humanities

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The Surplus Value and De-Alienation of Working-Class Literatures: On the Work of Chris Pannell

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Abstract

Though working-class literatures poorly fit within the theoretical purview of contemporary literary studies, the absence of scholarship in the Canadian context is particularly acute. Neoliberal readings thrive at the expense of labour-focused readings, with the possible result of insulating against the desired change such readings wish to bring into being. Because Chris Pannell's poetry is so focused on work, its representations and spiritual qualities amidst a particular post-industrial location (Hamilton, Ontario), it makes for poetry well suited my goal: to create an ambidextrous reading method. In this article, I summarize the work done to date in Canadian literary studies on both labour and neoliberalism. Due to the relatively thin literature in CanLit available over the past few decades, I bring in Lukács and some American literary scholars (Jameson, Christopher and Whitson, Clarke) to round out what a working-class literature might be theorized as, and read as, in Canada while also keeping in view how critiques of neoliberalism are inadequate to the task of serving the working-class. To recalibrate Canadian literary studies, I bring forward Marx's ideas concerning surplus value and alienation as they pertain to the production of poetry. While acknowledging the contributions of critiques of neoliberalism in Canadian literature, I critique those readings as rooted in Marx.

Keywords: poetics; alienation; neoliberalism; Canadian literature

1. Introduction

Admittedly, an article on working-class literatures is out of fashion in contemporary Canadian literary studies, a field focused on decolonization, race, gender, and sexuality. This was once not the case, however: unlike in the 21st century, scholars in the 20th kept class in view. Considering present-day literary studies, the remaining scholars interested in economic issues largely avoid class consideration, their attention having turned to the manifestations of neoliberalism. Economic issues retained an importance with this lens, yet class was obscured. I argue that it is time to encourage Canadian literary studies to return to its relative infancy, when it analysed working-class literatures, though it is, of course, obvious that such analyses should primarily, albeit not exclusively, be conducted by students and scholars from the working class, lest middle-class prejudices corrupt the investigations. I write this point passionately based on my own childhood spent as the son of working-class parents.

My argument explores the limits of critiques of neoliberalism. Using the example of Brown's (2017) *Undoing the Demos*, formulations of neoliberalism in literary studies owe more than a debt to Marxist thought. They can be thought of as recapitulations with a net loss. Hence, I feel it important to discuss old ideas that are of crucial importance

Received: 21 December 2025
Revised: 26 May 2026
Accepted: 26 May 2026
Published: 1 June 2026

to understanding working-class literatures in Canada: alienation and surplus value. I create no binary between readings of neoliberalism and Marxist readings, since both can complementary. To demonstrate its utility, I deploy this hybrid method to read Hamilton-based Chris Pannell's working-class poetry.

2. Clearing the Factory Floor: A Summary of Canadianist Criticism on Representations of Labour

To obtain a sense of what a poet like Chris Pannell means to literary culture and representations of labour, I first have to demonstrate how alienated he is from the critical culture that might sustain him. If the commodity that they produce—literary articles—is to be believed, Canadian literature scholars no longer prefer to think about representations of labour using a working-class lens as they once did. Essays and books have appeared examining the effects and originary conditions of certain poems written by labour figures during pre- and peri-modernist movements (Djwa 1987; Gerson 2002; MacKinnon and MacKinnon 2012; Mason 2007; McKenzie 1939; Stevens 1969; Trehearne 1990; Verzuh 2013). Frank Watt's "Literature of Protest," an essay devoted to tracking the socialism inherent in the poetry produced by Canadians from Confederation to the Second World War, appeared in the *Literary History of Canada* (Watt 1965). Peter Stevens wrote *The Development Of Canadian Poetry Between The Wars And Its Reflection Of Social Awareness* (Stevens 1968), which sympathetically lamented the failure to produce an aesthetically and popularly successful proletarian verse. Robin Mathews could be counted on to polemicize all things socialist in the milieu thereafter until his death, though *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution* (Mathews 1978) is most representative. In perhaps the most sustained study I can find of recent vintage, James Doyle's *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in* Canada (Doyle 2002) carefully parses the socialist leanings of many different Canadian poets, though it appeared almost 25 years ago.

Invoking Northrop Frye and his famous "Conclusion": a mutated 'garrison mentality' seems to have taken root in Canadian literary criticism in the 21st century (Frye 1965). Within the universities, academics have turned to postcolonial, then decolonizing and intersectional, lenses at the same time that the offshoring of labour created a deindustrializing, and soon thereafter deindustrialized, urban wilderness. Work on labour and poetics in Canada is hard to find in the past 25 years, though I must commend Erica Kelly's (2010) excellent dissertation "A Useful Art" and gainsay her observation that Frank Watt's essay on poetry and protest mentioned earlier was wholly overshadowed by Frye's terminal "Conclusion" where Frye continued his habit of dismissing Canadian political poetry generally. Imagine the gall of poets allocating for themselves the (Frye's words) "advantage[ous. . .] attitude" to merely adopt the posture of "rebellion against society" but "without imposing on him any specific social obligations" (Frye 1965, p. 834). As the son of a truck driver and diploma nurse from a poor rural Canadian province, I ask: was that rebellious attitude on the part of oppressed labour as it manifested in literary production, at least in part, not a righteous fulfilment of social obligation? To apply Lukács's (1963) Marxist thought here for a moment, do these writers not at least deserve an analysis as to how their writing demonstrates the ways in which literary form reifies and deforms class? In the absence of such treatment in Frye's mythopoetic work, at least his sneer here can be interpreted as revealing the common middle-class disdain.

