

‘A Lazy Lout’. Joe Corrie and the Heroism of Labour

By Gavin Bowd



Montage of Joe Corrie's portrait with pitheads and factories in the background, undated, NLS, MSS.26560, reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland.

The miner, like the metal-worker, has occupied a central place in the labour movement's identity, not simply because of their, now much-diminished, numerical and economic importance, but also for the symbolic resonance of their work. The coal miner is the Promethean character par excellence. He tears from the entrails of the earth what was known in France as 'the bread of industry'. Indeed, the miner was mythologised in the course of the 19th century, notably in Jules Verne's *The Child of the Cavern, or Strange Doings Underground*, with its Coal-City of Aberfoyle. In France, the miner has been closely associated with the coalfield of the Nord and Pas-de-Calais, which Zola transforms into epic in his novel *Germinal*. This work is key in terms of representations of the miners, notably in political terms, with the presence of characters representing socialism (Étienne), reformism (Rasseneur) and anarchism (Souvarine). The cult of mines and miners is not limited to France. In Czech Republic, coal country par excellence, there still stands a communist-era statue bearing the inscription: 'I am a miner. Who is better than me?'

The miner also represents a form of paternalist-cum-totalitarian social organisation (the tied cottages, the coal company management accompanying you from cradle to grave); values of solidarity, fraternity and struggle; the miners as wretched of the earth. It is therefore not surprising that the miner occupied a special place in the identity of the French Communist Party. After all, their revered general secretary, Maurice Thorez, *Son of the People* according to the title of his autobiography, was a miner from the north. His political rise illustrated the possibility for social advancement of the miner thanks to communism. Indeed, Thorez's home village would become a Mecca for French communists before and after the Second World War.

In his article on the miner and French communist identity, Marc Lazar insists on the ambivalent or, more appropriately, dialectical nature of the mine. On the one hand, the coalfield is what poet Louis Aragon called 'enfer-les-mines' (Hellmines Province?). There was no escaping the miserable, degrading and dangerous nature of the work performed underground. But these men who descended into the bowels of the earth acted on the material world, producing coal that would aid post-war

reconstruction and, in an inevitable radiant future, a socialist society. In 1951, André Fougeron's painting *The Judges* does not hide the ravages of silicosis and other work injuries, but even here the victims look back at the viewer in a defiant and determined manner. One miner may be blind, but he still clenches his last remaining fist. With Fougeron's composition, we are far from Zola's pity for the Morlock-like miners of *Germinal* slaving underground.

Thus, as leader of France's most popular political force, the French Communist Party, and minister in the first post-war government, Thorez launched a 'battle for coal' in which miners would strive to increase exponentially their productivity, a sort of Gallic Stakhanovism (a historical echo must be heard here: during the Second World War, the communist miners of West Fife, led by Abe Moffat, combatted 'nationalist' and 'trotskyist' sabotage of the war effort). In an interview given in 1946, Thorez declared: 'What grandeur in this ferocious struggle against matter, in this perpetual hand-to hand combat where man, crouching or often lying down, in all combat positions, tears coal from the rock's grasp' ^[1] . In autumn 1948, with the communists expelled from government and the Cold War world now divided into two hostile camps, a violent and doomed strike engulfed the French coalfields.

It was at this time that the Franco-Breton bard Guillevic wrote a poem, 'The Miners', which illustrates poetically this communist view of the miner as Promethean hero. Guillevic's miners are plunged into the object, lost in the darkness of matter. They 'are deep down/Hewing the rock/Which has the memory of fire'. But the miners do not want to revive this memory. Instead, they seek to provoke in this rock another, future and collective, flame:

Through coal they see into the future
And know clearly
That to hew again and again
Into the magma
Is to attract the day
When their brothers' eyes
Will be deep with joy
Like gentian is blue. ^[2]

Thus, the ancient central fire in the earth is replaced by a central day to come, a day lit up in matter by the action of and for the happiness of men.

Guillevic was of modest origin but worked at this time as a high-ranking civil servant. He did not go down a mine, as far as we know, and this poem can be seen rather as another illustration of Guillevic's obsession with the four elements, and earth in particular, as demonstrated in Gaston Bachelard's analysis of his poetics. The work of Joe Corrie fits badly alongside the Promethean imaginary outlined above.

