

# Poetry as Social Justice in *The English Review*

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### Background and Research Question

#### *The English Review* and Social Issues

**Problem:** "It is astonishing how little literature has to show of the life of the poor" (Hueffer 162)

**Solution:** "principal aim of *The English Review*...to aid in the comprehension of one kind of mind by another" (163)

**Research Question:** How did the poetry published in some of the first issues of *The English Review* seek to address class inequality and nonrepresentation?

**Thesis:** The July and August 1909 issues published poetry, namely Thomas Burke's "The Joy of Labour" and W. W. Gibson's "Daily Bread," that directly addressed the living and working conditions of the lower working class, bringing the attention of the middle and upper educated class to these harsh realities.

### Research Methodology

#### Ethnographic Textual Analysis

- Conducted a comparative literature analysis through creating annotated bibliographies of the July and August 1909 issues of *The English Review*
- "The Joy of Labour" (July 1909) and "Daily Bread" (August 1909) were the starting point
- Studied the details of the lower working class lives in English cities in the early 1900s as illustrated through the poems

### Conclusions and Future Work

Both Gibson and Burke, as well as several other authors published in the beginning issues of *The English Review*, are excellent examples of poets who utilized their art and platform to speak for those who could not speak for themselves. They sought to understand the poverty of their time and used their skill as writers to document what they saw in the world so others could see it as well. Engaging in such a Humanities research project is significant because of how it teaches us to observe a moment from the past that is distinctly human and to adapt it to the present day for the benefit of modern society, modeling a tradition of art as a force for social change for the poor and voiceless.

Future work in this research area would involve study of a wider range of issues of *The English Review*, particularly over its multiple decades of existence and its change in editorial leadership, to evaluate whether addressing social issue through literature grew or faded from importance to contributors of the *Review* as the decades went on.

### Works Cited

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Scan the QR codes for the July 1909 (left) and the August 1909 (right) issues of *The English Review*



### THE JOY OF LABOUR

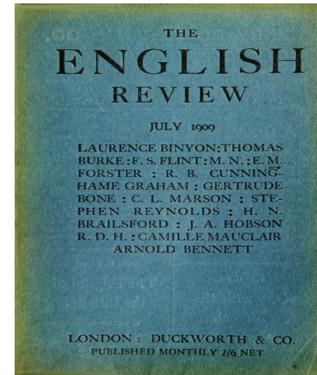
By Thomas Burke (1909)

(It was stated that prisoner's earnings were fifteen shillings a week. He had a wife and two children)

THEY caught him lifting purses,  
And they took him to the beak.  
They said he was in reg'lar work  
At fifteen bob a week.

It is a shocking thing to see  
A man become a thief, when he  
Is working reg'lar every day at **fifteen bob a week.**

"bob" = shillings  
Today = \$90/week for a family of four



"Modernist Journals: English Review. Vol. 2, No. 8." *The English Review*, Vol. 2, No. 8. *Modernist Journals Project*, modjourn.org/issue/bdr454348/.

Oh!  
Fifteen bob a week!  
Fifteen bob a week!  
It's **beer and skittles** keeping kids on fifteen bob a week!

"Fun, easy times"  
Mocking ignorant social attitudes

He said **the kids were poorly,**  
**And the roof let in the rain.**

The doctor said that strengthening food  
Would pull them round again.  
The parson called, and he confessed  
That things were ordered for the best;  
He hoped the chap was thankful for his fifteen bob a week.

Can't afford better housing

Bad living conditions = sick children

Oh!  
Fifteen bob a week!  
Fifteen bob a week!  
It's blazing fun to feed the kids on fifteen bob a week!

So now he's **tearing oakum,**  
And the wife has gone and died.  
The local House was angered  
At her very foolish pride.  
They took the kids and labelled them  
As—**Pauper Children N and M**  
**Of Convict X,** who used to earn his fifteen bob a week.

Unraveling rope for hemp – prisoner's punishment

No name = dehumanizing

Oh!  
Fifteen bob a week!  
Fifteen bob a week!  
Oh, isn't life a bleeding sport on fifteen bob a week!

#### Thomas Burke, "The Joy of Labour"

- Uses sarcasm to drive home his point
- Calls out the casual and ignorant attitudes of the general population towards the poor
- Answers Hueffer's question of what do the middle and upper classes know of the lives of the poor (161)

### DAILY BREAD

By Wilfrid Wilson Gibson (1909)

Scene: **A garret in the slums, furnished only with a bed.** It is nearly midnight; but Adah Robson, with hat and jacket on, and an old carpet-bag by her side, sits on an empty box by the window, in the light reflected from the lamp in the court below. Presently, a step is heard on the stairs; the door opens, and Isaac Oxley enters.

Why did you never come for me?  
You said you would,  
When you had found...  
Isaac. When I had found a home for you.  
But, I have found no home.  
Adah. Yet this...  
Isaac. This is no home for you-  
This empty **garret.**

**But you can never live here-  
Here, in this reeking hell.**

And I-  
How could I bear to see you starve...  
Adah. To see me starve!  
Why should I starve?  
For I am strong ;  
And I can work.

**I, too, was strong;  
And I could work:  
And yet,  
I starve.**

- A garret refers to the unfinished rough living spaces in London where the working class lived.
- Garrets were extremely terrible places to live and were extremely impoverished.
- Gibson describes the demoralizing nature of industrial life in England for the poor workers as working in the factories chipped away at the soul of a person.



"Slum Housing in Providence Place, London, 1909." *The British Library*, London Metropolitan Archives, www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/slums.

#### Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, "Daily Bread"

- "Today, when we need more than ever before to emphasize the brotherhood of man and the dignity of earnest effort in all kinds of true labor, such books as...*Daily Bread* are especially valuable" (Dilla 237)
- "Injuries, illness, death, and also the warping of mind or distortion of character caused by the struggle for daily bread are all shown with a sincere truthfulness, which does not neglect to show also individual faults and weaknesses not peculiar to the poor" (Dilla 45)