A Rhetoric of Exhaustion: Dialect, Labour and Critical Literacy for Policy and Curriculum

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Abstract

This article reinterprets Samuel Laycock's 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' (1863) as a historically grounded instance of a rhetoric of exhaustion, in which bodily depletion is converted into aesthetic method and vernacular critique. Bringing together cultural materialism, Freirean critical literacy, labour poetics scholarship and language ideology theory, the analysis shows how dialectal density, rhythmic drag, patterned repetition and tonal hybridity formalise industrial fatigue under the conditions of the Lancashire Cotton Famine. A compact comparison with Ellen Johnston, Ernest Jones clarifies Laycock's distinctive synthesis of testimonial immediacy, political address and dialectal realism. The article argues that dialect functions as epistemic voice, challenging standard language hierarchies and offering a historical model for linguistic justice in education. Policy implications follow for dialect affirming assessment, curriculum design informed by labour poetics and

teacher education oriented to critical language awareness. Finally, the study gestures to Eco pedagogy, reading Laycock's material focus on Surat cotton as an early trace of eco social entanglements between labour exhaustion and degraded ecologies. By recentring a working-class poet within nineteenth century literary culture, the article contributes a transferable analytic – exhaustion as method – that links Victorian labour poetics to current struggles over democratic pedagogy, collective agency and equitable curriculum formation.

Keywords: *exhaustion-as-method, dialect epistemic voice, labour poetics, linguistic justice, critical language awareness*

Introduction

The poetry of the nineteenth century British working class constitutes a substantial yet historically marginalised archive of cultural expression. Its marginality is not an index of aesthetic deficiency but the outcome of ideological mechanisms that calibrate literary value to classed notions of linguistic prestige and to the authority conferred on 'legitimate language' (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Victorian reviewers often dismissed labouring class verse as crude or ephemeral – judgements that register middle class anxieties more than they describe the poetics of labour. Read outside these assumptions and returned to their conditions of production and circulation, such texts emerge as highly sophisticated cultural artefacts, interpreting industrial modernity, articulating collective suffering, and translating lived experience into cultural knowledge (Boos, 2001; Maidment, 1987; Vincent, 1989).

Within this tradition, Samuel Laycock (1826–1893) is of particular importance. Raised in conditions of economic deprivation and compelled into textile work from childhood, he forged a poetic sensibility attuned to the bodily tempo and

affective pressures of industrial labour. His poems circulated through broadsides, newspapers and oral recitation – sites that, in Raymond Williams's terms, belong to the 'whole way of life' that composes a social formation (Williams, 1977). In this demotic ecosystem, Laycock's practice became inseparable from the Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861–65), a crisis of unemployment, hunger and exhaustion that structured feeling and time across the industrial North (Goodridge & Keegan, 2005; Hollingworth, 1977).

Composed at the height of that crisis, 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' (1863) is not merely a document of destitution but a formally intricate text that converts bodily fatigue into poetic structure. While the poem depicts the physical depletion of weaving poor quality 'shurat' cotton and the indignities inflicted by overseers, its significance lies in how dialectal density, rhythmic drag, iterative phrasing and tonal hybridity enact the very exhaustion they describe. Fatigue becomes not only a theme but the organising principle of the poem's linguistic and prosodic texture, what this article conceptualises as a 'rhetoric of exhaustion' (Boos, 2001; Laycock, 1863; Sroka, 2019). In this sense, Laycock's verse exemplifies how working-class poetics transform the practical mechanics of labour into aesthetic pattern under conditions of crisis (Goodridge, 2010).

The stakes of this rhetoric extend beyond Victorian literary history. Laycock's transformation of lived fatigue into cultural form bears directly on contemporary debates in critical pedagogy, linguistic justice and the politics of curriculum. By insisting that Lancashire dialect can carry conceptual weight, the poem challenges the assumption, embedded in dominant literacy norms, that Standard English is the privileged vehicle of knowledge. In Freirean terms, it models critical literacy: the authority to 'name the world' in one's own linguistic resources (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Read through language ideology theory, the poem simultaneously contests the symbolic power of standardisation and exposes the classed nature of linguistic hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy &

Milroy, 2012). As such, Laycock's dialectal poetics provide a historical precedent for inclusive curriculum formation and for classroom practices that centre vernacular repertoires as epistemic, rather than remedial (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Williams, 1977).

To pursue these claims with conceptual clarity, the article adopts a deliberately focused theoretical framework. Drawing selectively on cultural materialism, critical literacy, labour poetics scholarship and language ideology theory, the analysis foregrounds the historical, linguistic and pedagogical stakes of Laycock's work (Boos, 2001; Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Goodridge, 2010; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Sroka, 2019; Williams, 1977). This framework supports three interconnected aims: first, to redefine industrial exhaustion in 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' not as incidental content but as a formal and rhetorical category; second, to situate Laycock within a tightly delimited comparative field (Ellen Johnston, Ernest Jones, Ben Brierley), clarifying both continuities and divergences in nineteenth century working class verse; and third, to draw policy relevant implications for dialect affirming assessment, curriculum design informed by labour poetics, and teacher education grounded in critical language awareness (Giroux, 2004; Goodridge & Keegan, 2005). In short, by foregrounding dialect as epistemic voice and exhaustion as aesthetic method, the study positions a Victorian worker poet as a resource for contemporary struggles over linguistic justice, collective agency and equitable curriculum formation.

All quotations from 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' adopt the Cotton Famine Poetry Database (University of Exeter) transcription of the Ashton and Stalybridge Reporter first printing (10 January 1863) as the copy text. Dialectal spellings and punctuation are reproduced verbatim; we normalise only clear compositor's slips, and in the prose we standardise the commodity term to Surat

cotton while retaining Laycock's 'shurat' within quoted lines. Brief first mention glosses are supplied for locally specific forms (e.g., up th' speawt).

Theoretical Framework

A rigorous interpretation of 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' requires an analytical framework capable of explaining how Laycock transforms the lived experience of industrial fatigue into poetic form. This article therefore draws on four interrelated bodies of theory – cultural materialism, Freirean critical literacy, labour poetics, and language ideology – each illuminating a distinct dimension of Laycock's rhetoric of exhaustion. Rather than accreting disparate perspectives, the section that follows assembles a tightly coordinated conceptual apparatus that clarifies how material conditions, linguistic inequality and vernacular expression intersect in Laycock's work. In short, the framework is designed to track the movement from labour to form (cultural materialism; labour poetics), from voice to epistemic legitimacy (critical literacy; language ideology), and from text to public pedagogy (all four strands in concert).

