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Andrea Hasenbank

Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta

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Giving Account: Robert Blincoe and the Consequences of Modernity

Andrea Hasenbank
Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta

...as to its truth, [the confirmation] of Blincoe himself places the statement beyond all doubt. It is now a standard work, to which future ages may refer, as to a specimen of the christian character of some of the people of England, at the commencement of the nineteenth century.
– Richard Carlile
The Lion, April 5, 1828

In denouncing the “innocent and childlike fantasies” of philosophy as he saw it, Marx agitated for a revolutionary assessment of society based on “real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity” (103, 107). This paper takes up Marx’s challenge by considering the collision between traditional structures of labor performed by children with the modern factory system through the account of Robert Blincoe, a parish factory apprentice in the early nineteenth century. Blincoe survived factory conditions, eventually took up his own business and later recounted his experience in a biography authored by a Radical journalist and campaigner for factory reform, giving exceptional impact to his life story. The conditions by which the Memoir of Robert Blincoe was produced, circulated, responded to, and taken up in public discourse elucidates the transformations and consequences of modernity as described by Anthony Giddens; I will pursue their interaction in the text of the Memoir by critically developing the idea of the account. The account constructs a distinctly individualist understanding of human experience, resonating with the considerations of modernity as it reaches into the realms of economics, law, religion, and story. This paper considers the ways in which one working class individual’s account of his childhood intersects with networks of print, labor practices, legal discourse, political institutions, and the experiences of other working class people. In this, the revolutionary potential of such an account must be set against a public discourse of order and reform. Robert Blincoe’s account, in both its own content and
the life of the text in networks of communication and exchange, uniquely animates some of the key consequences of modernity as they emerge in this period.

The Life of the Text

The Memoir of Robert Blincoe is a pamphlet with an unusually well-documented history. It describes the experiences of Blincoe, born in 1792 in the parish of St. Pancras, London; from the age of seven he was apprenticed to Lowdham Mill, a textile mill near Nottingham, and later was removed to Litton Mill in Derbyshire (ODNB; Brown, 1832 8). Through the successive incarnations of the text, from oral history, to serial print, to political pamphlet, to industrial history, and finally as working-class autobiography, the Memoir highlights key networks of publication, circulation, and reception operating in the highly political debates surrounding the English industrial labor force and the position of apprentice children at the beginning of the nineteenth century. A brief assessment of the Memoir's history of print and response will be the foundation for the following discussion of this political-legal conjuncture, as well as issues of the verifiable account and the autobiographical voice as they relate to emerging modernity. In this, I am less interested in Blincoe's self-representation, and more interested in the networks into which the textual account is embedded and reproduced.

The text derives from Blincoe's oral account, given in a series of interviews to John Brown, a radical journalist in Bolton, around May 1822 (Brown, 1832 6, 14; Waller 245, 250). Brown intended to use the material to launch a newspaper devoted to issues of factory reform (Waller 250-1); however, the paper never materialized, and Brown spent several years revising draft versions of the Memoir (Brown, 1832 8-9; Waller 251-2). Still without a publisher, Brown committed suicide in April 1826, leaving the manuscript in pawn (Hardman 66; Waller 274; ODNB). Blincoe's story came to the attention of Radical publisher Richard Carlile when Carlile visited Manchester's cotton factories during a northern speaking tour (Brown, 1832 iv; Waller 277). Carlile returned to London in September 1827, in possession of the Memoir, though he had never met Blincoe himself (Waller 278).

Carlile launched his new Radical newspaper, The Lion, on 4 January 1828, from his Fleet Street print shop. The Lion offered a mouthpiece for Carlile's views attacking religion, fiction, and 'superstition', while providing cover for his campaigns in favor of freethought and birth control. He characterized the moment as one of “rapid mental changes” needing “free and fair discussion,” to which his publication brought “plainness, and ... unshackled honesty” in the service of public improvement (Carlile, “Address”). Carlile serialized the Memoir in five weekly installments of The Lion, 25 January - 22 February 22 1828, marking its first publication (Lion 1.4-8). Its initial title was “ORIGINAL BIOGRAPHY. Memoir of Robert Blincoe, an Orphan Boy, Who, with others, was sent from the Workhouse of Saint Pancras, London, to one of the horrible cotton-mills and cotton-masters in Nottinghamshire” (Lion 1.4:118). By the second installment, Carlile had attached a “Publisher's Preface” to the Memoir, comparing the cotton factories to the slave trade with characteristic
inflammatory rhetoric, detailing Brown's commitment to reform and his ultimate suicide, and confirming the validity of the account (Lion 1.5:145). The Memoir was well-received by Carlile's readers, whose letters of support and confirmation of Blincoe's experiences appear in subsequent issues of The Lion. Despite the newspaper's moderate circulation, popular historian John Waller describes more extensive networks of information and exchange in the workshops, pubs, households, inns, chapels, and wharfs, through which “Blincoe's story was told and retold,” its graphic details drawing in working class audiences to “each new instalment with a combination of excitement and morbid curiosity” (Waller 279). Seizing on the Memoir's success, Carlile published the complete account as a separate pamphlet, priced at 1s (Lion 1.7:224; Brown, 1828). In the process, he changed the title to the more descriptive A Memoir of Robert Blincoe, An Orphan Boy; Sent from the workhouse of St. Pancras. London, at seven years of age, to endure the Horrors of a Cotton-Mill, through his infancy and youth, with a minute detailing of his sufferings, being the first memoir of the kind published, emphasizing the horrific aspects of the account, as well as its novel claims.

