Working the Railways, Constructing Navvy Identity

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IDEALIZED EXISTENTIAL SPACE: THE SCANDINAVIAN TRADITION

The heyday of railway construction in Norway lasted about fifty years, running from 1880 to 1930, when the main railways were built. Approximately ten to twelve thousand men (and a few women) earned their living through railway construction. They led a transient life, with no fixed residence, working their way from one completed railway project to the next. When no new railroad construction work was available, they moved on to working the mines or to road construction.

A Nordic, or at least a Norwegian-Swedish, labor market already existed at this time. In both languages a neologism was newly coined to designate this occupational group. These navvies came to be known as *rallar*, probably based upon the English word “railway.” Most were the younger sons of farmers and fishermen and, as an occupational group, relegated to the very bottom of the social ladder. The work itself was backbreaking, while working conditions were abysmal. Their brief period of social acceptability lasted a mere few weeks or, more precisely, as long as their money lasted. Only when a construction project was completed and they got their wages did they enjoy some social reprieve from a life of marginality.

During this historic period the railway navvies constructed their own history by means of epic songs or ballads. In the mid-twentieth century, scholars showed great interest in the history of this socio-occupational class. Oral life stories were collected and published both in Sweden and in Norway as part of major fieldwork campaigns aimed at collecting the life histories or autobiographies of various occupational groups. This period produced significant archival and published materials (e.g., Bull 1961 for Norway, Rehnberg 1949 for Sweden, Haugbøll 1955 for Denmark).

As a genre, railway songs are heavily influenced by the preexisting songs of sailors (Lönnrot 1978, 20), lumbermen, and soldiers. The general themes were more or less to be found in all such songs, and all were sung to the well-known melodies of cabaret and popular songs. They were, of course, transmitted orally
or by way of broadsides. It was largely thanks to a university librarian, Hanna Lund in Oslo, herself of a railway navvy family, that many such songs were collected and partly published during the 1920s and 1930s. Having perhaps a vested interest in the cultural image of the railway workers, Hanna Lund painted a positive and romantic picture of this occupational group (Lund 1934). The ballads themselves, however, provide the main source for the writing of this group’s history, revealing a mentality, worldview, and mode of expression, in tune with the life they lived, the words they spoke, and the ballads they sang.

These ballads are, to be sure, little known outside Scandinavia, and even less popular in Denmark than they are in Norway and Sweden themselves (cf. Rehnberg 1944, 307). Curiously enough, they appear to be altogether unknown in Finland. One possible explanation is that Finland was under Russian rule during the time of its railway construction, and further, in Finland, the railways were built by the Russians. In the German tradition, they were scarcely known at all (Steinitz 1954–62, 1:295–303). Palmer notes for the English tradition that “songs about the navvy’s work and his life are very rare,” a fact confirmed by Porter’s study of the English occupational song genre (Palmer 1974, 45, Porter 1992, 66–72, passim; Coleman 1969). Despite a reference to laborers “carolling and singing” as they went to work on a trench in New Ross, Ireland, as early as 1265, hardly any songs survive from the time of the railway boom (Shields 1993, 41). Few such songs are included in Cohen’s anthology of American railway songs (Cohen 1981).

In the following pages, I draw upon the pioneering work by Ina-Maria Greverus, Der territoriale Mensch (1972), and on her hypothesis that all human actions, including those actions intended and planned, take place in real or imagined space. Every such location is always a specific and definite space which humanity imbues with its own values. Even utopian fantasies are aimed at real space wherein humanity’s wishes may come true (Greverus 1972, 51).

As literary manifestations, these ballads give us an understanding of the struggle for cultural identity and for a respectable social niche by an occupational group leading a shiftless existence, doing gruelling work on a contract basis, with no fixed address, and plagued by its own marginal socioeconomic status. But to appreciate and fully understand this worldview and this struggle, some historical context is necessary, as is a close examination of the themes expressed in these songs and of the functions they served.

