape from, and figuratively Larcom’s solution for, labor unrest back in Lowell. (Their friend Minta invites Eleanor and Esther to New Hampshire as a diversion from “talk of strikes,—they say that half the looms / Must stop, or wages be reduced” [*Idyl*, p. 99]). Eliding the prospect of class-based labor action, the conclusion of *An Idyl of Work* moves forward in time from its 1840s setting to Larcom’s 1870s present to comment on the role of class in a “true republic”:

If high rewards no longer stimulate toil,
 And mill-folk settle to a stagnant class,
 As in old civilizations, then farewell
 To the Republic’s hope! What differ we
 From other feudalisms? Like ocean-waves
 Work populations change. No rich, no poor,
 No learned, and no ignorant class or caste
 The true republic tolerates; interfused,
 Like the sea’s salt, the life of each through all.
[*Idyl*, p. 178]

As Larcom’s contemporary readers fully understood, these lines referred to the immigrants who, by the 1870s, had displaced the young New England-born women who had experienced more favorable working conditions in the mills of Larcom’s day.³¹ Converting those “populations” into an educated

poem published in 1877. “Asleep on the Summit,” to Larcom’s trip to the summit of Mount Washington in the summer of 1877 (*The Worlds of Lucy Larcom*, pp. 206, 212); but this corresponding passage in *An Idyl of Work* suggests either that Larcom had had earlier opportunities for such a summit view or that her reading of Wordsworth preceded and conditioned what she saw in nature.

³¹A testy but perceptive anonymous reviewer in *Appleton’s Journal*, for example, quoted this passage in arguing that “the book was written with the object of proving by illustration that even the most exhaustive and monotonous labor cannot of itself deprive one of all opportunity for high mental culture and noble living, and also

American workforce is the contemporary subtext of Larcom's *Idyl*. Hoping that an Anglophone culture's "democratic neighborhood" can assimilate these new workers into social hierarchies that will remain oceanically fluid rather than mechanically fixed, she embodies her desire in a simile: like waves, the new "work populations" wash ashore; like the sea, they are "interfused" with the life of all. Larcom's glance toward "Tintern Abbey," with its concluding sense of human feeling "more deeply interfused," recalls Wordsworth's earlier appearance among the books "Mingled in democratic neighborhood" on Esther's bookshelf. Her allusion implies the more literal historical means by which those arriving populations would Americanize: through the dissemination of an Anglo-American vernacular English literary curriculum in the public schools of the United States.

Its social agenda clarified, Larcom's *Idyl* sets about resolving its individual romantic plots, and in doing so, it once again borrows from *Aurora Leigh*. Like *Aurora Leigh*, *An Idyl of Work* closes with a glimpse of the New Jerusalem. Consistent with Larcom's other revisions of Barrett Browning's poem, this vision of a social sublime is shared homosocially (between Eleanor and Esther) rather than heterosexually mediated (aware that her illness rules out marriage, Eleanor's suitor, Ralph, retreats to the sidelines, where he loves her "with far-off reverence" [*Idyl*, p. 182]). Describing the sunrise for her cousin Romney Leigh, who has been blinded in the burning of his country house—seeing it for him—Aurora famously concludes her poem with the biblical materials of the renovated city of God: "And when / I saw his soul saw,—'Jasper first,' I said, / 'And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony; / The rest

to protest against the tendency of the change which has come over the conditions and character of mill labor since the period indicated. The increasing degradation of certain forms of labor, the rapidly-widening rift between the interests of employer and employed, fill [Larcom] with alarm, and she sees in them forerunners of national decay" (3 July 1875, p. 22). On the transformation of the mills' labor force in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, see Dublin, *Women at Work*, pp. 132–64; Dublin notes that the "proletarianization of the female work force" (p. 162) was marked both by the increasing numbers of immigrant women in the mills and by the closing of wage gaps between higher-paid jobs (held onto by native-born women) and lower-wage positions.

in order, . . . last, an amethyst” (*Aurora Leigh*, bk. 9, ll. 961–64). Anticipating her death from consumption, Eleanor reminds Esther that “There’s a City of whose streets / We’ve read together” (*Idyl*, p. 181), and she coaxes Esther’s eyes toward the sunset.