To write rebellion as society prescribes it, as systemic critique with intransitive work object, is to adopt the fashionable posture in literary studies and provide critiques of neoliberalism which, in contrast with analysis of working-class literatures, are quite easily found. To even write as Pannell does nowadays as waged participant in the economy *is* a rebellion against a contemporary society that does not provide writers a living wage

(The Writers Union of Canada 2018). As Lukács would argue, writers like Pannell do more than simply constitute a diversity marker around inclusion of class on an intersectional basis. Instead, they show how class determines the means of representation itself. Pannell's writing is not *from* or *part of* a demographic, but rather reveals historical relations as they manifest as art. Because class relations structure the terrain on which identity itself becomes historically intelligible, scholars employed by neoliberal institutions might prefer to avoid writers like Pannell in late capitalism, for his work exposes the exploitation of workers, rather than obscuring it through abstraction.

In the published studies that follow Kelly's dissertation from 2008, literary criticism seems to land on neoliberalism as its academic scab for labour as a subject (e.g., Unrau 2020). Wyile (2010) discusses neoliberalism in his article "Neoliberalism and the Future of Canadian Literature," working that up into his influential *Anne of Tim Hortons* (Wyile 2011). Many other scholars followed Wyile's lead. For example, Milne (2018) published *Poetry Matters: Neoliberalism, Affect, and the Posthuman in Twenty-First Century North American Feminist Poetics*, and an entire issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* concerned itself with neoliberalism (Aguila-Way et al. 2021). With the exemplary exception of Robert Stacey (2016) and Carl Watts (2022), critical discourse as it relates to labour published over the past twenty years has concerned itself with neoliberalism.

I should pause and discuss what I mean by neoliberalism. I follow Brown's (2017, p. 30) lead here. She writes,

> In contrast with an understanding of neoliberalism as a set of state policies, a phase of capitalism, or an ideology that set loose the market to restore profitability for a capitalist class, I join Michel Foucault and others in conceiving neoliberalism as an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life.

In other words, neoliberalism is the economization of everything, or the rendering of man into, in Brown's (2017, p. 10) term, "*homo oeconomicus*", our species now one of literal human capital. My argument is not against brilliant criticism that uses neoliberalism as a lens per se; instead, I maintain that contemporary poetry scholars and critics don't think enough of workers themselves, of work itself, as a way to understand—to borrow from Lukács again—how literary form represents, obscures, and reveals class structure. Thinking neoliberalism for so long as resulted in an (ironic) alienation of work(ing) poets from the academy. For example: in the introduction to the neoliberalism-themed *Studies in Canadian Literature* issue (Aguila-Way et al. 2021, p. 7), the editors begin in an initially promising Lukácsian fashion, writing that

> by the close of 2020 neoliberalism had become significantly more opaque as a historical phenomenon and object of critique. At moments last year it appeared that the impossible had a chance of happening: the lock that neoliberal reason ostensibly had on "all spheres of existence" seemed to loosen under the pressure of movements and events that either directly contested or indirectly undermined its workings."

Yet the righteous movements and events they list—the Wet'suwet'en blockade, for example, though there are several others—have little to do with the working class per se as means of analysis:

> Not only was the free market economy directly challenged by an Indigenous led movement that refused to subordinate the rights of Indigenous people to those of extractive capital and its export markets; neoliberal faith in a self-regulating market that was free of government interference was implicitly weakened by

> the hypocrisy of free-marketers who cried for intervention by the settler-colonial state, asking it to crack down on protestors and ensure the priority of unfettered capitalism over Indigenous sovereignty. (Aguila-Way et al. 2021, p. 8)

Not only is their initial bid *not* a collectivity of workers at the level of identity, but instead a race-based example. The jargonized rhetoric begins to feel like the tail wagging the dog. By adopting Brown's theory, the analysis of neoliberalism in literature becomes somewhat corrupted, remaining fixated on markets, states, and the like. Individual poor people aren't centred. Such marginalization is not a deliberate move, by any means, and a traditional introduction may not be the place to centre a worker. A working-class introduction, however, would be such a place.

In case the reader thinks I am being unfair, I mention that the remainder of the issue features articles with titles like "Bioarchives of Affect" (Quéma 2021) and "Looking Away at the Material Self: Collective Ethics in Neoliberal Environments" (Howden 2021), though one of them, "After Extraction: Idling in the Ruins in Michael Winter's and Alistair MacLeod's Neoliberal Fictions" (Lousley 2021), does consider the working class in a Lukácsian fashion, considering characters as subjects of historical forces—in this case, neoliberalism, making for a theoretical blend. By no coincidence is that article focused on writers from Atlantic Canada, my part of the world. Atlantic Canada would not let the fashionable neoliberalism be. In this way, Maritimers share common cause with Jameson (2019, p. 13), who, in *The Political Unconscious*, insisted on interpreting the interpretive frameworks used to read literature. By performing the 'strong misreading' work intended to displace the previous 'weak misreadings' mentioned by Jameson, (albeit neither correct or right, but surely provocative), I intend to unsettle the contemporary fashion.

Surely, the fact that readings of Canadian literature employ neoliberal critique occur within neoliberal institutions (universities) should be kept in mind? In one sense, Canadian readings of neoliberalism are also neoliberal readings. In further defence of my strong misreading: in "Toward a Theory of Working-Class Literature," Christopher and Whitson (1999, p. 75) explain that a working-class aesthetic usually also involves "a distrust of authority "that includes [l]aw, court systems, and bureaucracies [that] don't do as much for working-class people as they do for middle-class people. These institutions seem to exist to keep working-class people in their place and protect the rights of property." I cannot help but wonder if neoliberal critiques reinforce the status quo because they neglect to perform the kind of reading as advocated by Jameson, one that engages with a text from within its own formal and ideological logic rife with historical contradictions. Neoliberal readings remain always already in search of neoliberal structure and effects, though to be fair, singular 'working-class' readings would make the same mistake. Jameson (2019, p. 17) criticizes "the tendency of much contemporary theory to rewrite selected texts from the past in terms of its own aesthetic." Rather than unfold contradictions on the way to historicizing interpretation, such readings are always already in search of self-confirmation.