Norwegian railway ballads frequently describe the actual construction of a particular railroad or else certain episodes of construction projects. They sing the fate of individual workers as well as speak of the railway worker’s living conditions in general. The songwriter often presents himself through rather formulaic phrases, either in the opening or closing verses. He may open as follows: “En rallare jag är förvisst” (I’m a navvy indeed; Lund 1934, no. 1), or “Jag föddes i en...” (I was born...).
koja’ (I was born in a cottage; no. 20). Or he may end his song like this: “Ty jag är blott en rallare från Blekinge, ni förstår. Mitt namn är Albert Palmberg; min ålder tjugo år” (I am just a navvy from Blekinge. My name is Albert Palmberg; I am 20 years old; Lund 1934, no. 18). Naming the songwriter, of course, is intended to give the songs a mark of authenticity and to corroborate their veracity. Indeed, one of the most important issues of these ballads is to establish their credibility.

The central theme of this occupational song genre, work, must be presented in a positive way, or at least, it must provide a positive understanding of the reasons for the particular construction project. The railway navvy is proud of his manual labor. He has mastered the art of building solid and beautiful stone walls, of cutting and dressing stones, of blasting through tunnels. The railway between Oslo and Bergen, for instance, is described in the following words:

Her reises et verk i den evige sne
som fremtidens slekter med stolthet kan se.
(Lund 1934, no. 32)
There they erected a creation in the perpetual snow
That future generations can proudly look at.

The mine of Sulitjelma in northern Norway was called “den største bergsdrift på vår ort, den er et mesterverk jo, av sluskehender gjort” (the greatest mine in our land, a masterwork built by the hands of navvies; Lund 1934, no. 31). That they were able to work outdoors was also considered a blessing, even though songwriters seldom reached great heights in descriptions of nature.

The actual working conditions as described were anything but ideal, for the work itself was hard and dangerous. It took place on steep mountainsides at the constant risk of rock slides. Explosions that blinded or mutilated workers for life were a fact of daily life. Yet these circumstances too were seen in a positive light and did not diminish their praise of work well done. The clanging of sledgehammer on mallet and the explosion of dynamite was like music to their ears.

Living conditions were likewise bleak. Navvies normally lived in primitive barracks, cramped and drafty, but described them instead as castles of freedom. Food was miserable, since they did not have the money to buy good food, and the females employed to prepare their meals were anything but fine cooks. Further, management-employee relations were a source of resentment for navvies. Employers did not respect their workers, were not interested in their welfare, and were concerned only with extracting the maximum amount of work out of the men for as little payment as possible. Social relations with other occupational groups were likewise vexed. Storekeepers and farmers, for instance, considered navvies socially inferior and swindled them whenever possible. A frequent complaint according to these ballads and, to the navvies’ way of thinking,
the greatest crime in the world was being overcharged on the price of snuff—without which no navvy could live:

Treti fyra öre är det för sitt snus den jäkeln tar
Millioner årlig han från slusken drar.
(Lund 1934, no. 26)
Thirty five pence he takes for the snuff,
Out of the pockets of the navvies millions he steals.

Navvies were welcomed while they had money in their pockets, for they were open handed, and while it lasted, hard liquor flowed and girls gathered around. When the money ran out, so too did friends and women.

Railway workers displayed a remarkable degree of solidarity. One incident in particular, for example, which took place on the Narvik railway, tells us a great deal on this topic. During the arrest of a navvy, a policeman struck him on the head with a stick, and the next morning, the prisoner was found dead in his cell. The navvies gathered and determined to take vengeance on the policeman, but they did not have that satisfaction, for the authorities helped their own and found the policeman passage for his escape to America. Undeterred, the navvies took up a collection of money, it was told, and sent an armed man to America, who tracked the policeman down and shot him dead (Bull 1961, 230; cf. Lund 1934, no. 26). This sense of solidarity, hardly noticed or valued by their contemporaries, was a life source in times of urgent need. Since railway work itself was so dangerous, many of the men frequently suffered serious accidents. Neither health insurance nor disability pension was the social norm, and mutual aid was the only resort. It was only on one’s colleagues that an invalid could rely—colleagues whose strong sense of solidarity prompted them to give any help they could, as best they could. Very often, when a disabled worker had been blinded, a young boy had to be found to lead him to the construction site.

