# Is sixteen.

*‘Is sixteen. Is bound as a putter, but unable yet to put. A year ago the horse ran away;*

*knocked him off; trailed with the wagons.Off 10 months.Is lame now, and will always be lameHis leg was set wrong at first .One leg is shorter than the other. The pit makes him sick.The fumes make his head work.’*

# Evidence of a Monkwearmouth collier to the Children’s Employment Commission 1842.

From Seghill, Silver Lonnen, Ledston Luck,

from Hartley’s single shaft and broken crank, they brought the stories of the colliers to book,

those grave and watchchained, whiskered men.

Listening, frowning, to the foreign tongue of nervous pitmen, capless, ushered in;

like this one. Kay-legged. Broken by the pit;

sick with the sulphur rising in the shaft, reeling, blind and dry mouthed. Cannot spit

the firedamp cobwebs closing up his mouth.

Wound up within the limits of the light

to shuffle in, and wet his lips, and tell the truth.

He cannot think. His head works so

in this rare air they seem to breathe.

His head works. Neither he, nor they would know

he speaks the tongue that Malory’s Arthur spoke.

When Lucan wished to bring the king to town,

to leave the field to Mordred slain, his army broke,

and to the carrion men, the pillers, creeping to and fro

he lay there helpless, dazed with wounds.

‘I cannot stand,’ he said. ‘My head works so.’

Hic iacet rex quondam rex que futurus.

This pitman tells his tale by rote, his dialect so shaly, cracked

it must be screened and panned and trimmed

like gravel, for nuggets of hard Fact.

On history’s spoilheaps the shale of ideolect is tipped

by their Blue Book’s terse compendium.

Voices crying: rex quondam rex que futurus sum.

On his true tongue, his dialect, his self

the door of documentary’s locked fast shut.

Is sixteen. Is bound a putter. Cannot put.