Moving on from my concerns about neoliberal readings: Christopher and Whitson (1999, p. 72) describe a situation that remains extant in contemporary Canada, that class "is almost always ignored in the contemporary critical discourse." Like Lukács, they argue that "embracing a classed approach would mean rethinking many of the most fundamental questions of literary theory, genre, and criticism. Working-class literature, at base, cannot simply fit into the status quo" (p. 72). They provide a few handy tools that show exactly how Lukács's great insight—class analyses expose how literary form can reify prejudice—can be operationalized, such as their "'anti-Horatio Alger' narrative of unhappy upward mobility" (p. 77). Having this particular heuristic available shows through characters subjects for whom "upward mobility carries a price that is often too high to pay" (p. 77).

By no means do I wish to suggest that American literary scholars have created the equivalent of a worker's paradise of working-class criticism. As Clarke (2024, p. 1) writes, working-class literature still, as a "field," is "more amorphous than comparable areas recognized as part of the discipline, a position both reflected and reinforced by the lack of a well-developed scholarly apparatus of journals, publishers' lists, and academic programmes. There is no consensus about who should be considered a working-class writer or what criteria are used to establish this." What I do mean is that at least American literary scholars are in search of that field.

An idiosyncratic contribution comes from Middleton (2019) in the working-class poetics context, suggesting how even well-meaning analyses can become part of the problem. Middleton shows one way how poetry can be productively interpreted using a subtle, 'reading-into' kind of lens. In his essay "Show Your Workings: Other Forms of Labour in Recent Poetry", Middleton invokes a few seminal American texts like Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* and Barry MacSweeney's *Black Torch* as relatively modern examples of heavily work-focused texts that serve well as common-sense examples of the genre because of the thick deployment of the thematic. Middleton then suggests that, rather than understandably becoming hung up on the lack of direct representation of work in the current moment, we might focus instead on more subtle signs of labour in current poetry. He conjures a shadow form of work in poetry, of how labour is everpresent, even if not mentioned directly, arguing that work is (as per critical theory dogma) as much in silences and absences as it is found in represented presences. Middleton performs a trick of materialization in which the objects in our poems, our nouns, are shown to possess an inherent materiality that can be exegeticized. For example, consider a table. Any wood table requires several trees to be cut down, sectioned, hauled, processed, handled, shipped, shipped again. A poem therefore signals these developments, states, and textures in the very objects it brings forth.

Valid as it is on its own when considered in isolation, there is a real danger to such a kind of reading. Losing the direct line of sight on work creates a permissivity in which scholars might claim it is 'nevertheless everywhere' as a kind of academic salvage game, uncovering the hidden, one unlikely to acknowledge the primary problem: the lack of working-class poetry criticism. As Middleton (2019, p. 104) writes, there are

> forms of labour that can readily be treated as invisible either because they are primarily mental or intersubjective, or because they are gendered, or because the history and human agents of the labour required to provide an object or service have been carefully hidden by the organization that provides them. Modern retail relies heavily on the illusion that the goods arrive in the world fully formed, so that we don't have to think of the sweat and low pay of their actual makers.

But it seems to me that though reading in the material histories of mass-produced goods as they appear in poems is a useful exercise, perhaps it is also a distraction when taken in context of the absences I have mentioned so far in this article. Where are the Canadian class analyses of retail work as it appears in poetry? Or the transnational labour that produces same in its offshored places that are not merely external to 'here' but are themselves, and can be approached in their cultural terms? My fear is that the recourse to reading in may be reading in too much at the expense of doing more overt work.

Because Pannell's poetry is so explicit about work, I would press his verse upon any reader because of its direct representations. Far more frequently than most does a Pannell poem identify workers and work within their larger action. Yes, his poetry is often concerned with what Middleton (2019, p. 109) calls "familiar modes of waged work," meaning "[l]ifting hot plastic bottles from the moulding machine into a box for a ten-hour shift, typing reports, moving cattle across fields, driving vans, repeatedly filling test tubes in

the laboratory, sweeping factory floors, operating lathes, stocking shelves, spreadsheeting expenditures, and hammering nails," but, considering the situation in Canada that I have described, if scholars do not factor those representations into Canadian literary criticism, then our criticism will wag the dog.

Middleton (2019, p. 109) further suggests that "[w]hat has been lacking in poetic theory is recognition of the relevance of the conceptual density of the labour of housework, caring, and other forms of hard work that so many sociologists, activists, and historians have identified as essential to capitalism." In Canada, the rising subfield of care work theory offers at the very least a burgeoning remediation (e.g., Hétu 2019), but perhaps we should be concerned that old-fangled work needs need working-class conceptualizations at a moment in which work is being actively eradicated under late capitalism?

The issue here is not incompatibility or opposition. All forms of scholarly analysis are welcome. The issue is *emphasis*. Focusing on the working-class is essential because, unlike literature scholars, Canadian poets never abandoned class qua group. The number of Canadian books concerned with work is truly huge. In addition to Christensen's (1981) *Rig Talk* and Henderson's (2012) *The Lease*, consider the Song Fisherman group (Davies 2004); Joe Wallace, Dorothy Livesay, and Milton Acorn wrote about class throughout their careers; Tom Wayman offers a huge and still-growing repository; consider also Peach's (2018) *Bolt* (welding), Nicholson's (2016) *Digsite* (archaeology), Geitzler's (2018) *That Light Feeling Under Your Feet* (cruise ship employee), Shreve's (2015) *Waiting for the Albatross* (deck hand), Trower's (2004) poems about logging peppered throughout his many collections, and Braid's (2009) *Turning Left to the Ladies* (carpentry). But where are the working-class analyses that think through any of them? Like Clarke and Christopher/Whitson, Tom Wayman has argued over and over again in books like *Inside Job* (Wayman 1983) and *If You're Not Free at Work, Where Are You Free?* (Wayman 2018) that class is passé in modern scholarship and apparently needs dressing up with the theory's latest Edsel horse collar grille. The reason for the contemporary pivot away from class is simple: to have meaningful, stable work compensated by living wages impedes financialization and globalization, which is why focusing on individual representations of work is so necessary.