However, many were too proud to beg for money. Instead, they wrote or commissioned songs telling their life stories, with emphasis placed, of course, on their accidents and sad lots. Such songs were written in the broadside ballad style, full of pathos and semiliterary diction. Armed with song, disabled workers would travel the country over, singing and selling their broadsheets. In fact, many such singers were blind men due to occupational accidents. One of the last and best known singing navvies was Blind Fredrik (1878–1954), who traveled throughout northern Norway. The song he wrote about the accident that blinded and crippled him was banned by the police, but he went on singing it nonetheless. In his final years he focused on the singing and selling of his own ballads. Again and again he would visit construction sites, and with songs and good humor he was always a welcome guest (Skogheim and Sandvik 1977).
songs and the songs of other crippled navvies criticized management and the lack of social security, not the navvies’ working conditions.

Since disabled workers had nothing to fear from management, for they had neither security of employment nor health benefits, they could allow themselves to openly criticize both working conditions and the lack of insurance benefits. On the other hand, a navvy with a job had to choose his words carefully in order to protect himself. The voicing of an explicit criticism was usually translated into getting the “black cat,” meaning that they were immediately fired and blacklisted and were never again able to get another job. Such was the fate of Johannes Birkeland, who wrote a song about the Flekkefjord railway in southern Norway. He described the terrible working conditions and pitiful wages on this job site and criticized inspectors and foremen alike. But worst of all, he ended his song with an appeal to workers to abandon their work. He was fired and two years later died of tuberculosis—the fate of many a navvy.

In a few late railroad ballads we find a new political discourse, especially in the ballads written by C. A. Bernström. Born in Sweden in 1849, Bernström later went to Germany as a young man, where he was influenced by the new Socialist ideologies. When he found his way to Norway, working as a navvy on the construction of the railroad between Bergen and Voss, he became one of the pioneers of the labor movement headquartered in Bergen. He consciously made use of songs and broadside prints as a tool of political agitation. One of his songs was printed in six editions between 1881 and 1892. Early in 1999, I discovered two well-used copies of this song in a private collection. In the introduction Bernström characterized the song as

En bidende ironisk Kritik over Arbeidsforholdene paa Banen, tiliigemed Arbeidernes Livsvilkaar og Kontraktørernes og andre Tyranners hen-synsløse og graadige Udbytning.
[A biting ironic criticism of the working conditions at the railroad, as well as of the living conditions and of the ruthless and greedy exploitation of the workers through contractors and other tyrants.]

It would be wrong, however, to characterize the ballads of the navvies primarily as songs of social criticism. They were first and foremost a vehicle for the creation of occupational identity and social pride. How was this accomplished? By the rather unusual means of interpreting in a positive way, a lifestyle which society generally judged negatively. That is, their worldview inverted the normal state of affairs and values. To be without roots and homeless was described positively in terms of a life of freedom. Similarly, the dangerous working conditions were a source of pride, for there one displayed courage. That the navvies’ work was impermanent and their wages low, that
their living conditions were unhealthy and overcrowded, that there was no social network to speak of, and that the navvies bore a strong social stigma were all factors that were somehow inverted. Neither were navvies able to save money or marry. On the contrary, navvies considered squandering money, drinking freely, and brawling in barrooms, to be positive habits. Their shiftless lifestyle was the mark of a free man, their spendthrift ways signs of a generous spirit, and the unmarried man was something of a ladies’ man.