At the time of this publication, the Memoir entered into vocal public debates surrounding factory reform and child labor. Given its richness of detail and Brown's propagandist tone, as well as its growing recognition among the working classes, the Memoir was an ideal source for campaign material in favour of measures such as the Ten Hours Bill. Accordingly, trade union leader and publisher John Doherty excerpted a section of the Memoir describing a horrific accident at Lowdham Mill that maimed a young girl, Mary Richards, in his Radical paper, the Poor Man’s Advocate, in April 1832 (Waller 284, 294; Brown, 1832 25-6). Shortly after, Doherty re-published the pamphlet in full, preserving Carlile's title and including his "Publisher’s Note" and statements of verification from The Lion, as well as significant corrections to dates and locations of particular incidents. Doherty, who consulted with Blincoe directly while preparing the text as part of a series of biographies of factory workers crippled by the factory system (Waller 296; Simmons 80), also included an additional note on Blincoe's then-current life as a cotton-waste dealer and a woodcut portrait (Brown, 1832 i, 63). This document has remained the primary historical resource and critical text for subsequent studies of the Memoir, due to Blincoe's cooperation, and the pamphlet's completion, correction, and improved printing, as well as the increased survival rate of its sizeable print run (Simmons 81).

The Memoir retained its popular currency through the nineteenth century, as part of the political discussions surrounding the factory system and the condition of the working classes generally, before being taken up in fictional treatments such as Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist (1838) and Frances’ Trollope’s Michael Armstrong (1840) (Waller; Winn and Alexander xviii). As well, Blincoe's Memoir served as the model for other narratives of child labor. The document fell into relative obscurity until increased interest in social history and working-class narratives prompted critical reappraisal. In 1966, historians A.E. Musson and Owen Ashmore republished the Memoir for the Derbyshire Archaeological Society; this first critical treatment included notes and an introductory article by Musson that focused on the making of the early
factory system (Brown, Ashmore, and Musson). In 1972, Arno Press reprinted the *Memoir* alongside five other pamphlets and one broadside in a volume of source documents relating to the Ten Hours Movement. This version is a facsimile reprint of the 1832 Doherty pamphlet; it has no critical apparatus, but does offer the opportunity to consider Blincoe’s account alongside other contemporary material (Ten Hours Movement). In 1977, Caliban Books republished the 1832 Doherty pamphlet as a standalone volume, again with no critical additions (Brown 1977). The *Memoir* was anthologized among other examples of Victorian social protest literature (despite some slippage in period) in the 1992 volume *The Slaughter-House of Mammon*. The editors curiously chose to use the 1828 serialization in *The Lion* as their basis (Winn and Alexander 1-2), presumably seeking to capture the earliest and most immediate text, though this choice has flaws when considering Blincoe’s involvement and elements of response that are taken up in later texts. The most recent treatment of the *Memoir* is in 2007’s *Factory Lives*, edited by James R. Simmons. This volume includes full critical apparatus, editing, notes, and a contextualizing introduction, using the 1832 Doherty text as its source.

**The Modern Dynamic**

The *Memoir of Robert Blincoe* emerges at a crucial moment of transition in early capitalism, comprising the breakdown of the traditional system of craft apprenticeship and the fixing of the industrial factory as the key productive mode of modern capital. Anthony Giddens has identified a key set of discontinuities associated with modernity, here defined loosely as the period beginning in the late eighteenth century and characterized by an institutional dynamic of the nation-state, technologies driven by inanimate power sources, and a system of economic production based on the commodification of products and wage labor (4, 6). Giddens’s analysis of modernity offers an interesting lens through which to read the *Memoir* as well as the practices and experiences of apprenticeship and industrial labor interrogated by the text.