For many reasons, then, I think it important that Canadian literature ground itself again in working-class analysis so that the alienation of its work poets might be remedied. I write this article not only in allegiance with my parents[1] but also with the deceased poet (and Maritimer) Milton Acorn, whose (in)famous membership in the Communist Party of Canada (and in subsequent Canadian instantiations thereafter) is the most prominent example of a Canadian poet adopting a self-conscious and self-injurious political position vis-à-vis capital in the era of Canadian literary nationalism. I am no communist, but as I will soon discuss in terms of Pannell's poetry, I see the stripped and minimalized infrastructure of late capitalism in contemporary life and thereby know the wisdom inherent in Acorn's political critique as vociferously expressed in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Acorn's ideology could take simultaneously apocalyptic and foolhardy positions, as it does in his book *More Poems for People* (Acorn 1973):

> If we Canadians, following the programme advocated by many, but most clearly by the Canadian Liberation Movement, seized the foreign-owned industries in our territory—and if the principal foreign owner, the American Empire, launched military operations against us; What are the odds? Would we win? (91) [...] A people armed with a modern Marxist-Leninist ideology is invincible in a defensive war. (102)[2]

At the same time, Acorn's (1962) denunciations were rooted in simple solidarity amongst workers for humanist reasons, as expressed in his prose piece "I was a communist for my own damn satisfaction" where he celebrates "freedom," "equality," and "a rational

mode of life directed toward human happiness." This is also, I contend, Pannell's vision: a place where labour is a 'rational' counterbalance to the deformations of capitalism, labour itself providing the abstractions Acorn lists ("freedom," "equality," and "happiness") and Pannell's straightforward style proffering a workmanlike demonstration.

As Christopher and Whitson (1999) argued, and as repeated by Clarke (2024, p. 1), the definition of working-class literature is more difficult than those concerning "subjects such as race and gender," though a definition exists somewhere in the term 'working-class' itself, that "the term working-class interprets rather than simply describes a material and cultural position." Developing the point further, Clarke (2024, p. 3) adds that "working-class literature [. . .] is not just that the form and content of texts change to address distinct literary and political problems but that the category itself must be rethought to produce new solidarities. In both instances, the issue is what it does rather than what it denotes." As I will develop, what Pannell's work does is reduce alienation. As for how it does that, there is the matter of stereotype to dispense with.

Thinking of working-class literature in terms of a strict realism is fallacious, for the variety of forms to be found is vast, and to reach for the equivalent category in Canadian literary criticism, 'People's Poetry,' is to engage with a prejudicial term. Engage with it I must, however, if only briefly, for Pannell himself won the now-defunct Acorn-Plantos Award for People's Poetry in 2010 for *Drive*, a book largely concerned with his job as a bus driver. Like 'working-class literature,' the term is difficult to define, though I shall draw from Sharpe's (2015) introduction to *Milton Acorn: The People's Poet* to make one coalesce. As the poet who was awarded the inspiriting first "Peoples' *(sic)* Poetry" award by his fellow poets in 1970 out of commiseration for losing the Governor-General's Award for Poetry due to presumed malfeasance by an American judge, and as the author of the bestselling *More Poems for People*, Acorn serves as the quintessential avatar of the term. Though Sharpe does not explicitly define 'People's Poetry' (of course) in his unnumbered introduction, he describes Acorn's poetry as appealing to "ordinary people" because of its "down-to-earth proletarian style" (unpaginated). This, then, is my working definition of working-class poetry.

What I shall proceed to do in my reading of Pannell is shock the Canadian literary system with some straight-up Marx while also keeping the neoliberal reading in view. Haywood (1997, p. 3) has pointed out how impossible it is "in a class society" that "the experience of the working class can ever be fully assimilated into a literary tradition which still continues to be unrepresentative." This may indeed be the case, but I suggest that at the level of literary criticism, a theoretical hybrid as proposed can come closer to revealing the interaction of form and content, structure and effect, these also defiantly in connection with biographical criticism, use of the latter cited by Christopher and Whitson (1999) as a key reason why working-class literatures are neglected in contemporary literary studies.

3. Navigating the 'Easy to Follow': A Summary of Criticism on Chris Pannell

This article constitutes a rare intervention into the reception of Pannell in Canadian literature, for within the academy, Pannell has never been the subject of attention, and outside the academy, his reviewers all end up at the same place.[3] Reviews from earlier in his career, although more frequent, are consistent with the fewer that come later. In a review of *Sorry I Spent Your Poem*, Langevin (2000) deemed his poetry "accessible," "direct," and "easy to follow." Csamer (2002) writes of *Under Old Stars* (Pannell 2002) that Pannell's "vision takes in the everyday" and that in his choice of poetic subjects, he is not a "snob". Thackray (2011, p. 43) in an issue of the *Journal of Canadian Poetry* mentions that Pannell is a "People's Poet," that his "diction is down to earth." In the past 10 years, only two

literary critics have considered Pannell's work. One, the now-deceased poet Dennis (2013), wrote on his blog that Pannell's work has a "strong narrative drive", that he shows us "real people, being human," and that his technique is to deliver "small moments of beauty in the rush of things, little victories that make the everyday tolerable." Pannell writes out quotidian experience and finds beauty therein, but perhaps the most that can be taken from Dennis's assessment is the approval of a peer and the identification of Pannell's focus on dailiness. Owen's (2023) analysis of *Adventurize Your Summer* from her blog is more helpful. She too recognizes his technique—"the voice of a casual chatterer who wants to let the reader into an array of relatable narrations"—but also identifies the content of his concerns, commenting about "his poems about being a DARTS transit driver" thusly: Pannell's work exemplifies "why we need good people's poetry always." Lacking amongst his critics is a labour-facing analysis with one exemplary exception, a review of *Sorry I Spent Your Poem* by Deahl (2000). Deahl, of course, was Milton Acorn's acolyte and has been a vigorous publisher of class-conscious poetry (his own and others) for many years. Deahl writes,

> Chris does not live in the comfortable, self-assured world of High Modernism. His world is the ambivalent, self-contradictory landscape of Late Capitalism. You will note that I did not say Postmodernism. These poems, while representing a sensibility that is definitely after Modernism, cannot be termed Postmodern due to their lack of angst and their lack of any feeling of futility… Chris has rejected the easy responses typical of Postmodernism in favour of a more complex dialogue with his subjects… in these interpersonal pieces he sees that the edgy world of Late Capitalism masks something more basic—more real—than contemporary aesthetics can explain.

