Introduction

IN 1828 politician Henry Brougham addressed the House of Commons on the rising tide of working-class literacy: "There have been periods when the country heard with dismay that the soldier is abroad. That is not the case now. Let the soldier be ever so much abroad, in the present age he can do nothing. There is another person abroad. . . . The schoolmaster is abroad, and I trust to the schoolmaster armed with his primer more than I do to the soldier in full military array for upholding and extending the liberties of their country." By comparing educators with soldiers, Brougham showed himself strongly aware that a growing group of working-class readers entailed a growing working-class power, power that might be controlled by controlling what that class read. To that end, Brougham helped found the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK) in 1826. The purpose of that organization was to provide inexpensive knowledge to the working class. Its best-known product was the Penny Magazine, which on the first page of its first number made clear that its attempt to enlighten the working class was in no way an attempt to empower them politically: the editors promised to steer absolutely clear of "the violence of party discussion" (31 March 1832: 1).

But Brougham and his colleagues were far from alone in offering the working class inexpensive knowledge. Between 1816, when William Cobbett lowered the price of his Political Register from 1s.½d. to 2d. (a difference of 10½d.), and 1858, when the last of the Chartist periodicals with a mass readership, People's Paper, stopped publishing, hundreds of periodicals written both by and for the working class existed to voice what the SDUK would not: exclusively and self-consciously working-class views of politics, culture, and religion. If there was to be a schoolmaster abroad, working-class editors and writers were intent upon making that schoolmaster one of the working class, speaking working-class values.
Just as E. P. Thompson has shown in *The Making of the English Working Class* that the working class had much to do with creating their own political values, I argue in this study that the working class had much to do with the making of their own *literary* values, values clearly distinct from those of other classes. While several studies have focused upon works of literature written by or for the working class, deriving literary values implicit in the works themselves, no study has focused upon the explicitly stated literary values found in the hundreds of periodicals written by and for the working class. In this study I look at those periodicals and discuss the several ways in which the working class created its own literary aesthetic.

Working-class writers and editors actively sought to define for themselves the spiritual and political role literature played for an emerging working class. It would be foolish to argue that in the first half of the nineteenth century there was a uniform working-class "line" on literature. Instead, throughout the period working-class journalists conducted a lively and continuing debate about literature. Their disagreements, as well as their agreements, show a thriving and evolving aesthetic. Central to that debate was the question of whether literature should only serve political ends or have a function apart from the strictly political. Journalists early in the period generally distrusted the apolitical in literature; those writing later generally agreed that literature served the working class both aesthetically and politically.

Even the later journalists, however, never lost sight of the fact that in criticizing and promoting any work as "literature" they were further establishing an ideology for their class. I define "ideology" in this sense as Terry Eagleton does in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*: "the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in" (14). Every act of evaluating what was and was not literature for their audience was an act of defining and promoting a working-class value system. In that sense, every work they criticized was political, and every evaluation was in effect an attempt to empower their class. Working-class views did not evolve from an appreciation of the political to an appreciation of the nonpolitical. These journalists never valued literature for the sake of beauty alone. Rather, their views generally broadened from an appreciation of overtly political works of writers such as Thomas Paine to a recognition that writers such as Alfred
Tennyson could also promote values important to the working class as a whole. This difference—between valuing overtly political literature and seeing the political implicit in all literature—is, I believe, an important shift in awareness, one that lies at the heart of this study.

Working-class periodicals provided hundreds, even thousands, of working-class writers with what was often their only access to an audience, and in doing so, helped show the working class that its own written expression not only could be literature as valuable as any other but could, in its own distinctive way, add to a working-class canon of "great" literature.

At the same time, editors and reviewers were very concerned with literary works of other classes and ages. For want of a better term, I refer in this study to such works and writers as "established"—that is, having a strong and reasonably steady reputation among other classes, particularly among the middle class—or, to put it another way, writers and works considered "canonical" by the middle class. I do not mean to imply by that term that established writers were in some way better, or more universally valuable, than unestablished writers (a group, of course, that includes most of the working-class writers of the day). Nor do I mean to imply that established works were necessarily incorporated into a working-class canon simply because they held a secure place in the middle-class pantheon. Quite the opposite. Most working-class journalists rarely accepted without question the established, traditional readings of these writers. Nor did they reject them out of hand. Rather, through a careful selection of certain writers and works and by offering new readings of both the lives and works of established writers, they made these writers serve working-class ends and speak working-class values. This study is, for the most part, a record of working-class journalists disestablishing and reconanizing established writers, or sanctioning new, unestablished writers, to fit the values of their own class. Thus, for example, to some Milton's republicanism reflected their own; Shakespeare became "one of the People"; and the Chartist poet Ernest Jones earned a secure place in a new, working-class canon.4