In conclusion, these ballads actively construct a narrative of identity and of territoriality. They could also be considered an argument for identity. Greverus argues that:


(Greverus 1972, 382)

[First and foremost territory is the space of identification necessarily comprising the space of protection and of action. The familiarity of the territory is based on the familiarity of its values and norms, its meanings and its demands on behavior. The satisfying territory for the subject man is rooted in need satisfaction through undisturbed, fulfilled behavior in socio-culturally structured space. This includes, in addition to the “ideal” and recognized certainty of attitudes and roles, also material security as biologically necessary feeding space on the one hand, as well as culturally defined, status-providing “economic position” and in this space the possibility to be able to solve conflicts.]

Of what space do these ballads speak? Contrary to the songs of sailors and emigrants, in these songs there is no departure from a specific place, no tearful leave-takings, no homesickness. The place of birth is mentioned only casually, as the starting point for the song, but it is not longed for nor is it criticized. It is the construction site which becomes a kind of locus of self-identification, even though it is a place of only temporary affiliation. It is interpreted as an ideal, as imagined space—one which holds personal satisfaction and where all negative
Figure 1. Navvies in Romsdal, Western Norway—probably local workers. Photographer unknown. Norsk Folkemusem, Oslo, Norway, L.48.942.

Figure 2. Coffee is served, navvies on the Bergen railway. Photographer unknown. Jernbanemuseet, Hamar, Norway, no. 5131.
Figure 3. A female cook at work. Photographer unknown. Jernbanemuseet, Hamar, Norway, no. 5132.

Figure 4. The era of the navvies is coming to an end. Living conditions have changed for the better. From the Rauma railway 1922. Photographer unknown. Norsk Folkemuseum, Oslo, Norway, L. 48849.
reality can be transformed into positive values. It is not the space itself which gives optimal satisfaction, but it is a space where the harsh living conditions may be reduced to a minimum. History shows that such a situation can lead to aggression, at worst to war, in order to expand one’s territory or annex a new one. In the railway ballads, aggression, instead, is turned against management, as well as against other segments of society. Revolt is averted through the idealization of the situation. Through criticism of establishment norms, values, and lifestyles, itinerant navvies created alternative cultural space, their own territory, where their inverted values reigned. In the final analysis, it is freedom which the navvy holds up as the decisive advantage of his way of life. While he may lead a life of hardships, he is not bound to the farmer or the shopkeeper’s life of “imprisonment,” tied to the land, linked to the shop, and tethered to money-grubbing. When a job is over, he is free to move on. He has no family and property and hence no chains to a place. And with his money he is free to enjoy liquor and girls and to play “king of the heap” for a few hours. At the same time, and paradoxically, the songs are also a defense of a life without rights, without discipline, and with no possibility of expressing real criticism.

In contrast to other songs with themes of territoriality, in the songs of the railway navvies there is no question of a nostalgic return to the land and to place of origin. It is rather a question of creating a compensatory territory. Therefore, death cannot be depicted as a return to the original territory, to an idealized home. It is perhaps for this reason that death does not figure as a significant motif in these songs, despite the fact that it was an ever-present possibility, for accidents, fatal and otherwise, were a daily fact of navvy life. The navvies did not fear God nor the devil. In one song, a navvy who took part in the river driving of logs was taken by a waterfall. As he disappeared in the waterfall he cried out: “Gapa nå, fan! Her får du en jækla bit!” (Now, open your mouth, devil! Here comes a bloody fine bite; Lund 1934, 142). On the other hand, the navvy songs reveal a hope that God will punish the farmers and the shopkeepers. On the day of the last judgment, God will say to the farmers:

Ni gav ei Kalle föda, You did not give Charles food
ni lot ham ute stå! you let him stand outside
Gå därför ner til Belzebubb, So go down to Beelzebub
där stekti blir med rubb och stubb, where you will be grilled with bag
mäns hela Himlens frydesal and baggage
står kvar för Glada Ka’l. while the whole joyful hall of Heaven
(Lund 1934, no. 5) is open for Happy Charles.