Though the periodization of Pannell's work is a mite crude—one could better appreciate Pannell as a writer of anecdotal free verse that cannot not be properly periodized as a modernist efflorescence—the unusual insistence on economics as an aesthetic mode, as if there is an aesthetics of economics that stands in opposition to postmodernism's vacation of stable meaning, strikes me as a very good explanation as to why Pannell's poetry has not gained the attention of scholars of Canadian literature. Rather than offer postmodern fare or consider race and gender in a signalled way, Pannell wrote out Hamilton anecdotes with striving bit players almost always in full view. In his poems, people spent themselves.

4. Pannell and His Relation to Labour

Naturally, the first time I met Chris Pannell was in the downtown of his city—a bar called Homegrown Hamilton, perhaps 20 years ago now, where the reading series LitLive ran for several years. Pannell was the host that night, as he had been for many years prior and would be for many years thereafter. There is a feeling one develops about poets who have been writing for some time and who offer dedicated, quiet service to their local community of poets. Artists who serve in these roles are, I contend, those who reduce our poetry community's sense of alienation in the concrete sense. They create and facilitate spaces for us to gather and share. Poets like Pannell also reduce our sense of alienation in an abstract sense. They bring into focus what work is though mimesis. By representing work mimetically, they show us not only what it is like to work a particular job, but also what it means to feel as if one is a commodity and thereby act as an antidote to the atomization inherent to capitalism.

For an article that declares itself focused on a working-class poet from a working-class perspective, there is the matter of bona fides. Therefore, I shall list Pannell's previous employment record:

1969–1974: newspaper delivery boy

1974–1975: tractor driver, pub worker, gas station pump jockey

1975–1980: university student, tree planter, truck driver, copy boy, equipment delivery, gas station attendant

1980: government clerk

1981 to 1985: M.A. student, record store worker, warehouse worker, union organizer **Laid off for Union Organizing**

1986–1993: temp company worker, LCBO employee (product pricing, technical writer, systems tester, user training)

1993–1994: temp worker (mail deliveryman, technical writer)

1994–1998: writer, consultant

1998–2001: technical writer, user trainer, and consultant

2002–2004: bus driver

2005–2006: senior technical editor

2006–2007: English tutor

2007–2013: Bus driver

2014–2016: editor[4]

As you can see, Pannell's first job involved the physical delivery of words. Most of the rest of his life, he worked as a technical writer or editor for companies, often through temp agencies. His work record is one attesting to a long, blue-collar relationship with words, a precarious one that often resulted in being laid off and, in one memorable instance, being fired for successfully organizing a union.

Because it is so unfashionable in contemporary Canadian literary criticism, I shall zestfully take the risk of appearing dated and bring in some basic Marx at this point in the article, for it is worth clarifying what relationship Pannell's wage labour and his poetic labour has to capitalism. According to Marx (2024, p. 125) in a recent translation of *Capital*, capitalism can be represented as the formula M−C−M′, in which Money (M) is transformed into commodities (C) that then become profit. Profit (M′) can be further broken down into two variables, (M + ΔM), in which ΔM represents the *surplus value* provided by labour. As Marx insisted, capitalism is a process, not a thing, and my interpretation of Marx's view of that process is normative: capitalists provide money to purchase raw materials, factories, and labour power. Commodities are produced, and the purchase of these commodities results in an excess of value surpassing the amount inputted into the process. This excess value is provided by workers, who are paid wages incommensurate with the value of what they make. Though contemporary conditions do not fit perfectly within this formulation, its interpretative value is certainly enough to help re-send the signal to attend to working class literatures 24 years after Doyle's landmark study.

A recent surge in articles and books (e.g., Sørensen 2024) revisit Marx's concept of alienation, an increase so sustained that there is commentary upon the phenomenon to the effect that it feels like an apt normative critique of society doubly alienated from both the abstract ideals of democracy as well as their concrete institutions. For Marx, alienation is the inevitable feeling one gets when believing what one does, what one is, is a commodity—not a being in various social relations and bonds with others, but a commodity. According to Walton and Luker's (2019, p. 18) interpretation of Marx in *Poetry and Work*, "[b]ecoming a commodity that can only produce other commodities [. . .] suppresses and degrades our human creativity, our expressivity, our deep connectivity with the needs, hopes, and experience of others, and—crucially—our capacity to picture and to pursue alternative realities." We cannot be to one another if we are considered separately from our values, and then only in terms of value. By thinking of human beings in terms of value, we become unvalued beings. Poetry reestablishes the proper ontology by reestablishing our 'capacity to picture.' The connection with neoliberal readings and this formulation of alienation is hard to ignore, but as Doyle (2000) himself put things in a review of a biography of Acorn,

"a Marxist [. . .] would recognize the 'new entrepreneurial spirit' as another version of the old one."

