**Bearing Witness to Our Working Lives**  
by Judith Vollmer

**Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life**  
Edited by Peter Oresick and Nicholas Coles  

‘Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.’ — Bertolt Brecht  
‘To inherit an uninterrupted and recognized culture is a privilege.’ — Adrienne Rich

Here is a book that moves literary change along a little faster, and with lasting resonance and meaning. So many voices, from so many places gather their collective power from the plain authenticity of their subject — work and our working lives — and the change happens, elegantly, brutally, visibly. In this new, landmark anthology investigating the North American worker, Peter Oresick and Nicholas Coles have culled the human document and dreams found in the work of 74 poets. The poems rage against, denounce, and poignantly pay tribute to the violence and rare rewards of hard jobs. They contemplate what escape might mean. For men, the rich uncle, the better job in a distant city — these could be ways out, and for women, the rich uncle, the proper and prosperous marriage, the notion of a real education — these could be ways out. But most of all, the poems in this weighty collection, 169 of them, dating from 1945 to the present and representing all of the regional landscapes of North America, begin to transform the canon of North American poetry.

This transformation isn’t a first. Walt Whitman at the helm had wanted and dreamed of an American poetry in love with its byways, with its natural worlds and with forgotten workers distanced from the drawing rooms of Europe. And after the era of High Modernism (the first several decades) in this century, an era in which the subject of work had no place in the white, male, literary canon, avant-garde poetry groups like the Beats, again began to embrace daily life with its multiplicity of subcultures. Then the women’s poetry movement that began in the late sixties awakened writers and readers to the fact that the personal voice, uncluttered, unstopped, could make the essential forging of a union between personal experience and the external world — work, power, politics — real. Moveover, that forging could ride the edges of both rage and celebration.

What Muriel Rukeyser’s remarkable *The World Split Open* and Ellen Bass’ *No More Masks* did as anthologies twenty years ago for feminist poetics and the canon, Oresick and Coles are doing for all of us now — defining our work and the ways in which our work defines us. Their volume focuses on industrial work, which for many Americans has become a fading heritage rather than a paycheck. Indeed, most of the poets in the anthology write of jobs they or their families once held in factories. Many of the poets now teach the craft of writing.

Yet the poems are not mere commemoratives. They confront the reader with unforgettable images, timeless in their power to call forth what still is, as in Brendan Galvin’s now classic “A Photo of Miners,” a poem about child miners in 1908:

> With trees backing them  
> instead of the pit’s mouth,  
> they could have been  
> at a fifth-grade picnic.  
> But the spitballer won’t grow into  
> his father’s jacket, and a ladder  
> of safety pins climbs the front of  
> the class clown. Stretch,  
> who got tall the soonest,  
> and here is a little grandfather  
> in brogans and rag glove,  
> his face shoved between two shoulders  
> his arms are draping,  
> his eyes flashing the riding lights  
> of pain.

Galvin’s lens could, in an instant, move eerily onto contemporary scenes of hunger or drug-ravaged street kids, to lives locked into despair for lack of livelihood. Indeed, the poems don’t just ask us to look, they lead us into scenes of foreboding and questioning like the one in Johnstown, in “Gray” by Maggie Anderson:

> At Johnstown I stop, look down the straight line  
> of the Incline, closed for repairs, to the gray heart  
> of the steel mills with For Sale signs on them. Behind me,  
> is the last street of disease-free Dutch elms in America,  
> below me, a city rebuilt three times after flood.  
> Gray is a lesson in the poise of affliction. Disaster  
> by disaster, we learn insouciance, begin to wear  
> colors bright as the red and yellow sashes on  
> elephants, whose gray hides cover, like this sky  
> an enormity none of us can fathom, though we try.

Ultimately, to look demands the acquisition of language, a theme nearly absolute behind every poem in the collection. And the acquisition of language takes

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generations. The daughter speaks for her aunts, her mother; the son speaks for his father, as in "Reaganomics Comes to Pittsburgh" by Michael O'Connor:

My father's eyes say it, always.  
Who ever thought that steel mills would be  
a thing of the past?  
But they are  
and it's here  
all together  
all alone  
all at once.