My analysis employs working-class periodicals in a number of ways. Obviously, I have paid close attention to essays and statements about specific literary genres—essays and statements that appear with surprising frequency even in what might at first seem exclusively political
periodicals. I am also concerned with the literary and stylistic values adopted by the writers and editors of these periodicals and with those figures they saw as their models, as well as those they rejected. Besides these factors, I take into account the writers, established and unestablished, working-class and otherwise, that the editors of working-class periodicals chose to publish. Also, I have noted the reviews, notices, and even brief mentions of writers and works—again, both working-class and otherwise. These reviews and notices offer serious appraisals of now-forgotten writers and novel, important, and (to most modern readers) fresh views of well-known writers.

This work is not in itself a study of working-class literature but is instead a study of the perceptions of literature by working-class writers and editors. When I look at specific poems, stories, or essays in these periodicals, therefore, I am not as concerned with how the modern reader might evaluate them as literature as I am with how the working-class thinkers of the time criticized them, and, in turn, what they took literature to be.

Also, this is not in itself a study of the politics or political values of the working class or of working-class periodicals, which E. P. Thompson and others have thoroughly investigated. I do not ignore those values, however; I cannot. They are crucial to this study when they are inseparable from literary values; and, in the broadest sense, the two are always linked.

Neither is this primarily a study of the publishers, printers, editors, and writers of working-class periodicals. Most of the successful working-class periodicals, however, owed much of their success to the individual energy, philosophy, or even eccentricities of their conductors. As I said, the views of those involved with working-class periodicals are far from uniform; in the ongoing debate in those periodicals over the forms and functions of literature, many and various voices offer much insight into collective views.

Finally, although the periodicals I look at constantly tested the sedition, blasphemy, and tax laws of the time, this study is not about the struggle for freedom of the press, except when that issue clearly involves literary questions.

The five chapters that follow divide roughly into two sections. Chapters 1 and 2 are contextual; chapters 3, 4, and 5 are generic.
In chapter 1 I provide a sense of working-class literacy. Although I do
give some numbers and percentages, I go on to point out the many
limitations to such a quantitative evaluation of literacy. I then look at
working-class autobiographies to give a sense of how early reading expe-
riences shaped working-class journalism. Further, in that chapter I dis-
cuss exactly what a working-class periodical is, a task that is not as simple
as it may first seem, since there are several important distinctions be-
tween working-class periodicals and other "cheap" periodicals. I also sort
periodicals that attempt to include all classes in their audience from
those that are exclusively aimed at the working class. Finally, I deal with
the problem of the class standing of editors, publishers, and writers of
the periodicals; I argue that while in many (but not most) cases such
men and women were not, for political or economic reasons, typical of
the working class, they still generally strove to represent the views of that
class.

In chapter 2 I provide a brief history of the working-class press be-
tween 1816 and 1858, paying careful attention to the literary aspects of
these periodicals and to the evolving sense of a working-class canon on
the part of the journalists. After showing the influence of Thomas Paine
on these writers and editors, I look at the evolution of a working-class
sense of literature through three readily distinguishable subperiods:
1816–29 (the years of the earliest working-class journalists), 1830–36
(the years of the "War of the Unstamped"), and 1837–58 (the years of
the Chartist press).

Chapter 3 focuses on views of fiction in working-class periodicals,
views that progressed and broadened through time. In the earlier peri-
odicals editors and writers generally distrusted the genre as a whole, be-
lieving simply that what was fiction was not truth. This suspicion can be
seen most clearly in working-class views of Sir Walter Scott and in the al-
most complete absence of fiction in early working-class periodicals. In
time, however, working-class journalists accepted fiction as a valuable
and positive genre for their class. They began to review certain works of
fiction favorably, and later working-class periodicals even began to pub-
lish fiction themselves.

Chapter 4 concerns views of poetry in working-class periodicals. Un-
like fiction, poems—lyric, dramatic, and even epic—were integral to
working-class periodicals from the start. Paradoxically, however, many
editors attacked poetry as a genre while publishing poems. Much of this conflict stems from the early view that poetry need not be beautiful but had better be explicitly political. Gradually, however, those involved with working-class periodicals generally accepted the view that poetry could serve their class both politically and aesthetically—or, rather, they politicized the aesthetic.

Finally, in chapter 5, I look at working-class views of the drama and at the relative lack of an evolution of views toward performance drama (as opposed to closet drama, written primarily for reading). I investigate the reasons why working-class journalists rarely felt that staged drama could serve the working class in the ways that fiction or poetry could. I then attempt to demonstrate that despite this pessimism toward the stage, the working class of the time had an obvious and deep thirst for the dramatic in their lives, and that in many ways the working-class press sought to provide for that thirst.