Cultural Materialism: Literature as a Material Practice

Raymond Williams's insistence that culture constitutes 'a whole way of life' (Williams, 1977: 19) licenses a reading of Laycock's poem not as an autonomous aesthetic object but as a cultural practice produced within – and actively responding to – the conditions of the Lancashire Cotton Famine. On this view, the poem's formal strategies arise from labour's tempo: metrical drag and phonetic weight make exhaustion audible in lines such as 'mi back's welly brocken', while domestic precarity is condensed in idioms like 'up th' speawt', binding workshop and household within the same economy of depletion (Laycock, 1863). Williams positions literature as part of a social formation – relations of production, structures of feeling and lived experience – so that rhythm, diction and refrain are read as indices of material pressure rather than

decorative choices (Williams, 1977). The account elaborated by Dollimore and Sinfield (1985) sharpens this claim: cultural texts ‘work on the dominant’. In this sense, Laycock’s ballad form, Lancashire dialect and representation of industrial exhaustion, including the struggle to ‘root among this shurat’, register the socio-economic pressures of the Civil War blockade and simultaneously contest them by turning bodily strain into vernacular analysis (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985; Laycock, 1863; Williams, 1977).

Freirean Critical Literacy: Vernacular Language as Epistemic Agency

Freire’s argument that literacy begins when individuals ‘read the world’ using their own linguistic resources (Freire & Macedo, 1987: 29) allows us to recognise Laycock’s use of Lancashire dialect as an act of epistemic assertion rather than a marker of deficiency. In ‘Th’ Shurat Weaver’s Song’, dialect is the medium through which the speaker names exploitation, domestic precarity and bodily depletion – ‘aw ne’er wur so woven afore’, ‘mi back’s welly brocken’, ‘up th’ speawt’ (pawned) – thereby maintaining immediacy and embodied pressure in ways a standardised paraphrase would mute (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Laycock, 1863). On this view, dialect is not representational colour but constitutive discourse: it fuses experience and knowledge, exemplifying a literacy that begins from the learners’ own words and worlds (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Freire’s concept of dialogic pedagogy also clarifies the poem’s communal voice. The rhythmic, repetitive ballad structure mirrors the participatory texture of oral culture, inviting collective recitation and shared interpretation; the closing apostrophe – ‘yo at ha nowt to give / an help yo’re poor brothers an’ sisters to live’ – shifts the enunciative centre from the singular to the communal, converting lament into public address (Laycock, 1863). In this sense, the poem models, avant la lettre, a form of public pedagogy grounded in working class linguistic practices: it does not merely describe the weaver’s world; it teaches

readers how to interpret and resist it (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2004; Williams, 1977).

Labour Poetics: Aesthetic Labour and the Structuring of Fatigue

The third strand is labour poetics scholarship, which underscores that working class writing is shaped by the physical, emotional and temporal conditions of labour. Scholars show that labouring class poetry often mirrors manual work's structures: repetitive metre echoes mechanised rhythm; tonal oscillation reflects affective volatility; vernacular diction registers experiences unavailable within elite linguistic registers (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010; Sroka, 2019).

Sroka's conceptualisation is particularly useful: working class writers repurpose available cultural forms to transform hardship into creative agency (Sroka, 2019: 44). This perspective clarifies how Laycock's ballad form and dialectal stylisation convert industrial exhaustion into aesthetic method. Strained syntax, rhythmic drag and tonal hybridity do not merely represent fatigue; they formalise it, reproducing the loom's repetitions and the famine's temporal stoppage at the level of prosody. Through these techniques, Laycock performs the labour of representing labour: form becomes a direct manifestation of bodily and social conditions (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010; Sroka, 2019).

Language Ideology: Dialect and Symbolic Power

The final component concerns language ideology, especially the political economy of standardisation. Bourdieu argues that 'legitimate language' operates as symbolic capital, conferring authority on those who conform to dominant norms (Bourdieu, 1991: 45). Conversely, non-standard dialects attract stigma not because of grammatical deficit but because of institutional illegitimacy – their exclusion from sites that regulate value. Milroy and Milroy (2012) further show how standard language ideology naturalises these inequalities by

presenting certain forms as inherently superior (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 2012).

This dynamic is essential for interpreting Laycock's poetics. His consistent use of Lancashire dialect signals a refusal of linguistic subordination: orthographic and phonological choices ('mi' for my, 'neaw' for now, 'speawt' for spout) index working class identity and resist assimilation to prestige codes. Micro moments such as 'mi back's welly brocken' retain embodied immediacy that a standardised paraphrase would dilute, while idioms like 'up th' speawt' (pawned) name the domestic economy of scarcity in the community's own terms; likewise 'aw ne'er wur so woven afore' renders depletion as a mode of knowing rather than a report of symptoms (Laycock, 1863). By composing in a vernacular routinely excluded from literary institutions, Laycock asserts the epistemic and expressive validity of working-class speech. In this sense, dialect in 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' operates as a counter hegemonic practice: it challenges the symbolic power of Standard English, exposes the classed nature of linguistic norms and foregrounds the cultural knowledge embedded in everyday industrial language (Bourdieu, 1991; Laycock, 1863; Milroy & Milroy, 2012).

Toward an Integrated Framework

Taken together, cultural materialism, critical literacy, labour poetics and language ideology yield a coherent interpretive strategy that captures the full complexity of Laycock's rhetoric of exhaustion. Cultural materialism situates the poem within the economic and ideological structures of the Cotton Famine; Freirean literacy theory explains the epistemic force of dialect as a people's knowledge; labour poetics accounts for the aesthetic conversion of labour and fatigue into form; and language ideology theory clarifies the poem's political challenge to linguistic hierarchy (Boos, 2001; Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Goodridge, 2010; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Sroka, 2019;

Williams, 1977). Read in concert, these strands allow us to show how Laycock's poem operates simultaneously as aesthetic artefact, cultural document, linguistic intervention and vernacular pedagogy, a text in which exhaustion functions not only as content but as method.

Article Aims and Analytical Orientation

The analysis developed in this article is guided by three interconnected aims, each arising directly from the theoretical framework outlined above and from the historical specificities of the Lancashire Cotton Famine that contour Laycock's practice (Goodridge & Keegan, 2005; Hollingworth, 1977). Together they specify what the article contributes to literary scholarship and how this contribution bears on contemporary debates in critical pedagogy and language politics (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Williams, 1977).