For Giddens, the dynamism of modernity is based on the separation of time and space, the disembedding of social systems from localized relations, and the reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations (16-17). This reflexivity derives from continual inputs of knowledge that affect actions of individuals in a reinforcing loop; he argues that the findings of history must be “filtered through the self-understandings of social agents” (15). Textual scholars might also consider this to be a function of print history; by filtering a particular work through its networks of production, circulation, and response, we can better use the self-understandings of agents at every stage to enhance our understanding of the text’s role in public discourse and private experience.

The influence of disembedding and re-embedding on the cluster of social relationships surrounding factory apprentices such as Robert Blincoe will be considered below. However, these dynamics can be understood in relation to speaking, writing, and print using the idea of ‘the account’. As a critical term, *account* is particularly resonant with considerations of modernity as it reaches into the realms of economics, religion, law,
and story. Its primary meaning, that of calculating the balance of money received and paid, is indicative of business relationships bound by credit and trust. We shall see that trust is significant for Giddens as well. Extending the credit side of the balance sheet, account denotes as well a reckoning in one’s own favour, counting profit or advantage; on the debt side, it covers responsibilities and duties discharged—answering for one’s conduct (OED). Account slides over into terms of valuation, such that one’s account stands for one’s estimation, consideration, or worth in the eyes of others. The term also carries Evangelical overtones, in the final accounting of God on the Day of Judgment. As such, ‘to give account of’ is to give an explanation for, bringing the term to its narrative sense. An account, generically, is a particular statement or narrative of an event or thing: it is a recounting of some absent thing and a vouching of its worth.

Modernity is largely concerned with questions of absence and presence. In the premodern era, space and place are coincident, such that social life is dominated by “presence,” whereas “modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between ‘absent’ others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction” (Giddens 18). This separation is an enacting force in the idea of ‘giving an account’—the narrative serves to transport the teller over a distance, or to link the teller back to an identifiable place. The account, and its counterpoint in verification, provides knowledge divorced from the community, where an individual would have been knowable in relation to place. As well, the account becomes part of the “distanciated relations” (Giddens 19) that comprise the locale in its distended space. Separation of time and space allows them to be ‘emptied out’ of local relationships made up of habits and practices, producing instead standardized, ‘empty’ units. This emptiness is what permits rational organization, managed bureaucratically; modern time is relationship and practice reorganized as the timetable (Giddens 20). We might consider issues of time and date in personal accounts: do they follow standardized systems, or are they personally/locally referential? Blincoe’s Memoir is thoroughly modern in its conception of time: it is meticulous in noting dates, locations, and the breakdown of the apprentices’ working day. Dates, especially, are subject to revision through later versions of the text as the Memoir’s claims are verified more stringently. Concerning modern dynamics and the account, writing “expands the level of time-space distanciation and creates a perspective of past, present, and future in which the reflexive appropriation of knowledge can be set off from designated tradition” (Giddens 37). Arguably, modernity is distinguished by the replacement of the oral account with the written account, which can travel far afield, retaining its information value and deferring its tale until it reaches a distant other; the price, however, is a silencing of voice and a severing of context.

Masters and Apprentices

Modernity is concerned not just with constructions of time and place, but also with the minute parsing and management of their relationship to social arrangement. Giddens’s argument emphasizes the increased institutionalization and bureaucratization of social relationships through the modern period; however, contemporary legal
and political documents suggest that many relationships that we would now consider to be economic or class-based were already heavily institutionalized. A more important distinction can be made with respect to locating the responsibilities associated with these relationships, whose displacement seems to be a key anxiety underlying the *Memoir* and its use within public discourse in the 1820s and 30s.

Both “Apprentice” and “Infancy” as descriptors of age and social position are given detailed legal definition in Sir Thomas Edlyne Tomlins’s 1820 *Law-dictionary*. Apprenticeship, as an institutional relationship and as a set of practices, is particularly concerned with the regulation of trades rather than identifying the needs and duties of apprentices themselves. The apprentice is entitled to “voluntarily bind himself” by indenture to a master for seven years, after which “he may have the benefit to use his trade” (Tomlins, “Apprentice”). No mode of training or check on the process is described; indeed, the apprentice becomes a kind of property or tool of the master, such that “whatever an apprentice gains is for the use of his master” (Tomlins). In cases of cruelty or abuse, the apprentice has no direct recourse, except that on his behalf two justices of the peace may summon the master to account.