Having drawn “their hearts / Indissolubly close,” the narrator finally leaves her heroines “looking forth into fair realms / Of untried being; . . . East and West / Life beckons” (*Idyl*, p. 183). As always in *An Idyl of Work*, the transatlantic Anglo-American literary field—“East and West”—is both the medium of the workingwomen’s community and the matrix of Larcom’s claims for the dignity of her protagonists’ collective cultural biography. What circulates through Larcom’s *Idyl* is a shared mid-century Anglo-American dream of literary culture as a mediator of class division, a dream that Larcom articulates through the anthology-poem’s formal power of dramatizing the passage of poems from hand to working hand.



Both the reception and the sales of *An Idyl* disappointed Larcom’s hopes. As Larcom’s biographer Shirley Marchalonis summarizes, “Some critics liked it, but only friends and former mill girls bought it; financially it was a complete failure.”³² Most nineteenth-century reviewers were polite but not enthusiastic. They conceded the poem’s ambition but complained of its lack of plot or incident, and they found the poem’s collective protagonist a gallery of types rather than realized individuals. The *Atlantic Monthly*’s mixed review, for example, declared that “[t]he story of the poem is scarcely anything at all: mostly the sayings and goings and comings of four young girls, whose characters are not forcibly distinguished”—but it also praised Larcom for the “Wordsworthian courage with which she paints the scenes of her idyl.”³³

³²Marchalonis, *The Worlds of Lucy Larcom*, p. 199.

³³“Recent Literature,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1876, p. 242.

Recent scholars of American literary history have been rather uniformly indifferent to Larcom's long poem. Josephine Donovan's entry on Larcom in the still-standard reference work *American Women Writers*, for example, rightly judges *An Idyl of Work* to be Larcom's "most important poetical work," but Donovan heartily gives thanks that Larcom elsewhere treated its subject matter, the life of Lowell factory women in the 1840s, in prose rather than poetry. "Larcom's reputation today," Donovan concludes, rests not on her poetry "but rather on the straightforward, unsentimental picture of her life and times she has given us in her prose works." Similarly, Susan Alves's entry on Larcom in a late-twentieth-century collection of bibliographical essays on nineteenth-century American women writers deems Larcom's prose memoir *A New England Girlhood* "far more successful" than *An Idyl of Work* on the grounds that "the prose of autobiography is better suited to the purposes of representing life experiences in the industrial age" than is "anachronistic" blank verse poetry. And Marchalonis begins and ends her discussion of the poetic form of *An Idyl of Work* with the observation that "its use of blank verse instead of prose probably did not help sales."³⁴

Prose works that treated the labor of working-class women were, in fact, being written. Larcom's plotting of *An Idyl of Work* goes out of its way to distance her heroines, literally and figuratively, from the beginnings of labor unrest in the Lowell mills in the 1840s; and her framing narrative's picture of class

³⁴Josephine Donovan, "Lucy Larcom," in *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*, 4 vols., ed. Lina Mainiero (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), 2:506, 507; Susan Alves, "Lucy Larcom," in *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Denise D. Knight (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 293–96, 295; Marchalonis, *The Worlds of Lucy Larcom*, p. 199. More recently the 17 April 2006 "Mass Moment," issued by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities to mark the anniversary of Larcom's death, declared, along the same lines, that Larcom "would be forgotten today except for a work of prose," her *A New England Girlhood*. <<http://www.massmoments.org/odex.cfm?mid=1116>>, accessed 16 June 2006. Among present-day critics, Paula Bernat Bennett is almost alone in taking exception to the critical neglect of Larcom's poetry in favor of her prose, arguing that "Larcom's strongest poetry . . . deserves much more serious attention than it has received" (see her *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology* [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998], p. 112).

relations in the United States in the early 1870s equally avoids direct representation of the economic depression, accelerating inequality, and swelling labor movements of those years. Larcom's avoidances are all the more striking—and meaningful—in comparison with two nearly contemporary prose works by Boston-based authors whom Larcom knew personally, if slightly: Louisa May Alcott's *Work: A Story of Experience* (serialized in 1872 and published as a book in 1873) and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Silent Partner* (1871).³⁵