The first aim is to show that exhaustion in 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' is not an incidental topic but a generative aesthetic principle: fatigue is formalised through prosody, diction and tone so that the poem does exhaustion rather than merely saying it (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010; Sroka, 2019). Concretely, the analysis demonstrates how metrical drag, dense consonantal clusters, iterative phrasing and tonal hybridity enact depletion at the level of lineation and voice. In this sense, Laycock's ballad converts lived industrial strain into patterned sound and syntax, crystallising what Williams terms a 'structure of feeling', a collective, pre conceptual register of social experience (Williams, 1977). The argument thereby extends labour poetics scholarship, which has long traced the relation between working class writing and material labour, by centering exhaustion itself as a compositional method (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010; Sroka, 2019). This reframing also interlocutes with affect theoretical accounts of modern depletion, situating Laycock as an early textualiser of fatigue as temporality and social critique (Ahmed, 2004; Crary, 2013; Schaffner, 2016).

Methodologically, the article operationalises this aim via close reading of rhythmic and lexical cues and via a narratological attention to voice, address and focalisation (Genette, 1980; Laycock, 1863).

The second aim is to place Laycock in a compact comparative constellation – Ellen Johnston, Ernest Jones and Ben Brierley – so as to clarify both continuities and divergences within nineteenth century working class poetics. Johnston's gendered testimonial lyric, Jones's militant Chartist address and Brierley's comic realist dialect delineate the terrain against which Laycock's synthesis becomes legible (Hollingworth, 1977; Klaus, 1998; Maidment, 1987; Sanders, 2009; Vicinus, 2024). Read alongside these writers, Laycock's poem emerges as a hybrid modality shaped by the tempo and corporeality of textile labour: it braids testimonial immediacy, political address and dialectal realism, yet slows and drags prosody under crisis conditions to produce what this article conceptualises as a rhetoric of exhaustion (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010; Sroka, 2019; Williams, 1977). Framing the comparison narrowly prevents theoretical dispersion, keeps historical grain in view and ensures that formal claims remain anchored in a demonstrable field rather than in impressionistic analogies (Hollingworth, 1977; Maidment, 1987; Sanders, 2009).

The third aim extends literary analysis into educational politics. By foregrounding dialect as epistemic voice and by showing how Laycock's poetics contest the symbolic hierarchy of 'legitimate language', the article identifies actionable implications for critical literacy, dialect affirming assessment and curriculum design (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 2004; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Freirean pedagogy frames dialect as a knowledge bearing discourse that begins from learners' own words and worlds (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987), while language ideology scholarship clarifies how standardisation enacts symbolic violence against non-prestige varieties (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Read through this lens, Laycock's

rhetoric of exhaustion functions as a historical precedent for linguistic justice in schools, informing assessment rubrics that prioritise meaning making and rhetorical clarity, curricula that integrate labour poetics as social knowledge and teacher education that cultivates critical language awareness (Giroux, 2004; Williams, 1977).

These aims entail a dual commitment to textual precision and socio historical accountability. Analytically, the article combines (i) close reading of prosody, diction and tone with (ii) cultural materialist contextualisation of the Cotton Famine's economic and ideological pressures (Goodridge & Keegan, 2005; Williams, 1977). The procedure is deliberately parsimonious in scope, centred on one emblematic text, so as to keep the argument sharply focused while developing a transferable heuristic ('rhetoric of exhaustion') that can be tested against adjacent famine or factory poems (Boos, 2001; Hollingworth, 1977; Sroka, 2019). Throughout, the article treats the ballad's demotic form and dialectal surface as public pedagogy, infrastructures of participation that turn private affliction into collective address (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2004; Williams, 1977). The upshot is an approach that sees Laycock's poem operating simultaneously as aesthetic artefact, cultural document and pedagogical practice, thereby positioning nineteenth century labour poetics as a resource for contemporary struggles over language, equity and democratic curriculum (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Williams, 1977).

Samuel Laycock and the Industrial Imagination

Samuel Laycock's emergence as a poet is inseparable from the industrial lifeworld that shaped his earliest experiences. Born in 1826 in Marsden, Yorkshire, and compelled into textile work from the age of nine, Laycock's formative years coincided with the consolidation of the industrial working class described by Thompson as 'the making' of a new social formation under

capitalism (Thompson 1963). The long hours, bodily strain, noise, heat and precarious wages of the mill environment were not simply external pressures but conditions that molded his sensory, linguistic and imaginative orientation. His minimal formal education and early immersion in mill culture placed him squarely within the working-class literacy practices identified by Vincent (1989): oral circulation of texts, broadside reading, communal recitation and autodidactic learning within domestic spaces.

The Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861–65) intensified these dynamics. Caused by the disruption of cotton imports during the American Civil War, the famine produced catastrophic unemployment across Lancashire's textile districts, leaving hundreds of thousands dependent on relief works, charity and the humiliating distribution of inferior 'shurat' cotton. Laycock lived not at the periphery of this crisis but at its centre. As Goodridge and Keegan (2005) and Hollingworth (1977) document, the famine created a 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977: 132) characterised by hunger, fatigue, temporal stagnation and a heightened sense of political vulnerability. The poem emerges not only from Laycock's personal experience but from this collective environment of deprivation and forced resilience.

A Focused Comparative Field: Johnston, Jones and Brierle[1]

Building on the previous section's historical grounding of Laycock within the industrial lifeworld of the Lancashire Cotton Famine, a structurally comparative lens clarifies what is distinctive about his poetics by setting him alongside Ellen Johnston, Ernest Jones and Ben Brierley. All four address subaltern publics through accessible forms, yet they organise voice, metre and address differently; read through the allied notions of organic intellectuals and subaltern counterpublics, ballad and dialect are best understood not as quaint survivals but as low threshold infrastructures of participation and public pedagogy (Fraser, 1990; Giroux, 2004; Gramsci,

1971; Williams, 1977). Within this triangulated field, attending to voice, form, political function and audience allows Laycock's contribution to emerge with precision (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010; Hollingworth, 1977; Klaus, 1998; Maidment, 1987; Sanders, 2009; Vicinus, 2024).