Recall that Brown (2017, p. 10) also argues Man transmogrifies himself into commodity. This reads to me as an update of Marx's alienation, albeit Brown's version is focused more on rhetoric. In a move exactly like Marx's, however, Brown asserts that in such an ontology, "[a]ll conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics." Indeed, in her foreword to *Capital*, Brown (2024, p. xvi) reveals that her work at the intersection of political economy and rhetoric is largely an update on Marx's ideas:

> For Marx, the thinness and superficiality of the mainstream account not only shrouds capital's power and plunder but ignores its conditions of existence, the social relations and social subjects constituting and constituted by it, the protean orders it creates, transforms, destroys, abandons. Indeed, what Marx's work forever challenged was not only capitalism's exploitative nature and commodifying effects, for which he is readily known, but the reduction of economics to markets and thus to a domain of knowledge and practice imagined to be independent of social relations, histories, laws, family forms, politics, policing, religion, language, representation, and psyche.

Or, rather than a "mainstream social science" view of "capitalism as an economic system based in markets organized by free competition and spurred by the profit motive" (Brown 2024, p. iv), capitalism is instead unveiled by a critical theory that reveals the workings and effects of an obscuring ideology as it manifests across a vast array of human interactions, especially as it coalesces in language. If neoliberalism's strategy is to overmaster rhetoric, thereby seeping into our rationality, causing us to commodify all relations and to render the world into manipulable, marketized variables, then Brown already introduces Marx as aware of the fact. Marx was aware that extant political economy "has ripened into a totality, one comprising [. . .] unseeable relations and forces whose effects are unprecedented and only graspable theoretically" (Brown 2024, p. xxv), a capitalism that "contours all social relations and subjectivities" (Brown 2024, p. xv). With such a similarity between theories, one wonders where all the criticism on actual representations of individual labour went. Perhaps the lack of capture of the individual working-class poet is the result of neoliberalism studies' preference for analysis at scale: of system failures such as the widespread loss of the welfare state in the West, environmental catastrophes wrought by rapacious corporations, or global economic devastation of unregulated markets—all righteous concerns, but also somehow displaced from the working class.

Among the work poetry is tasked to do is expression of all these qualities and pursuits. Thus, there *is* something anti-capitalist about the work that (certain kinds of) poetry does. When he was still working as a bus driver, the now-retired Chris Pannell might have been looking out the window of his bus, meditating, thinking of lines that might form a poem, enmeshed in his work but also using material conditions to create a different form of work, work that he finds meaningful—poetic work that itself represents the commodified labour he provides the city of Hamilton. If poetry has the potential to emphasize the logic of production above the logic of transaction, Pannell's poetry enacts such a change in the *how* of our being and relations as it brings forward a neglected, underrepresented *what*.

For Pannell, there is the traditional understanding of his labour record: either adding to his employers' profit in his technical writer role, assisting with training materials that increase worker efficiency, or acting as a city bus driver who supports the process of capitalism by transporting workers to their places of employ and back, thereby serving the needs of industrial society. There is another sense, however, in which his work evades the formula. By working these jobs, Pannell uses the experiences to write poems that represent

labour, perhaps not directly participating in a classical Marxist productive capacity—there is little profit in poetry, and none explicitly for his wage employers—but yet nevertheless creating a commodity that (at least according to the poets and critics from antiquity onward) has a maximal social use value, albeit one tethered to the reality of a negligible exchange value. For the poet himself, the matter of value becomes more complex: his wages must factor in the experiences provided by the labour itself, from which he creatively extracts his own product that is in aesthetic excess of the relative drudgery of day labour. Already I am extending Marx's theory of capital far beyond where it should go, but such fancy and license is always the case when abstracting theory into literature, a sin no greater than that of the neoliberal readings discussed earlier. I will now focus on poetry as analogically alongside Marx's critique of capitalism as process.

In Marx's theory, poetry can be considered (poorly) as a commodity, but in my analogy, poetry is a process that results from the circulation of humans with relational capacities that perform waged labour. The result is an aesthetic effect in the world that is in excess of the aesthetics inputted to the process, those inputs being the inherent beauty to human beings and, perhaps, the beauty inherent to the work itself. The labour of the arts worker is to focus attention in a particular way to consolidate, amplify, and sometimes outright create beauty from experiences during waged labour. Surplus value, then, is the aesthetic effect that is in excess. Should the poet engage in the process of poetry on the job, any surplus value in my analogous, aesthetic bastardization of Marx would decrease productivity and therefore profit in a crude sense, but one could argue that a poetic sensibility in workers might actually increase the technical acumen and sensitivity to language demanded by a technical writer, or to a bus driver who needs to interpret the speech and non-verbal signalling of the cognitively disabled. The matter is not so simple, then. For Pannell, blue-collar work is not romanticized as noble. It simply constitutes jobs that pay such that Pannell's preferred work can occur: writing poetry. Poetry is served by doing the waged work. Waged work then does work for Pannell's poetry by informing that poetry while also creating the time and space for it.

I feel these critical moves justified, beyond what might be deemed mere conflation. As Brown (2024, p. xviii) also explains in her foreword, for Marx, "[c]ritique [. . .] always entailed a triple move—critique of thought or representation, critique of actual arrangements and dynamics of power, and a critical or symptomatic reading of the relation between the intellectual and the practical, or, to use Marx's terms, ideal and material life." I already have, and will continue to, critique capitalist ideology, its neoliberal instantiation, and representations of it by Pannell; critique intellectual power structures insofar as they fail to engage with work poetry seriously; and be self-reflexive about Marx's theory as it considers material life and might apply to 'ideal' life.

The bulk of Pannell's jobs were worked in Hamilton, Ontario, formerly a blue-collar bastion, a union town. One might consider the city somewhat post-industrial now, but in the latter part of the 19th and for a good portion of the 20th century, the city's labour power was strong. For example, the first Canadian chapter of the Noble and Holy Order of Knights of Labour was formed in the city in 1875. Other notable labour insurrections and achievements include The Nine Hour Movement in 1872, the Hamilton Street Railway Strike in 1906, the election of the first Co-operative Commonwealth Federation MLA in the province of Ontario in 1934 (nicknamed "Mr. Labour" to boot); and the Stelco strike of 1946, one that was partly responsible for securing the right to collective bargaining for workers. A near-lifelong Hamilton resident, Pannell's poems are suffused of this history. "City Life," the first section of *Sorry I Spent Your Poem*, his first book, treats Hamilton at length. The title poem of his fourth book, *A Nervous City*, begins,

We rose and forgot we had once been as soft as babies.