Where Larcom's heroines are attractive even in death, *The Silent Partner* registers industrial labor's depredations on the working body: one character dies mangled in the factory machinery; another, Catty Garth, is deaf and blind, her "shrunken and disfigured eyes" and maimed hands the results of her wool-picking; the central working-class character, Catty's sister Sip Garth, is smelly, brown-faced, ragged, and—as Amy Lang points out—both masculinized and figuratively blackened by her condition as a wage slave.³⁶ Alcott's *Work* is not set in a factory, but Christie Devon passes through many varieties of women's paid employment, from governessing to piecework sewing, before she falls into despair and is rescued on the verge of attempting suicide. Eventually, as the respectable widow of an artist turned Civil War officer, she joins the cause of reform on behalf of workingwomen: "I have been and mean to be a working-woman all my life," she declares to the working-class women of her audience, who see with enthusiasm that "the same lines were on her face that they saw on their own, her hands were no fine lady's hands, her dress plainer than some of their own."³⁷

³⁵Elizabeth Stuart Phelps recalled her glancing acquaintance with Larcom in her *Chapters from a Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), pp. 179–81; Louisa May Alcott was a contributor to *Our Young Folks* during Larcom's editorship.

³⁶Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Silent Partner* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1871), p. 192 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text); Amy Schrager Lang, *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 86–98.

³⁷Louisa May Alcott, *Work: A Story of Experience*, ed. Joy S. Kasson (1873; New York: Penguin, 1994), pp. 332, 333; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

During the writing of *An Idyl of Work*, then, Larcom had immediately before her literary models for a more direct representation of the material conditions of industrial work and of cross-class reform alliances among women; yet she actively avoided either possibility. Larcom certainly conceived her own long poem on industrial Lowell as a contribution to the same public debate entered by Alcott and Phelps. She may also have written partly in direct rejoinder to their books, both of which treat the conditions of industrial labor from a narrative perspective distinct from and horrified by it. Larcom's wishful depiction of the blending of literary culture with industrial work in her *Idyl* may be understood in part as an effort to repudiate what Amy Kort calls the "class-based stigma" she must have felt attached to her through Alcott's and Phelps's reformist works, a stigma that had accrued over the years rather than diminishing, as workers' conditions in the mills deteriorated and as class struggles were painfully revived in the post-Civil War years.³⁸

The plot of *The Silent Partner*, like that of *An Idyl of Work*, turns upon an episode in which springtime high water brings the machinery of the mills to a halt. In *An Idyl of Work*, the consequences of the idling of the mills are pastoral, as the young women use their time for outdoor walks, reading, and improving conversation. In *The Silent Partner*, the consequences are apocalyptic. The millworkers, male and female, wander "through their holidays in their best clothes" rather than improving their time; as the river continues to rise, they gather on its banks to watch: "Masses of men, women, and children hung, chained like galley-slaves, to either bank, intent and expectant" (*Partner*, p. 264). Untended at home by her sister Sip, who has stayed out for "A little shopping up town, and an errand . . . and perhaps another look at the flood" (*Partner*, p. 275), Catty wanders onto the bridge and is swept away, deaf

³⁸Amy Kort, "Lucy Larcom's Double-Exposure: Strategic Obscurity in *A New England Girlhood*," *American Literary Realism* 31 (Fall 1998): 25-40. Kort observes that "the rise of the American middle class during the industrial revolution and the birth of the middle-class, leisure-centered home must have seemed to have overtaken the public interpretation of [Larcom's] own childhood memories, transforming Lowell from an opportunity to a class-based stigma" (p. 37).

and blind to her sister who tries to pull her back: “one beck of a human hand would save her; but she could not see it. One cry would turn her; but her ears were sealed” (*Partner*, p. 278). Beyond rescue by her own kin and kind, Catty becomes for Phelps the exemplary figure of her class: “Type of the world from which she sprang,—the world of exhausted and corrupted body, of exhausted and corrupted brain, of exhausted and corrupted soul, the world of the laboring poor as man has made it, and as Christ has died for it” (*Partner*, p. 277). Undisciplined, improvident “slaves” not only to wage labor but to their own bodily and spiritual degradation, the working poor of Phelps’s novel are beyond any form of the self-culture practiced by Larcom’s heroines; their salvation can come only from outside, whether in the form of Christian redemption or the enlightened self-interest of reforming millowners.

Larcom’s idealization of her heroines’ reading in Esther’s homely Anglo-American bookshelf recalls a passage from Alcott’s *Work* in which Alcott’s working heroine Christie is dusting the book-table of her patron David, whom she will fall in love with and marry.

At the table she paused again, for books always attracted her, and here she saw a goodly array whose names were like the faces of old friends, because she remembered them in her father’s library.