The delineation of the relationship between master and apprentice in law contains also its negative in the figure of the runaway or vagrant. Public discourse shows a slide between the language of labor and the language of law and order; criminality is often phrased as the only recourse of abused or abandoned apprentices. Referring to Blincoe’s tale, another former apprentice, Simon Smike, draws a very straightforward conclusion: “In the *Memoir of Robert Blincoe* (a most painfully affecting narrative of a factory lad’s sufferings) — that boy was driven, by the treatment he received at a factory, to run away” (Smike 72). One respondent in the 1828 *Report from the Select Committee on Criminal Commitments and Convictions* also suggests that a leading cause of offense is “the abandonment of boys by their parents and masters” (9). Another respondent explicitly describes a breakdown in the relationship between employers and laborers, where a growing separation of interest “that harmony and goodwill kept up which formerly there used to be between them” (8). Into this gap of industry, alternative lines of training present themselves. Respondents to the 1828 *Report from the Select Committee on the Police of the Metropolis* describe connections between old thieves and young delinquents in much the same terms as apprenticeship. One respondent states that juvenile offenders are “nurtured by old thieves...there is a real system of nurture by the old thieves of the young lads” (52). Another respondent affirms that old thieves are likely to “make a tool of” educated boys (68), using the same term figuring in the ‘proper’ legal relationship between master and apprentice.

Committee evidence presents the apprentice as a site of anxiety in this period; many respondents identify a break in traditional practices that leave apprentices with an uncertain role and classification. The slide into criminality offers one potential reclassification, with attendant restrictions. Reformers such as Brown and Doherty, however, turn to masters on the other side of the relationship as the source of delinquency and criminal activity. In terms of rhetoric, this is strategic; as campaigners focus on the child victim, the master is cast as a villain “possessing that innate love of cruelty
which marked a Nero, a Caligula, or a Robespierre” (Brown, 1832 39). However, Brown's profuse language also contains a subtler systemic critique, aligning the master with aristocratic excess:

John Needham, following the example of his father, and possessing unlimited power over the apprentices, lies under the imputation of crimes of the blackest hue, exercised upon the wretched creatures, from whose laborious toil, the means of supporting the pomp and luxury in which he lived were drawn. (Brown, 1832 43)

Brown does not pursue the conflict inherent in this class divide; however, he presents a moment of potential revolution in the exploited apprentices that cannot be fully subsumed into his reformist campaign. As the child is constructed as both a revolutionary threat and a protected resource in the Romantic period, significant tension is concentrated in the reduction of the child’s potential power; the turn to rhetoric of delinquency and victimization, seen in Parliament as well as circulating through documents such as the Memoir, seems to me to be an eruption of this tension.

Re-Making Labor and Trust

Parish apprenticeship, which is a part of the traditional system gestured to by Tomlins, was an important link between caring for the poor and gainful trade; many of the laws governing its operation date from the Tudor period, as do the Poor Laws that set the orphaned Robert Blincoe in the care of St. Pancras workhouse. Labor historian Katrina Honeyman, discussing the experience of parish apprentices and the early textile factories, identifies its organized basis alongside its undeniable exploitation and abuses of the pauper children entrusted to the care of parish officials. When considering the collision of traditional and industrial institutions at the outset of modernity, it is important to recognize the practice of parish apprenticeship as a regular, rational system in transition. The ‘problem’ in the system is that the form of apprenticeship as a structure regulating craft production ceased to fit the actual experience of factory labor before modern bureaucratic institutions were prepared to address it more effectively. Accordingly, reformers and agitators turned to accounts such as the Memoir to articulate that experience and the extreme violence done to child apprentices by the disjuncture in the mechanics of the governing economic and legal institutions.

The Memoir of Robert Blincoe makes evident that the institution of apprenticeship was radically destabilized by the early industrial mode of production. With respect to traditional social relationships, bonds of continuity and trust (as Giddens accounts for them) are completely broken, and especially for the orphans of the narrative, more modern personal relationships fail to replace them. Indeed, much of the trauma recounted in the Memoir—and the expressions of outrage that became lodged in records such as parliamentary hearings and draft laws—can be read as a reaction to these broken bonds and an attempt to mend them institutionally. Giddens's configuration of modernity pays close attention to the absence of kinship systems (101): this is also a key dividing line in Blincoe’s account. Brown notes the greater resources of
children with families compared to those without (Brown, 1832 26-7) and devotes the entire first chapter of the Memoir to Blincoe’s name and possible parentage. Indeed, many of the parish apprentices are placed in the care of the workhouse because of a lack of kin support.