Johnston develops a gendered testimonial lyric that repurposes factory experience as autobiographical witness; in poems such as *The Factory Exile* she repeatedly turns to the cadence 'in the morning' (e.g., 'Of the Factory Boy's song in the morning!', 'We shall conquer or die in the Morning!'), a forward calling refrain that seeks visibility and recognition across mixed readerships (Johnston, 1867, pp. 25–26; Boos, 2008; Fraser, 1990; Klaus, 1998; Maidment, 1987). Against this horizon, Laycock's idiomatised lines – 'aw ne'er wur so woven afore', 'mi back's welly brocken' – do not merely report depletion; they sonically enact it, as consonantal density and breath short phrasing redistribute bodily pressure into phonotexture, making exhaustion a compositional constraint rather than a topic (Laycock, 1863; Williams, 1977).

Jones anchors the Chartist agitational pole. His chant-like anaphora and forward-thrusting cadence are designed to mobilise – hear, for instance, the surging refrain of *A Song for the People*: 'We'll rally round the banner, boys … The People shall reign' – projecting teleological momentum as a rhetoric of movement (Epstein, 1994; Jones, 1846; Sanders, 2009). Laycock bends the recognisable ballad matrix in the opposite direction, engineering drag rather than surge: slowed tempo, weighty syntax and iterated phrasing model the temporal stoppage of famine economies; the friction of inferior fibre is made audible as caesural halt and repetitive strain – 'root among this shurat' – so that metre exhibits critique by converting labour's wear into prosodic time (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010; Goodridge & Keegan, 2005; Laycock, 1863; Sroka, 2019).

With Brierley the comparison turns to dialectal realism and humour. His Lancashire idiom crafts social recognition and conviviality; dialect functions as a portable code – hear, for instance, the rhythmically jaunty 'Wi' mi pickers an' pins' from *The Weaver o' Wellbrook* – yet seldom bears the full somatic load of exhaustion as a shaping device (Brierley, 1863; Goodridge, 2010; Hollingworth, 1977; Vicinus, 2024). Laycock exploits the same vernacular resources yet loads them analytically: 'up th' speawt' (pawned) compresses household economy into a single idiom; 'thin as a lat' condenses bodily attrition; and 'welly brocken' preserves embodied immediacy that a standardised paraphrase would dilute. Here dialect becomes epistemic voice – the medium that names exploitation in the community's own terms (Laycock, 1863).

Synthesising these strands, Laycock rearranges the coordinates of the field. From Johnston he retains testimonial immediacy but transposes it into form, allowing exhaustion to organise lineation and cadence; from Jones he adapts public address while replacing kinetic drive with prosodic weight; from Brierley he inherits vernacular hospitality yet insists that dialect bear analysis rather than operate as garnish (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010; Sroka, 2019; Williams, 1977). The ballad's AABB matrix and isochronous lines lower thresholds of participation, turning repetition and refrain into infrastructures of public pedagogy that travel across broadsides, streets and households (Boos, 2001; Hepburn, 2000; Hollingworth, 1977; Williams, 1977). In language political terms, his Lancashire operates as counter hegemonic literacy that disputes the prestige of 'legitimate language', exposes the classed nature of linguistic norms and anticipates critical discourse critiques of standard language ideology (Bourdieu, 1991; Crowley, 2003; Fairclough, 1992; Milroy & Milroy, 2012).

This comparative mapping does more than position Laycock historically; it prepares the analytic terrain for the detailed stylistic reading that follows. If Johnston foregrounds visibility, Jones propulsion and Brierley convivial code, Laycock's specificity lies in how the poem makes exhaustion work: (i) phonotexture and metrical drag – the audible weight of 'welly brocken' and the slowed cadence it imposes; (ii) repetition/anaphora – iterated complaint and refrain as formalised stoppage; (iii) tonal hybridity – oscillation between indignation and dark humour ('Afore these bad toimes cum… awm as thin as a lat'); and (iv) address/voice – the widening from 'aw' to a communal appeal that domesticates publicity ('up th' speawt', 'root among this shurat') (Boos, 2001; Goodridge & Keegan, 2005; Laycock, 1863; Sroka, 2019; Williams, 1977). On this basis, the ensuing Close Reading traces, point by point, how rhythm, diction and tone in 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' convert bodily depletion into method, thereby grounding the policy relevant claims about dialect as knowledge and ballad as public pedagogy that the article later develops (Bourdieu, 1991; Giroux, 2004; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Williams, 1977).

Close Reading: Exhaustion as Rhetorical and Formal Method

A close reading of 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' shows how Laycock converts the corporeal realities of textile labour into the poem's very sonic and rhythmic fabric. The opening lament – 'aw ne'er wur so woven afore, mi back's welly brocken, mi fingers are sore' – places the reader inside a body under duress. The phonetic density of *welly brocken* (heavy bilabials and plosives) produces audible drag, a prosodic correlate of strain. Here, material depletion becomes phonology: consonantal clusters and truncated function words compact breath and tempo so that exhaustion is not only told but heard (Laycock, 1863). In this way the poem exemplifies the insight that

labouring class verse encodes tactile and affective pressures in its linguistic surface (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010).

The poem's dialectal lexicon deepens this rhetorical effect. Idioms such as 'thin as a lat', 'bloint as a bat', and 'up th' speawt' compress socio economic realities into vernacular formulae instantly legible to Laycock's intended audience. Dialect here is not ornament but what Freire and Macedo call a 'language of knowing', a discourse through which speakers 'read the world' from the vantage of lived experience (Freire & Macedo, 1987: 51). In terms of language ideology, this practice contests the symbolic capital attached to prestige codes and exposes how the standard language ideology naturalises inequality (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). In short, Lancashire speech functions as epistemic assertion, refusing translation into 'legitimate' English and thereby redistributing linguistic authority (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Milroy & Milroy, 2012).

Formally, the ballad matrix further organises exhaustion. An AABB rhyme scheme and isochronous beats mirror the loom's repetitive motions, but Laycock also distorts this regularity: micro slowings, weighty syntactic linkages and end-stopped lines enact disrupted rhythms of work with inferior fibre (Boos, 2001; Hepburn, 2000; Williams, 1977). The result is a fatigued metre whose felt heaviness is a structural analogue of bodily depletion – what Sroka terms the 'aesthetic labour of exhaustion' (Sroka, 2019). Read culturally, the poem embeds the temporality of factory life into rhythm, so that collapse of momentum reflects material crisis rather than technical limitation (Williams, 1977).

Repetition intensifies this patterning. Recurrent complaints, references to hunger, and iterated appeals to communal suffering build an additive structure that resembles the loom's turns rather than narrative progression. Each stanza is 'another day' of scarcity; iterativity renders stoppage as form.