The imagined space is in this case extended to include heaven. God himself defends the navvies against the farmers.
These songs are limited to a dimension of illusion and unreality, for they do not express a longing for real places, and they are remarkably free of place-related nostalgia. This is probably why they did not attract the interest of other occupational groups to any great extent and why they certainly did not interest the middle classes.

SPACE FOR SELF-IDENTIFICATION: THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING TRADITION

This dimension of illusion and unreality was not confined to Norwegian navvies. Both in Britain and the United States, those constructing the vast network of railroads, a few decades earlier than in Norway, also labored to create a positive cultural space of the kind described by Greverus. They thereby contested the actuality of conditions working on the cuttings, tunnels and viaducts and in the overcrowded shanties. For example, in Northamptonshire, England, in the 1880s, a laborer was charged fourpence a night for a bed, a penny to sleep on a table, and a halfpenny for the floor (Coleman 1969, 85).

Since the settlements and worksites were in a constant state of flux, the workforce was repeatedly on the move. One result of the great migrations of those seeking work was the rapid spread of a body of working lore through the huge network of migrant laborers that had moved from canal building to the railways, lore which was to reemerge in the twentieth century with roadbuilders. The navvies were an “anarchic elite” whose work was likened, in terms of material shifted by hand, to the building of the pyramids. Their space for action was not the bounded line of the stone monument but the seemingly infinite time and space of a network of iron that would hold the whole planet in its embrace: navvies traveled all over the world, often in their original gangs, on contract work. By 1851 200,000 navvies were working on building the railroads in Britain alone (Burnett 1974, 25). Despite the great differences in working conditions between gangs on the Erie railroad in the United States and those battling against subsidence on the Leeds to Selby railroad in Yorkshire, England, Irish laborers were working on both, and “Paddy Works on the Railway” was sung on both lines (Porter 1992, 66–70). The most famous navvy song of all, “John Henry,” spread so rapidly through the United States, despite segregation, that classifying it as a “black” or a “white” song has no meaning (Cohen 1981, 61–89). Opening lines like “I’m an Irish [or jovial or English] navvy” and the expression “working on the line/railroad” became so widely diffused that we can almost regard the singing culture of the navvies at any particular time as one vast synchronic text.

The creation of such a body of songs was in part a necessary response to the way bourgeois discourse treated the navvies as outcasts. This description is from an early account:
These banditti, known in some parts of England by the name of “Navies” or “Navigators,” and in others by that of “Bankers,” are generally the terror of the surrounding country; they are as completely a class by themselves as the Gipsies. Possessed of all the daring recklessness of the Smuggler, without any of his redeeming qualities, their ferocious behavior can only be equalled by the brutality of their language. It may be truly said, their hand is against every man, and before they have been long located, every man’s hand is against them; and woe befal any woman with the slightest share of modesty whose ears they assail.\(^5\)

Negative stereotypes like these are also found in contemporary songs written from the point of view of those whose lives were disrupted by the building of the railways: in “The Oxford and Hampton Railway,” a woman whose home has been demolished to make way for the line complains that she has not only lost her vegetable garden but that her daughter has run off with a navvy (Raven 1977, 52). A parliamentary commission in 1846 confirmed in more measured terms the havoc wrought by the navvies:

The great amount of outlay already thus made, its suddenness, its temporary concentration at particular localities, often spots before but thinly inhabited, have created or developed evils (touching both the welfare of the labourers employed, and the interests of society) the taint of which seems not unlikely to survive their original cause.\(^6\)

In the face of such characterization as folk devils in both popular and official discourse, one response contains an almost brutal realism:

I’m a navvy, I’m a navvy, workin’ on the line
Choppin’ up the worms, makin’ one worm into nine.
Some jobs is rotten jobs, other jobs is fine,
But I’m a navvy, I’m a navvy, working on the line.
(Coleman 1969, 158)