The significance of localized relations (Giddens 101) is also evident when speaking of the distance between the apprentices’ ‘home’ parish of St. Pancras and rural textile factories (see Honeyman 206-7). The anxiety surrounding local breakdown can be read in the 1816 Act for the Better Regulating the Binding Out of Parish Apprentices, which introduced the 40-mile limit (Honeyman 51-2). This Act was aimed at preventing estrangement between parents and children (where the children had families remaining), and to allow parents and parish authorities better access to information regarding the children’s treatment. Honeyman, however, points out that the impact of the 1816 Act was very limited, coming after parishes had already begun to limit practices of long-distance factory apprenticeship, and after factory apprentices were already a declining component of the labor force, which had begun employing greater numbers of ‘free’ children (52-3).

Most significantly, the customary weight of apprenticeship was utterly transformed by the changing mode of production from craft labor to factory work. The apprentices themselves, particularly parish apprentices, were arguably the site for these major changes as their early introduction and adaptation to the factory system was integral to constructing the new industrial labor force (Honeyman 264): organized, disciplined, and alienated. A key element in traditional apprenticeship was training, and the expectation that the apprentice would assume the skill and rank of the master; however, the skills of factory apprentices were negligible. What they received by indenture was instead a radically new understanding of time and space, which Giddens argues is the underpinning of modernity. As distinct from ‘free’ children and adult workers, parish apprentices were already conditioned to routine and regular working within an enclosed environment (Honeyman 143). Such children were best equipped to adapt to the regime of factory life. Focused on Giddens’s “inanimate power” and connected to the machine, rather than the field or animal life, child laborers were forced to work in a managed and supervised way based on maximizing the (industrial) means of production. They became particularly adjusted to the danger and extreme discomfort of working with the machinery; with no other options or experience, they were far more pliable than any other class of workers. Because factory labor was so different than any other form of labor, children were arguably a necessary step in transforming the attendant labor force:

work in mechanized factories required regular attendance and consistent effort, respect for tools . . . used but not owned . . . and the ability to work in close quarters with a large number of persons. In late eighteenth century England, these were largely new kinds of skills. (Galbi, qtd. in Honeyman 145)

The exploitation engendered in the system of factory apprenticeship alongside its re-education of the labor force can be considered a concomitant “consequence of modernity.” The institutional structuring of labor became inverted through the
figure of the apprentice: the traditional understanding of what apprenticeship is and should achieve was utterly undone even as participants continued to attach trust to the form of the system. This trust in the traditional system is what enabled the economically necessary remaking of labor and transition into new bureaucratic and disciplined regimes within its name. However, this trust was misplaced; beneath the form, people became committed to a thing not yet understood, and thus created economic and social relations whereby the child apprentices were exploited rather than protected.

Verifying Accounts

The condition of modernity demands that we grapple with great distances and enact relationships with absent others, often mediated by institutional channels. As I have defined it, the account is one way in which knowledge can be deferred and delivered to those others, replacing knowledge that would have previously been supplied by one’s local position and relationships. The flip side of the account, as I see it, is verification, which provides the mechanism by which the account can be made trustworthy. The account and its verification are reinforcing discursive practices, functioning in the same manner as Giddens’s disembedding and reembedding systems. Disembedding is the “lifting out” of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space” (21). This is accomplished through two key entities: symbolic tokens, media of interchange that permit exchange between individuals and groups regardless of personal characteristics (i.e. money), and expert systems (22). The account is a form of symbolic token; it is a mode of deferral, containing social interactions indefinitely and permitting distanciation between agents in exchange (24). Much like the account itself, disembedding involves interchanges of credit and debt, needing both balance and surety, rather than direct mutual relationships. The account, in this case, couples “instantaneity and deferral, presence and absence” (25).

However, the work of social relationships cannot be done with frozen tokens: relationships must be liquefied and re-animated. Such is the process of reembedding, which recasts relations between distant agents to fix them to local conditions (Giddens 79–80). Giddens argues that “all disembedding mechanisms interact with reembedded contexts of action, which may act either to support or undermine them” (80). Disembedding and reembedding processes are linked by trust. This trust is not invested in individuals but in “abstract capacities” (26): it is based on absence as well, securing an interplay that is otherwise dominated by a lack of power or a lack of information shared by agents in exchange. Verification of an account is part of an ongoing process of reflection and adjustment, as well as an expression of trust in the means of verifying.