In Corrie's play *Hewers of Coal*, the mine could be a school in solidarity and altruism: The experience of being entombed exposes the petit-bourgeois acquisitiveness of pit handyman Peter and makes Bob disgusted with his own function as a gaffer. But, at the end, the search party do not seem to hear the characters as they sing the 'Skye Boat Song' in voices that, like the lamp light, are ever-weakening then extinguished.

'The Image o' God' would not have pleased Stalinist human resources:

Crawlin' about like a snail in the mud,
Covered wi' clammy blae,
ME, made after the image o' God –
Jings! But it's laughable, tae.

Howkin' awa' neath a mountain o'stane,
Gaspin' for want o' air,
The sweat makin' streams doon my bare back-bane
And my knees a' hauckit and sair. ^[3]

This negative view of the mine and the miner's fate continues in 'Miners' Wives':

We have borne good sons to broken men,
Nurtured them on our hungry breast,
And given them to our master when
Their day of life was at its best.
(*I OG, p.10*)

In an echo of the doomed pit ponies Bataille and Trompette in Zola's *Germinal*, we have 'Wee Danny':

We Danny's deid and buried in the bing;

.....

Na, Danny couldna weel forget the days
When winds blew fresh frae aff the Lomond hills,
And blackies woke the echoes wi' their trills,
And grass grew sweet and green amang the braes.

....

But, Danny, you ha'e broke your chains at last,
You'll hear nae mair the curse, nor feel the pain
O' savage strength. A martyr ye lie slain
To Freedom's cause. A Christ o' different cast.
(*IOG*, pp. 12-13)

'Miners at Morning' also echoes the *Germinal* characters' daily trudge to the great maw of Le Voreux (although a significant contrast in Corrie is the absence of female workers down the pit):

Silence and darkness of a winter morning,
Only a few yellow blobs seen through the mist of steam,
The lights of the pit.
Then suddenly the hooter sounds its blatant blast,
Tearing the air and the silence to shreds.
Our master's day has begun.
Loud and long it screams,
Like some fiend from the guts of Hell.

.....

And for five minutes a thousand mouths keep time
At Hunger's command.
Then five hundred doors open,
And the trudging of two thousand feet is heard,

On through the blackness,
Into the blackness,
The march of the living dead.
(*I OG, p. 21*)

It is life above ground and away from industry (as well as the temptations of a move to the big city or emigration to Canada) which Corrie celebrates, as in 'The Miner Lover':

Here in the guts of the earth,
In my father's tomb,
In the forests of aeons past,
In the gas and the gloom;
Naked and blind with sweat
I strive and I strain,
Like a beast in the famine year,
Or a blood Cain.

But, home, I will wash me clean,
And over the hill,
To the glen of the fair primrose
And the daffodil;
And there I will sing of my Love
With a tenderness
That only a god can feel –
Lord God, what a mess!
(*I OG, p. 23*)

He therefore defends the bucolic Ploughman whom his fellow inhabitants mock:

'A walking cabbage!' But this month of May
When smart folk sit in offices and read
The coming of the morrow lest their bread
Be cut away from them, sit bent and grey,
My ploughman treads the heath with youthful pride,
And could not be unhappy if he tried.
(*I OG, p. 35*)

The Poet would also follow the bohemian road the fiddler went:

For the road the fiddler went
Is the moonlit road to peace,
Away from the master's hold,
From his sorrow and disease.

But I only stand and hear,
And clench my hands till they bleed.
Oh! Why should we live on bread,
And why should we live in need?
(*IOG, p. 59*)

And so, Corrie logically concludes the collection with 'A Lazy Lout':

Give me a summer day
And a chestnut tree
To shield the naked rays
Of the sun from me.

And let me lie down there
On a couch of grass,
With a window in the tree
Where white clouds pass.

That is the life for me,
The life for me!
A lazy lout?
Thanks to the powers that be.
(*IOG, p. 61*)

It can be concluded from this that Corrie's work exploits the dramatic rather than poetic potential of the mine. He also illustrates the peculiar nature of mining: a rural industry where the consolation of the pastoral is never far from the darkness of modernity.