Tillie Olsen has taught us that the silencing of writers is one of the tragedies in the human drama. Work numbed our ancestors to the point of no words, or at least, no words on a page or in a book that they could call their own. No words meant that they could never translate their lives into a universal art, unless their daughters and sons might do it for them; and so then, some did. Importantly, then, this anthology celebrates a first generation of poets whose work bears witness to the job/work of those silenced, and to their own job/work of summer jobs, early jobs, filler jobs in factories now gone. Writing it down, getting it right, makes the human document without which we cannot evaluate our lives, let alone plan social or personal futures.

That Working Classics has been conceived and birthed out of the so-called Rust Belt — nine of the contributors, in fact, currently live and work in Pittsburgh — speaks for the intensity of its authenticity. Oresick and Coles work in writing, publishing and teaching at the University of Pittsburgh; both have a strong affinity to the working-class and both have had formal educations which, until now, knew no anthologies like this one. When Oresick began college and found himself genuinely attracted to university culture, he began collecting poetry as a way of reaffirming his working-class roots. Around 1980, he met Coles, who was teaching working-class literature. This acquaintanceship marked the beginning of many fruitful exchanges, and their eventual collaboration on this anthology.

As rage and pain incise the pages of their anthology, so too do pleasure in accomplishment, pride in craft, and in several poems, including selections by Patricia Dobler and Kevin Rippin, the mysterious connections between sex, labor and power of the body. Rippin's "Belle's Body" and Dobler's "The Mill in Winter, 1939" are incandescent in their evocations of releases, traps and rhythms of physical labor.

Notable, too, is that for the first time we see the masterpieces of James Wright and Richard Hugo side by side, sharing their compelling subjects. Poems by

material for use in mass markets.

The new company struggled against competitors, patent suits, with the need to develop markets and to scale up the production process, and with numerous technical riddles. Solutions in these areas often established long-lasting patterns. For example, Pittsburgh Reduction helped companies substitute aluminum for traditional materials, watching closely to be sure that aluminum's reputation was not sullied. Perhaps more importantly, the company moved to control its raw material (bauxite), the refining of bauxite, and electric power for smelting. Always, the Mellons were involved in the growth of the company. The result was success in both the technological and business arenas. In 1907 the company was renamed the Aluminum Company of America; it was already one of the largest industrial firms in the country.

Smith chronicles these developments and the amazing growth of the company that followed for the next half century and beyond. The appearance of real research during and after World War I, the enormous expansion during the 1920s, and the contrasting difficulties the company faced during the Depression and World War II are treated, as is the spectacular growth of the 1950s, when Alcoa salesmen set out to cover the world in aluminum. In short, Alcoa was one of the most successful American businesses. Indeed, until 1946, the story of Alcoa was the story of aluminum in America, as the company exercised a complete monopoly over smelting and production. This situation changed only when the federal government sold wartime plants to Reynolds and Kaiser in the wake of an antitrust conviction handed down in 1945.

Since 1946, Alcoa has operated in a different world, first as the leading firm in an oligopolistic industry, and by the 1980s, in a more open international market. For a company used to calling its own tune, the changes proved wrenching at times. But the company continued to grow. It found markets as a supplier of aluminum for architectural components in large buildings; it played a leading role in the development of beverage containers. The company has not avoided the difficulties facing most American manufacturers in the 1970s and 1980s, but in contrast to the declining fortune of Pittsburgh's firms, Smith shows Alcoa tackling difficulties with some success. The story ends with the 1986 announcement by board chairperson Charles Parry that Alcoa had to diversify away from aluminum in order to survive, thereby marking another transformation for the firm.

Smith's narrative is organized around a number of recurring themes. Always part of Alcoa's history has been the question of technological change. The company's origins are a classic tale of the backyard inventor, but in the end, devel-
Philip Levine and Ed Ochese — veterans of the democratization of poetry in our times — appear alongside Tess Gallagher and Stephen Dunn, their stories by now part of the regional landscapes all Americans know.