This aligns with historical accounts of the Cotton Famine as a period of stasis, waiting and weariness, when time itself seemed to elongate under deprivation (Goodridge & Keegan, 2005; Hollingworth, 1977; Sroka, 2019). The poem thus formalises suspension, converting social time into prosodic time.

Tone is equally constitutive. Laycock juxtaposes indignation and dark humour – 'once "fat", now "as thin as a lat"' – so that laughter and lament coexist. Such tonal hybridity signals what Williams theorises as a 'structure of feeling' – an emergent, collectively sensed register that precedes explicit ideology (Williams, 1977). Humour here is not levity but survival technology, a way to voice injury without capitulating to despair; it registers the affective volatility of industrial life (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011; Williams, 1977).

Perhaps the most potent index of Laycock's method is Surat cotton itself. Coarse, knotted and inferior, it operates as metonym for imperial supply chains and local attrition. The speaker's struggle to 'root among this shurat' signifies both fibre friction and structural futility, binding colonial trade to the weaver's body (Goodridge & Keegan, 2005; Sanders, 2009). In cultural materialist terms, the text 'works on the dominant' by embedding ideological contradiction in material imagery – commodity defect mirrors human depletion (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985; Goodridge & Keegan, 2005; Williams, 1977).

The poem's enunciative stance also matters. First person deixis ('aw', 'mi') and direct address collapse distance between voice and audience. This is a dialogic lyric: the line becomes a turn in conversation rather than a solitary confession. Read with Bakhtin, the text's heteroglossia – vernacular spellings, idioms, and rhythm – redirects meaning away from elite norms towards collective experience (Bakhtin, 1981; Genette, 1980). Syntactic

parataxis, brief exclamations and audible caesural pauses emulate breath under labour, so that fatigue migrates from theme to technique: the body's rhythm becomes the poem's (Boos, 2001; Sroka, 2019).

Two local mechanisms are central to this migration. First, phonotexture: dense clusters (*welly brocken*) and vowel colouring generate acoustic weight that slows articulation, a sonic analogue of bodily drag (Laycock, 1863). Second, discourse patterning: anaphora and refrain convert complaint into collective chant, facilitating oral uptake – ballad as public pedagogy in noisy, time scarce environments (Boos, 2001; Hepburn, 2000; Williams, 1977). Predictability here is not naivety; it is infrastructural hospitality that lowers thresholds of participation.

The domestic register extends the poem's critique. Phrases like 'halliday clooas… up th' speawt' compress economic despair into a pawn shop idiom, relocating fatigue from mill to household and revealing the gendered distribution of labour and privation. The poem thus maps a continuum of exhaustion – from workshop to home – where care, hunger and shame circulate with wages (Hepburn, 2000; Hollingworth, 1977; Vicinus, 2024).

Finally, the poem's rhetorical vector arcs from singular to plural. The speaker's I shades into collective address, converting private affliction into shared utterance and modelling a pedagogy of conscientisation in Freire's sense: naming structural causes through one's own words (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Through the interplay of dialect, rhythm, repetition, tone and material image, Laycock assembles a rhetoric of exhaustion that operates simultaneously as theme, form and political analysis. The poem does not merely represent fatigue; it organises it, transforming vernacular language into a medium of cultural theory and resistance (Boos, 2001; Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985; Goodridge, 2010; Williams, 1977).

Read this way, the close reading underwrites the article's policy arc: if dialect can bear analytic load and if fatigue can be formal method, then dialect affirming assessment and curricula informed by labour poetics are not indulgences but epistemically warranted practices (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Williams, 1977).

Dialect as Critical Literacy

Interpreting Laycock's dialect as a mode of critical literacy requires understanding language not as a neutral conduit of meaning but as a terrain of political struggle. In Freirean terms, literacy becomes meaningful when individuals 'name the world' using the linguistic resources native to their experience (Freire & Macedo, 1987: 29). 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' offers a historically grounded instance of this principle: its consistent use of Lancashire dialect is an act of epistemic affirmation, a refusal to translate lived experience into prestige codes sanctioned by the dominant culture (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Williams, 1977).

Within the Victorian linguistic hierarchy, Standard English enjoyed symbolic authority and functioned as cultural capital, while non-standard varieties were routinely stigmatised (Bourdieu, 1991: 45; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Laycock's defiant commitment to non-standard spelling, idiom and phonology thus challenges the prestige economy of language; it elevates the vernacular to the status of cultural knowledge rather than conceding it as deficit (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). The point is not merely stylistic: dialect is the medium through which working class experience is theorised from within.

This becomes especially clear when we contrast 'mi back's welly brocken' with 'my back is almost broken'. The latter translates bodily pressure into a detached report; the former preserves immediacy, compressing pain into

phonology, breath and beat. What changes is not only sound but epistemic orientation: the dialectal utterance fuses experience and knowledge, exemplifying Freire's claim that language is inseparable from worldview (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Here dialect is constitutive rather than merely representational.

The communal intelligibility of dialect further transforms the poem into vernacular pedagogy. It requires no interpretive mediator for its intended audience – the workers who encountered it in broadsides, newspapers or oral recitations. Its idioms resonate with a shared repertoire, enabling the poem to circulate as public pedagogy beyond formal schooling (Giroux, 2004; Hepburn, 2000; Vincent, 1989). Predictable rhythms and familiar diction lower the threshold of participation; readers learn by recognition, meeting their own speech, fatigue and precarious dignity in poetic form (Goodridge, 2010; Hepburn, 2000; Vincent, 1989).

The implications for contemporary literacy debates are direct. If dialect in Laycock functions as a knowledge bearing discourse, then educational systems that subordinate non-standard speech to institutional norms reproduce the hierarchies his poem resists. Standardised assessment often conflates mastery of prestige forms with intellectual competence, penalising difference and masking symbolic violence as 'standards' (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Laycock provides a counterexample: linguistic legitimacy arises from experiential accuracy and communal intelligibility, not from conformism. This historical case underwrites arguments for dialect affirming pedagogies and critical language awareness in teacher education, where students' repertoires are treated as resources for inquiry, not obstacles (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Milroy & Milroy, 2012).

In this sense, Laycock's dialect becomes a model of Freirean critical literacy: it embodies the practice of naming the world from below, using the language

of the oppressed not as an object of shame but as a tool of analysis. By centring dialect as epistemic voice, the poem demonstrates how working-class speech can generate cultural theory, aligning literary practice with democratic pedagogical aims (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Williams, 1977).