I’m a navvy, you’re a navvy, working on the line,
Five-and-twenty bob a week,
And all the overtime.
Roast beef, boiled beef,
Puddings made of eggs;
Up jumps a navvy
With a pair of sausage legs. (Summerfield 1970, 138)

However, space was also opened up for other, more positive versions of that same reality, expressed through jokes, tales of heroic labor, and songs. For
example, a broadside from Norwich, where the navvies were a strong political force, offered an ironic idealization of the world of the railway directors:

Let’s not forget railway directors, and from all harm they will protect us,  
They’ll study never to neglect us, so dearly they love locomotion.  
It’s for our good they take such pains, and never do they think of gains,  
And, if a few hundred should be slain, our wives and children they’ll maintain.  
Then happy and thankful may we be, such blessed inventions we’ve lived to see;  
To all other travel bid for ever goodbye, but the wonderful Eastern Railways. (Palmer 1974, 60)

The presence of internal rhymes points to an Irish source for this savage characterization of a system which could assume “a few hundred” deaths to achieve its goals.

As in Norway, the creation of cultural territory was often associated with the worker as an exalted and carefree individual:

I am an English navvy, and I tell the tale with glee,  
Though thousands curl their lip in scorn, and mock at chaps like me;  
But round and round our kingly isle, on meadow, glen and hill,  
Ten thousand mighty monuments proclaim our strength and skill.  
(reprinted in Coleman 1969, 158)

This evident attempt to affect one’s personal mood or inner space, combined with resignation towards what were seen as ineluctable social conditions, is found in a number of songs which set out to raise personal well-being with a bluff image of cheerfulness and pride. Another, in a broadside printed in Manchester, proclaims that “we are jovial banksmen all. . . . We don’t give a damn whether we work or no” (Raven 1977, 28–29). However, there is no firm evidence that either of these songs, both from printed sources, were ever popular among the navvies themselves.

One significant difference between the Norwegian songs and those in English is that no attempt was made to collect songs actively during the high summer of railroad navvying, which was between 1830 and 1880 in both Britain and the United States. Most of the songs quoted here were not collected until long after the railroad boom was over, in some cases as late as the 1960s, when the network was already being radically reduced. Contemporary texts are confined to published songsters, broadsides, and booklets, and most of these were more or less didactic, such as A Navvy, Saint of God, offered at 8s. 6d. (about
60 cents) a hundred. “I am an English navvy” is clearly one of these, since its second verse reveals it to be a temperance song:

Yes, I’m an English navvy; but oh, not an English sot,
I have run my pick through alcohol, in bottle glass or pot,
And with the spade of abstinence, and all the power I can
I am spreading out a better road for every working man.

As Terry Coleman comments laconically, “it is unlikely that this song commended itself to more than a few” (1969, 158).

Another song, “Navvy on the Line,” was published as a broadside in Preston near Manchester. Describing himself as “happy Jack,” the navvy offers his life as a version of Utopia:

I’ve got a job of work in the lovely town of ———,
And working on the line is a thing that makes me merry.
I can use my pick and spade, likewise my old wheelbarrow;
I can court the lasses, too, but don’t intend to marry.
  I’m a navvy, don’t you see,
  I’m a navvy in my prime;
  I’m a nipper, I’m a tipper,
  And I’m working on the line.7

Though idyllic, this is rooted in the actuality of a particular job of work: the space in the first line is for the singer to insert the location of the current job, and the reference to the nipper and the tipper would have meant nothing to an outsider.8 This is most clearly seen when we look at the fantasies of other groups associated with the railways. The imagined paradise of the hobo, for example, was very different:

I’m going to a better place where everything is bright,
Where handouts grow on bushes, you can sleep out every night.
Where I will not have to work at all, not even change my socks,
And little stream[s] of whiskey come flowing down the rocks.9

Unlike such jocular sentimentalizing, “Navvy on the Line” suggests a person securely anchored, in lifestyle and culture, within a group that is itself not threatened. This hardly applied to the fractured, discontinuous life of the migrant laborer. However, the presence of navvy jargon in the refrain shows an inwardness that one associates with the development of group consciousness.