The Memoir of Robert Blincoe is entirely preoccupied with veracity, as reflected in the document itself, its textual history, and its critical evaluation. Brown frequently interrupts Blincoe’s narrative with interjections of its truth and consistency: “After I had taken down his communications, I tested them, by reading the same to other persons, with whom Blincoe had not any intercourse on the subject, and who had
partaken of the miseries of the same hard servitude, and by whom they were in every point confirmed” (Brown, 1832 7). The act of verification often provides some sense of the process of writing, which creates a troubling overlay to Blincoe’s oral account. Accordingly, Brown is also eager to account for himself within the pages of the Memoir:

I do not, in this declamation, indulge in light, personal, or selfish motives: for whatever I assert, as positive matter of fact, I hold myself morally responsible, and stand publicly pledged to substantiate my assertion, by adducing, if requisite, not alone the authorities on which I make them, but also to prove the validity of those authorities. (Brown, 1832 37)

Perhaps out of a journalistic sense of documentation, or perhaps as a way of increasing the credit that would be afforded to a ‘nameless’ working-class man like Blincoe, Brown is particularly concerned to link Blincoe’s account to external sources of verification connecting to what Giddens terms “expert systems” (22)—magistrates, medical men, or other professionals:

The authenticity of this narrative is, therefore, entitled to greater credit, than much of the testimony given by the owners of cotton-factories, or by professional men on their behalf, as will, in the course of this narrative, be fully demonstrated by evidence wholly incontrovertible. (Brown, 1832 9)

Verification of Blincoe’s account is also taken as an opportunity to discredit the account of mill-owners and deficient officials: “the imputation is corroborated by the total silence of the magistrates of this part of Derbyshire, as to the character and conduct of the owners of Litton Mill, during the parliamentary investigation” (Brown, 1832 35). Although this is characteristic of Brown’s propagandist style, statements such as these do offer a sense of the dynamics of trust at play. Brown devalues the truth claims of corrupt institutions, but grants authority to governing bodies such as Parliament. His is not a revolutionary stance, which might entail leaving an undorned account of Blincoe’s life and experience to speak for itself, but one committed to reforming institutions by changing the nature of the public discourse of child labor: Brown wants to pass Acts, not smash machines. As such, Blincoe’s account must be made to fit within the parameters of the existing legal and political conjuncture.

The published Memoir is further positioned by external verification that stands as direct response within the network of print. These statements of confirmation begin with the Memoir’s second serial installment in The Lion, to which Carlile appended his ‘Publisher’s Preface’: “So that, though the Publisher does not presume to make notes for the Author, nor for himself, to this Memoir, he is prepared to confirm much of the statement made here” (Brown, 1832 iv; Lion 1.5:145). This verification became attached to the account itself, despite changes in publisher and manner of publication, much like a reference or ‘character’ was given to laborers at the time as they moved between jobs. Similarly, The Lion published a series of letters from readers confirming Blincoe’s account of factory labor. The first of these is from Samuel Davy, who “has said that his own experience is a confirmation of the general statement made in the Memoir” (Lion 1.8:256; Brown, 1832 64); this letter
is notably paraphrased, rather than direct correspondence. A direct, signed letter comes from John Joseph Betts, in which he “write[s] to corroborate the statement of Blincoe, having heard him relate during [his] apprenticeship, all, or nearly all, the particulars that are now narrated in his memoir” (Lion 1.9:276; Brown, 1832 64). Like the Preface, these statements of verification became attached to subsequent printings of the Memoir. In his positioning of the Memoir, Carlile seems to be deliberately provoking his audience with the horrific details of the account, then placating them with claims of verification. An anonymous correspondent in Derbyshire (likely a construction of Carlile) takes a revelatory tone:

On first reading the account, he was much inclined to think the statements it contained were greatly exaggerated; and he tells us, that, he has since taken some trouble, in making enquiries, as to their truth; and sorry he is to say, that the unanimous testimony of several persons resident at, or near the place, go to the length of supporting, generally, the statements of Blincoe, with horrible additions. (Lion 1.13:401)