Canon, Curriculum and Cultural Materialism

The implications of Laycock's rhetoric of exhaustion extend beyond literary analysis to the politics of curriculum formation. The Victorian canon has historically privileged texts by middle class, Standard English authors, marginalising working-class production and dialect traditions. This exclusion is not merely aesthetic preference; it reflects ideological assumptions about whose experiences count and which linguistic forms bear intellectual weight (Blair & Gorji, 2012; Bourdieu, 1991; Williams, 1977: 111). Reading Laycock alongside canonical authors exposes the narrowness of these boundaries and underscores the need for a more inclusive understanding of nineteenth century literary culture (Blair & Gorji, 2012; Maidment, 1987; Williams, 1977).

Laycock's poem challenges canonical hierarchies on several fronts. Its formal discipline counters stereotypes of working class writing as shapeless or crude; its dialectal richness refutes the assumption that only Standard English can sustain serious expression; its affective complexity – from indignation to humour to despair – rebuts the notion that labouring class texts merely document hardship rather than interpret it (Boos, 2001; Hollingworth, 1977; Maidment, 1987). These qualities position the poem as a sophisticated cultural artefact that embodies a 'structure of feeling' generated by the Cotton Famine (Williams, 1977: 132). Including such texts in curricula allows students to encounter affective histories of industrial modernity that canonical literature often renders invisible (Boos, 2001; Williams, 1977).

Pedagogically, teaching Laycock reshapes how literature is understood in educational settings. Rather than treating literature as the preserve of elite culture, educators can present it as a site where social, economic and linguistic forces intersect. This approach aligns with Freire's insistence that education should enable learners to perceive critically the connections between lived experience and broader structures of power (Freire, 1970: 36; Giroux, 2004; Williams, 1977). When students read Laycock, they confront industrial exploitation in the language that arises from working class life; they see how macrostructures – war, trade, empire, labour regimes – are inscribed in the microstructures of diction, rhythm and tone (Goodridge, 2010; Williams, 1977).

A curriculum that incorporates labour poetics also challenges dominant language ideologies. By foregrounding dialect as a legitimate vehicle of knowledge, such curricula contest the institutional privileging of Standard English and affirm the repertoires many students bring to class. The equity stakes are non-trivial: recognising students' speech as worthy of academic attention cultivates agency and increases participation, whereas deficit framings do the opposite (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Laycock's poem thus becomes both object of study and pedagogical tool for dismantling linguistic hierarchies.

Crucially, cultural materialism reminds us that expanding the curriculum is not neutral. Inclusion is a political intervention in the distribution of cultural capital, a reallocation of value across texts, genres and voices (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985; Williams, 1977). Integrating working class texts not only realigns the canon; it also alters the symbolic economy of language, legitimising dialect as a carrier of analysis and critique (Blair & Gorji, 2012; Bourdieu, 1991). In this light, Laycock's rhetoric of exhaustion is more than an interpretive lens; it is a catalyst for broader conversations about class,

labour, linguistic justice and the politics of knowledge in educational institutions (Giroux, 2004; Williams, 1977).

In sum, situating Laycock within the curriculum reconfigures both literary history and educational practice. It demonstrates that texts forged in contexts of industrial deprivation can serve as democratic pedagogies – teaching readers to connect language with labour, form with power, and aesthetic practice with policy questions about assessment and inclusion (Boos, 2001; Freire, 1970; Williams, 1977). This is precisely where cultural materialism meets critical pedagogy: at the point where canon revision becomes a practice of linguistic and educational justice (Blair & Gorji, 2012; Bourdieu, 1991; Giroux, 2004).

Policy Implications

The rhetorical and formal strategies that shape 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' have implications that reach beyond Victorian literary analysis into the terrain of contemporary educational policy. Because the poem enacts dialect, embodiment and exhaustion as forms of knowledge, the orientations proposed here follow as direct extensions of its internal logic rather than as external extrapolations. In effect, Laycock's poetics articulate a theory of language and power that converges with debates in critical pedagogy and language ideology scholarship: 'legitimate language' is historically produced and hierarchically enforced, while literacy acquires emancipatory force when learners name their world in their own words (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 2004; Milroy & Milroy, 2012).

At the level of institutional reproduction, 'legitimate language' is sustained less through explicit bans on dialect than through routinised policy instruments that translate standard language ideology into measurable compliance. These include (i) high-stakes examination specifications and

mark schemes that conflate clarity with Standard English, (ii) assessment rubrics that weight surface correctness over rhetorical effectiveness, (iii) teacher-facing marking guidance and moderation protocols that normalise 'correction' as fairness, (iv) curriculum specifications and attainment descriptors that treat non-standard forms as deficits to be remediated, and (v) school accountability metrics that incentivise error-counting and rapid standardisation. In Bourdieusian terms, these mechanisms constitute a linguistic market: they distribute symbolic capital by rewarding proximity to the prestige code and by converting dialect difference into institutional risk (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). The policy question, therefore, is not whether dialect should be 'allowed' in principle, but how assessment and accountability infrastructures can be redesigned so that epistemic performance, audience design, and meaning-making become the standardised object of evaluation rather than surface uniformity.

A first implication concerns assessment. Conventional regimes frequently presuppose that mastery of Standard English is the primary index of literacy, thereby conflating linguistic conformity with intellectual competence and reproducing the symbolic violence of 'legitimate language' (Bourdieu, 1991: 45; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Yet Laycock's text exhibits communicative clarity and conceptual precision entirely through dialect. The visceral compression of 'mi back's welly brocken' in the opening complaint – paired with the more distanced Standard English paraphrase 'my back is almost broken' – shows how dialect retains immediacy and embodied pressure (Laycock, 1863). Likewise, idioms such as 'thin as a lat' and 'up th' speawt' condense nutritional depletion and pawn shop economics in compact, intelligible phrases (Laycock, 1863). An aligned assessment framework therefore recalibrates emphasis from prescriptive correctness to epistemic performance – how effectively students mobilise repertoire to convey

meaning, stance and audience design. In practice this means rubrics that weight purpose, evidence and argumentative coherence; metalinguistic notes where writers justify code meshing choices (e.g., why ‘mi back’s welly brocken’ communicates affect more precisely than a standardised rewrite); and moderation protocols that distinguish difference from error (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Milroy & Milroy, 2012).