In sweat and by collision

we learned these parks through play

and later, that they were not ours.

New places to work were being built.

A man waved a map: *Here, son!*

One day all of this will be yours! (Pannell 2013, p. 13)

Pannell likely knows that his city originated at the site known as Gore Park, now an urban park in downtown Hamilton, that his opening line's sensuous reference to infancy deliberately brings forward this infancy of city. And yet capital owns home: the parks "were not ours" and instead "[n]ew places to work were being built." What is fated is not ownership, as concretized and systematized in the form of a map, but instead an overpromising kind of neoliberalized labour. In the second stanza, there is more reminiscence of the city's labour history occurring on a city bus:

My fellow citizens run after a swaying bus

across rocky roads. Sighing, someone sleepy

and proud tells us of the old prosperity—

She wishes to not be sold and sold again

what our grandparents raised on their civic tendons

and bequeathed us. (Pannell 2013, p. 13)

With a focus upon the stripped commons, Pannell pushes against easy nostalgia. Rather than an "old prosperity," the modern state of things is poor infrastructure: the "swaying bus" and "rocky roads" that poorly serve "fellow citizens" who have to "run after" the bus, presumably to catch it, suggesting that the citizens serve the precarious bus rather than the bus serving them. Yes, there is a voice that speaks to the way things were, but it is for a purpose: to resist being monetized in an era of the financialization of capital. The fact that there is nostalgia in this context—the woman who mentions the old days is "proud"—means that something important has been lost, something that should be brought back: a commons that was not just 'there' but one built by solidarity between workers, one constructed by "grandparents" who thought in terms of providing legacies to communities ("bequeathed") via a process that directly signals embodied work ("civic tendons"). A fair reading of this stanza is that a worker is "sold and sold again" on the back of infrastructure formerly provided by the bodies of his ancestors but now hollowed out and preserved by the barest provision of 'services.'

Just as Pannell's poems insist on representations of Hamilton locales, they insist on representations of work too. The next stanza of the poem mentions the guts of city, its infrastructure at the molecular level: "[p]ipe and plaster, rod and brick" that are, again, precarious, dangerous, that people must "step gingerly around." "Water pressure" and "natural gas in the mains" threaten a public collective ("we") of city inhabitants. The fourth stanza literally equates the human body with city:

This boulevard, an arm

this thoroughfare, a leg

eyes from lighted towers

shine, and never blink—

Pannell suggests not only the inextricability of humans and their built surroundings, but also a kind of surveillance-capital-as-panopticon: "Antennae transmit images of massed

crowds/and charismatic leaders back through the network/the metropolitan, carbonate, silicate musculature." Not only are our lives being beamed back to imposing capital ("towers" that "never blink"), so also are our protests. More worrisome is the incorporation of the human into the "network." Rather than individual humans choosing to become cyborgian, the "network" itself is being anthropomorphized. Qua Brown, capital is being rhetorically incorporated into how we think of our bodies, but Pannell suggests the move is inherently false. As the final stanza puts it, "The city shakes so subtly, we sometimes mistake it for/the ghost of its ambition, the effect of our work/the force of our breath in the night." Not only does the poem have as its final image the breath of a human collectivity, but a glitch appears in the matrix, its mask falls, and we can recall what it was dreamed to be, long ago, something that should be more based on "the effect of our work." The poem begins and ends on seeing through capitalism and reclaiming the legacy of lineages of workers, throughout its course intermingling physical representations of city and work.

"A Nervous City" is hardly a one-off in the poet's oeuvre. Pannell has focused on labour from the start of his career. An entire section of *Sorry I Spent Your Poem* (Pannell 1999), his first full-length collection, is titled "Working Stiffs." The second poem in the book describes a moment in the working life of a parking jockey. The concern with labour has been maintained through every book Pannell has published. Most frequently, Pannell poems concern the labour of driving a bus (his job later in middle age and the subject of the bulk of *drive* (Pannell 2009) and *A Nervous City* (Pannell 2013)), but a close second is office work (recalling the poetic deployment of work record in list fashion earlier, his job often took the form of temp work). To skip to and survey his most recent book, *Adventurize Your Summer* (Pannell 2023), I count 11/51 poems to greater and lesser degrees thematized by work. The 'thicker' work poems include "I Am Graffiti" (pp. 3–4), "Exit Through Ragged Falls" (p. 7), "The Captain's Voice" (pp. 8–9), "Wary of Classical Music" (pp. 13–14), "I Read All Twelve Signs" (pp. 17–19), "For the Trainee Bus Driver" (pp. 51–52), "How We Fear Each Other" (pp. 53–54), "Passenger Paul, Three Trips on DARTS" (pp. 58–59), "Brief Egyptian Rain" (pp. 74–75), "A Day Trip to El Alamein" (pp. 81–82), and "Upon Hearing 'Strangers in the Night' on an Accordion as We Sat in an Outdoor Café at Quarter to Two in the Afternoon" (pp. 99–100). The thicker work poems do what one might expect, providing a glimpse of 'what it is like.' Though they do not approach the Marxist signalling of Acorn circa *More Poems for People*[5], they nonetheless do the poetic work Acorn espoused.