Faust was full of ferns, Shakespeare, of rough sketches of the men and women whom he has made immortal [i.e., David has tucked leaves and sketches into his books]. Saintry Herbert lay side by side with Saint Augustine’s confessions. Milton and Montaigne stood socially together, and Andersen’s lovely “Märchen” fluttered its pictured leaves in the middle of an open Plato; while several books in unknown tongues were half-hidden by volumes of Browning, Keats, and Coleridge.

In the middle of this fine society, slender and transparent as the spirit of a shape, stood a little vase holding one half-opened rose, fresh and fragrant as if just gathered. [*Work*, pp. 173–74]

This is no “democratic neighborhood” but rather a “fine society” of books, a microcosm of cultural hierarchy. Where Larcom’s plot aims at exposing and countering the unequal pedagogical erotics linking the male classics tutor to his female student,

Alcott's scene blatantly eroticizes the "unknown tongues... half-hidden" by David's careless mastery. Where Larcom's plot insists that culture rightfully can and must be transmitted from woman to woman, Alcott's scene of reading ratifies the name of the father, whose books magically reappear in the possession of the man destined to inherit the daughter: the rose is there to be taken. Where Larcom's plot idealizes a lost time when industrial workers could find time to read, this moment comes to Alcott's Christie after she has been rescued from a suicide she preferred to the ultimate degradation of factory employment.³⁹ And in the end, *Work* leaves culture to do the job of improving the better classes rather than pondering its accessibility to women of the working class: even as Christie commits herself to a cross-class, cross-race reform movement, she relegates the work of culture to her prosperous friend Bella, whose task it is to provide the men and women of her own class with "the sort of society we need more of, and might so easily have if those who possess the means of culture cared for the best sort, and took pride in acquiring it" (*Work*, p. 339).⁴⁰

³⁹As a seamstress, Christie initially has time for self-culture: "Her evenings at home were devoted to books, for she had the true New England woman's desire for education, and read or studied for the love of it. Thus she had much to think of as her needle flew" (*Work*, p. 103). When her sewing work contracts and industrial labor remains her only untried option, she meets the absolute class boundary of her sense of self. Alcott comments that "to those who know nothing of the pangs of pride, the sacrifices of feeling, the martyrdoms of youth, love, hope, and ambition that go on under the faded cloaks of these poor gentlewomen, who tell them to go into factories, or scrub in kitchens, for there is work enough for all, the most convincing answer would be, 'Try it'" (*Work*, p. 117). As Amy Lang observes, "Christie's native gentility, her perfect middle-classness, that is to say, blocks the possibility of her proletarianization" (*Syntax of Class*, p. 124).

⁴⁰Jean Fagan Yellin's early feminist reading called Christie's "loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white, rich and poor" (*Work*, p. 343), a utopian "feminist commune" ("From *Success to Experience*: Louisa May Alcott's *Work*," *Massachusetts Review* 21 [Fall 1980]: 528). Kathryn R. Kent concurs, although she notes that the ending's elaboration of "new forms of female-female association" still "mobilizes the terms of affiliation offered by a remade family" (*Making Girls into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003], p. 65). More skeptically, Lang concludes that Christie's ability to serve as intermediary between all the novel's class positions "displays the unique social competence of the white middle-class woman. Eluding the strictures of class, she embodies the prospect of class harmony by assimilating all class experience to herself" (*Syntax of Class*, p. 127).

Christie's reverie over David's books throws into relief the kinds of class critique Larcom does accomplish in *An Idyl of Work*, as against her poem's evasions. Larcom's effort to reclaim the meaning of her own collective past and project it forward into the national future is a serious one. The high blank verse form of her narrative and the lyrics and ballads that circulate through it are an attempt not only to seize the implements of literary culture directly for laboring women but also to provide respectable Anglo-American literary culture of the 1870s with a genealogy in more humble technologies of literacy. The form of the anthology-poem enables Larcom to model and reflect upon an idealized miniature of transatlantic nineteenth-century liberal print culture: its history, its hopes, its reform narratives, its modes of circulation.⁴¹ *An Idyl of Work* deserves respect, then, not only for its wishfulness and its ambitions but for its very real accomplishments as well.

⁴¹For a comprehensive account of how questions of reform saturated and constituted the transatlantic Anglo-American literary field in fiction during the nineteenth century, see Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). Claybaugh demonstrates that transatlantic discourses of reform shaped many kinds of literary ambition, including the high literary ambitions of writers who, like Henry James, were largely indifferent to the practical goals of reform movements.

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