These letters of verification are less important for validating the Memoir’s truth claims than they are for giving the account a sense of authenticity in relation to the experiences of a working-class readership. Verifying stands in for witnessing among this disparate and disjointed community, again taking up one of the more Evangelical ideas underlying the account. To witness is to become associated with a phenomenon, even as one is altered by the perception of it: it is marked by an inability to remain apart. The Memoir is at core the testimony of a witness,8 with both spiritual and legal inflection, but it also serves to draw readers into an act of bearing witness alongside Blincoe. The account is given for a purpose; as such, it is inextricably tied to processes of justice and persuasion, in which the speaker does not necessarily want to give away his position. Judith Butler’s critique of universal ethics in Giving an Account of Oneself is built around a nuanced treatment of accounting as a mode of speaking or response in a highly structured social setting. The speaking subject, attempting to narrate his/her experience, finds him/herself “already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration” (8). As such, individual experience is not knowable in isolation, the speaking “I” is forced to include the “conditions of its own emergence,” necessarily deciphering and commenting on the society enclosing the speaker. We are back to Marx’s “real social conditions,” as manifested in the relationship between speaker and audience. This relationship of address, as Butler interrogates it, is a reflexive one. Prompted by questioning, the mediator is the spark to reflection: “I begin my story of myself only in the face of a ‘you’ who asks me to give an account” (11). This exchange, however, is not necessarily an accusative one; the moral implications of the account become a part of a diffuse set of institutional practices that attempt to make the suffering of others knowable if not remediable. Notably, the only document that reflects Blincoe’s unmediated voice is a heavily institutionalized one. Based on the account given in the Memoir, Blincoe was called upon to give testimony before the Factory Inquiries Commission in 1833. Here, Blincoe’s account of his factory apprenticeship is recast to celebrate his ascension into the middle classes and to set up his support for the reform agenda. Blincoe’s recollections
before the Commission compete with those of the printed account; rather than detail his experiences openly, he refers the Commission instead to “the book written about these things, describing my own life and sufferings” (Factory Inquiries Commission 18). In this public scene, the revolutionary potential of a working class man giving voice to his own suffering is deferred; rather than embody the account of his own life story, Blincoe instead gives primacy to a textual witness that can only be interrogated by others in his absence.

Against Autobiography

Jane Humphries has used the Memoir of Robert Blincoe as one of the 600-plus autobiographical sources for her study of childhood and child labor during the early British industrial revolution (14, 366). However, she mischaracterizes Blincoe as “the most famous working-class autobiographer of the era” (247) by treating Brown’s prose as Blincoe’s own speech. Although Humphries gestures to problems with the Memoir’s textual authenticity, admitting that “it was embellished for political purposes in the struggle for the Factory Acts” (247), she does not mention that the embellishments—and indeed records of authorship—come at the hand of John Brown rather than Blincoe. Taking issues of authorship into question, the Memoir does not meet the criteria of a “genuine” working class autobiography set by David Vincent in Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom in that Blincoe is not the writer of his own story (2); indeed, the conditions of production and circulation at the hands of Brown, Carlile, and others suggest that the Memoir is one of those texts “susceptible to appropriation” by persons with particular political interests (Vincent 2). Accordingly, the Memoir is not included in the later critical bibliography of working-class autobiography edited by Vincent with John Burnett and David Mayall. This is not to discount the validity of the narrative—as discussed, internal and contemporary verification of Blincoe’s account is an intrinsic part of the text’s significance as well as its utility. Rather, the Memoir makes visible the influence of mediators on its text in ways that are erased when an autobiography is deemed to be “genuine.”

The fixity of print permits a degree of reflection on history and the self to a degree not possible before the advent of modernity. Significantly, the network of print enables Blincoe to confirm and respond to his published Memoir, as well as suggesting more particulars of its composition. Blincoe, indirectly and not as a signed correspondent, offers corrections and notes on place, etc.: “He said, the whole, with the above exceptions, was true, so far as it went: but that the enormities practiced in Litton Mill were much greater than those related in the memoir” (Lion 1.13:401). More interestingly, Blincoe comments on his initial anger at “why you had published an account of his life without his permission” (Lion 1.13:401). The idea of the protected, internal self must be set against a fear of exposure: this tension influences the construction of an account, but betrays a certain anxiety about its circulation and uses. The relationship between speaker and interlocutor is one that shapes the account in response to the valences of affect involved in crafting it: “an account of oneself is always given to another, whether conjured or existing, and this other establishes the scene of address” (Butler
As biography, Robert Blincoe’s *Memoir* shows a particularly difficult interlocutory arrangement. Blincoe’s account is layered beneath Brown’s, which acts more purposefully as propaganda. Blincoe’s voice collides with that of Brown, whose role as interviewer is subsumed into that of crusader, a more apt characterization given the register of voice and the gothic excesses of his writing. In some ways, the *Memoir* represents a collision of genres, or the uneasiness of a not-yet established genre of writing and activism.