Special status was also derived, almost supernaturally, from navvy material culture, in particular their distinctive clothing: moleskin trousers, felt hat, rainbow
waistcoat, and above all the hobnail boots needed for the rough terrain. In “Navvy Boots,” widely sung in Scotland and Ireland, the laborer visits his lover at night (a common topos, of course, in traditional song) but refuses to remove his boots. The significance of this is emphasized by the refrain to every verse:

I am a young navvy, I works on the line,
And the places I live are no palace of mine,
And well I remember the night of the fun,
Twas the night that I slept with me navvy boots on. (Dawney 1974, 42)

He does not represent his shanty as a castle of freedom like his Norwegian counterpart. Instead, he endows his boots with both a metonymic and a fetishistic significance, transferring the physical strength and endurance of the workplace to the sexual arena, where they function as a talisman of sexual power.

Similarly, a number of songs emphasize the superior desirability of navvy work over other occupations. This is often seen as part of a process of social advancement. In northern Ireland, the daughter of a ganger (or foreman) falls in love with a “Navvy Boy.” Her mother is very scornful:

For navvies they are rambling boys
And have but little pay;
How could a man maintain a wife
With fourteen pence a day? (Raven 1978, 34)

The daughter reminds her mother that her father, the ganger, had started as a navvy. Providentially, he dies soon afterwards and leaves the couple five hundred pounds. In this fable of marrying the boss’s daughter, the only realism lies in the figure of fourteen pence a day and the fact that after her wedding she will have to “go and tramp it.”

These songs maintain in their variety the economy of representation that is characteristic of the occupational song, which depends for its force and deeper meaning on an envelope of cultural reference, including the context provided by other, contiguous, singing repertoires, where such songs of sexual preference are common. At the same time, “The Navvy Boy” has a complexity of its own. Though sung by the navvies themselves, the perspective throughout is a woman’s, and by avoiding circumstantial detail, the song manages to speak simultaneously at an individual and a group level. As in most occupational songs, love and labor are fused, but untypically, the blunt message is that such relationships are ultimately based on money.

Of the few occupational songs sung by American navvies, most were intended to accompany work rather than for recreation. They emphasize the distance between the employers’ world and the tracklayers’ own:
The captain don’t like me,
Won’t allow me no show. (Cohen 1993, 345)

The boss’s contempt was particularly seen in the low value given to human life. Accident reports, according to the title of one song, would record that the victim was “Only a Navvy” (Cohen 1981, 173). At the end of the nineteenth century, the song “Drill, ye Tarriers, Drill!” gave the comment of the Irish “tarrier,” or dynamiter, on the serious accident record. It was widely sung across America in localized versions:

Now the new foreman was Jean McCann;
By God, he was a blamed mean man!
Last week a premature blast went off,
And a mile in the air went big Jim Goff.

The next time pay day came around,
Jim Goff a dollar short was found,
When he asked what for, came this reply,
“You were docked for the time you were up in the sky.”
(Fowke and Glazer 1973, 87)

The grim humor of the last line is just one of many contemporary references to the way unorganized workers were cheated of their full wages, but it also suggests a world in which natural laws operate differently, a world apart. This is powerfully suggested in the American “rolling” (wheelbarrow) worksong “Roll on the Ground”:

Work on the railroad, Sleep on the ground,
Eat soda crackers, And the wind blowing around.
Work on the railroad, Work all the day,
Eat soda crackers, And the wind blowing away. (Wade 1997, track 23)

Here a kind of wry sense of fate has taken the place of the unfocussed cheerfulness of the British songs.