Joe Corrie's miner is therefore far from the heroism of labour celebrated by the French communists. But his work attracts comparison with francophone contemporary 'miner' and 'minor' writers. In 1933, in the review *Prolétariat*,

Henri Poulaille, champion of a 'proletarian literature' made by the people for the people, cites Joe Corrie alongside the Belgians Jean-Louis Vandermaesen, Louis Gerin and Constant Malva and the Frenchman Jules Mousseron. For Poulaille, these writers who had worked in the subterranean hell they evoke, bring an authenticity that Zola drowned with lyricism in *Germinal* ^[4] .

We will therefore conclude with some possible veins of comparative inquiry that can be hewed further. Jules Mousseron (1868-1943) was born and died in the village of Denain, in the Nord, and worked for a while down the pit at Anzin, which served as the basis for Zola's *Germinal*. Mousseron published a dozen collections of poetry, but is best known for his humorous tales of Cafougnette, an anti-hero who always manages to get entangled in misadventures. The very titles of Mousseron's collections of poetry show a constant attachment to his home region, from *Flowers from below* (1897) to *The Black Ferns* (1926) to *In Our Coal Mines* (1940). Perhaps this real experience of mining, as well as Mousseron's manipulation of humour, promise similarities and differences between the work of these Scottish and French miners turned writers. There is also the issue of the language chosen by Corrie and Mousseron. Mousseron's discourse is directed towards the interior of the community, which is marked above all by his linguistic choice of *rouchi*, a Valenciennes version of Picard patois. Mousseron as poet has no intention of breaking out of this circle and aims essentially to strengthen the ties that bind this community by celebrating common values or moments. His main technique is creating complicity, a shared consensus, which explains why the residual use of his work today is soaked in nostalgia. This can be contrasted with the linguistic variety of Corrie, which shows him both as standard-bearer of a mining community and as ambitious writer aiming for a Britain-wide audience. Corrie's relative failure contrasts with Mousseron's peculiar success: the Picard *diseur* (story-teller) will work down the pits until 1926, retiring at the age of 58, but also receives the prestigious Palmes academiques in 1904, then is made chevalier de la Legion d'honneur in 1936, year of the triumph of the Popular Front.

However, Mousseron was not a politically engaged miner-poet. Corrie seems closer to two of the Belgian writers cited by Poulaille. Louis Gerin (1914-1980), author of such works as *A Woman in the Mine* (1931) and *1400 Beneath*

Ground (1943), became associated with the militant journal *Syndicats*. The case of Constant Malva (1903-1969), also a miner from the Borinage coalfield in Wallonia, is more complex. In his oeuvre, he evoked the misery of the ‘underground heroes’ he worked alongside. At the same time, he was active in the Communist Party then, after the expulsion of Trotskyists, the Revolutionary Socialist Party. He was also associated with the review *Ruptures*, which brought together Surrealists of the Hainault region. In 1940, finally disgusted with mining, Malva chose to write for Nazi collaborationist journals. He ended the Second World War in disgrace and, ironically, died from silicosis contracted underground.

We propose to make a comparative study of these fascinating writers, which would explore their portrayals of mining and the mining communities and confront them with works by writers above ground. We would also situate them in their literary and political fields and examine how their work was received by, for example, proponents of proletarian literature or socialist realism, as well as by the self-proclaimed vanguards of the working class.

[1] Quoted in Marc Lazar ‘Le mineur de fond : un exemple de l’identité du PCF’, *Revue française de science politique*, 2 (1985), pp. 195-196.

[2] Guillevic, *Gagner* (Paris, 1949), p. 51. For a deeper comparative analysis, see <https://www.wikipoemes.com/poemes/guillevic-sphere/guillevic-analyse2141971612.php> [19 October 2018].

[3] Joe Corrie, *The Image o’ God and other poems* (Edinburgh, 1927), p. 9. Abbreviation for further references in text: *I.O.G.*

[4] Henri Poulaille, ‘Les mineurs parlent’, *Prolétariat*, 1 (July 1933).