A second implication concerns curriculum design. Integrating labour poetics enables students to track how macro structures – imperial trade, wartime economies, industrial capitalism – are inscribed in micro structures of diction, rhythm and tone. Laycock’s line ‘aw ne’er wur so woven afore’ renders industrial depletion audible, while the repeated struggle to ‘root among this shurat’ links the material friction of inferior fibre to global commodity chains (Laycock, 1863). Teaching the poem as cultural practice rather than autonomous artefact invites sequences that move from close listening (how fatigue becomes sound) to historical context (the Lancashire Cotton Famine’s temporality of waiting and want) and to present analogues (precarious labour, burnout, supply chain exhaustion). The idiomatic economy of ‘up th’ speawt’ (pawned) supports classroom discussion of domestic precarity, mapping the poem’s movement from mill to household, while the pluralising turn of the closing appeal – ‘yo … help yo’re poor brothers an’ sisters to live’ – can anchor oracy tasks that stage the poem’s shift from I to we as a lesson in public pedagogy (Giroux, 2004; Goodridge & Keegan, 2005; Hollingworth, 1977; Williams, 1977).

A third implication lies in teacher education. Educators often work within institutions that reproduce linguistic hierarchies by treating Standard English as the sole academic register (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Laycock’s dialectal surface supplies historical counter evidence: phrases like ‘bloint as a bat’ (blind as a bat) and ‘thin as a lat’ are not ornamental; they

are knowledge bearing formulations that integrate bodily state, resource scarcity and cultural memory (Laycock, 1863). Teacher education programmes should therefore develop critical language awareness as professional competence – interrogating standard language ideology; practising dialect sensitive close reading; designing dialect affirming rubrics; and rehearsing dialogic facilitation that treats vernacular expression (e.g., 'mi back's welly brocken') as analytically productive, not remedial (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Milroy & Milroy, 2012).

A fourth implication treats exhaustion itself as a pedagogical and policy lens. In Laycock's poem, depletion is not private failure but socially produced condition, inscribed in rhythm and lexis. The tired tempo of the ballad, the phonotexture of 'welly brocken', the self ironising contrast 'I used to be fat … now as thin as a lat', and the reiterated need to 'root among this shurat' formalise what contemporary fatigue studies would call the temporal drag of deprivation (Ahmed, 2004; Crary, 2013; Laycock, 1863; Schaffner, 2016; Williams, 1977). Policy translation follows: auditing practices that intensify fatigue (e.g., punitive language policing); redesigning timelines to privilege substantive learning over error counting; embedding low stakes, oracy rich formats (choral recitation of key lines such as 'aw ne'er wur so woven afore' to discuss how sound carries meaning); and reframing improvement metrics to track voice, participation and interpretive acuity alongside attainment (Giroux, 2004; Williams, 1977).

To move from principle to practice without tokenism, implementation needs joined up design and evaluation. Rubrics should explicitly recognise argument, warrant, audience fit and metalinguistic reflection while distinguishing error from difference (Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Text sequences can pair Laycock with canonical Victorian

prose/poetry to expose how different registers narrate the same conjuncture, and classroom artefacts (e.g., annotated glosses of 'up th' speawt', reader's notes on why 'mi back's welly brocken' is retained) can evidence learning. Indicators of success – participation in oracy tasks, student self-efficacy with dialectal writing, frequency of reasoned code meshing, moderation agreement across assessors, and growth in critical consciousness – keep equity in view and allow iterative refinement (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2004). Addressing recurrent objections is part of this work: the claim that dialect affirming assessment undermines 'standards' mistakes a shift in what is standardised (from surface uniformity to standards of thought) for a relaxation of rigour; the worry that dialect disadvantages out group readers is mitigated by metalinguistic framing – glosses for items like 'bloint', 'lat', or 'speawt', and brief language memos that guide code shifts for audience without erasing voice (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Goodridge, 2010; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Williams, 1977).

Taken together, these implications position 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' not as archival curiosity but as a pedagogical resource for linguistic justice and democratic agency. By aligning assessment, curriculum and teacher education with the poem's vernacular epistemology – its insistence that 'aw ne'er wur so woven afore', that the body speaks as knowledge, that survival is voiced in 'mi back's welly brocken' and 'up th' speawt' – educational practice can move from policing language to recognising knowledge, enacting in policy what Laycock's poetics already theorise (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 2004; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Williams, 1977; Laycock, 1863).

Discussion: The Contribution of a Rhetoric of Exhaustion

The central contribution of this article is to reframe exhaustion as a rhetorical-formal category within nineteenth century working class poetics.

Where scholarship has richly documented themes of deprivation, solidarity and protest (Maidment, 1987; Sanders, 2009; Thompson, 1963), it has less often specified the mechanisms by which lived industrial fatigue is encoded in form. Our reading demonstrates that, in Laycock, exhaustion operates across syntax, prosody, diction and tone, so that fatigue functions as a method rather than a mere topic. This reconceptualisation extends labour poetics work by grounding claims about 'work in verse' in the minute organisation of language – metrical drag, iterative phrasing, consonantal density and tonal hybridity – thereby complementing accounts that emphasise social context or authorial milieu (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010; Sroka, 2019). It also aligns with Williams's insight that literary forms register emergent 'structures of feeling', condensing collective pressures into patterned expression (Williams, 1977).

A second contribution concerns the redefinition of dialect as epistemic voice. The argument here is not that Lancashire speech supplies colour or authenticity; it is that dialect carries analysis. Laycock's diction is a knowledge bearing discourse through which industrial modernity is named from below, in direct tension with the prestige economy of 'legitimate language' (Bourdieu, 1991). This position resonates with Freire's pedagogy, where critical literacy begins from learners' own words and worlds (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987), and with sociolinguistic critiques that expose the naturalisation of standard language ideology (Milroy & Milroy, 2012). By reading dialect as epistemic, we move beyond toleration or 'representation' toward recognising conceptual force in working class repertoires.

Third, the comparative frame sharpens Laycock's distinctiveness. Set alongside Ellen Johnston, Ernest Jones and Ben Brierley, his poem crystallises a hybrid modality: it braids testimonial immediacy, agitational

address and comic realist dialect while slowing prosody under crisis so that fatigue becomes a structuring agent (Hollingworth, 1977; Klaus, 1998; Maidment, 1987; Sanders, 2009; Vicinus, 2024). Rather than treating these writers as a loose constellation, the comparison specifies modal contrasts – gendered lyric witness, Chartist chant, comic dialect realism – against which Laycock's rhetoric of exhaustion is legible. In Williams's terms, exhaustion emerges here as a historically situated structure of feeling; the poem's method is the crisis's tempo (Williams, 1977).