For example, "Three Trips on DARTS," written with a bus driver as speaker, consists of three sections with the subject throughline of a single passenger. The title of the poem frames work serving a marginalized population (the DARTS acronym refers to Hamilton's Disabled and Aged Transit System), a common enough poetic strategy in Pannell's oeuvre. What makes the poem interesting is its careful consideration of Paul, an aged and ill passenger, who, in his previous life, was an "ex-cabbie, ex-dispatcher" and who knew "Hamilton, /every street, every corner" (p. 58). This passenger "saved" the speaker on his "first night" as a "meds driver" by guiding the speaker through his passenger delivery sequence with his encyclopaedic knowledge of the city, including "every dumb idea." In the second fragment, Paul's ill, suffering a hypoglycaemic episode on his way to dialysis, with everyone on the bus thinking he might die. The poem's speaker suggests an ambulance, but Paul's wife rejects the idea, knowing how long emergency services take in the city. Put abstractly, Paul's wife chooses the disability infrastructure she knows she can rely on—a service worker already familiar with her husband and who already has demonstrated that he cares. In the third fragment, Paul continues to be represented as ill, with the stigmata of illness—a "clear tensor bandage" is wrapped around his "stump"—duly signalled. Yet there is a deliberate futurity here, a willingness to change civic conditions by this charismatic "curmudgeon." On the bus, Paul discusses "the city, the idiots on council, /the

new year, the future of downtown—like he believes in the future." That final clause might be read as ironic, but the reader soon learns it is not. Paul "straightens up on his scooter—something interests him/in the conversion of one-way streets/back to two directions." Paul still cares about his place, rooted in his history of work and being, a give and take between these, not an extractivist, one-way relationship. At the end of the poem, Pannell offers an invocation in solidarity to Paul, one worker to another:

> Let's roll, Paul—find us a map and a ramp
>
> up the steps of city hall—
>
> we'll circle the evergreens with lights
>
> and say we'll never leave. (p. 59)

In this impromptu imagined protest, both the speaker and Paul will romantically use their expertise to surround and circle city hall, as if things might change—because Paul believes that they might, and because the speaker believes in Paul's knowledge. Albeit small and fanciful, this imagined protest would be a worker's protest.

Pannell's work also benefits from the neoliberal reading habit. After all, how could his poetry avoid depicting the accelerating social change of the past 50 years since the deregulation of financial markets in the 1970s, change that radically transformed his city from an industrial one to a rust belt city with surviving industrial infrastructure? Could any anecdotal lyric poet's work focused on Hamilton be completely free of such allusions and content?

Consider "I am Graffiti" from *Adventurize Your Summer*, in which the poet writes of a Hamilton in which the "homeless push shopping carts up streets named Prosperity/or Lifestyle," of how the poet is "losing track, afraid of the future" and in need of "someone who's in for the long haul" in terms of political leadership. Yet even in that nod to neoliberal ravages, we see Pannell pay attention to retail labour concerns, for the poem kicks off with a cigar-smoking "recycling boss" (recalling Acorn from earlier) who marks his tenure based on posters depicting the previous mayors of the city, as if to say, 'Time here is marked by politics and how irrelevant they are to me, for I outlast my masters.' At the same time, the poem remains properly ambiguously 'poetic': it is not overdetermined by the thematic focus on labour and neoliberalism, for running throughout it is a meditation on selfhood. Parallel to the labour boss's thoughts about a wall displaying the current mayor is Pannell's "private wall/a kind of notebook, full of complaints" and an elaboration of a lexical image pattern (signs, fallen letters from signs, graffiti). The poem ends as a poetic manifesto[6]:

> I must make my mark, even though these
>
> city corners have made me crazy. Get a pen
>
> and a few spray cans of various colours. Some stencils,
>
> some simple shapes. And we'll be off
>
> to record the treason of our tongues, the tremor
>
> of our talk. (p. 4)

I do not read this snippet politically except for the poet's need to escape the prevailing, devaluating conditions of society and instead embrace a personal meaning-making that occurs through reciprocal human relations as they occur in equitable conversation, fashioning new worlds out of a basic shared grammar that will evolve as relations evolve. Which is to say, I read it quite politically, though it does have a double life as escapist romance. I read it as a sign not only of the times, but also of the need to see the poetic word, conversation, and street graffiti as analog grounding techniques. Yes, we need to read work and work's absence into poetry just as we need direct representations to remember that which we

might need to recover. By doing so, we resist alienation in Marx's sense of the term. We resist commodification within the neoliberal order. We have and bear relations with one another. We incorporate working-class literature into the academy and perhaps inoculate it from neoliberal readings. We honour our working-class poets. And along the way, we must avoid a middle-classification of pedagogy.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 As Christopher and Whitson (1999, p. 71) write, a nation's "intellectual life" might "be richer if those of us from the working class brought with us into the academy our own literature and culture." Hence, I again provide by bona fides: son of workers who spent the first seven years of his life living in a trailer home in rural New Brunswick. This rationale is also why, later, I bring forward my relationship with Pannell as a poet.

2 I thank here Dr. Alan Filewod for his cunning splice in his article "Maoist Performativities: Milton Acorn and the Canadian Liberation Movement." In: Avant-Garde Performance and Material Exchange, edited by Michael Sell, Performance Interventions series, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

3 Pannell has had his share of interviews, but I deliberately do not quote from them out of solidarity with his work. There are many quotations I could use from them from Pannell's side of the conversation, but I rue having to. Pannell has been left to explicate himself, and when taken in view of the lack of critical commentary, I have decided to spare him doing this work a second time.

4 Personal correspondence with Chris Pannell 2 Mar 2024 (Pannell 2024).

5 For example, Acorn (1973, p. 14) writes of "bourgeosie"; capitalizes a cigar-smoking "Capitalist" and a self-comparison to Lenin on the same page (p. 22); and reflects on "Trotskyites" as "enemies" (p. 108).

6 A not infrequent choice made by Pannell, who is quite explicit about the work poetry can do. See Pannell (1994, pp. 226–27) and "The Train Stalled in Hamilton Bay" and "Shazam Went the Head of My Hard Drive" (p. 231).

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