Jim Daniels, Chris Llewellyn, Anthony Petrosky and Peter Oresick explore the sheer range of tones inside the industrial experience: the din of the physical labor contrasted with the icy silences and heated implosions of political abstraction. There is much richness here.

It must be pointed out here that the editors have focused primarily on the industrial places: factories and sweat shops, excluding poems about office and health care work. That choice accounts for the fact that less than a third of the selections are by women poets, an absence that calls attention to the fact that no representation of so-called pink collar work yet exists. While no anthology can do everything, I hope that a second edition of Working Classics narrows the gap.

The continuing industrialization of the smaller countries ought to ensure that Oresick’s and Coles’ anthology will be read internationally. It’s heartening to think that readers of poetry worldwide — in places where poetry is read, bought and collected in far greater quantity and with much greater interest than in our own country — might someday be carrying copies of Working Classics with them as they go about their work and the process of thinking about and changing that work.

Finally, there’s a sweet dignity and engraved-in-our-common-lives legacy about the book that means it’s going to last. Here in its entirety is James Wright’s “Honey”:

My father died at the age of eighty. One of the last things he did in his life was to call his fifty-eight-year-old son-in-law “honey.” One afternoon in the early 1930s, when I bloodied my head by pitching over a wall at the bottom of a hill and believed that the mere sight of my own blood was the tragic meaning of life, I heard my father offer to murder his future son-in-law. His son-in-law is my brother-in-law, whose name is Paul. These two grown men rose above me and knew that a human life is murder. They weren’t fighting about Paul’s love for my sister. They were fighting with each other because one strong man, the driver of a coal truck, was laid off from his work. They were both determined to live their lives, and so they glared at each other and said they were going to live, come hell or high water. High water is not trite in southern Ohio. Nothing is trite along a river. My father died a good death. To die a good death means to live one’s life. I don’t say a good life.

I say a life. ♦

Development of processes and products required more formal research efforts. Smith follows closely the company’s attempts to build a foundation of technological knowledge and demonstrates how important this strategy was to Alcoa’s success.

Another thread in Smith’s account involves business strategy and entrepreneurship. Here the story focuses on Alcoa’s managers, from Hall’s partners A. V. Davis and Alfred Hunt to such recent leaders as Frank Magec, Fritz Close, John Harper, and Charles Parry. Many of these men served for long spans of time, providing the basic continuity of purpose and corporate style that shaped Alcoa. The company remained a “family firm” with a highly informal management structure well into the century, despite the sweep of its operations. But since 1950, a major concern of corporate officials has been to develop organizational stuctures that meet the company’s needs. Smith makes clear, however, the fact that people create the structures of management.

As a final thread, Smith weaves into his history a number of company problems of a more topical nature. Many of them were long-lasting, such as labor-management relations, changing technology, changing markets, and the nature of research. This topical approach can be repetitious, with overlapping occasionally making it a little hard to follow events in time. But this is a minor criticism.

The most important of the themes Smith traces concerns antitrust and government/business relations. Alcoa was unique in surviving until 1946 without significant competition or regulation in its industry. But from 1910 until the late 1960s, Smith tells us, the company was almost constantly threatened with antitrust suits, federal investigations or congressional studies of monopoly. The company survived a lawsuit in 1911; the Federal Trade Commission studied Alcoa for eight years beginning in 1922; a trial from 1938 to 1940 ended with a finding that Alcoa was innocent of restraint of trade. In 1945, however, Judge Learned Hand reversed that verdict. During the war the government had financed Alcoa-built plants for defense, and with the Hand reversal, the government decided to sell plants to fledgling companies in order to establish competition in aluminum; it also placed Alcoa under the court’s supervision to protect those competitors. Kaiser and Reynolds, later Ormet and others, also received government subsidies. Only in 1958 did court supervision end, but government scrutiny continued through the 1960s. Clearly, antitrust considerations shaped every aspect of Alcoa’s history.

From Monopoly to Competition began as an internal study in 1983, but the project expanded into a full-blown historical narrative connect to the corporation’s centennial in 1988. Thus the author enjoyed the support and encouragement of Alcoa officials. Beneficial results of this