Fourth, the article bridges literary analysis and educational politics. If dialect is epistemic and exhaustion formal, then texts like Laycock's supply a historical warrant for language justice curricula, dialect affirming assessment and teacher education grounded in critical language awareness (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 2004; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Williams, 1977). The poem's ballad orality and vernacular density exemplify public pedagogy: infrastructures that lower participation thresholds while sustaining conceptual content. This reading supports policy relevant claims without instrumentalising the poem; the institutional implications are immanent to its form.

Finally, the analysis situates Laycock within wider debates in affect and fatigue studies. By showing how temporal drag – waiting, repetition, stoppage – migrates from labour to line, from body to prosody, we connect Victorian worker poetics to modern analytics of depletion (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011; Crary, 2013; Schaffner, 2016; Sharma, 2014). Such alignment does not anachronistically translate the poem into contemporary idioms; it identifies an early textualisation of exhaustion as form, anticipating later theorisation. Methodologically, this suggests avenues for corpus level prosodic study of Cotton Famine verse, comparative work across regions and trades, and classroom research on dialect affirming assessment – each

testing the portability of 'rhetoric of exhaustion' beyond a single text (Blair & Gorji, 2012; Goodridge & Keegan, 2005).

In sum, we claim originality along four axes: (i) defining exhaustion as method in labour poetics; (ii) arguing for dialect as epistemic voice against standardising ideologies; (iii) specifying a comparative synthesis that anchors Laycock's distinctiveness; and (iv) translating formal insights into policy relevant propositions for curriculum, assessment and teacher education. Together, these axes relocate working class poetry from the periphery of Victorian studies to a theoretical centre where questions of labour, language and power converge (Boos, 2001; Goodridge, 2010; Sroka, 2019; Williams, 1977).

Conclusion: Exhaustion as Cultural Method and Pedagogical Resource

This article has argued that Samuel Laycock's 'Th' Shurat Weaver's Song' demonstrates how nineteenth century working class verse reorganises lived hardship into aesthetic device and political claim. Across the reading, exhaustion appears not merely as content but as procedure: repetition, rhythmic drag, dialectal density and tonal hybridity comprise a poetics of depletion that renders fatigue audible and thinkable as social knowledge (Boos, 2001; Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985; Williams, 1977). Read within a compact comparative field, Laycock emerges as a poet of collective intimacy, where ballad predictability and vernacular immediacy convert testimony into shared critique, memory and address (Hollingworth, 1977; Sanders, 2009; Vicinus, 2024; Williams, 1977).

Conceptually, the argument links Laycock's practice to affective and temporal analyses of modern depletion. If, as affect theory suggests, exhaustion binds communities in shared structures of feeling, then Laycock's ballad models how formal patterning distributes affect as public

pedagogy (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011; Williams, 1977). Fatigue studies further clarify how industrial temporality – elongated shifts, stoppages, precarious waiting – reappears as prosodic time (Crary, 2013; Schaffner, 2016; Sharma, 2014). From a cultural materialist perspective, the poem 'works on the dominant' by circulating vernacular critique in demotic metres, placing form at the centre of ideology critique (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985; Williams, 1977).

For critical education policy, the consequences are direct. Laycock's commitment to dialect models a counter hegemonic literacy consistent with Freirean principles: learning that begins from people's own words, not from prestige norms (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Recognising dialect as epistemic resource reframes language difference as linguistic justice, with implications for curriculum design, assessment criteria and teacher education (Bourdieu, 1991; Giroux, 2004; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). The ballad's isochronous lines, refrain and orality operate as participatory infrastructures that lower thresholds of entry and sustain collective interpretation; they can be redeployed in classrooms as problem posing practices that connect lived experience to structural analysis (Freire, 1970; Williams, 1977).

A final horizon concerns ecopedagogy and the shared grammars of depletion. We do not claim that Laycock is an 'ecopoet' in any strict contemporary sense, nor that the poem articulates a fully formed ecological discourse. Rather, the ecopedagogical dimension is best understood as a forward-looking extension of the article's core analytic – exhaustion as method. The poem's material insistence on Surat cotton – cheap, defective fibre routed through imperial supply chains – renders visible how depletion is distributed across bodies, materials, and systems of production. In this limited but precise sense, the 'shurat' problem is not only physiological and classed; it is also materially mediated, shaped by commodity infrastructures

that displace costs onto precarious workers and, by implication, onto the landscapes and ecologies that sustain extraction, transport, and circulation. Read this way, Surat cotton functions as a material hinge that allows teaching and curriculum design to connect labour exhaustion to eco-social entanglements without anachronistically importing present-day categories into the nineteenth-century text (Goodridge & Keegan, 2005; Pollard, 2025). The methodological payoff is that the same formal attentiveness that makes exhaustion audible in dialect, rhythm, and repetition can also train students to ‘read’ supply chains as ethical and narrative structures – linking linguistic justice, class analysis, and environmental responsibility within an integrated critical literacy curriculum.

We acknowledge limits as openings for further inquiry. Our focus on a single poem was methodologically deliberate; future research should (i) extend close form analysis across a wider Cotton Famine corpus; (ii) test comparative claims across regions and trades; and (iii) pilot classroom studies on dialect affirming assessment and dialogic pedagogy, tracking impacts on participation, voice and critical consciousness (Blair & Gorji, 2012; Goodridge & Keegan, 2005).

If Laycock’s poem teaches anything beyond its moment, it is that form is already social practice. By turning exhaustion into pattern and dialect into analysis, it renders visible how working-class communities theorise their world. That is why the poem endures as both aesthetic artefact and pedagogical resource, a nineteenth century text that speaks with clarity to contemporary struggles over language, equity and democratic education (Bourdieu, 1991; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 2004; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Williams, 1977).

Notes

[1] The choice of Ellen Johnston, Ernest Jones, and Ben Brierley is not incidental but methodological. Each represents a distinct pole within nineteenth-century worker-poetry – Johnston crystallizing the gendered autobiographical lyric, Jones embodying the openly agitational Chartist register, and Brierley cultivating the dialectal-popular mode of comic realism. Together they map the primary coordinates of voice, form, and political function against which Laycock's poetics can be read. The comparison thus defines a triangulated field rather than offering illustrative examples, clarifying Laycock's distinct synthesis of authenticity, inclusivity, and what we term a *rhetoric of exhaustion*.

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