The *Memoir of Robert Blincoe*, and particularly Brown’s role in its construction, has much more in common with Henry Mayhew’s subsequent street surveys in his *Morning Chronicle* letters and later refined in *London Labour and the London Poor* than it does with the working-class autobiography of Blincoe’s contemporaries. As described by Regenia Gagnier, “interviews are clearly not autobiography” (65), though they may often provide accurate representations of working lives emerging out of verifiable accounts (66). Gagnier takes up the question of working-class autobiography apart from the oral histories she ascribes to Mayhew, treating them as literary and aesthetic objects. Although Gagnier sets out the formal variety of these narratives as well as “problematic relationship of author to audience” (150) with aplomb, particularly the difficulty of reading such texts as records of individual rather than class identities, those invested in the study of working-class autobiography would do well to consider further the problematic relations of textual production. The difficult balance of power between interviewer and self-narrating subject that is foregrounded in discussions of reporters such as Mayhew is amplified in the relationship between Brown and Blincoe and the resulting text of the *Memoir*.

Modernity, as Giddens suggests, is marked by a pervasive uneasiness; as individuals, we are subject to a constant need to re-read ourselves and re-situate ourselves in the whole. It is in relation to this experience that biography emerges as a distinct genre in the Romantic period; self-preservation demands narratives of self that account for the present—the consequence otherwise is utter alienation. When considering biographies of the working class, voice is a central issue, particularly when speaking of “the poor, the dispossessed, and the young” (Honeyman 199). At a further remove, biography attempts to reconstruct the child in the voice of the adult. As much as the account tries to speak to an absent other, the child is also absent to the adult speaker, whose account approaches but never reaches the experience of the child; it can never be entirely re-embedded. As such, we are left to trail these moments of exposure, when irreducible voices of the past call out to us in denial of the great narratives we would make of them.

**Notes**

[1] The most significant legislation emerging from this campaign is likely the 1833 *Labour of Children in Factories Act*, which limited the work of children thirteen and under to eight hours per day and limited the work of children fourteen to eighteen to twelve hours a day and provided for routine inspection of factories.

[2] Within this paper, I have also taken this position regarding source material. Accordingly, any quotations from the *Memoir* or discussion of its contents will refer to the 1832 Doherty
publication of Brown’s text (Brown, 1832). Please note also that citations give Brown, rather than Blincoe, as the author. Other versions, particularly serialization in The Lion and Carlile’s 1828 pamphlet have been cited where necessary for comparison, as (Lion) and (Brown, 1828) respectively.

[3] See, for example, The Factory Lad: or, The life of Simon Smike, exemplifying the horrors of white slavery [1839].

[4] Compare, for example, the date of Robert Blincoe’s marriage. The initial Lion publication gives the date as 19 June 1819 (Lion 1.8:256), replicated in the Carlile pamphlet (Brown, 1828 55), whereas the Doherty pamphlet, prepared with Blincoe’s input, gives the marriage date as 28 June 1819 (Brown, 1832 63). This date can of course be verified by a concerned reader or researcher using external records, which is exactly the point of modern time.

[5] This has also been a preoccupation of many historical considerations of the Memoir, most egregiously in Waller.

[6] Indeed, the worker’s ‘character’ makes an appearance in Blincoe’s account as well, when he asks an employer, Mr. Clayton, for a character after he “gets the bag” from his position. Clayton refuses, and Blincoe is left to give his own account to potential new employers (Brown, 1832 59). The ‘character’ or letter of reference is a clear example of both an account as I have used it, and of the disembedding processes at work: the worker is not known when he seeks employment, and potential employers cannot personally establish his credentials.

[7] Verification becomes something of a critical preoccupation with historians seeking to balance horrific accounts of pauper apprentices’ treatment with the more widespread and benign deprivations of the poor in this period (see, for example, Humphries 247).

[8] Blincoe’s suitability as a witness, in terms of capacity and sincerity, is shored up by Brown: “Blincoe is in no means deficient in understanding: he can be witty, satirical, and pathetic by turns, and he never showed himself to such advantage as when expatiating upon [his] desolate state” (Brown, 1832 12).

Works Cited


House of Commons (Great Britain). Factories Inquiry Commission. *Second report of the Central Board of His Majesty’s commissioners appointed to collect information in the manufacturing districts, as to the employment of children in factories, and as to the propriety and means of curtailing the hours of their labor: with minutes of evidence, and reports by the Medical Commissioners*. 1833. *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online*.