The ultimate world of the imagination was, of course, heaven, and broadside publishers early exploited the metaphor of a spiritual railway which led there. Cohen and Neuberg have documented some of the many songs on the theme, which appear to have originated in evangelical circles in the United States and were reprinted in England (Cohen 1981, 596–644; Neuberg 1977, 128–29). Henry Such of London published “The Railway to Heaven” in the 1840s: “This Line runs from Calvary through this vain world and the Valley of the Shadow of Death, until it lands in the Kingdom of Heaven” (Cohen 1981,
599). These pious allegories do not appear to have entered navvy circles, but at least one navvy song extended imagined space to include heaven in the same way as its Norwegian counterparts. The song projected heaven as an ideal worksite, a utopian version of a very different life. “Poor Paddy Works on the Railway,” collected in the locomotive sheds of Hellifield in West Yorkshire, describes an Irish navvy’s experiences on various sites, from the Erie Canal in New York State to the Leeds and Selby Railway in Yorkshire. Although these projects were completed in the 1830s, each stanza opens with a date in the 1840s, the years of large-scale emigration from Ireland. The sequence of events has the marks of a personal narrative, an insider’s view of the work involved:

I was wearing corduroy breeches,
Digging ditches,
Dodging hitches, pulling switches
I was working on the railway. (MacColl [1954?], 2)

The refrain is far less ebullient, and indeed gives the song its commonest American title, “Weary of the Railway”:

I’m weary of the railway,
Oh, poor Paddy works on the railway. (Ibid. 20)

The shift from the first person pronoun to the generic “Paddy” shows a person in dialogue with himself. However, full resolution is only found in the last verse, which shifts the conflict to another arena altogether, where he had a chance of surviving:

In Eighteen hundred and forty seven
Poor Paddy was thinking of going to heaven
Poor Paddy was thinking of going to heaven
And working on the railway. (Ibid. 20)

It did not escape the navvies, however, that, wherever the line might be going, its route ran through a very different region where, as “Poor Paddy” put it,

Me belly was empty, me hands were sore
With working on the railway. (Ibid., 20)

This “vain world ,” as the broadside described it, was a territory more like hell. In America, a locomotive was routinely described in songs of the time as “some fettered fiend of hell” or “a death-fiend” (Cohen 1981, 43, 45). Ultimately,
therefore, the imagined state of the navvy was an aspect of personal identity: as
the sexual adventurer in “Navvy Boots” sang, “the places I live are no palace of
mine” (Dawney 1974, 42).

The migrant railway workers were and have remained a stigmatized group,
exact as they depicted themselves through their own ballads. No one but the
navvy imagined his own way of life, and his constructed mental space, as any-
thing but unappealing. By creating an imaginary space, the navvies attempted to
build a bridge across the insuperable abyss between their real life and the socially
accepted ideal—after all, construction was their work.

Notes

An earlier version of the first part of this paper was read at the 29th International
Ballad Conference, Aberdeen 9–15 August 1999. A German version is published in
1. Broadside print with the title Den gamle velbekjendte Jernbane-Vise om Jernbanen
fra Bergen til Voss. Digtet af en Jernbanearbeider Aar 1881. Omrevidert 1892 og
2. See Song of a Road. 1999.
3. Palmer 1974, 44. In 1839, Peter Lecount made elaborate calculations to show the
labour involved in building the London to Birmingham Railway to be greater than
that involved in building the Great Pyramid (Coleman 1969, 36–37).
4. Coleman 1969 cites the experiences of navvies in India, Argentina, South Africa,
and the Crimea (pp. 212–20, 228).
5. Peter Lecount, The History of the Railways Connecting London and Birmingham
8. A nipper was a navvy’s assistant, while a tipper carted earth to an embankment,
usually from a nearby cutting.
9. Cohen 1981, 367. For this dream of a very earthly paradise, see Del Giudice on
Cuccagna in this volume.
10. These include fishermen and above all, miners (Porter 1992, 77–80).

Works Cited

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